



Restoring Dignity, Inspiring Change.

ICMC Secretariat
1, rue de Varembe
P.O. Box 96
CH-1211 Geneva 20
Switzerland

Tel: +41 22 919 10 20
Fax: +41 22 919 10 48
Email: info@icmc.net
www.icmc.net

FOLLOW US ON:    

Presentation by
Rev. Msgr. Robert J. Vitillo
Secretary General of the International Catholic Migration Commission
and Convener of Catholic Response for Ukraine Working Group
at Synod of Greek Catholic Bishops,
Przemyśl, Poland, 09 July 2022

Your Beatitude, Your Eminences, Most Reverend Bishops, Reverend Fathers, and dear sisters and brothers in the Lord Jesus,

I must begin by thanking you for the honour of addressing you today. I am very sensitive to the great burdens and responsibilities that you are carrying for your faithful people throughout the world, and, most especially during this time of great trial and suffering for you and all the people of your beloved country.

And it is for this very reason that I am so grateful for your kind invitation to this august Synod. I come to bring the solidarity of the organization for which I am privileged to serve as Secretary General, the International Catholic Migration Commission. This organization, founded by the Venerable Pope Pius XII in 1951, which enjoys public juridical personality granted by the Holy See, is a network of Catholic Episcopal Conferences and ecclesial structures of similar juridical status that respond to the needs of migrants and refugees in every region of the world.

I come as well to convey the deep concern and commitment of the Working Group calling itself “The Catholic Response for Ukraine”, or “CR4U”. In early March, at the encouragement of officials of the Vatican’s

Migrants and Refugee Section, the leaders of global and European regional Catholic-inspired humanitarian and pastoral organizations met to share their findings and action already undertaken during the first days of the conflict. Since that time, representatives of Caritas, Jesuit Refugee Services, International Catholic Migration Commission, the Sovereign Order of Malta, DePaul International, the Knights of Columbus and Stella Maris Organization, the Councils of Episcopal Conferences in Europe, and of the Episcopal Conferences in the European Union countries have participated in regular meetings.

These ecclesial bodies and organizations have pledged to share information on their respective ongoing efforts to relieve the suffering of those affected by the senseless invasion of Ukraine – both of the local populations and displaced persons in the country and of those Ukrainians who have sought refuge in both neighbouring and far-distant countries. They also are committed to seek your wise and holy counsel on the yet unmet and newly arising needs of those affected by this war, including basic living needs, shelter, medical care, and education; to provide protection; and to accompany them with mental health and psychosocial support and spiritual care. Areas of particular attention among Working Group members include humanitarian assistance; advocacy, data- and information- sharing; spiritual care; and communications

Of course, our respective organizations are rooted in the Teaching and Tradition of the Catholic Church, the theological virtues of charity and justice for all persons in need regardless of their religious, social, ethnic identity, and of respect for the sacredness and dignity of human life from conception to natural death. We also recognize and jointly affirm the responsibility to respect and protect our common earthly home which was created by God for our use and for our integral human development.

Weekly reports are provided to the Working Group members and other interested parties in relation to both United Nations and other multi-lateral actions. We meet on a bi-weekly basis and collaborate closely with relevant offices of the Holy See, including the Secretariat of State, the Permanent Missions of the Holy See to the United Nations, and other International and Regional inter-governmental bodies, and the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development. Overall, we are guided by the principles and guidance on response to both natural and human-made emergencies that have been developed by international humanitarian agencies. We have committed ourselves to respond to the present needs of the Ukrainian people but, at the same time, not to neglect or diminish our responses to the human suffering currently being caused by many other conflicts, wars, persecution, and violence throughout the world, especially those that have been forgotten by the media and by many governments as well as civil society on the global level.

In the area of advocacy, many of our respective Working Group members joined other faith-inspired organizations to issue a *Statement on the arrival of refugees from Ukraine and the application of the Temporary Protection Directive*, related the urgent decision made by the European Council "... to activate the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) and to introduce operational guidelines for external border management to facilitate border crossings at the EU-Ukraine borders." They welcome[d] the mobilisation and flexibility of EU funding to be allocated towards the needs of Ukrainian refugees and found it "... encouraging that EU Member States have taken a pragmatic approach to help the people concerned, for example, by allowing people to choose which EU Member State to go to." They urged that "... all persons leaving Ukraine in need

of protection should be allowed to avail themselves of protection – irrespective of their origin, colour of skin ... or residence status.”¹

But no activity report or international advocacy statement could ever hope to communicate the lessons that I have learned during my one-week visit to Poland and Ukraine which I will conclude today. My “teachers” were the displaced persons and refugees themselves and your own bishops, priests, Religious Sisters and Brothers, and the faithful laypersons who are labouring, day and night, in the Catholic churches, seminaries, convents, monasteries and schools as well as in private homes and local government buildings to offer comfort and build resilience among those millions of Ukrainians who have lost their limbs, are nursing multiple physical, emotional, and spiritual wounds, and are deeply grieving the loss of life and of property in so many parts of Ukraine that has been subjected to such terrible violence.

Without exception those being served by the local Churches in Ukraine and in Poland expressed profound gratitude for having been received with such gentle care. One woman pointed out that food and shelter was not enough since they also needed to ease their hearts, minds, and souls and that they had found much loving care at this seminary where she had sought protection and shelter.

We heard similar stories at a local Church-run schools and in many other religiously-inspired facilities and programmes. All those offering such testimony were keenly aware that they might have to leave these facilities when regular school sessions would resume. They pointed out the impossibility of returning to parts of the East, which

¹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/moldova/statement-arrival-refugees-ukraine-and-application-temporary-protection-directive> , 23 March 2022.

now have been occupied by an invading power and noted that many of their homes had been destroyed. One couple brought out photos of their bombed home and said that they did not know how to start over again.

The sights, sounds, and feelings were not always easy to encounter during this several-day visit. But tenacity and resilience of these forcibly displaced people renewed my faith in the human dignity that God gifted to each of them -despite the suffering and loss to which they have been subjected.

And I carry back to the fellow members of our CR4U Working Group my firm belief in our need to redouble our humanitarian partnership with the Church communities in Ukraine and in surrounding host countries. I also will inform them of some special needs which perhaps were not considered sufficiently in our respective appeals for aid which we launched to our respective donors. These include the need for more capacity-building among seminarians, clergy, members of religious congregations, and laypersons to provide focused psycho-social and pastoral care to those whose lives have been torn apart by war and wanton destruction of life, limb, and property; the need for more specialized and intensive psychological care among those who become victims of post-traumatic stress disease; special attention and support to widows and orphans left behind during this war; assistance to address special needs of military chaplains and members of their respective families. There also is an urgent need to envision safe and voluntary return of refugees and displaced persons and future rehabilitation of economic and social life and holistic

development in an even stronger and more determined Ukraine which will and must flourish at the end of this terrible war,

I end with the words of Pope Francis, which inspire continuing partnership between the members of the Catholic Response for Ukraine Working Group and you the revered and esteemed members of the hierarchy in the Greek Catholic Church gathered in Holy Synod. May our Holy Father's lament, proclaimed his *Urbi et Orbi* Message for Easter, help us to labour without ceasing in the vineyard of Our Lord Jesus, who Himself was a refugee as a tiny baby, together with His Most Blessed Mother Mary and His foster father Saint Joseph: *"I hold in my heart all the many Ukrainian victims, the millions of refugees and internally displaced persons, the divided families, the elderly left to themselves, the lives broken and the cities razed to the ground. I see the faces of the orphaned children fleeing from the war. As we look at them, we cannot help but hear their cry of pain, along with that of all those other children who suffer throughout our world: those dying of hunger or lack of medical care, those who are victims of abuse and violence, and those denied the right to be born."*²

² Pope Francis, *Urbi et Orbi* Message, Easter, Vatican City, 17 April 2022.