Columns
Horizons
Religious Life



The banco peregrino, a bench along the Camino de Santiago, offers pilgrims a moment of rest. The yellow arrow represents hope and the determination to continue. The author, who lives in Kyiv, Ukraine, spent her annual retreat on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.



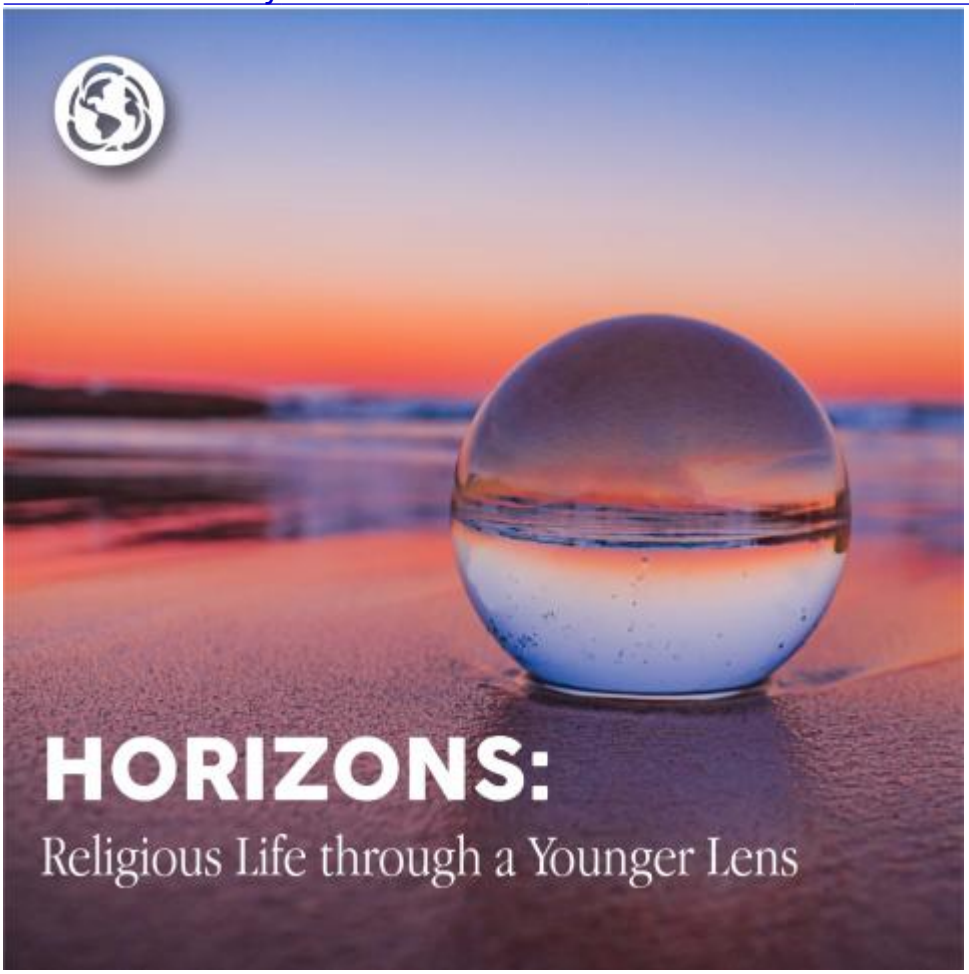
by Olga Shapoval

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War changes everything. It's impossible to adapt to it. Obviously, one can try to learn to live in a state of war, to stop being afraid, even while knowing that the next missile or deadly drone might hit your home or your loved ones' homes at any time. However, it is impossible to accept this. Since Feb. 24, 2022, we have been running a marathon for survival. And while two years ago there was still some hope in our hearts that this nightmare would end sooner or later, that belief has begun to weaken.

Talking to other consecrated people, I've noticed that we all share a common experience. With the onset of war, our prayers have changed, as have our relationships with God. It's as if we've grown within them, becoming more mature and adult. What once evoked surprise or emotion now barely touches our hearts. Instead, the smallest acts of human kindness, service and sacrifice become

compelling evidence that God is love. We find ourselves less interested in hearing answers to questions we no longer ask; that is why we choose annual retreats that offer more silence and focus, rather than sermons and teachings.



A backpack with the Ukrainian flag and Camino shell stands in front of Porto Cathedral, the starting point of the Portuguese Way of the Camino de Santiago. (Olga Shapoval)

I live in a district of Kyiv that endures the largest number of Russian missiles and drones with explosives every night. Everything around my house is constantly on

fire, buzzing and exploding. Sometimes the air raid sirens don't stop all night. In the best case, you have to hide between the walls of the corridor or bathroom, and in the worst, you spend the night in the subway. When news of the dead and wounded comes from all sides, in addition to intercessory prayer, you can't help but thank God for the gift of your own life. You begin to appreciate this life and even start to see it differently.

Perhaps the most tragic experience was when a Russian missile struck the children's hospital Okhmatdyt. It's only 500 meters from my workplace and on my way home. While hiding in the corridor, we heard explosions and the sounds of air defense, and we read on our phones that this time the victims were sick children who, connected to IV drips and machines, were waiting for surgery.

You can't get used to something like this; it surpasses any notions of human cruelty. Yet, it raises many questions about the meaning of life and death, suffering, the world and faith in God. What struck me most was how people came from all directions to help clear the rubble, carry the wounded, and deliver drinking water and food. It was a manifestation of love and solidarity that spoke more powerfully than any sermon.

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When the time came for my annual retreat, I chose an unconventional method of spiritual therapy. I needed to recover, reflect, and spend time alone with myself and God. I also wanted to pray and offer my small sacrifices in the pierced heart of Jesus, fervently asking for the war to end as soon as possible. I decided to embark on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. I planned it so that each day I could meditate on the letter of St. James, pray the rosary and participate in celebration of the Eucharist.

It wasn't easy to walk 30 kilometers (19 miles) every day, sometimes in heavy rain or, conversely, in unbearable heat. There were days when I had no dry clothes left, felt every step and I pressed on my own blisters. Yet, I thought of our soldiers who, constantly risking their lives, defend my country. They sleep in bunkers and bravely

hold their positions in the cold, heat and rain. I prayed for the doctors and volunteers on the front lines, who, under fire, carry the wounded and deceased, provide medical care, deliver food, and evacuate women, children and even pets. In short, they fully embody Jesus' commandment of love. My thoughts were with those who have lost loved ones and friends to this cruel war. Their grief can never be diminished or fully understood.

While staying in *albergues* (hostels) I woke at the slightest sound during the first few nights. I felt as if I could hear explosions and needed to urgently seek shelter. And when planes took off from the nearby airport, I dreamed of a sky over Ukraine that would finally be clear and peaceful, free from deadly missiles and fighter jets.



The author, who lives in Kyiv, Ukraine, spent her annual retreat on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. She walked 30 kilometers (19 miles) every day, sometimes in heavy rain or unbearable heat. (Olga Shapoval)

I felt grateful when pilgrims from different countries approached me along the way to talk. They saw the blue and yellow flag on my backpack and wanted to express that they remember our pain. Their friendly smiles, warm hugs and words of support felt like messages from God: "I am here! I love you!" Each act of solidarity was like a prayer being heard. There is indeed more goodness than evil in the world, even when it sometimes feels like I am living in the very depths of hell. War is hell on earth, but it clearly highlights the light against the darkness.

I arrived in Santiago tired but very happy. According to legend, witnesses of St. James' martyrdom in the Holy Land placed his body in a boat, which sailed to the town of Padrón on the coast of Galicia, from where the relics were transferred to Santiago de Compostela.

Praying before St. James' tomb, I found myself thinking that I no longer asked for anything. Words of gratitude flowed from my heart. After all, "All good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change" (James 1:17). His love is stronger than any suffering and death. And although I would soon have to return to the harshness of war, I was filled with hope that God would surely ignite His *campus stellae* (field of stars) over Ukraine.

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