



The remains of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church of the Holy Martyr Cyprian and the Martyr Justina in Antonivka, Ukraine are seen after an Aug. 11, 2024 missile strike by Russian forces. (OSV News/Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church Information Department)

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ANTONIVKA, Ukraine — August 13, 2024

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Russian forces have destroyed another Ukrainian Greek Catholic church, while a priest at a separate parish is hastening to remove sacred items ahead of an expected Russian attack.

On Aug. 11, a Russian rocket leveled the Church of the Holy Martyr Cyprian and the Martyr Justina in Antonivka, located in Ukraine's Kherson region.

News of the strike, which took place on a Sunday, was reported by the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church on its information website that same day. The UGCC did not specify if there had been casualties.

Images shared by the UGCC showed the severely damaged remains of the Antonivka church amid rubble. Windows and doors had been completely blown out, with structural framing warped and twisted.

The UGCC noted that the Antonivka church had also been struck Aug. 9 by a Russian drone. Parishioners and area residents had managed to extinguish the resulting flames.

The parish, formed in 2005, originally worshiped in a residence, moving in 2012 to a private chapel in the rectory of Father Igor Makar. The now-ruined church had been newly built shortly thereafter, and was consecrated in May 2014 by Bishop Mykhaylo Bubniy.

In Myrnohrad, a city in Ukraine's Donetsk region, a priest and a volunteer worked Aug. 11 to save sacred objects and art at the Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, as Russian forces have shelled the area.

Father Ivan Vasylenko posted several videos and photos of the effort to his Facebook page, noting that "parishioners (have) all left the city."

"We consecrated, prayed. ... Today, people hugged, cried and already left," said the priest, who urged Myrnohrad residents seeking shelter to contact the Jesuit Refugee Service.

The "evacuation" of the holy items from the church evoked a "weird double sense," he said.

In a video included in one Aug. 12 post, Vasylensko showed the interior of the church and the items set to be rescued, saying, "Jesus, Lord, Our Savior, Jesus Christ, the Blessed One — it just hurts, my heart is so empty. I don't even know what's going on inside. ... I don't know where to start, what to do."

However, with Russian forces having advanced to nearby Hrodivka, "those church things consecrated for the glory of God must be taken out of the city of Myrnohrad," he said. "This temple was built for the glory of God and the salvation of human souls in Myrnohrad."

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Icons, banners, the parish library and the iconostasis — a screen of icons used in Byzantine Christian tradition to separate the sanctuary from the nave — are all being extricated with the help of a layman experienced in construction, said Vasylenko.

The video, during which the priest can be heard sighing several times, lingered briefly on a statue of Our Lady of Fatima, devotion to whom stresses prayer for the conversion of Russia.

A marble angel crafted in 1894, "which survived two world wars and now faced a new war," will also be rescued from the church, said the UGCC.

Since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 — declared a genocide in two major human rights reports by the New Lines Institute and the Raoul Wallenberg Center for Human Rights — Russia has destroyed at least 660 religious sites representing several faith confessions. Clergy and faithful of various denominations have been expelled, detained, tortured and, in some cases, killed.

In late June, Ukrainian Catholic priests Father Ivan Levitsky and Father Bohdan Geleta were released after a year and a half of Russian captivity, during which they were reported to be regularly tortured.

Russian occupation officials in the Zaporizhzhia region issued a written order in December 2022 banning the UGCC, the Knights of Columbus and Caritas, the official humanitarian arm of the worldwide Catholic Church.

"Jesus, have mercy on us," said Vasylenko in his Facebook video. "Take care, (my) people. ... Praise God for everything."