A Year of War – Hardships and Courage

BY ROMELLA RYAN, PRESIDENT

February 24th marked the one-year anniversary of the invasion. It’s hard to imagine spending over a year in fear of what today and tomorrow will bring. Our Ukrainian brothers and sisters continue to experience unimaginable hardships and atrocities. We, at the Catholic Outreach to Northern Ukraine (CONU), are renewing our focus to assist refugees with mere survival; it’s the foremost on our minds. Our contacts on the frontlines throughout Ukraine consistently share how the winter months have been extremely difficult in their communities. Disruptions in power have brought on more darkness and loss of heat. The comfort from a hot meal for some is rare. Still, we are inspired by the messages of resolve that God will provide and the war will be won.

While we hear less from the media about the devastation experienced by the Ukrainian people and more about the questioning of our country’s involvement, we cannot forget about those innocent victims caught in the crossfire. They, like us, love their freedom. Their faith in God has been challenged but the test is showing a strengthening, not a questioning. The faithful are crowding the churches of the spiritual leaders working with CONU. In this newsletter, we present two articles about the amazing disciples and their work.

CONU’s highlights for support in early 2023 are:

- Financial assistance with providing meals and supplies for immigrants in the Lutsk community
- Funding for food and shelter of refugees in Lubny and Myrgorod
- Financial assistance with providing meals, fuel, medical treatment and supplies for war zone victims in the Kharkiv Diocese of Eastern Ukraine
- Initiatives to increase the awareness of CONU’s mission and fundraising needs

THANK YOU TO ALL OUR 2023 DONORS

May God bless you as you continue to support our Brethren in Ukraine during these cold months filled with hardships and challenges to find food and shelter. Your support is a special blessing during a time of dire need. You serve as the Lord commands:

“God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.” Hebrews 6:10

Refugee Support Continues for Faithful in Lutsk and Myrgorod

Since the beginning of the war in February 2022, the Catholic Outreach to Northern Ukraine (CONU) has kept in close contact with our partners spread across Ukraine. These leaders are facing major challenges introduced by the horrific impacts from war. They find themselves not only providing for the spiritual needs of the faithful but they now must focus on basic survival needs of displaced refugees and other victims of the unprovoked Russian aggression. Consequently, CONU is realigning our mission by providing funding as much as possible to help. In this article, we highlight two of the most notable leaders, the pastors in Lutsk and in the Myrgorod-Lubny area.

Father Pavlo Khomiak Leads Refugee Support in Lutsk

Father Pavlo Khomiak is a Diocese chancellor in Lutsk within the Diocese of Kharkiv, and former military chaplain. Teamed with Bishop Vitalii Skomarovski (a co-founder of CONU in 1994), he is passionate in his mission to support the immigrants in his community. To best understand the dire situation in Lutsk, CONU recently received this request: "this year the Kitchen for the Needy has generated an extremely high demand among the public. Due to the difficult financial situation and the large number of new immigrants, people massively stood in huge queues to get their share of food. … Unfortunately, we still live in conditions with constant power outages, people are losing their jobs en masse, and people who have managed to escape from the war zone have no financial means to live on. On some days, the number of needy people who were waiting for their portion of hot lunches reached … 800 people. Even massive air raids and planes circling overhead did not scare people who wanted one thing above all else - to eat."
CONU is grateful to be able to quickly provide assistance to this disciple. We are fortunate to be able to respond to this request but we have been challenged to increase fundraising to continue providing for such dire needs.

Father Khomiak reciprocated his gratefulness to CONU in a February 9, 2023 missive: “Let me thank you from the bottom of my heart for your great and steadfast support and help you provide for the needy people in Ukraine who are going through the ordeal of the war. I would like to inform you that we have received … will be used for the purchase of food and necessary utensils for the continuation of the Kitchen for the Needy project. Thanks to your support, people will be able to satisfy their hunger and warm up in the cold season, because now in Ukraine there are very big and severe frosts. Therefore, your support is extremely valuable and important for these people, and thanks to your care, we will be able to provide assistance to children of immigrants with disabilities ...”. Father Khomiak has been a miraculous blessing and shepherd to his flock in Lutsk.

Father Stanislav Tanatarov Provides for Spiritual and Subsistence Needs in Mygorod and Lubny

The situation for Father Stanislav Tanatarov, aka Father Stan, mirrors the challenges faced in Lutsk. As the pastor, he finds himself totally engaged in complementing the spiritual needs of the community with subsistence essentials of food and shelter. The pastor led the project of constructing the new church in Myrgorod, aptly named Church of Jesus of Divine Mercy. The church has now become a gathering spot for Ukrainians in need of basic life support. He leads daily masses for the faithful and then oversees the distribution of food and supplies after mass.

Some days, over 200 and as much as 450 packages of food are distributed to refugees. The basement chapel is often filled with food and other donations. When Father Stan is asked where everything comes from, other than CONU he jestingly replies, only from CONU, just like “fishes and loaves” from Jesus in the Bible. While CONU contributes, other organizations from Poland and the USA are also donors to this mission to help with the multiplication of the “fishes and loaves”.

There is no doubt Father Stan is a great leader of his parish and community. He is grateful for CONU’s help and has been an impeccable steward with funding by providing remarkable results. The winter months are the hardest times for his community. Food is scarce and expensive; shelter is limited; heat and power are often unavailable or unreliable. Disruptions are frequent. Recently he shared with our board of directors, this message: “Your donors ... and members of the Board of Directors can be proud of what your efforts and money does to help the people, especially the war victims and refugees. The money CONU and others give is saving lives.”
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Refugees line up for distribution of food and supplies in Myrgorod

Refugees receive supplies outside of church.

Single Mothers’ Home Continues to Inspire Hope

The Single Mothers’ Home has provided love and support for pregnant and unwed mothers for decades. The home originally resided in the Diocese of Kharkiv and was started by nuns from Poland Congregation of the Sisters of the Orionists. Sister Renata starting building a home in Korotych in 1996. She is joined by Sister Kamila who has served for 10 years in Ukraine; Sister Lydia for 5 years; and Sister Sabina for 12 years. They form a dynamic team and typically house around 20 single mothers and 30-40 children.

CONU is proudly a major and steadfast contributor to their operating costs. It’s sad to say but many of the children would likely have been aborted or abandoned were it not for this place of refuge. Most mothers were formerly homeless, many from orphanages themselves. The home provides a safe and healthy environment for the mothers to learn life skills for potential employment as well as how to care for their children. All mothers learn essential life and work skills with the goal to find employment and start an independent life. Education is also provided to the children. The inspirational sisters instill faith in God in both the mothers and their children. They help build a relationship with God based on unconditional love! The sisters, sometimes referred to as soldiers of God, also share their endless love with all residents. It can especially be seen in the children. Visitors are amazed at how happy the children are. The sisters provide videos (see our Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/CONUOrg/, and website, https://www.conuhome.org/, pages) with children smiling from ear to ear. When Ken Rackers, CONU’s VP, visited in October 2022, he remarked he has never seen children happier anywhere. He was constantly showered with kisses and hugs. Many sought opportunities to sit on his lap and enjoy his presence.

Children pause from play for prayer. The sisters engage the children with a balance of prayer, play, music, and religious and formal education.
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The sisters are resilient and tireless in all their efforts. With the outbreak of war and the intense fighting and bombing near their facilities in Korotych (western side of Kharkiv), they prayed for a new beginning at a location out of harms way. The prayers were answered by sisters from another order at the old monastery in Yazlovets, southeast of Lviv in Western Ukraine. Their relocation required 600 miles of travel. They are well reestablished. The houses in Korotych now provide for four refugee families from areas of active warfare along with five single mothers with children. The total is 28 people including 14 children. The sisters also support them.

Although the number of sisters is few, their impact is far reaching. The interaction with the children and activities are much more than indoor play and enjoying an outdoor playground. Education is paramount. There is a kindergarten teacher that provides formal education to the very young. Older children can receive online education or attend a local school.

The children are afforded a very full and joyful life! Although the alias for the home is the House of Hope, it could be easily be named the Home of the Joyful! It’s an amazing place for the children and mothers to thrive. It all starts with the absolute love that our Lord Jesus taught us!

Sister Kamila with a recent addition to the House of Hope.

The long relocation from eastern to western Ukraine to find safety.

The new location for the Single Mothers' Home, once a monastery.

Sister Renata, along with Ken Rakers, Vice President CONU, share love and smiles during Ken’s October visit to “The House of Hope”.
Sister Renata provides comfort to an ailing resident.

In the House of Hope in Korotych, the sisters sponsor daily classes for about 30 children from the village. The classes include such topics as sports, English, drawing and music, as well as individual instruction.

Until the war, Sister Sabina served the poor at the cathedral and lived in Kharkov. She is currently serving in Korotych.

The sisters not only work and operate the Single Mothers’ Home but also devote their time, energy, and fruits of their labors to the community. Pictured here, they work with other sisters in the small town of Karobeczka. Sister Kamila Frydryszewska described the situation there as: “A whole lot of damage. A lot of people were killed. Thanks to the gifts (received) from our Friends we were able to distribute humanitarian aid to the residents. Sad, tired faces, dead eyes... Out of work. ...We just talk to people. They tell us about the bombings, the deaths of a family of five, the destruction of a school.”

Sister Lidia leads in the care of the children. She led the kindergarten in Korotich until the outbreak of war.

Sister Kamila and her cohorts are such inspired disciples. Again in her words: “For me, this is a difficult but profound experience of intertwining suffering, evil, destruction and death with heroism, beauty, goodness and the Lord God's great presence...God, give peace to Ukraine. ...God, give peace to Ukraine.” God give strength and courage to these sisters to continue to carry out their good will. The sisters also help in their diocesan Caritas which provides humanitarian aid to about 4,500 people a week, including about 450 children.

Sister Lidia leads in the care of the children. She led the kindergarten in Korotich until the outbreak of war.

Bishop Pavel Gonczaruk of Kharkiv once told our CONU representative he visits the Home when he needs a “happiness recharge.” “This Home is a special place... it seems with God’s strong blessing.”
Our Mission: To develop a partnership of prayer and action with and for each other in both our nations, allowing ourselves to share both in giving and receiving the many gifts God has given us, experiencing a greater depth of our human dignity in the one Body of Christ.

Our History: Since 1995 we have brought help to orphanages and rehabilitation centers in Kharkiv; have financially helped in teaching the blind community in Kharkiv, the Vincentian Depaul Center in Kharkiv; have helped renovate several churches in Ukraine, among them: Sumy, Romny, Rehalsk, Shotska, Oleyks, Korasten and have funded new building of churches in Konotop and Mirgorod. In addition, we have funded hospital patient needs, and a soup kitchen in Sumy. CONU was stood up as a 501(c)(3) organization in 2000.

Our Current Focus: To help keep safe the Ukrainian people in three of our dioceses that have been in the center of the madness. Recently, significant funding is being prioritized to assist refugees who need protection as well as for the care of war victims placed in harm’s way. Due to the extent and duration of the impact from these terrible times, our ability to provide continued support to these efforts is in dire need. This also has forced delays and impacts on our foundational missions.

Our Leadership: We were blessed to be under the spiritual guidance and direction of Father Paul Wicker for over 15 years and are delighted to announce his role to be passed to Father Tom Jamka. CONU operates under an all-volunteer Board of Directors and 100% of all donations and gifts go to CONU designated recipients and projects.

More Info: To learn more about the CONU missions, projects, volunteers, happenings, and events, or to assist with our support to our Ukrainian brothers, please visit https://conuhome.org or https://www.facebook.com/CONUOrg/ or email greg.sullivan@conuhome.org