



U.S. President Joe Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky walk next to St. Michael's Orthodox Cathedral in Kyiv Feb. 20, 2023. (OSV News photo/Gleb Garanich, Reuters)

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President Joe Biden's unexpected Feb. 20 visit to Kyiv, calmly walking alongside Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky as air raid sirens wailed in the capital, is being hailed as a surprise and a signal to the world.

Ahead of the first anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Biden arrived in Kyiv at 8 a.m. local time, following an unannounced 4:15 a.m. Eastern time departure the day prior from Joint Base Andrews in Maryland.

Biden spent more than five hours in Kyiv, meeting with Zelensky at Mariinsky Palace and walking to key sites in the city, including St. Michael Cathedral -- with air raid sirens sounding, a near constant feature of life for Ukrainians living there.

"We wouldn't expect that President Biden would come to the capital. Maybe Lviv, as it's safer, but Kyiv? It's really an amazing boost of hope and strength for us," Auxiliary Bishop Jan Sobilo of Kharkiv-Zaporizhzhia told OSV News. "People were shocked. Some even thought this was an early April fool's (joke), but it is for real, and somehow we all got the positive feeling that maybe war is finally coming to an end."

Metropolitan Archbishop Borys Gudziak of the Archeparchy of Philadelphia and head of all Ukrainian Catholics in the U.S. told OSV News Biden's decision to head to Kyiv caught him off guard.

"I was pretty much convinced (Biden) would come to Ukraine, but I was not sure he would go all the way to capital," Archbishop Gudziak said. "I thought he would meet (with Zelensky) somewhere near the Polish border because of security concerns."

Gudziak, who has just returned to the U.S. following his sixth visit to Ukraine over the past year, said Ukrainians are deeply grateful for what he called "outstanding" American support. He said one woman in Bucha -- where a mass grave of Ukrainian civilians murdered by Russian troops was discovered in April 2022 -- urged him to "thank all Americans and President Biden."

"There's nothing stronger than presence, and the presence of the president underlines his personal commitment, and that of the U.S. government and people, to freedom and democracy," Gudziak told OSV News.

Biden and Zelensky laid wreaths at Kyiv's Wall of Remembrance, which honors Ukrainian soldiers killed since Russia first invaded Ukraine in 2014 by annexing Crimea and arming a separatist movement in Ukraine's Donbas region.

"One year later, Kyiv stands. And Ukraine stands. Democracy stands. The Americans stand with you, and the world stands with you," Biden said in an address, according to reporters present.

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Biden's visit was "a very brave move," Eugene Luciw, president of the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America's Philadelphia chapter and a member of Presentation of Our Lord Ukrainian Catholic Church in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, told OSV News.

Seeing pictures of Biden -- the U.S.'s second Catholic president -- and Zelensky before St. Michael Orthodox Cathedral was particularly striking, Luciw said.

"I got this feeling, with St. Michael the Archangel, the patron of Kyiv, and with President Biden as a worldly sort of guardian of Ukraine -- to have both spiritual and earthly guardians in that image was very moving," he said.

Luciw also pointed out that St. Michael Cathedral was used as a field hospital during the 2014 Revolution of Dignity (also known as the Maidan Revolution), when scores of Ukrainians were killed and hundreds injured as Russian-backed Viktor Yanukovich, then president of Ukraine, cracked down on thousands of protesters who sought to align Ukraine with the European Union.

"The injured were treated there when hospitals were inaccessible," said Luciw. "This cathedral has always been symbolic. It stands regardless of how many times Ukraine has been attacked over the centuries. The bells have always rung, warning of an attack coming. The cathedral itself is a bulwark to Ukraine's defense, with St. Michael as the patron of Kyiv."

Luciw said Biden's visit "gave me the feeling that Ukraine is going to win, at a terribly massive cost -- but Ukraine is destined to win with all that strength behind it."

Fr. Roman Pitula, rector of the Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Philadelphia, said he was struck by the fact the visit coincided with the Feb. 20 memorial of Ukraine's "Heavenly Hundred" -- the 107 protesters killed during the Revolution of Dignity.

With fears that China could move to invade Taiwan in the coming years, Biden's visit had a message for more than Moscow, said Nicholas Rudnytsky, professor of history and dean of academic services at Manor College in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, a school with deep historical roots in the U.S. Ukrainian-Catholic community.

"Democracies are undaunted," Rudnytsky told OSV News. "A free people should not be allowed to be suppressed and dominated by a greater power. Might does not make right in the 21st century. The dogmas of the past need to be buried, and certain fundamental principles and rights we've all agreed upon since World War II cannot be violated."

Gudziak agreed, saying he hoped Biden's visit would "help many Americans refocus on the fact that Ukraine today is the epicenter of global change."

A victorious Ukraine will ensure that "tyranny and dictators will be humbled," said the archbishop. "The imperialism and colonialism of not only Putin, but that of other dictators will be undermined."

With a renewed Russian offensive expected soon, Sobilo said Biden's visit was "like a movie scene -- and we're hoping for a happy ending."

"I hope this visit is the beginning of the end of this war," said Pitula.