

From a recent edition of THE TABLET: The Papal Nuncio to Ukraine, Visvaldas Kulbokas, reflects on his experience of living in a war zone

For the Pope's representative in Ukraine life has become stripped to the essentials / By VISVALDAS KULBOKAS

Learning from the war

IT IS VERY difficult for me to communicate with the “other world”, the world other people live in. We have drone attacks in Kyiv almost every night and missile attacks every couple of weeks. I find it impossible to rest if there is an attack during the night, and impossible to concentrate on work if there is an attack during the day. This world of violence and fear consumes all my time and attention.

Being in Kyiv is, though, incomparably easier than living in, say, Kherson, Sumy, Kharkiv or Zaporizhzhia. When a Greek Catholic bishop invited some soldiers to join him at the Easter table in Zaporizhzhia this year, I found it impossible to talk to them: after I said a few words about Easter, about the resurrection of Jesus, the soldiers plunged into thoughts about their comrades in the trenches. A military chaplain told me his white Samoyed dog Aeneas was better than he was at communicating with soldiers, especially the



Archbishop Visvaldas Kulbokas at a prayer breakfast in Kyiv

wounded. Aeneas just needs to cuddle up and be there. He doesn't need words.

The same chaplain tells newly mobilised soldiers, “When your hands shake while loading a rifle or cannon – don't be surprised, it's normal. When you pee in the trenches or soil yourself the first time you come under attack – don't be afraid. Your yellowed or browned trousers will not surprise anyone.”

NEAR THE FRONTLINE, everyone is a target: bus drivers, humanitarian aid workers, priests. A former chaplain, now a simple priest in Kherson, showed me wounds on his side and thigh. He explained: “A drone was chasing me as I was driving. A parishioner saw it and called me. ‘Put your foot down as hard as you can,’ he told me. ‘There's a drone right behind you!’ By driving at top speed and manoeuvring the car I prevented the drone (or rather, the drone operator) from accurately targeting me, so I escaped with only a moderate injury.”

In the Gospel, Jesus says: “When you give food to the hungry or water to the thirsty, you give me food and you give me drink; when you visit a prisoner or visit someone who is sick, you visit me.” As nuncio I represent the Pope to all the people of Ukraine, including those in the occupied territories, and, especially, the children and civilians and prisoners of war being held in Russia. What chance have I of visiting them, of offering them water to drink and food to eat? None. I live in a reality where it is impossible for me to do as Jesus asks. Except, of course, in prayer.

The living conditions of prisoners are so difficult that I personally know priests who, having been captured, are looking for ways to take their own lives. My friend Ihor Kozlovskiy, the philosopher, religious scholar and poet, was captured in 2016, when Russia occupied the Donbas. He was imprisoned and tortured. After nearly two years, he was released. “In order not

to go crazy,” he told me, “I used to give lectures to the rats while standing in my cell, which was full of dirt and faeces up to my calves.” I thank God that he survived to see his wife and children and to enjoy a taste of freedom. Ihor died in his sleep on 6 September 2023.

I have been here for over four years. I thank God that I am in Kyiv. People here are no longer interested in anything other than the absolute essentials. This became clear to me after President Donald Trump suggested that peace negotiations with Russia and Ukraine might take place with the mediation of the Holy See. Within a few hours I was contacted by fellow diplomats, by negotiators and analysts. None wanted anything for themselves. The situation in Ukraine is so serious, the threat of what might happen if the war is not ended is so dire, that they all – whether they were from France, from Great Britain, Egypt, Switzerland, the Netherlands, or refugees from Russia – shared their insights, thoughts and experiences without ceremony.

It occurred to me: this is how humanity should be. Only by supporting each other can we create something together, because the threats Ukraine faces are common to all. I don't think that we are united enough or that there are enough of us, but the breakthroughs in togetherness have been inspiring.

A question arises for me: what to do with *time* in the middle of war. I have given up reading books and watching the news, except for the most essential of the essential. What else can I eliminate from my worries so that I have strength and time left for essential things? So that the background of relatively smaller problems does not overshadow the main ones?

The price of giving up all that is small. I simply no longer know, I can no longer imagine, what life looks like and feels like elsewhere, in that “other world”. So much energy, so many hours here are spent in meetings and conferences. Many ordinary Ukrainians – captured soldiers, citizens and illegally deported children – are imprisoned in Russia. What more can we do to bring them home to their families? Because we are so caught up trying to address the human consequences of the war, there is little time left for contact with the other world, the world that is outside Ukraine – even with those I report to in the Holy See, not to mention family and friends.

Yet the greatest refreshment for the soul is to communicate with people from “other worlds”; and from the heart, not with platitudes or clichés. And as I lie awake fearful that it might be my turn to be killed or injured in the next drone attack, one “recipe” that I have learned here in Kyiv comes to mind: it is time for all of us to truly love – and respect – each other. Then we will be able to rely more firmly on the Gospel, which says that only by loving each other are we in God, and is God in us.

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“There is hope,
but we still need
to work hard,
pray hard,
and truly seek
the way forward,
to find peace.”