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## Ukraine: a priest seized, threatened and deported from his hometown. The story of Father Oleksandr who feels no hatred

( in cooperation with Fr Taras Zheplinskyi) Catholic Church outlawed in Russian-occupied territories. That is why Father Oleksandr Bogomaz, priest at the Greek-Catholic Church in Melitopol, was taken by force, interrogated for three hours and threatened. He was subsequently expelled from the city after a sham "verdict" was read out. "I was not subjected to physical violence, not a single hair was pulled out of my head. But it's a great miracle that I cannot explain", the priest from Melitopol - currently under Russian occupation, known as the 'gateway to Crimea' owing to its position at the crossroads of two major highways and a key railway line connecting Russia to the peninsula and other territories occupied in southern Ukraine - told SIR. "This is a strategic territory that the Ukrainian military is trying to retake, along with the entire Zaporizhzhia region, as far as neighbouring Kherson. "I have been carrying out my ministry in the city of Melitopol since 2016," the priest said. "I provided pastoral ministry service at the parish Church of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos for three years, followed by three and a half years as administrator of the parish. I was seized on December 1st, 2022. For the seventh time, representatives of the Russian special services came to search me. I asked who they were, but they would not answer. They searched my house, everything was thrown to the ground. They also took our minivan." **Were you arrested?** I was not detained, I was simply told that the Catholic Church, particularly the Greek Catholic Church and the Roman Catholic Church, had been outlawed in the Zaporizhzhia region, which is controlled by the Russian Federation. I was forcibly brought to the penultimate checkpoint, near Vasylivka, and then I walked across the delimitation line. At my request, the Ukrainian army and police brought me to Zaporizhzhia. **On what grounds have you been forced out of Melitopol?** The verdict was read to me at the penultimate checkpoint, controlled by Russian troops, near Vasylivka. It displayed a flag of the Russian Federation. I was positioned next to this flag and I was read out the verdict. In Russian, this process is officially referred to as 'vydvoreniie', which means excommunication 'for inciting racial hostility, inter-religious hostility, hindering social service activities and for anti-social behaviour.' Those were more or less the charges brought against me, and for which I was 'deported'. I was also told that the decision was not made by the persons who had deported me, but by higher-ranking officers, i.e. the higher-ranking occupying authority. **Were you afraid of dying?** I never thought about that. I was frightened. There was a man in Vasylivka, I think he was from the security service of the Russian Federation, who yelled at me very strongly, shouted at me, said all kinds of abominations, and threatened to shoot me. However, I realised he was just threatening me. They put me under heavy psychological pressure. I was interrogated for three hours. They asked me if I was a member of the 'Knights of Columbus'. Many things... I don't remember everything now. But I do know what gave me strength during those nine months of occupation. The Eucharist, celebrating the liturgy every day, the daily reading of the Holy Scriptures, meditation and praying the Rosary at least three times a day. That's what saved me. **Do you feel hate for the people who seized you?** As I was being taken away, I prayed for the four Russian soldiers who seized me. Likewise, when I made my way to Zaporizhzhia, I prayed for those people, asking the Lord to bestow conversion on them. I feel no hatred nor do I have negative feelings against them. I will not even think about them. I don't want to nurture evil feelings in my heart. **Why did you decide to stay in the city despite the Russian occupation?** Even during my interrogation I was asked why I decided to stay. I stayed because so many of our people are there, our children, young people, there are families and persons whom we take care of, whom we help. Those people are living under occupation now and they are facing a very hard time. The Church with the celebration of the Liturgy, with the Eucharist and Holy Confession, gives people strength and keeps them together. I was told that when people found out I had been carried away, they broke out in tears. They did the same with the parish priest, Father Petro Krenytskyi. Not being able to celebrate the Divine Liturgy is a tremendous loss. **Two Greek**

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**Catholic priests from Berdyansk, from the Donetsk exarchate, Father Ivan Levitskyi and Father Bohdan Heleta, have been arrested. What are your feelings today?** I have no idea as to why God has saved me. I know I am unworthy, I did not deserve this. I believe that I am being asked to make qualitative use of this time that the Lord God has given me. As for Fathers Ivan and Bohdan, I am praying for them. **How has your life changed since then?** I am still scared, even though 13 days have passed. I feel anxious. I still have trouble calming down, I cannot manage to find some quite place for myself. I think about it often. Many thoughts come to my mind. I used to have a parish, with people, a community. Now I am exiled, I have nowhere to rest my head. I have visited and am visiting refugee families in cities across Ukraine. These are meaningful encounters. I don't know what I will do next. I do know that now it is necessary to support the families who left Melitopol. We dream of returning there together. **Father Oleksandr, what is peace after all you have experienced?** What is peace? Peace is when God is in my heart. If I love God I can do no harm. Then there will be peace. Peace is also being able to step out of our comfort zone to reach out to a person in need. Just like the Good Samaritan did, extending a helping hand, offering freedom to that person and loving them irrespective of their decision. And waiting for the other person to do the same, to reach out to you and love you for who you are. That is peace.

M. Chiara Biagioni