

The parish priest of Mykolaiv: "We went through hard times, don't forget about us and continue supporting us"



"I want to thank the Italian people for their show of solidarity. The extent of the pain and destruction we have experienced has perhaps not been fully grasped in Italy. All I ask is: do not forget us and continue supporting us. Help us rebuild a strong and solid fabric through the Church." This was the appeal of Father Taras Pavlus, parish priest at the Greek Catholic Church in Mykolaiv and director of the local Caritas. The church is still under construction. It can only be reached via a dirt road. It's hard to reach by foot or car. **Although it's a very cold Sunday and it's starting to snow, the small chapel located underground is full of people.** It's a day of great celebrations for the parish: Father Alexej celebrated Holy Mass for the first time. The congregation welcomes him with prayer and chants. Then everybody stands in line and one after the other they kneel before the new priest to receive a blessing from him.



The remains of a destroyed building are just a few metres away: probably a missile hit the roof, wiping out each floor and flat. Tanks and military vehicles can be seen along the streets. The city centre, which is only a few kilometres away from the parish, is off limits and completely cordoned off with barbed wire and cheval-de-frise. The area is monitored by militarised bunkers. The regional and municipal administration buildings are situated in the protected area. Concerns also exist regarding the port and its shipyard, once the pride and joy of this country, because of the threat of Russian landings on this territory.



"We experienced some very hard times. But today we have hope." The church remained open at all times during the war. The small underground chapel is not easy to enter. As in all Ukrainian churches, every inch of free space is filled with Caritas relief parcels. "Thanks to Caritas, we were able to provide food and humanitarian aid to the people," says the priest. "Everyone, the faithful and people in need, will always find a relief package for them here." Food distribution centres are being set up at various locations in Mykolaiv every day. A form of financial support is also being attempted. "But this could be just a temporary situation," the priest said. "We need to see how it will evolve. We realise that the relief packages and the warm meals are still useful, but we cannot prolong this service too much longer because they will no longer be sufficient when people will ask for help to

resume their normal life. In other words, we must be able to provide loans. I believe that this form of support will also be needed to bolster and restart an economy that was stalled with the war. Plans for the future will also involve rebuilding housing units and the church, said the parish priest. Winter has arrived, with dropping temperatures. "We are used to harsh winters. What worries us is not the cold but the lack of electricity. Without that, we have no way to stay warm," he said.



. What did you say during today's liturgy? "Every Sunday, we pray for the armed forces, for victory and for the Great Ukraine", said Father Taras. "Every Sunday we thank all the people who have been helping us throughout these past months, all the volunteers who work here and all the people who are helping from abroad. We have been receiving help since the first day of the war. The last prayer was a chant to the great united Ukraine. We have great hope. Our hope is that everything will be fine. We are starting to believe it. We went from very hard times, when 20 to 30 rockets were fired at our people and our cities every day, to days when we have no attacks at all." The last thought of the parish priest goes to the Pope in Rome: "We are awaiting Pope Francis. Today Pope Francis is a light for us. His visit here in Ukraine would bring light and hope to this war-torn land."

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