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## Ukraine. Apostolic nuncio in Kyiv: "My place is here"

The apostolic nunciature will remain in Kyiv. It was confirmed to SIR by the Apostolic Nuncio to Ukraine, Msgr. **Visvaldas Kulbokas**, contacted by phone. "I am currently at the nunciature in Kyiv", he said. "We are located in a central district of the city. We are here with two aides and the religious sisters who assist the nunciature. We had stockpiled some food supplies before the war, as did most of Kyiv's residents, although many could not imagine that the situation would escalate to this extent. *We will therefore have enough food and water for a short period of time, although not for very long. A severe humanitarian crisis is already affecting some people, and as time goes by it is bound to spread to the whole city of Kyiv. The city of Kharkiv, Odessa, Mariupol and Kherson are facing a similar situation.*" **Are you worried you won't have enough food and water supplies?** We are, and this problem is only going to get worse. I have been worried for the sick and vulnerable from the beginning. How can anyone be treated in these situations? This is especially true for those who stayed behind, because they were unable to or weren't strong enough to leave. We are also worried about pregnant women. Many children are being born in underground shelters, and there is no medical assistance. It's a dramatic situation. **On top of that there has been bombing. How was your night?** We must regain our strength no matter what, so we identified some sites that we believe to be comparatively safer in the event of a missile attack. We sleep on mattresses that we spread out in some places, including the basement. We also celebrated Holy Mass in a place we consider to be safer. *However, I always carry my rucksack with the essentials: some water, ID card, mobile phone, to be prepared for any eventuality.* **Your Nunciature, the Holy See's diplomatic corps, has decided to remain in Kyiv. Why?** Because we are more than just an embassy. I represent the Pope in Ukraine, but I also represent him to the people and the Churches in Ukraine. My duty is not only to be here, but also to stand close to the people. Thus, my place is here. Obviously, should we realise that it is physically impossible to remain, we will consider the possibility of leaving, but for the moment, as long as we can stay here, we will not leave.

**The presence of the nunciature is thus symbolic of Pope Francis' presence at the heart of this war.**

It is. And it has a very strong meaning for me too. In some ways, by being here, we can share the plight of people facing gunfire, cold, danger, injury and even death. However, we also perceive the strong solidarity between Ukrainians of all faiths and religions. Every day the Mufti's assistant calls me and asks if we have enough food and water, or if someone needs to be taken in. Catholics do the same in their churches, as do the Orthodox and the Jews. There is widespread solidarity, and witnessing this sense of unity is a very powerful and beautiful experience. In addition, a great show of solidarity reaches us from abroad, from people praying for peace, praying for us who are here. The people thinking of us, those whose hearts are close to ours. *During these days, it feels as though we were the spiritual capital of the world. The tragedy is combined with overwhelming human response.* **We followed Pope Francis in his diplomatic efforts, including surprise gestures. How would you describe the Pope's diplomatic activity today and how have his initiatives in Ukraine been received?** Many people have called me and asked me to convey to the Pope their heartfelt gratitude for his concern, for his prayers and also for his efforts, which are not only diplomatic but also human, acting as a shepherd. The Pope is indeed close to suffering Ukraine, but he is also close to everyone. *The Pope said that war must always be stopped, there is no justification to war. War is the work of the devil and therefore all efforts must be made to stop it.* Secondly, we are all brothers and sisters and the Church seeks to reconcile us all. Sowing the seeds not of hatred but of love and brotherhood. I hope everyone will join in this mission of condemning war and of spiritual unity and reconciliation with all. **Today, the first day of Lent and Ash Wednesday, we celebrate the Day of Prayer and Fasting for Peace. With which spirit will you be experiencing it today in the city of**

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**Kyiv?** Today is a very important day, at the invitation of Pope Francis. It is the Day of Prayer for Peace, enhanced by the fact that it is being celebrated at the beginning of Lent, on Ash Wednesday. This is a very humble prayer of supplication, of conversion. Sometimes we doubt our prayers, as if they were only personal pleas. Prayer is more than that: it brings solidarity even to non-believers, it conveys closeness, brotherhood. It contributes to peace because it demolishes the very foundations of war. It eradicates arrogance, lack of responsibility. It engenders conversion, it imparts the spirit of humility. *Prayer unites us to God and to each other. When we pray, we are again becoming His children and we are all brothers and sisters to each other - attentive, supportive, merciful, just, fair, full of respect and love. When God sees us like this, He does not remain indifferent and grants us the gift of peace.*

M. Chiara Biagioni