

Christmas under the bombs in Kyiv. The testimony of the apostolic nuncio

## «The light of Jesus shines even in the darkness of war»



04 January 2024

Second Christmas of war for Ukraine, devastated for almost two years by a tragic conflict that shows no signs of abating. Just a few days ago, Russian forces launched the most massive attack since February 24, 2022. The Ukrainian capital of Kyiv in particular paid the consequences in terms of civilian victims. «Even during the Christmas period the war has not disappeared, the war continues – says the Apostolic Nuncio to the country, Monsignor Visvaldas Kulbokas, in an interview with the Vatican media –. It was also significant, for example, on the evening of Christmas Eve while concelebrating in the Roman Catholic cathedral in Kyiv or on January 1st on the World Day of Peace, we noted with the bishops that the air alerts sounded precisely at the peak moments of the celebrations, when we were in front of Jesus. So Christmas is combined with the risk that war entails. But in this sense Christmas even stands out even more because the light of Jesus shines in the darkness, shines in difficulties. For example, in recent days even our collaborators at the nunciature or all the people with whom I have had contact – each one experiences the war first-hand because, for example, in Kyiv there is no neighborhood that has not seen the explosions, which didn't feel the houses shaking, the windows shaking – each one "received his share", so to speak, each one received "his portion" of missiles in each neighborhood. So the whole city has been affected: both those who live in the center and on the outskirts. However, in this way Christmas becomes even clearer because, as Jesus says: "Do not seek peace in the world because the world is incapable of giving it to you. So, look for her in my arms." Therefore, an even clearer meaning.»

*One of the cities most affected by these new attacks was Kharkiv. You had visited Kharkiv shortly before these attacks began. What was your experience of this visit and what did leaving the city bring to your heart?*

I went to Kharkiv on Christmas Day and I went both for myself – to pray better – and to be with those who suffer the most. Because then when I said, I wrote to my friends that I was in Kharkiv, you don't know how many replied: "How much we would have liked to stay there too!" There are many people who would like to visit this city not to see the destruction, but to pray together in such difficult situations. Because for me the most profound Christmas is precisely this: praying together with the faithful gathered in the cathedral – we celebrated in the Roman Catholic cathedral, then the Greek Catholic bishop also joined, and we continued with the Greek Catholic community in their cathedral – seeing the eyes of the people, priests, faithful, the eyes collected because they know that they have nothing, no one will protect them, absolutely no one, there is no world body, there is no army capable of protecting them: only God remains. And so celebrating Christmas with them is the most profound experience there can be. And this is exactly what I was looking for: praying with those who live Christmas seriously. Christmas remains joyful even in these conditions, because Jesus is our born Redeemer, but this joy is combined with great seriousness. So I even realized that in this period I could hardly celebrate Christmas in a place where people are too relaxed because I would feel bad and therefore for me too it was the only possible way to celebrate Christmas.

*Recently the Kharkiv administration announced that nursery schools are being moved to the basement, i.e. in the city's metro, to allow children to stay with their teachers, to be together for a while. How did you hear this news and what can you say about the children you saw there in Kharkiv?*

Children are always present in my mind when I pray: every morning, but especially during the Christmas holidays, I begin my prayer by uniting my mind with that of the children, also uniting many prisoners of war, but also civilians. You don't know how many I know personally, how many families who have their loved ones somewhere in Russia, we don't know where, but they are not even military: they are doctors, they are civilians, or we have our two Redemptorist Catholic priests, Father Ivan Levytskyi and Father Bohdan Heleta... I begin the prayer from them in my mind. And then on the occasion of Christmas, I also had the opportunity to meet the mayor of Kharkiv and one of the things we talked about was the children and the mayor was partially satisfied, in the sense that the city is already completing the preparations to open the first underground nursery school and then in March, if all goes well, also a first underground school. So, it is really disconcerting that in our time, in this very advanced civilization, we have reached, so to speak, "such a level of development" that we have started to create schools underground because otherwise in Kharkiv there is no way for young people to go to school. And for example, also on a statistical level: in Kharkiv, as the mayor said, before there were 715 schools and during these almost two years of bombing over 300 schools were seriously damaged, almost half of the schools. And in addition to the damage of the destruction, there are not even the conditions to go to school. So for almost two years the kids there have only been able to study online and therefore it is a great goal to create schools underground. It's impressive, but without this very difficult solution, we cannot move forward.

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