

Church leaders join Ukrainian Americans in praying for loved ones, homeland

BALTIMORE (CNS) – Lighting a candle near the sanctuary inside St. Michael Ukrainian Catholic Church in East Baltimore on Feb. 27, Wendy Bozel struggled to contain her emotions.

Thinking of the sons of several of her friends serving in the Ukrainian army, Bozel offered silent prayers for their safety.

“They’re trying to protect the Ukrainian people,” Bozel, her voice cracking, told the Catholic Review, the news outlet of the Latin-rite Archdiocese of Baltimore. St. Michael is part of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia.

Bozel was among about 60 people, mostly St. Michael parishioners, who gathered for the first Sunday liturgy at their parish following the Feb. 24 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori offered solidarity with the Ukrainian community, greeting parishioners prior to morning worship and listening to harrowing stories of family members besieged in Ukraine. He strongly condemned the invasion.

“It’s not just unjust,” Archbishop Lori told the media following his visit. “It’s evil.”

The archbishop said he wanted to be present at St. Michael to express “oneness” with his fellow Catholics. He prayed for peace and for world leaders to “take the steps that need to be taken to end this invasion.”

The archbishop also encouraged support for humanitarian outreach needed in the wake of war.

Many St. Michael parishioners have loved ones in Ukraine. They spent the days since Russia's invasion communicating with them via phone calls, email and social media.

"As of a few days ago, I know they were hearing a few bombs outside of their house," said Melanya Humeniuk, speaking of her cousins in Ukraine. "I just think it's all so unfortunate, unnecessary and just completely irrational. It's awful. It's horrible watching every day."

John Fedarcyk, a parishioner of St. Bartholomew Church, a Latin-rite church in Manchester, Maryland, who also worships at St. Michael, said the last several days had been stressful worrying about family members in Ukraine and Poland.

"I've been up three or four days, constantly looking at the news," he said. "I'm in contact with my family. They're scared. They know what the Russians did in World War II and before World War II with Stalin. And they believe that this will happen again."

Church leaders said supporters donated blue and yellow flowers – the national colors of Ukraine – to St. Michael. The flowers were placed in a vase in front of an icon of Mary, along with a note asking that Mary shield Ukrainian soldiers.

In addition to worrying about the war in Ukraine, members of Baltimore's Ukrainian community also expressed concern about the recent desecration of St. Michael's cemetery in Dundalk, Maryland, where 49 headstones were toppled several days ago.

"I'd hate to think it was a hate crime," said Steve Humeniuk, cemetery administrator. "I didn't see any notes, any spray paint or any sign of an intentional hate crime, but you never know. I'm just praying that this war comes to an end and this stupidity at our cemetery does not reoccur."

The same day Archbishop Lori visited St. Michael Church, police were at the cemetery conducting an investigation.

“My goodness,” Archbishop Lori said, “it’s heartbreaking. And I cannot understand why we can’t let the dead rest in peace.”

One day after Archbishop Lori’s visit to St. Michael, Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan also stopped by the church to offer his support during an hourlong liturgy attended by more than 150 people. At the end of the liturgy, the governor joined parishioners in lifting a large Ukrainian flag.

In neighboring Delaware, a capacity crowd filtered into the Ss. Peter and Paul Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Wilmington for a prayer service on a cool day with brilliant sunshine that stood in contrast to the violence and darkness of war in Ukraine.

Latin-rite Catholics, Ukrainian Catholics, Ukrainian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Protestant and evangelical leaders and followers and others in Wilmington filled the ornate church to offer together prayers for war-torn Ukraine and its people.

Peace is the goal of the worshippers, many of whom – like their counterparts in Maryland – have been in near-constant contact with friends and family in their Ukrainian homeland.

Among the many clergy and people of faith at the gathering were Father Joseph W. McQuaide, chancellor of the Latin-rite Diocese of Wilmington, and Father Volodymyr Klanichka, pastor of St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic Church in Wilmington. St. Nicholas is part of the Philadelphia archeparchy. Father McQuaide was standing in for Wilmington Bishop William E. Koenig.

“Ukraine is a peaceful nation and has tried to grow in faith and freedom,” said Father Stephen Hutnick, pastor at Ss. Peter and Paul.

Rabbi Michael Beals of Congregation Beth Shalom in Wilmington is director of the Delaware Council of Faith-Based Partnerships.

“We seek the comfort of believing that everything will be all right even in the face of insurmountable odds,” said Rabbi Beals. “Grant us the inner peace we so desperately seek.”

Elected officials from across Delaware joined members of multiple denominations.

“This is a difficult and very tragic time for our people,” said Father Klanichka. “Courageous people and a strong nation are protecting its land.”

Matysek is managing editor of the Catholic Review, news outlet of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Contributing to this story were Kevin Parks in Baltimore and Joseph P. Owens, editor of The Dialog, newspaper of the Diocese of Wilmington.