

# Christ's light dispels the shadows

Retiring UK National Director, Neville Kyrke-Smith describes the challenges facing the Church

**DEEP shadows have again fallen across Ukraine, a country on the fault line where East and West meet, and so often clash.**

As Russian tanks rolled over its borders in February and fierce fighting broke out, I remembered being in the country when military action in Crimea and parts of the Donbas first led to some 1.5 million becoming Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). My heart and my prayers were with our project partners, who were already heroically supporting IDPs who had fled following earlier conflicts – not to mention grappling with the challenges of continuing their ministry of love during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today the needs are greater than at any time since the end of the Soviet era.

And yet vocations continue to flourish, and priests and Sisters pour out their lives as a libation of love for the faithful.

Ukraine has faced ongoing challenges of one kind or another for almost a century. When the Iron Curtain was drawn across the country, it threatened to crush the very lifeblood out of the Church, as the faithful were exiled or martyred. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church – an Eastern Church in communion with Rome – went underground after it was officially banned, but it lived on, holding clandestine Masses in caves, forests or cellars.

Today the Church has risen again. It not only bears the scars of its past but also continues to face immense challenges. Nurtured by your solidarity,

Ukrainian Orthodox Archbishop Kliment (pictured) has suffered repeated attempts to evict him from his cathedral in Simferopol, and been arrested on charges of terrorism and stealing Church artefacts, following Crimea's annexation.



Neville Kyrke-Smith KSG

prayers and love, the Church can provide emergency help for IDPs, offer extraordinary pastoral support during the coronavirus crisis and help families in Crimea facing extreme poverty.

The light of Christ can dispel the deepest of shadows – and thanks to your love ACN is helping ensure that the Church can be that light to a suffering world. 🕯️



# Christ's love amid conflict and crisis



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**Last year Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, warned that Ukrainians feared an escalation of Russian aggression. He told Vatican News: "We live [in] great fear not only of the intensification of military action in the occupied territory of Donbas, we fear a new, direct invasion of the Russian troops in Ukrainian territory which could be a cause of thousands of victims, and also a precipitation of the humanitarian situation in Ukraine."**

When these fears became a reality in February 2022, ACN rushed through its first batch of help, of more than £830,000, to meet the essential needs – including heating, lighting, water and food – of priests and religious courageously ministering to those whose lives were thrown into chaos by the Russian invasion.

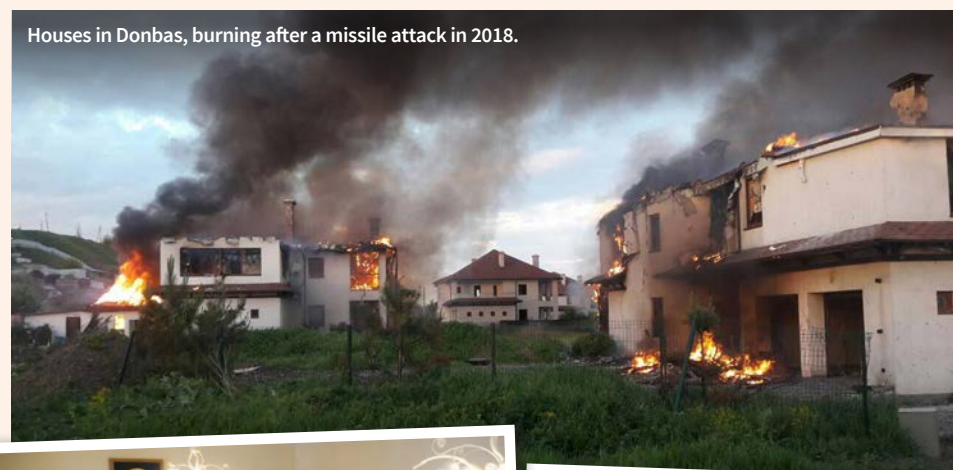
Across the country, the Church was caring for growing numbers of IDPs. The numbers were at their highest since some 1.5 million fled the eastern parts of Ukraine such as Donbas in 2014, and ACN has provided ongoing support.

Among the IDPs who had sought

refuge were children – and among the projects ACN has supported were rehabilitation and therapy for children from refugee families.

The needs are great for Ukraine's

IDPs, but ACN has supported a number of Church projects (see map). Thanks to your generous love we are helping the Church heal the wounds caused by conflict and crisis. ✚



Houses in Donbas, burning after a missile attack in 2018.



Spiritual healing: Praying with the families that fled east Ukraine.



A mother and child who fled from Donetsk.

## Helping poverty stricken families in Crimea

**With incomes plummeting and costs soaring in Crimea, Bishop Jacek Pyl of Odessa-Simferopol made a heart-felt plea for vital help for poor families. Following its annexation by the Russian Federation, Crimea has been affected by the same crippling poverty which, Bishop Pyl told us, means that 80 percent of Russian families are struggling to buy basic necessities.**

In the Crimea, the minimum cost of living has been set at 13,890 rubles, but Bishop Pyl added: "Most pensioners and disabled have only 3,000 rubles for food – which is simply impossible to live on – they are forced to ask for help from children and grandchildren, sell their old things at the market, or even dig in rubbish dumps, just in order to survive."

Bishop Pyl wants to reach out in love to those who are struggling, and appealed to ACN to back an emergency programme helping poor families survive this difficult period. The diocese will focus on providing food, hygiene products and medicine, and with COVID-19 infections



An elderly couple who receive help from the parish once a month.

rising during the winter months – as well as flu and bronchitis – medical aid is more urgent than ever.

The prelate said: "People who would have been fine previously now find themselves in a difficult situation. Old people only have small pensions and prices are rising. Many young people have lost their jobs because of the pandemic."

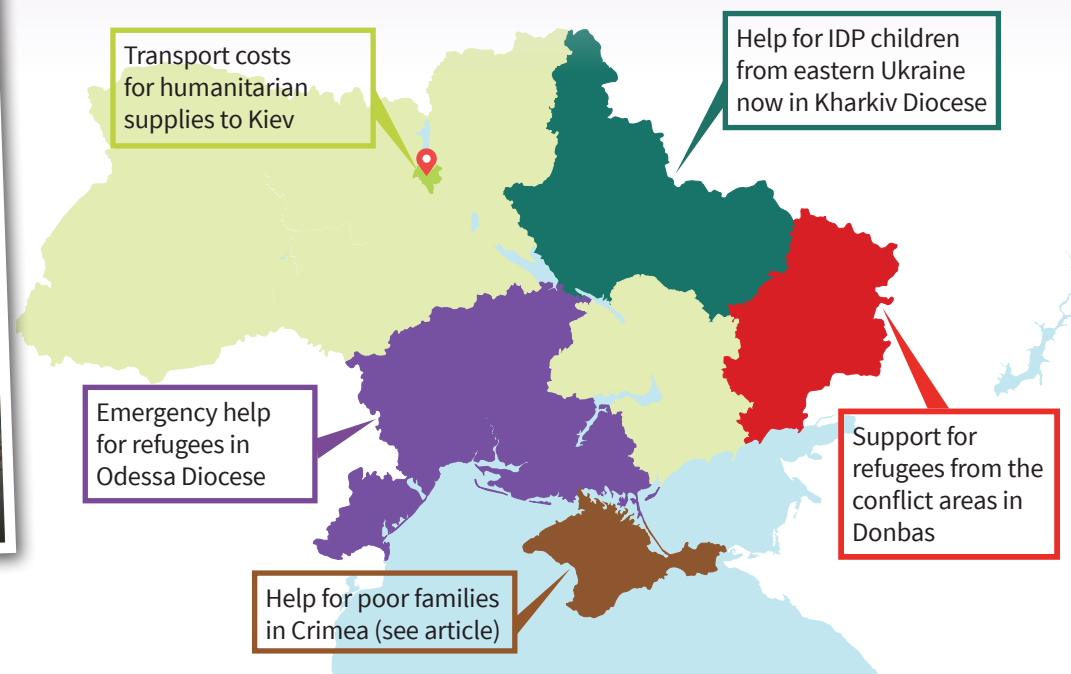
ACN has supported several projects with Bishop Pyl, including holiday camps to keep children off the streets. The two

"Holidays with God" camps helped them avoid "the risk of becoming addicted to... drugs or alcohol" according to the prelate. The ongoing challenges in the peninsula mean your support is vital.

Encouraged by your solidarity and prayers, Crimea's Catholics have conveyed their deepest gratitude to ACN's benefactors for the help we have already provided. Please help us to offer the support they so urgently need in these challenging times. ✚

Bishop Jacek Pyl.

**ACN has renewed its emergency help for the parts of eastern Ukraine affected by armed conflict and for Crimea. Since 2014 ACN has supported a number of projects helping those affected including:**



A woman from Lobanovo village, Crimea receiving vital help from the Church.



# You have been the hands of Christ

Neville looks back on his time at ACN



St George's Cathedral, Lviv being repaired in 2000.

**Before the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, I used to smuggle books into the countries behind the Iron Curtain. At the time I was still an Anglican clergyman, but meeting priests and laity who had been imprisoned and suffered for their faith, and who had seen others die for Christ, convinced me of the real vitality of the Catholic Faith.**

I was finally received into the Catholic Church in October 1990, in the very chapel in Littlemore where St John Henry Newman was received by Blessed Dominic Barberi. God had also answered the question of how I would support my family after I left Anglicanism. On the final day of a novena of prayer to St John Henry Newman, I met the then director of ACN (UK), who was leaving

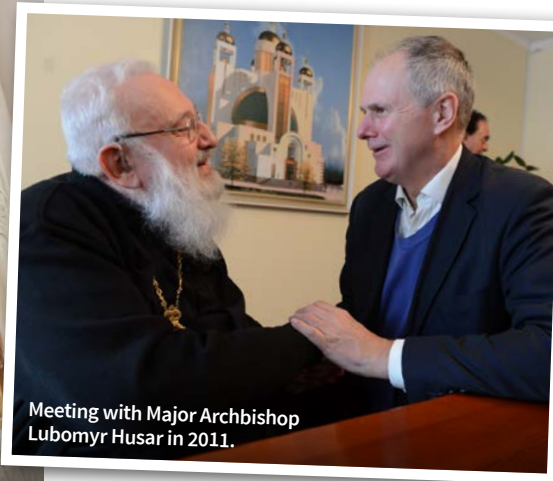
and told me the charity was looking for a replacement. Starting that novena I had no way of knowing that God was about to call me to another thirty or so years supporting the suffering Church.

The early years of my work in Aid to the Church in Need focussed on offering vital support to rebuild Christian life in Eastern Europe. Communism had just fallen, and the Church in former Soviet countries was coming out of the catacombs. The priests, religious and lay people had the fire of the Faith burning within them, but needed help from abroad to realise their vision.

In March 1991, the head of the



A seminarian helping install a new mosaic in a church in Bryukhovychi in 2022.



Meeting with Major Archbishop Lubomyr Husar in 2011.



Young girls receiving Child's Bibles in 2010.

Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Cardinal Myroslav Lubachivsky, returned from exile and ACN helped rebuild the Church. Today around 85 percent of Ukrainians are Christians – 11 percent are Catholics, but the help from ACN is vital to support the Church as it reaches out to those who are suffering. As you will see in this report, today the needs are greater than at any time since the fall of the Iron Curtain.

The words of one late, heroic bishop to me back in 2001 are still applicable today: "Your help is our existence! Without your aid we could not do even 10 percent of what we do. Some priests have nothing in the parish and we finance them by Mass stipends. You are the Amen and the answer to our prayers."

ACN has helped the Church get back on its feet throughout Eastern Europe. Russia suffered terribly during the Soviet period, and our work there is helping to heal the scars left by decades of atheistic Communist oppression. In 2017, I visited a rehabilitation centre for recovering drug addicts in Sapernoye, 65 miles north of Saint Petersburg, being run by Russian Orthodox priest



The workshop of the Sapernoye Rehabilitation Centre, which I visited in 2017.

Father Sergij Belkov. The centre is quasi-monastic, with a strict rhythm of prayer and work, and they pray for ACN's benefactors every day. Our ecumenical work in Russia has been going on for almost 30 years now, and following a direct request from Pope Saint John Paul II ACN has been committed to supporting and promoting dialogue with the Eastern Orthodox Church. As Pope John Paul II wrote in *Oriente Lumen*: "The Lord's call is to work in every way to ensure that all believers in Christ will witness together."

And in many parts of the world this common witness of faith between the Catholic Churches and the other ancient Churches can be seen in situations of



Distributing aid in Erbil, northern Iraq, with Chaldean Archbishop Bashar Warda.

persecution and suffering, and I have been privileged to see first-hand how the Chaldean Church (another Eastern Catholic Church) worked with Syriac Orthodox and others to help those Christians displaced by Daesh (ISIS). Similarly in Lebanon, the Melkite Greek-Catholic Church (yet another Eastern Catholic Church!) has worked with its

Greek Orthodox counterparts to provide support for Christian refugees from Syria receiving no help from international aid bodies, such as the UN.



The beauty of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Liturgy.

As I approach my retirement, I would like to thank you, ACN's benefactors, for your support over many years. Please continue to keep the Christians of Eastern Europe in your prayers, and in your love, as they face continued challenges and an uncertain future.

To conclude, I would like to share a story I heard in a homily given in Ukraine. The priest said: "There is a story about a special crucifix. Jesus Christ was shown on it without his hands. And every time one prays in front of that crucifix, after concentrating on the face of Christ, your eyes are slowly drawn down and you could see the words at the bottom: I do not have hands. But I want you to be my hands in this world."

Thank you for having been the hands of Christ tending to the suffering Church over all these years. I know you will continue to be his hands for many years to come. ✝



The hill of crosses, to the north of Šiauliai, Lithuania.



# Sisters continuing to serve – despite COVID-19



One of the Sister Servants of Mary Immaculate in Boryslav tending to a seriously ill woman.

In my visits to Ukraine I was always struck by the sacrificial work being done by Sisters. Whether they were helping the priests in parishes or working in hospitals, orphanages, schools or elsewhere they were the workhorses of the Church.

But the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that Sisters who would not normally need support are now facing a very different situation. Sister Renata Nuckowska from the diocesan commission for religious orders in Kiev and Zhytomyr Diocese wrote to ACN, saying: "The pandemic has brought with it a great deal of uncertainty, anxiety, fear and insecurity which has affected not only the world around us but also our communities."

With Church attendance severely restricted, and the diocese's income having dried up, it can no longer afford to support the Sisters – but they still need to heat their convents, buy food, and cover other costs.

Sister Renata wrote to ACN asking for urgent help to support 138 religious Sisters from 22 different religious

communities in Kiev and Zhytomyr – and how could we say no?

Even with parish attendance having declined, Ukraine's Sisters are more needed than ever. An almost constant stream of people are knocking at the convent doors seeking counsel, support or prayers. The Sisters supply a sympathetic ear, listening to their fears and concerns.

And they are still carrying out activities such as teaching catechesis and preparing the faithful for the Sacraments, their work has just gone online.

Sister Renata added: "Our Sisters are praying the Rosary daily for an end to the pandemic and are constant in their Eucharistic adoration before the Lord – they draw graces above all from the Eucharist. We also remember in our prayers all our benefactors who have made it possible for us to carry out our work."

ACN is planning to help with more than £55,000 in order to assist those 138 Sisters as they faithfully serve God and his people in the midst of the pandemic – but we need your love to help us fulfil our promises. 🙏



Sisters visiting in Krasnoyarsk, Central Siberia.

## Across eastern Europe, Church ministers during COVID crisis

**Not just in Ukraine, but across eastern Europe, ACN has been providing life-giving aid to help the Church confront the coronavirus pandemic.**

In Siberia, Russian Sisters have gone to the faithful during restrictions, carrying out the pastoral visits to those in special need, including the elderly.

In Belarus, we are also supporting the 62 Sisters in Minsk-Mohilev diocese, who are providing other vital aid – especially for the sick.

And throughout eastern Europe we are providing Mass stipends – which are a crucial lifeline when churches are shut or only allowed small congregations due to safety measures, and collections have dried up.

Your help is reaching the Church throughout eastern Europe. 🙏



One of the Sisters in Minsk-Mohilev.



Ringing the bell to summon the faithful in Akhaltsikhe, Georgia.

## Stewards of God's Mysteries during the coronavirus crisis

**"Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the life of our community has been restricted. But our church in Czervonograd remains open all day so that the faithful can pray and I am present to give the sacraments of Confession or Holy Communion."**

So said Fr Mikolay, the Roman Catholic parish priest in Czervonograd – one of the priests receiving essential PPE (personal protective equipment) as part of an emergency aid package from ACN to help the Church continue ministering to the faithful more safely during the coronavirus crisis.

In addition to celebrating Mass – to greatly restricted congregations – priests continue to provide other essential pastoral care including visiting the sick and the elderly, and giving the last rites. After medical

personnel, priests are the most at risk group in Ukraine during the pandemic. But they are stopping at nothing to support the faithful during these times of trial.

Churches are open – but that means safety measures must be put in place to protect the faithful. Fr Mikolay said: "In the church we – priest and faithful – have to wear masks and disinfect our hands. We clean and disinfect the church... In these difficult times, we must take care of the faithful by serving them on the path of salvation, and we must also ensure that they remain safe in the Church."

You are helping to provide essential PPE, so that priests can continue bringing the love of Christ to the people during the pandemic. Only through your ongoing support can the Sacraments be brought safely to the people. 🙏



Fr Mikolay ministering to the faithful during the pandemic.



# Without your help I couldn't study for priesthood

**"I have always wanted to become a priest since I was a child – and now I am here, I thank God for this wonderful opportunity to study in the seminary."**

The future of the Catholic Church in Ukraine lies in the hands of young men like Lutsiv. Thanks to you, Aid to the Church in Need is able to support more than 900 seminarians in Ukraine – all of whom are devoted to serving God and their people.

Seminarians used to live, study and pray in an old Communist camp – eight or even nine of them sharing dilapidated

rooms that were freezing cold in the winter. But ACN has supported the building or rebuilding of all Ukraine's seminaries, and today there are six Eastern Catholic and five Roman Catholic seminaries.

Young men like Lutsiv bless you for your support and continue to remember you in their prayers: "I am deeply grateful to all of our benefactors, because our priestly formation would have not been possible without help from abroad. May the Lord reward you for your generosity!" 🙏



## Seeds of Faith are flowering

**More and more young women are choosing to dedicate their lives to God and joining contemplative orders like the Sisters of the Protection of the Holy God-bearing Virgin located in the heart of Lviv's old town.**

They worship God in their prayers and in their works, painting icons, embroidering vestments and teaching religion to young children at the neighbouring school. ACN has supported the Sisters over the years, including help to train novices.

Vocations are blooming – and ACN has helped to sow the seeds. Sister Hlykeria told me "In 1989 I wrote and asked for a Child's Bible from Aid to the Church in Need. It was the first time I felt that someone had heard a request of mine and responded to it. I am now a Sister here.

"In their gesture of goodwill your dear supporters are spreading the glory of God. Please hold on to your faith – and even in your difficulties please know that we remember and pray for you."

She added: "Thank you for all your help... May God reward your people ten-fold for their generosity and give them grace to continue to help them grow in goodness and love." 🙏



Sisters in the convent garden.



Sister Hlykeria.



Sisters in the convent garden.



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