

Speech of His Beatitude Sviatoslav at the Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies in Toronto on February 25.

In the great Canadian tradition of welcoming those who have suffered at the hands of violence and evil, Canada has received nearly 300,000 displaced Ukrainians since the beginning of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. Your unity as a nation indicates a resolve to welcome the stranger and to stand against tyranny and international aggression. Your support contributes to achieving a just peace for Ukraine. For the goodwill and hope that Canada has shared with us, I express the profound gratitude of all Ukrainians.

Yesterday, the world marked the third anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In two days, we will also mark 11 years since Russia's initial act of aggression, its claim to Crimea and war in Donbas. Today, we stand potentially at the doorstep of yet another year of air raid sirens; another year of carnage, terror, and death. What will succeed in forcing Putin to abandon his plans: plans to destroy my people, my country, my Church; to obliterate an international order based on law and human rights, and to exploit what he purports to be the "impotence of the democratic world?" After three years of war, I can say with certainty: only our moral clarity, our unity in courage, and our joint decisive action, by God's grace.

This war has turned into a deadly marathon in which Ukrainians must sprint — not run — to avoid defeat. Today, I ask you to run with us — fast, firm, and fearless — toward a just peace. I come to you as a pastor of the Church, to encourage you to understand the true meaning of a **just peace**, and how your words, your actions, and your prayers can contribute to a safe and peaceful future for Ukraine and, in turn, for the West.

From the Synodal Letter of March 2024

A year ago, the bishops of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine published a letter to encourage their people during this time of strife. We emphasized that whatever force Ukraine uses against its enemy must be done in defense of the innocent and vulnerable, and that the highest priority for Ukraine on the path to ending the war is a **just peace**.

On this path toward a **just peace**, the Government of Canada (along with other Western nations) has generously donated billions of dollars for Ukrainian defense, economic, and humanitarian needs. Canadians may rest assured they are backing a just resistance and

that your aid is used properly and most effectively. Your contributions protect the innocent and provide for vulnerable Ukrainians across the country, of whom there are 13 million, a full 30 % of the population. For this life-saving generosity, the people of Ukraine are deeply grateful.

However, a **just peace** for Ukraine requires not only material support, but a unshakeable and unbending commitment to defending the truth. Ukrainians need the clear-eyed recognition by Western states of the type of violence that is being perpetrated against the victim. Throughout this war, lies have multiplied about the Ukrainian people, and foreign actors have used these distortions to excuse — and even support — Russia’s actions. These lies, beyond the bombs and the ammunition, have caused devastation to Ukraine, the Ukrainian people and their identity.

The Honour of the Name (Christ our Pascha, 946–947)

Ukrainians have a legitimate need to uphold a basic moral principle: “the defence of one’s honour and good name.” In the Bible, “to name” means to acknowledge God-given dignity. A name recognizes personhood. To name is to bless. To name is also to bestow a power. When God reveals his name to Moses in the Burning Bush, he shares with Moses the power that liberates captives. In the New Testament, God takes the name Jesus—“God saves”—for the sake of true peace: “to tear down the wall of enmity” between God and man and between the warring factions in the world (Eph 2:4). The great Ukrainian scholar and statesman Mykhailo Hrushevsky once said: “We are the people whose name has been stolen.” The defense of Ukraine, then, is to protect the God-given dignity of our people, of our name, in the biblical sense.

Russian propaganda — at the time of Hrushevsky and now — aims to discredit the name of our nation. It aims to convince the West that this current war should not concern it, that it is futile to impede Russia’s neo-imperial agenda and its expansionist, revisionist objectives. Russia portrays Ukraine as a “failed state,” a traumatized society, with no authentic national identity. Furthermore, Putin claims Ukraine is a threat to Russia, an aggressor, unwilling to conduct realistic peace negotiations and unreasonable in its insistence on a **just peace**.

Sometimes we Ukrainians are asked: “Don’t you want to stop the war? If yes, what or whom are you willing to sacrifice to stop the fighting?” It is indeed a difficult question, because it is not a question only of territory. It is first and foremost a question of **our people, our faithful, our children**. What compromise should we make regarding the dignity of our people? How many of our faithful should be deprived of their freedom of religion?

Allow me to formulate a few dystopian questions emerging from imagined, nightmarish North American scenarios. May such hellish scripts never become realities.

Thus, in the United States, one might ask:

“If pressed by overwhelming power propagating a racist policy, how many Afro-Americans are you ready to return to slavery?”

In Canada one could theoretically ask:

“Are there any circumstances in which Canadian authorities would again mandate taking indigenous nations’ children away from their parents in order to assimilate them into a colonizing culture?”

But crimes against humanity, torture, and bondage are the fiendish reality of the Russian war and occupation. Abduction of tens of thousands of Ukrainian children and their brainwashing to hate Ukraine is a constituent element of Russia’s Orwellian social policy. Colonial neo-imperialism that resorts to genocidal strategies is exactly what today’s “Russian world” is all about.

As we repeated to the world yesterday in our synodal statement, Ukrainians will never return to a colonial status. Ukrainians will never submit to genocidal policies. Our people will not surrender their cultural, religious and social liberty. Ukrainians will never sacrifice their children.

Russian authorities propagandize the existence of the *Russkiy Mir* — or the Russian World — an ideology that envisions the privileged moral civilization of “Holy Russia” against the “corrupt West.” *Russkiy Mir* proposes Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, as its birthplace. It is where Prince Volodymyr of Kyiv consecrated his nation of Rus’ by mass baptism on the banks of the Dnipro River in 988. Therefore, Russia’s prolonged insurgence into Ukraine aims not simply to conquer territory but to rewrite history and to instrumentalize religion at the service of this ideology. To assert the myth of *Russkiy Mir* requires the eradication of Ukraine. Ukraine’s very existence testifies that *Russkiy Mir* — and its claim to a “holy origin” — is a baseless and blasphemous fiction. To build its empire, Russia must annihilate the name of Ukraine.

In support of their agenda, Russian media and propaganda outlets have disseminated lies about Ukraine. Regrettably, this diversion has deluded respected scholars, public intellectuals, and politicians in many Western countries. For the sake of their own security, Western states must examine how malicious regimes can abuse freedom of speech and distort the truth while avoiding accountability. These rights require protection, since lies aimed at the extinction of a free people are never permissible.

Let us not be deceived about the ends Russia and Putin pursue. Putin has unambiguously, explicitly expressed his genocidal intentions and geopolitical goals. In other contexts, Putin has brutalized populations to achieve those goals. He thinks nothing of manufacturing chaos and division in societies aside from his own, occupying parts of Georgia; razing the Chechen capital, Grozny; sending state-funded Wagner mercenaries to terrorize people in African states; and demolishing Syrian cities, forcing millions of men, women and children to flee their homeland. In each of these contexts, Russian and Russian-sponsored soldiers committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. These soldiers disregarded millions of lives to later receive high military honors from Putin.

Putin's motives also impact the Church I lead directly. If Russia succeeds in occupying Ukraine, our Church will be liquidated — again! In the past three centuries, each time Russia has occupied lands inhabited by Eastern Catholics, Eastern Catholics have been forced to convert to Russian Orthodoxy, were driven into exile, or sent to perish in the Gulag. In God's Providence, we have survived each attempt at annihilation and we live to witness to the truth of the Gospel.

In Ukraine, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is an integral part of society. Our commitment to be close to our people on the front lines comes at a high cost and at great peril. Russian troops have destroyed almost all our parishes in Russian-occupied territories in eastern Ukraine. They have confiscated our churches and monasteries and looted our property. Last June, two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests, both Redemptorists — Father Bohdan Heleta and Ivan Levytsky — were restored in their freedom after more than 18 months of imprisonment, torture, and humiliation at the hands of the Russian military.

Ukrainian solidarity and resilience have come at a price. But there is no other choice in the face of evil. We must continue to speak these truths, defend the sanctity of human life and the honour of our name, of our very identity. We know the great risks involved, but we maintain our resolve, trusting in the Lord's promise: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

Ukrainians Desire True Peace

I continually wrestle with the pain of my people and their feelings of abandonment and isolation amid such destruction. As a pastor, I share in the grief of those families — tens of thousands — whose loved ones have been killed or injured in this war, and of the millions who have been displaced from their homes and have lost everything. I have seen their broken hearts, their shattered spirits. If you could see their faces, you, too, would know that all they desire is a **just peace**.

Since Ukrainian independence in 1991, the Ukrainian people have demonstrated their desire for peace through concrete actions on the global stage. As Pope Francis has noted — and so many people have forgotten — just three years after independence, in December 1994, Ukraine disarmed its nuclear arsenal, which at that time was larger than that of the United Kingdom, France and China combined. A courageous step such as this would deserve a Nobel Peace Prize.

As well, despite its history of Soviet oppression, Ukraine has worked to replicate the values of Western stability, rule of law, and human rights. Ukraine experienced peaceful revolutions in 1990, 2004, and 2013, and demonstrated its profound commitment to democracy and freedom. We assured freedom of the press and public expression, religious freedom, and the peaceful coexistence and fraternal collaboration between churches and religious organizations. Our country conducted peaceful transitions of power from one freely elected president to another — until Russia disrupted our democratic cycle by trying to impose its autocratic ways. Today, the free world recognizes that Ukrainians hold to principles of freedom, even during a time of martial law, despite the centralizing influence this tends to have.

Ukrainians — who are enduring untold sufferings, losing family members and homes, and crippled and traumatized by the cruelties of war — crave and long for peace. We want peace with all our hearts and all our souls. Those of us who are believers in Christ may take heart in the promise that “blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God” (Mt 5:9). But we don’t want just any peace — we want a **just peace**, as sustainable peace, one that does not compromise our name. A **just peace** first requires the honest recognition of the violence and dehumanization that has befallen the Ukrainian people. This will be impossible if we do not have the support of those Western nations we have sought to emulate in creating a society that promotes law, justice, and human dignity.

Conclusion

My Canadian brothers and sisters, I understand that a war happening thousands of kilometers away can be hard to comprehend. I understand that you may believe that the stakes are not as high for you as they are for the millions of Ukrainians who do not know what tomorrow will bring. But I want to tell you that this war is closer to Canadians than you may think. New Ukrainian immigrants to Canada, whom you have welcomed and integrated into your schools, workplaces, churches, and communities, bring this reality home. Scores of Canadian volunteers have also risked their lives to care for those in Ukraine. The war in Ukraine is an offense against world peace, which is a value Canadians hold dear and work to promote around the world.

Let us also not forget that Ukraine fights on behalf of democracy. Russia's goal is not simply the annexation of Ukraine to fulfill its ideological claims. Russia aims to remake the world order. It wants to assert its arbitrary will to interfere in the affairs of other countries, whether through war or the support of authoritarian regimes. Should world leaders demand concessions of Ukraine without the promise of security, it would give permission to other authoritarian global actors to take what they want without any threat of retaliation. Yet, history proves that totalitarian regimes, such as Russia, are fragile. Sustainable peace can come about through the combined pressure of Ukraine and its allies to thwart Russian neo-imperial intensions. Ukraine and the entire free world can only win together or lose together.

Given all I have shared, I want to conclude by suggesting three concrete actions you can take within your spheres of influence in your daily life to help Ukrainians maintain their freedom, identity, and future. First, seek reliable sources of information on the situation in Ukraine. Whether encountering claims in the media, on social media or in personal interactions, think critically and ask the proper questions: Who is propagating the information and how reliable is this source? Engage with reputable cultural and educational organizations, such as the Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies here at the University of St. Michael's College. Through the institute, grow in knowledge about our history, our people and our faith, which impels us forward and gives us the trust, hope and strength to persevere. Take opportunities to be vigilant in speaking the truth in your own communities, countering lies and misinformation wherever they arise. St. Paul reminds us: "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbour, for we are members of one another" (Eph 4:25). I ask that you refuse to subscribe to or propagate the lies that have been contributing to the suppression, degradation, and elimination of my people. We must be sure that, in the face of lies, we are bearers of truth; in the face of despair, we are messengers of hope; in the face of violence, we are peacemakers.

Second, with the truth in hand, pray unceasingly for Ukraine, our people, and all who are suffering because of this war. Pray for an end to this war and a **just peace**; for our world leaders and for the conversion of those who propagate lies and commit atrocities, since God desires all to come to the truth.

Third, continue your generous, tangible solidarity. According to a recent assessment of the United Nations, prepared in collaboration with Ukrainian and international NGOs, almost 13 million people in Ukraine are in need of humanitarian assistance. Ukraine is halfway around the world, but the Ukrainian people are suffering and need the support of those who enjoy peace. In this way, throughout the past century, Canada has been a loyal and faithful

friend to peoples and countries in need of peace. Looking to our friends in Canada, we seek additional strength to triumph over injustice.

In this context, stand against the temptation to turn inward; the temptation that would have us forget our brothers and sisters in need in foreign lands; that would have us focus only on national concerns. Keep advocating for your government to provide the aid and resources we so desperately need. Continue supporting humanitarian efforts in Ukraine through trustworthy Canadian church-run organizations, such as Catholic Near East Welfare Association, CNEWA. CNEWA is connected to Ukraine's nationwide humanitarian network and directly funds programs that care for millions of internally displaced people, single-parent families, traumatized children, and vulnerable seniors and adults. There are many Canadian, Ukrainian, and international church and community organizations that help and that you know. Continue working with them.

Ukraine knows the Canadian spirit of giving, and we hope we can continue to rely on your support in our efforts to achieve peace. Remember the words of Jesus: "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40).

If we engage in these three activities together—to advocate, to pray, and to help—as one Body of Christ, we can stand firm against the darkness that comes with lies and violence and proclaim with unwavering conviction: Evil will not prevail. Truth, love, and justice — these will endure.

† SVIATOSLAV