

Ukraine chaplain sees his mission as helping troops protect their humanity

By : Cindy Wooden, Catholic News Service, February 15, 2022



Rome — For Jesuit Father Andriy Zelinskyy and the soldiers he ministers to in Ukraine, the threat of a war with Russia isn't new : *“the war started eight years ago,”* he said. What is new, he said, is that the United States and the European Union are taking the threat seriously.

Father Zelinskyy is coordinator of military chaplains for the Ukrainian Catholic Church. He ministered full time with troops on the front in Eastern Ukraine from 2014 to 2018 before taking on the coordinating role.

Speaking from Kyiv with Catholic News Service Feb. 14, Father Zelinskyy said while global headlines are filled with dread over the Russian mobilization of troops and weaponry on Ukraine's border, most Ukrainians are just going about their business, and that is even more true for the troops.

One new thing for the Jesuit is that in December, the Ukrainian parliament passed a law establishing a military chaplain structure within the country's armed forces. Before 2016, he said, all of the chaplains were volunteers ; for the past six years some of them have been civilian employees, but starting in July they will be considered members of the military.

Father Zelinskyy had been part of an ecumenical and interreligious working group pressing for the law but running up against a *“post-Soviet mindset”* that either saw military chaplains as unnecessary or as a violation of the separation of church and state. Now he's involved in designing training programs for the ministers. *“I see my role as helping lean heaven toward the soldiers”* he said.

“We must help them choose good, seek truth, promote justice and contemplate beauty,” he continued. *“These are all essential for preserving their humanity. We can solve so many problems if we can preserve our humanity, especially in the chaos of war.”* And while he said his most vivid memory of the front is *“tens of kilometers of mud,”* Father Zelinskyy insisted beauty also can be found there.

He tells the story of moving with an officer from one position to another near Donetsk in the fall of 2018. *“We would move very early in the morning, because usually there was no fighting.”* The area was industrial, filled with defunct and abandoned factories, he said. They went inside one that was pocked with thousands of holes from bullets and missiles. *“The sun was just coming up”*, he said. *“It was like being in a planetarium and seeing a starry sky. It really was beautiful. You don't have to make it up, you just have to see it.”* Of course, holding on to one's humanity in war also means experiencing pain.

Before the war in Eastern Ukraine began, Father Zelinskyy was involved in a chaplaincy program working with military cadets in Lviv, in Western Ukraine. When the war started in 2014, those young men were on the front. *“It was very difficult to see friends die,”* he said. *“It wasn't just two or three. There were many.”*

“There is nothing worse than war,” he said. *“We have to treasure peace because if we lose it, it is very difficult to bring back.”*