

Ukraine. Monsignor Ryabukha, a bishop on the front line of the war: “I am not afraid, but what I am seeing is inhuman”

“I’m not afraid. To me, dying is nothing but the threshold between this life and heaven. It’s not the fear of dying that upsets me, but the clear progress of evil. When I think about this war, about what is happening in the battle zones, the word ‘inhuman’ is not enough to describe the suffering of our people. Some stories are too tragic for words. ‘Inhuman’ is a far cry from the extent of the cruelty. It’s utterly evil, devilish, diabolical.” Monsignor **Maksim Ryabukha**, Auxiliary Bishop of the Greek-Catholic Exarchate of Donetsk, resident in Zaporizhzhia, explains what it means to be a “bishop on the front line” today. His exarchate covers the regions of Lugansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Dnipro. These names on a map, hitherto unknown, are now unfortunately in the news because they are located in the combat zones. During his visit to Rome, the Bishop met with SIR journalists and shared his testimony with the Executive Council of the Federation of Italian Catholic Weeklies (FISC). “I am worried about the access ban imposed on all international and solidarity organisations located in the border areas, such as Caritas, which is 20 kilometres away from the combat zones”, he said. “This means that there are towns that will not receive any aid.” “Now is not the time to stop and worry about the risks involved. The focus right now is on how to support, accompany and sustain human life.” **“The situation is getting worse,” says Msgr. Ryabukha.** “The Russians are not only targeting military installations. They are attacking civilians and infrastructure. More than 80% of Ukraine’s energy capacity has been destroyed or damaged. As a religious man, I wonder what spark of humanity is left in the hearts of the Russian people. In war there’s no simple situation, but the destruction I bear witness to is massive.” The bishop spoke about the efforts to help the elderly and the sick who remained in their homes and near the soldiers. He recounted countless journeys in minibuses loaded with humanitarian supplies, crossing checkpoints, celebrating Mass on the front lines at -23°C in the winter cold and in trenches covered with black tarpaulins to hide from drones. “We are fighting a war for freedom and civilisation,” said Monsignor Ryabukha. “Wherever Russia advances, it sows death. In all the places that Russia has occupied, they left utter devastation. The city of Bakhmut no longer exists, it’s a pile of rubble. For me, as one of my people, this is very painful.”



[“I personally know many of them,” the bishop said. “They chose to defend human dignity in their homeland.” Msgr. Ryabukha firmly believes that although Communism deprived the Ukrainian people of God, there are no “atheists” fighting. “One day I received a phone call from a 20-year-old soldier. He had narrowly escaped a massive bombardment. A few centimetres further and he would have been killed by a piece of shrapnel. He thanked me for my prayers. Father, he told me, it was a miracle! “Who can we rely on today?” asked the bishop. “Humanity sees us, but we are too distant.](#)

They read the news about our plight, but they only care about rising gas and oil prices. You only realise how precious human dignity and freedom are when you start to lose them.”

“I saw what happened in Irpin and in Bucha. There is not a living soul left”

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a law lowering the conscription age from 27 to 25 in early April. Ukraine needs soldiers. The war is taking its toll and new soldiers are needed. Faced with the possibility of being sent to the battlefield, how do young people react? “It would be madness to think that they're happy,” replies the Salesian bishop. “No one is happy about going to war. It's a painful human tragedy.” He adds: “As long as international solidarity to support and defend life is not forthcoming, life will be destroyed, step by step.”

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