Columns
Religious Life



Refugees from war-hit eastern Ukraine stand in line waiting for departure in a refugee center Sept. 15 in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine. Writing on a bus reads; "Children Evacuation." (AP photo/Andriy Andriyenko)



by Veronica Oksana Galatan

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Last year, by God's providence, as a Sister of the Order of St. Basil the Great I was assigned to serve in Croatia. Neither I nor my superiors could even imagine how soon this appointment would play an important role both in my life and in the lives of those whom the Lord would give us.

"Sister, do you know that a war has started in Ukraine?" My brother persistently called me on the morning of Feb. 24. Hearing this news far away from home, I wanted to return to Ukraine as soon as possible to be with my religious sisters, my relatives, and friends. Every day was difficult for me because the information from social networks tore my soul apart.

"Veronica, why, when people are trying to leave Ukraine, do you want to return?" our general superior said when I expressed my desire to return to Ukraine. "I don't know why God decided that we assigned you to Croatia even before the war. Ask God what He wants you to do there now."



Sister Veronica Galatan, left, serves as a part of a Red Cross team consisting of a psychologist, a translator and student volunteers. (Courtesy of Sisters of St. Basil the Great)

With the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Ukrainians fleeing from the war zone began to come to Croatia. Most of them were women and children, who also brought their pets with them. Thanks to the support of the general superior Mother Marcella, I ended my "crying" phase and registered in the local Red Cross, joining a group of volunteers to help with the reception of refugees from Ukraine.

Assistance to refugees from Ukraine included: settlement and provision of necessary household items; provision of necessary information regarding legalization, job search, and education of children. This is where my knowledge of the Croatian language came in handy. I started translating for the police, for social security institutions, in hospitals, centers, monasteries, and families where our Ukrainians were settled.

Every day was full of touching, difficult and painful stories. In most cases, my job was listening to someone who cried, who rebelled, who was angry, who hated but continued to love. I tried to feel when it was necessary to get closer and when to move away. I understood that their pain was too great, and I was too small to heal it. That is why I decided just to be with them. Encouraged by my sisters I started to keep a journal:

"I started life in war, and I end it in war" — words of an 84-year-old grandmother who moved to Zagreb with her daughter. This grandmother trembled while sharing her experiences, and I trembled as I listened to her. Not knowing what to say, I just sat next to her and embraced her. Her old, cold, trembling hand held mine. I held the grandmother in my arms and prayed for her.

I sit and am afraid to move so as not to embarrass myself, hearing a story from a woman from Mariupol. She is over 70. She lives in Zagreb with her daughter and grandson. They were "defended" by the Russian occupiers, who bombed their houses. They sat in the basement until they escaped. They did not just sit, they also prayed. "Today, God brought me good news," the woman said gratefully after learning that her son and eldest grandson were alive. I look at this woman with

pride. There is so much of the Living God in her — she herself is the Calvaria of God — she, like God, accepts, embraces and does not complain.

A mother from Severodonetsk, filling out documents at the police station, told me: "My son took only a school diary and a tennis racket with him because he was playing tennis in Ukraine. He really wants to go to school." I looked at her 12-year-old son and saw in him a thirst for life, for knowledge, for development. I looked at this young mother and saw how her fragile female shoulders in a foreign country became not only a mother's, but also a father's shoulders for her son.

I helped this mother and her son fill out the police documents. She was embarrassed when it was necessary to enter the place of her birth in the column. "I was born in Russia, but I was just born there. After my birth, we left there. I do not want this place entered in my documents and will seek this through the court. I am ashamed." I had to explain to her that nationality and religion are not the reason why a person is evil. Kindness or malice resides in our hearts.

I understand the cry of her soul. This mother lived in Bucha. Having come out one day from the basement to the street, she saw an enemy tank approaching her. It stopped, pointed the gun at her and waited: she, the Ukrainian woman and mother also stood and waited. Only the Russian killer was waiting to destroy, and the Ukrainian woman-mother was waiting to die.

"Veronica, thank you for being with us," said the young mother whom I escorted with her daughter from the police after they received a temporary residence permit in Croatia. I hugged her, and she opened her palms and continued: "Here is our family heirloom. That's all we could take with us." In her hands was an old small icon of the mother of God with her child. The icon of the mother with her baby enveloped by palms once again showed me the greatness of how God builds a personal relationship with a person. ...

Today I was again on duty at the Ukrainian settlement center. I was asked to go to Room 114 to talk to a woman who had come here the other day. On the way I learned her story. She is from the Luhansk region. She has four daughters (ages 8, 4, 1 1/2, and 3 months). A Russian missile flew into their house and killed her

husband. When she arrived in Croatia, her youngest child was in intensive care.

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Entering the room, I saw a young mother unable to cry or speak. She did not make contact. I told her that I could not take away her pain, but I would pray that God would give her the strength to get through these difficult times. I suggested that she take the children outside for a walk, and invited her to choose any Red Cross supplies that she needed; the doctor gave her medicine. After a while, this mother did look at me. This was the highlight of the day for me. So little and so much in a sea of pain and sadness! A few days later we even had dinner together and exchanged phone numbers.

Easter was a day off for all the volunteers, but Father Andriy and I came to the center to visit our refugees, pray with them and bless their Easter meals. "Christ is Risen! You know, I was waiting for you," said one woman, who saw me opening the workroom door.

"I came to see my grandchildren, whom I haven't seen since the war started," said an elderly man who introduced himself with tears in his eyes, who had been taken from Kharkiv to Austria, and who came to Zagreb this weekend. Because they left from different places and at different times, the family ended up in different countries. "Happy holidays!" he said, looking intently into my eyes. I thanked him and managed only a wordless hug because the pain has no words.

As I left him, an elderly woman from Zaporizhzhia approached, leaning on a stick, and asked me to give her water. "Look, 'the peacekeepers' came and evicted us. I lived in the village, I had everything, and now ...", she cried.

People began to gather for breakfast. It was obvious that most of them did not know how to behave, how to greet, or what to answer. And it was amazing how their faces changed from our human kindnesses, as if some kind of lightness enveloped them.

Returning to the church for the holy liturgy, I offered to the Lord their eyes, their hearts and all that is in them — visible and invisible — all that needs the touch of the Risen to be resurrected.

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Unfortunately, the war in Ukraine is ongoing. Despite the danger, some Ukrainians return to their homeland. Many want to return, but their homes no longer exist. Thanks to the openness of the Croatians, refugees from Ukraine can continue their studies, find jobs, and get the necessities of life. Of course, they face many difficulties, but — compared to the dangers of war — they have a peaceful sky.

Taking care of refugees for several months gave us new acquaintances and built friendly relations between us. The gratitude of our Ukrainians, with whom the war brought me together in Croatia, is evident in their words and actions.

"Sister Veronica. You have not visited us for a long time. How glad I am to see you. Will you eat borsch, I just cooked it? Would you like some coffee? I baked Easter bread for you so you can experience the smell of home ...".

And only now, I understand the words of my general superior Mother Marcela: "Ask God where you can do more right now." In times of war, when confusion and the unknown surrounds you completely, a simple gesture provides hope for the best.

Editor's note: *This column was translated by Teodozija Myroslava Mostepaniuk.*

This story appears in the **War in Ukraine** feature series. View the full series.