

Spirituality ON THE BATTLEFIELD

Father Andriy Zelinskyy SJ, the chief military chaplain for the Ukrainian-Greek Catholic Church, spoke to **John McManus** about how he finds a place for Ignatian spirituality on the frontline of the war in Ukraine.



Above (right) and opposite: Fr Andriy Zelinskyy SJ

It's now more than three months since Russian threats against its neighbour Ukraine morphed into a full-scale invasion – or as President Putin initially called it, a 'special military operation'. The attack has left thousands of people dead, with many more displaced, and has tested Ukraine's resolve – and those who are fighting for it.

Among those who've been on the frontline is Father Andriy Zelinskyy SJ, the chief military chaplain for the Ukrainian-Greek Catholic Church. Yet as Fr Zelinskyy tells me over the telephone from Kyiv, February's invasion was not the start of the war – that began, he says, in 2014, when Russia invaded Ukraine's eastern



provinces and annexed Crimea. 'The West decided not to notice it, hoping it would pass. In the same way that a child closes its eyes when it's done something bad, the West closed its eyes to the consequences of Donbas.' There are consequences to hiding from the truth, he says, in practical and spiritual terms. 'Sometimes we think we can define the truth, but we can only discover it, not appoint it. This war is full of spiritual meanings!'

Fr Zelinsky's current role is to coordinate the work of the military chaplains, who provide spiritual solace and direction to soldiers who are fighting for the existence of their country – and the safety of their families. Although he is forbidden from fighting, he has seen the carnage up close. As the first military religious chaplain admitted to a battlefield in 2014 (and the only Jesuit in the chaplaincy), he witnessed the conflict in Luhansk and Donetsk up close; but his association with the military first began in 2006 when he became a chaplain. 'I got to know lots of cadet officers at the time. I married them, and then baptised their babies. Then when war broke out, I asked for permission to go to Donbas, and I started burying those same officers.'



He describes 2015 as a 'period of shadow'. 'When a friend leaves your life, it takes a part of you with them.'

In what appears to have been a coincidence in political timing, the role of Ukraine's military chaplains changed in December 2021. Previously, they had served as civilians, but a new law promoted them to military staff. Which means, says Fr Zelinsky, that Ukraine is a post-Soviet society which has now admitted priests to its armed forces. Russia is also a post-Soviet society of course, but its trajectory has been

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very different to Ukraine's – as has its spirituality. 'Priests in Ukraine provide spiritual guidance, not propaganda – as some priests do in Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church has become part of the State apparatus.' Fr Zelinsky is particularly critical of the role played by the Russian Orthodox leader, Patriarch Kirill, who has supported the war.



Photo: Alina Komarova

I point out that Pope Francis has spoken to Kirill on the subject – but has that made any difference? 'The West sees the East through its own eyes,' says Fr Zelinsky. 'Kirill does not hold the same role as the Archbishop of Canterbury or the pope. He has no influence at all, he just blesses the armies. This is one of the most absurd wars in the history of humanity – there was no single reason for it. Civilians have been killed, hospitals and schools bombed. Kirill is blessing all of this. He hasn't expressed a single word of sympathy or compassion for the people of Ukraine, for Kharkiv, for Mariupol. He could have even just warned soldiers to be careful not to harm civilians.'

In May, Fr Zelinsky was one of thousands of military men and women who took part in a pilgrimage to Lourdes. He says the Ukrainian flag was cheered repeatedly. It's clear where much (though not all) of the world's support lies in this conflict, but how does he look after himself amidst the stresses of war? 'It's one of the most serious challenges. I'm armed with Ignatian spirituality, especially meditation – that's very helpful to me personally. The Spiritual Exercises are really about our internal dynamics.' He also must care for the other chaplains. 'It's important for the chaplains to talk, so they meet twice a year and go to a Marian shrine, and they also invite psychological experts along. St Ignatius tells us to talk to Jesus like a friend, and comradeship on the battlefield is vital – the art of comradeship can be learnt and it's essential.'

For Fr Zelinsky, Ignatian spirituality is about facing reality even amongst the worst circumstances. 'There is a space for the sinner, a space for broken, wounded people – it's a part of your life, your journey, your healing. It's essential to be a witness of hope, particularly as society crumbles around you. Someone whose light is not extinguished on the battlefield, who doesn't give into darkness, but is a witness to hope – that is the Jesuit calling.' ●