Ukraine: 30,000 refugees in Bulgaria, including 9,000 children. Caritas at the forefront. Fr Nikolov to SIR, "I went and picked up refugees in Odessa"

(Sofia) 30,000 Ukrainian refugees, including 9,000 children, have entered Bulgaria to date, according to the figures provided by local authorities. Bulgaria, a country that had closed its doors to migrants in the past, is now at the forefront of solidarity, not least because the Ukrainian border is only 200 kilometres away from the Balkan country and the country invaded by Russia is home to 200,000 people of Bulgarian origin. According to Emanuil Patashev, Secretary General of Caritas Bulgaria, "we do not know how many of these refugees want to remain in our country because Bulgaria is not very attractive to Ukrainians, particularly highly skilled workers". Caritas is providing transport and housing, food and basic supplies as well as any kind of support that is necessary, and is coordinating the aid of the Catholic Church who, following the appeal of the President of the Bulgarian Bishops' Conference, Mgr. Christo Proykov, opened the doors of its convents and religious buildings to refugees. Some people, like Fr Ventsi Nikolov, went to Odessa to bring humanitarian aid and take refugees to Bulgaria. "We have seen horrific scenes in Ukraine", the priest told SIR news agency: "a long line of mothers with children, but once they arrive in Bulgaria, some decide to take temporary shelter on the Black Sea coast, because the Bulgarian government is giving hoteliers €20 per day for the reception of refugees". Fr Nikolov will soon leave for Moldova to drive other refugees there. Some Ukrainians are also accommodated in the Sisters of the Eucharist Monastery and in the Caritas Centre in Ruse. In Sofia, a fundraising has been activated for the convents of the Capuchin Friars in Ukraine, organized by the Capuchin custody "Fra Marco di Aviano in Bulgaria". "It is true that the refugees arriving in Bulgaria have some savings", Fr Elko Terziyski said, "but the people who remained in the Ukrainian cities are really poor, and they are in desperate need of help. We transfer money to the accounts of our Polish brothers and priests who work in Ukraine, they cross the border and withdraw. Hundreds of people have found refuge in their convents". Even the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, represented by Bishop Polycarp, vicar of Patriarch Neofit in the city of Sofia, has activated a fundraising in each church to support the people affected by this tragic war.

Valentina Bombelli