News

The destroyed Church of the Holy Myrrh-Bearing Women in Pisky, Ukraine, is seen Feb. 11, 2025, amid the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. (OSV News/Reuters/Alexander Ermochenko)

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Lay Catholics in Russia are unable to speak freely to Western media for fear of sanctions and reprisals. This interview was given to the National Catholic Reporter, on condition of anonymity, by a Russian graduate of Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University, now working as a historian and philosophy professor in Moscow.

***NCR*: What are your own feelings, and those of your Catholic friends, on this third anniversary of the "special military operation" in Ukraine?**

The war anniversary doesn't evoke any good emotions. I remember my first feelings three years ago — of horror and loss, a sense that reality had turned into a nightmare. These sentiments have been resurrected again with news that [U.S. President Donald] Trump has become [Russian President Vladimir] Putin's best friend and begun reproducing the rhetoric of Putin's propaganda.

But, in general, three years of war have left a sense of fatigue and doom, that justice is not achievable in this world.

Children's fairy tales and Hollywood movies accustom us to the idea that good people will always defeat the bad. But recent history tells us that happiness and justice do not belong in the here and now: They are relegated to the future kingdom of God as a promise and a hope.

Residents are seen at a site of an apartment building in Odesa, Ukraine, March 4, 2025, hit by a Russian drone strike, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine. (OSV News/Reuters/Nina Liashonok)

Fortunately, there are people in my circle who resent the "special military operation" no less than I do. Some have had the courage to express this quite openly in Russia. And while some have left the country, others are simply living in silence so as not to endanger themselves and their loved ones.

But this is a small element. Most Catholics currently reflect Russian society, with all the tensions inherent in it.

Have you been surprised by the sudden changes in U.S.-Russian relations?

Yes, the Trump administration's actions are shocking to the casual observer. I've heard some plausible explanations that attribute Trump's motives primarily to economics — reducing the costs the U.S. has incurred in recent years. In this optic, Trump has no ideology that would morally invalidate an alliance with Putin: He

simply follows the logic of profit.

But even so, it's absolutely unbearable to hear Trump repeating word for word the talking points that justify Russian aggression against Ukraine. There seems to be more to this than just a desire to restore supposedly beneficial ties. Judging by the reactions of some Russian government members, it seems they themselves are in shock.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and U.S. President Donald Trump have a heated exchange during a meeting in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington Feb. 28, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Brian Snyder)

Do Catholics feel under pressure politically and socially to support the "special military operation" and the policies of Putin, as Patriarch Kirill and other religious leaders have done?

Although I may not know all the circumstances, I don't sense any such pressure on Catholics. My Orthodox acquaintances tell me that even priests trying to resist

silently have ended up facing demands to participate in rebuilding the Donbas [territory in eastern Ukraine now occupied by Russia] or to collect funds for the front. I haven't observed such open submission to external demands within the Catholic Church. But it's obvious that our own priests are having to deal with parishioners who hold very different views, from anti-war to nationalistic.

Some Catholics have been mobilized or gone to the front themselves, and their relatives ask for prayers. Sometimes soldiers need to be buried, and priests cannot refuse these requests.

In general, Catholic priests are trying to remain neutral, paying attention to parish life and spiritual needs, and trying not to provoke their parishioners. Yet there are very different sentiments among priests as well, including nationalistic ones.

If the Russian state becomes ever more powerful, how could this affect the Catholic minority, including the many non-Russian Catholics who've come here from Africa, Asia and elsewhere?

This is a difficult question. The modern rules of life in Russia assume there are boundaries that cannot be crossed. Catholics were turned into a silent, inconspicuous minority back in the 2000s, making the quiet development of parishes possible in certain communities. During the recent war years, however, there've been cases of foreign priests being expelled, which suggests the rules have changed and the state has become more suspicious of foreigners.

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Nothing affects Catholic communities more than the loss of priests. But this reflects how foreigners are treated, rather than whether Russia is becoming more powerful.

In everyday life, Catholics don't evoke any particular emotions in people. But if the nationalistic component becomes stronger, we can expect more claims against Russian Catholics. "If you're Russian," they will be asked, "then why aren't you Orthodox?"

Is there perhaps some special role for the Catholic Church in today's Russia, as a force for dialogue and reconciliation?

I don't have much hope for our church as a significant influence here. Russian Catholics are as disunited as the rest of society. While some have adopted an active anti-war position, I also have old acquaintances who've gone to the Donbas out of patriotic conviction, criticizing Western countries and wishing a speedy military victory for Russia.

Since there's no dialogue between these people in the church, only silent coexistence, there's no chance for the Catholic church to serve as an authority in matters of dialogue and reconciliation.

Even when it comes to dialogue with state representatives, there's little chance that anyone in Russia will want to listen to someone who isn't part of the Orthodox Church.

If you had the opportunity, what would you say to Catholics in Ukraine, and Catholics in the West who are now critical and hostile toward Russia?

Catholics here honor the Fatima apparitions, in which a special place was assigned to Russia, then on the threshold of the Bolshevik revolution. The Virgin Mary, appearing to shepherds, predicted there would be great persecution. But this wasn't a reason to curse and reject: It was an occasion for greater prayer and dedication.

It seems to me that this example deserves to be remembered now, to strengthen prayers not only for Ukraine, but also for Russia, too, for both the Orthodox and Catholic Churches — that the good that remains in people does not fade away completely, but at some point becomes the basis for a deeper spiritual conversion.

Read this next: At 3 years of war, Russian Catholics reflect on the place of their small community