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Mykhailo Cherenkov  
*Ukrainian Catholic University, Lviv*

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## **THE WAR IN UKRAINE AS A TEST FOR THE GLOBAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY: A TRIAL OF SOLIDARITY, FREEDOM, AND PEACEKEEPING**

**By Mykhailo Cherenkov**

Dr. Mykhailo Cherenkov is the vice president for strategy and education at the Association for Spiritual Renewal, Mission Eurasia's (formerly Russian Ministries) national affiliate in Ukraine, as well as a professor at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv. He served as Rector of Donetsk Christian University. He is a scholar in social theology and missiology.

Events in Ukraine are not only a cause for concern, but also a powerful challenge to Christian solidarity, the lack of which would be a betrayal of Evangelical principles. Solidarity with victims, defense of religious freedom, and restoration of peace—these are both needs and opportunities for participation.

First, the war in Ukraine threatens the religious freedom and religious diversity of the country. In the Crimea and the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, "Orthodox extremism" has become the reigning ideology and practice. Non-Orthodox confessions are discriminated against and persecuted. Our brothers and sisters are in need of our solidarity and intercession—through monitoring of rights violations, informational support, international advocacy, and financial assistance to the families of the repressed.

Second, the military action in eastern Ukraine has led to a real humanitarian catastrophe. Dozens of cities are destroyed and over 2.5 million people displaced—these are only the visible effects. The scale of the social, cultural, and psychological effects are much more difficult to evaluate. An effective response to these needs would be a coordinated international program of humanitarian aid, as well as the creation of special centers and programs for social adaptation and psychological help.

Third, the war continues not only because someone supports it, but because there is no vision for peace, no formula for reconciliation, and no unity among peacekeepers. Undoubtedly, the Church should play a key role in reconciliation, due to the trust of the people. International Christian organizations with relevant experience can be a significant help in the business of national and international reconciliation.

Obviously, the new Ukrainian government is not capable of handling the destructive consequences of war on its own. Ukrainian leaders have appealed multiple times to international institutions for help. In turn, leaders of Ukrainian churches have turned to the international Christian community in hopes of solidarity with their friends and brothers in defending freedom and peace in Ukraine.

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The tragic events in Ukraine proved to be a harsh test for local churches, and their ability to show solidarity with the Ukrainian people in defense of freedom and peace. Unlike the even bloodier events in Syria, the Ukrainian conflict is set in an Eastern European context, which is what makes it so horrifying: the participants in the conflict are two traditionally Christian countries, one of which is practicing aggression under an Orthodox banner, while the European Christian community is slow in showing solidarity with Ukraine, defending its freedoms, and restoring peace.

What are values worth if no one plans to defend them? If solidarity with the victim, freedom, and peace are no longer valued enough to risk well-being for, then after Ukraine, another European country could be next. On the other hand, if there is maximal Christian solidarity and empathy towards Ukraine and the defense of its freedom and peace, then this can be the start of a process of regeneration of those same Christian roots, of which obliteration we hear endless discussion.

Ukraine, whether it serves as a topic, story, or challenge, can change the fate of European Christianity. In turn, the European response to the Ukrainian challenge can change the fate of Ukraine. Ukraine's perception of Europeans depends on this response—whether they see them as true Christians showing solidarity or as uncaring lukewarm post-Christians. Nothing draws those closer than solidarity in trouble. Nothing divides like betrayal in time of need.

Solidarity with the victim, defense of freedom, and longing for peace together constitute a worthy Christian response to aggression against Ukraine. They also have a logical and moral consistency, which is worth holding to scrupulously.

First of all, in regards to solidarity, instead of premature talk of reconciliation with the aggressor and his side, it would be better to show solidarity with the victims. Without solidarity with your neighbor, without empathy and all-around support, dialogue about “peace on earth” will be a mere substitute for the main topic. We know not only from life, but also from Scripture, that “peace and security” can replace the truth, just as political correctness, calculated caution, and worldly wisdom can leave the victim without help from his neighbor. If I walk past a wounded man, my calls for forgiveness and peace are not worth a cent.

Secondly, freedom—this means to live, think and believe differently as one likes. Today it may seem that freedom has become too cheap, and discussions of it have become banal. However, when a real threat to the freedom of one's neighbor arises, all principles of good neighborliness and guarantees of help turn out to be empty. We need to remember that if the freedom of Ukrainians is not worth anything and the civilized world allows the strong to take away these freedoms, then not just the fate of Ukraine will be in question, but also freedom as such, including the freedoms of other European countries, some much smaller than Ukraine. At the same time, we must keep in mind that we are not only talking about

national sovereignty—there are other, more fragile personal and group freedoms in question. Expansion of the “Orthodox Russian world” and its “traditional values” threaten religious freedom and the confessional diversity of Ukraine, as well as any Western sympathizers, supporters of human rights, and non-Orthodox Christians.

Thirdly, reconciliation means not only an end to military action, but restoration of relationship, repentance, cleansing, forgiveness, and healing of wounds, memory, and conscience. Unquestionably, reconciliation will not be easy or quick. And without solidarity and freedom, reconciliation won’t be possible even in the long-term.

If solidarity does not protect the victim, then the victim will not only suffer, but will disappear, will be destroyed and wiped from memory. Solidarity does not save from trouble, but helps those who suffer to preserve their subjecthood. Solidarity stands against the self-confidence of evil, allows collective resistance to the aggressor and salvation of the disillusioned victim. If freedom is not defended, then the aggressor will have no one to make peace with, the victor will remain alone, and he, as is well-known, writes history. The battle for freedom only sharpens resistance, and in the end, it justifies it. Therefore, reconciliation is possible only in freedom, from freedom, and for freedom. Otherwise, it will not be reconciliation of free subjects, but rather a defeat of the freedom of the weak by the freedom of the strong, i.e., the crushing and death, the destruction and obliteration of the other free subject.

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Desperately seeking peace, we can’t forget other important truths, which serve as orientation points along this path. You can’t refuse freedom and you can’t refuse compassion. You can’t win a war by betraying your brother and refusing freedom. You can only lose, while at the same time losing your dignity.

The most dangerous illusion of our time is that by appeasement of the aggressor, you can avoid war, as though by the suffering of the innocent, you can buy prosperity for the rest. “While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them” (I Thess. 5:3).

Christian peacekeeping does not deal in principles and neighbors for the sake of appeasing the aggressor. Peacekeepers know the power of evil, but they also know the power of the solidarity of good people and they value freedom enough that they will never reject it in favor of survival. The Sermon on the Mount speaks not only of blessings for peacekeepers, but also for the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those thirsty for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, and those persecuted for righteousness’ sake (Matt 5). You can see that God takes the side of the poor, those who mourn, the meek, and the persecuted, showing solidarity with them and promising them blessings—the Kingdom of Heaven, comfort, and ruling the earth.

Modern peacekeepers should take this same side, as there is no third option. At the same time, we need to be merciful towards the other side. There is a need among peacekeepers for a thirst for truth and purity of heart.

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Events in Ukraine can be seen as a test for our Christianity, in light of modern challenges and long-known Evangelical truths. At the same time, today we need to think not only of Ukraine. Of course, we are interested in knowing what Western Christians think of events in Ukraine. But what is even more interesting is something else: what do Western Christians think of themselves in connection with events in Ukraine—how much do they value freedom, feel solidarity, and how ready are they to fight for peace? The question of Ukraine is put to every member of the global Christian community: do I believe in my own

Christian principles, am I ready to fight for them, am I capable of seeing Ukrainians as my neighbor and showing solidarity with them in their fight for freedom and peace; what am I ready to do here and now in response to the Ukrainian cry for help?