

Polish Orionine Sr. Renata Jurczak embraces Anna, a Ukrainian woman, in this 2023 photograph. She has been in Ukraine for 30 years. With their initiatives, the sisters bring back the purpose of life to farmers, mothers and children.(OSV News/Courtesy of Sr. Victoria Andruschina)

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As the full-scale Russian invasion in Ukraine reached a tragic threshold of three years Feb. 24, religious sisters are bringing rays of sunshine to those who don't know how to smile anymore, including children whose carefree childhood disappeared, and farmers, whose fields are mined and useless.

Sr. Victoria Andruschina of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Angels didn't leave the country when the war broke out, even though she was ordered to evacuate.

"I cried and asked my superiors to let me stay," Andruschina said, "I felt that I was needed most here. With those children who stayed. I thank God and my superiors for letting me stay."

The plainclothes congregation of the Sisters of the Angels was founded in 1889, when the church was persecuted by the Russian czar.

Before the war, Andruschina worked in a kindergarten. When the Russian invasion began, she decided to continue helping children — those who need it most in the reality of war. With a group of lay volunteers from the Christian Rescue Service, she travels from village to village in eastern Ukraine, right on the front line, and organizes programs for children. The initiative is called "Angels of Joy." The purpose is simple — make them smile again.

"We never know if we'll be able to run a program," Andruschina said, "and we never know if we'll be able to return. Being a volunteer in the war is not just about getting out of one's comfort zone, it's about risking one's life," she said.

Games, contests and music — which sometimes doesn't drown out the war blasts — are part of the events, along with gifts and candy. "Angels bring joy to children and hope to their parents," the sister told OSV News.

"It's a ray of light in the darkness in which they live," the sister said.

"These people have lived through terrible things. Our initiatives are sometimes the first opportunity to meet in such a large group. Children don't go to school, they sit in their homes — or what's left of them — because even being in the yard is dangerous. They have no contact with others," Andruschina said.

"It is very difficult to organize these meetings, because children do not have natural childlike reactions, they are frightened, full of sadness, afraid of people, sounds, afraid to play. It's as if they are afraid to be children," the sister said.

"The transformation we see during our program is amazing," she added. "The children slowly become emboldened, relaxed, participate in play ... they smile — sometimes for the first time in a very long time. There is no greater reward for this effort than a child's smile. This is the greatest reward. The risk is worth it."

And the risk is a fact. Andruschina told OSV News that she is aware that any trip close to the front lines could be the last.

"Am I afraid? Yes," she said, adding: "Not so much of death, because it means eternal life, but disability, the fact that I will no longer be able to help others. I also feel a great responsibility for the volunteers who are going with me. This is my initiative, so I carry the burden of responsibility."

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"Angels of Joy" is not a typical event with a purpose to evangelize. But a testimony of faith is omnipresent.

"We don't tell people directly that God loves them, we don't quote the Scripture, but our goal is to conduct the meeting with them in such a way that at the end they say — praise the Lord that my child smiled," Andruschina told OSV News.

"They are the ones who ask us who we are and who is behind us. They ask: 'who is crazy enough to risk his own life just to make children happy.' And when they ask, I answer: 'God is my strength, and if it weren't for him, I wouldn't be here.' And this is our evangelization. It is more difficult than words," Andruschina said.

For three years of the war, the "Angels of Joy" brought smiles to more than 20,000 Ukrainian children. The campaign exists solely thanks to the support of sponsors — Catholic organizations and individuals.

Polish Orionine Sr. Renata Jurczak has been in Ukraine for 30 years. In the beginning, she helped the homeless and street children. Now she works at a single mothers' home, in Korotych near Kharkiv, and organizes classes for children to help them cope with the trauma of war.

"These children know everything — which bomb is flying in which direction, from which weapon it is released, who is shooting — our boys or soldiers from the other side. They are like adult kids. Childhood escapes them," she told OSV News.

She and her fellow sister also go to ruined frontline villages where some of the residents have returned.

"Every morning those people go out in front of the house and look at what is around," the sister said.

What they see is agricultural areas of which the region consists of demolished, burned, and lifeless. Everything is mined, the land cannot be cultivated. "And when they cannot seed their fields, they have lost their purpose," Jurczak said.

The sisters came up with an idea on how to restore that purpose to them. "The chicken campaign" was created.

"We buy small, one-day-old chickens, food for the entire rearing period, and take them to families who can raise them," Jurczak told OSV News. "We weren't sure of how this campaign would come out, these people were so resigned, but the effects surprised us. People on the verge of depression cried with emotion that they had found an occupation and a new reason to live. We realized that this is what these people needed," the sister added.

The campaign is repeated periodically, and in addition to it, the sisters also organize other events and long-term initiatives, such as sewing workshops, through which Ukrainian women gain new skills and jobs.

"When there is support, hope returns — that all is not lost, that it is possible to start anew," Jurczak said. "Often people say: 'I guess God exists, since you come here, to places where no one comes anymore.'"

The Orionine sisters, at the beginning of the war, were asked if they would prefer to return to Poland. They all decided to stay.

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