

Gerald O'Connell - What an Argentinian nun has seen on the frontlines of Ukraine after 18 trips.

The world has increased its supply of weapons to Ukraine, but it is failing to send the badly needed humanitarian aid in equal measure, according to Lucía Caram, O.P., an Argentinian nun living in Spain, who has already made 18 journeys to the war-torn country over the past 15 months, usually bringing humanitarian aid and returning home with refugees or wounded soldiers.



Sister Lucia Caram with Pope Francis

On March 10, 2022, I wrote a story for America about Sister Lucía's extraordinary journey, driving 2,000 miles in a minibus from her convent in Manresa — near the cave where St. Ignatius Loyola famously wrote the Spiritual Exercises — to Romania's northern border with Ukraine. She went to offer concrete help to refugees arriving from the country under attack. It was her first journey to the war zone, and she brought refugees back to her convent in Spain. I pick up that incredible story 15 months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine to report on how, since then, this tireless, courageous nun has made 18 journeys from her convent to Ukraine to bring several kinds of humanitarian aid to this "martyred people," as Pope Francis calls this nation of 44 million, 25 percent of whom have been displaced from their homes due to the almost daily Russian bombing. Some eight million Ukrainians are now living in exile as refugees while millions are internally displaced, and hundreds of thousands have been killed or wounded. Sister Lucía will set out on her 19th journey to Ukraine on June 9.

"I always say I was wounded by the war on that first trip, seeing what it was like, seeing people fleeing across the [Romanian] border [from Ukraine]," she said when she spoke to Spanish-speaking journalists, including America's Vatican correspondent, on May 24 in Rome.

"I was wounded by the war on that first trip, seeing what it was like."

She said she felt the pain even more on a subsequent trip when she was allowed into a military hospital. "I could really see what war wounds were like, seeing those mutilated young soldiers," Sister Lucía recalled.

From her convent, Sister Lucia has involved countless Spanish citizens, institutions and organizations in helping 4,000 Ukrainians leave the war-devastated country by creating "humanitarian corridors." Sister Lucía's Santa Clara Convent Foundation has taken in 1,000 people, "mainly mothers with children," over the past 15 months, she said. "We realized that the important thing was not to pick up people, but to welcome them, to accompany them. Many of them ended up having their fathers, their husbands, their sons [fighting] at the frontline, some of whom subsequently died. Of those we brought out, only 30 percent have since returned home. Most people are working now [in Spain]. We have many apartments where families have been taken in. We also have 17 shelters for refugees and for other people who are already working, providing for themselves."

"Now after 18 trips, I see that Ukraine has lost one or two generations. You go to the cemetery, and you see the graves multiply every time. I am struck by this," she said. She recalled that at the beginning of the war there was "a compulsive rush" to provide humanitarian aid, but that is no longer the case. "Maybe it is because of media fatigue, tiredness or whatever, but [in Ukraine] they tell me that humanitarian aid has decreased by 80 percent." And yet, she said: "I believe the situation is worse now than it was then. It's necessary to speak in the media about the victims and to request the sending of more humanitarian aid."

"There is a lot of talk about counter-offensive strategies, weapons, new ways of defending themselves, but the humanitarian aid is not arriving."

At the same time, the flow of arms into the country has continued. "Once, when we were bringing ambulances into Ukraine, we realized that next to us were trailers, about 40 of them, with containers marked 'Explosive USA,'" Sister Lucía recalled. "We were small next to those huge containers with arms. Now there is a lot of talk about counter-offensive strategies, weapons, new ways of defending themselves, but the humanitarian aid is not arriving."

"I believe that a country has a right to defend itself, so I will not go into the question of arms," Sister Lucía said. "But I also think the international community has to act at the same pace in providing humanitarian and relief aid, and this is not happening."

Sister Lucía is working with her network of volunteers to respond to that need for aid, particularly in the health field. Over the past 15 months, she has delivered 92 ambulances and claims "every ambulance saves more than 100 lives." She said the network has also provided a bus with eight bunk beds to move the wounded from the attacked zones. She also

delivered 61 generators to Ukraine during the winter to mitigate the lack of electricity and heating systems for hospitals and care centres when Russia was attacking the country's infrastructure. She is now seeking funding to enable her to provide at least three mobile field hospitals to Ukraine, ones that can be assembled or dismantled in half an hour, "to bring operating rooms and intensive care units closer to the battlefield or to the places of attacks," so as "to minimize the number of deaths and minimize amputations or irreversible losses."

Explaining why she decided to provide ambulances first and is now raising funds for mobile field hospitals, Sister Lucía said: "I learned that 40 percent of the seriously injured die due to lack of assistance. We saw that many people were dying because ambulances could not reach them. They were asking for ambulances. So first, we took one, then two, three, and soon I was encouraged to launch a challenge to send 30 ambulances...and then 60, and now we have sent 92 ambulances." Sister Lucía is now seeking funding to provide at least three mobile field hospitals to Ukraine, ones that can be assembled or dismantled in half an hour.

She has already brought no less than 60 badly wounded soldiers to Spain and had them treated in hospitals, often with great success, and is working to provide rehabilitation as well. She is able to provide treatment thanks to the generosity of many institutions and people in Spain and elsewhere.

The medical need in Ukraine, however, extends beyond wounded soldiers. Last week, Sister Lucía received a request through the Ukrainian National Institute of Health Management for vaccines, antibiotics and medicines for diabetes. She has also been asked to set up humanitarian corridors for oncology patients. She is doing all this, she said, "because the country has been devastated. Many hospitals have been attacked, many people have been killed or injured. The health centres and hospitals that have survived so far are really in a precarious situation."

She cited, for example, a "military hospital in Kyiv that had rooms to care for two patients in each room, but today these rooms are now occupied by five patients [each], and when you see these soldiers, these kids — I call them kids because they are so young — they are mutilated; they are missing an arm or both arms, or both legs or an eye. This war is so cruel and bloody." Moreover, "there are wounds that cannot be seen, that are caused by a shockwave, in the skull. There are many neurological wounds, and it is necessary to have neurosurgeons in the field hospitals for these types of head and spinal wounds caused by blast waves."

Sister Lucía: Humanitarian work has 'confirmed me in my faith'

This Argentinian nun, who has lived in Spain for more than 30 years, revealed that her involvement in this humanitarian work "has confirmed me in my faith." She noted that "in the face of great misfortunes, people often rebel and ask, 'Where is God in the midst of all this?'" But, she said, she has seen "what it means for the Ukrainian people to have faith, when all else has failed." She mentioned as an example a woman whom she met in a cemetery who told her that "she comes to the cemetery every day to visit the grave of her 18-year-old son, her only son, who was killed in the war." The woman confided to her, "I come here to ask God to take care of my son."

"In all the tombs [in Ukraine], there is a rosary."

"The faith of these people is so very strong," Sister Lucía said. She said she was particularly struck by their faith when she saw that "in all the tombs there is a rosary." She told Pope Francis about this, and he has given her many rosaries to bring to the people. "When I go there and give them one, they clasp it in their hands. It's as if faith is the only thing one can hold onto when all else is failing." When she talked to people on her trips to Ukraine, she said, "They tell you they want 'a just peace', and a 'just peace' means that the enemy, the invader, goes away from their homeland." "I think we have learned not to judge, not to pass judgments from afar," Sister Lucía said. "When your family has been taken from you, when you have lost your home, when you have lost your ability to plan a future, what's left to you? I believe the lives of these people are a sacred ground, and the only thing we have to do is not to go there as spectators but somehow to return home and bear witness to what is happening and to give voice to this reality."

Sister Lucia has visited Pope Francis many times and shared with him the tragic reality of what is happening in Ukraine that she has seen with her own eyes. She revealed to journalists: "Always when I talk with Francis, I see that he is suffering very much for these situations. I see he is so moved for the martyred people of Ukraine who are bleeding. I see he, too, is wounded by this war, and he is suffering at his impotence [to stop it]. He wants to do something. He is asking desperately — I should say, hopefully — to find a solution, to ease the suffering. At this moment, he is very focused on the issue of humanitarian aid." She said he always encourages her to continue the work she is doing.

She recalled that Pope Francis keeps repeating in his public prayers, "'Let us not forget the martyred Ukraine, a people who is bleeding and it is necessary to attend to their wounds.'"

"His words help me to continue asking people to provide humanitarian aid," she said.