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*"Let the holiness of God shine forth" (cf. Mt 5, 16)*

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item 354

## **military chaplain in Ukraine**

The wind sways curtains through the broken windowpanes. The war! Once children were playing behind them. Standing on tiptoe 'tiny eyes', filled with life, were looking out for their mother through these windowpanes, as she returned from work. Now today, smashed and wide open, they cry: 'the death of war has come'.



In a small town called Troyitske, in southern Ukraine, there are a lot of such windows. And craters from mortar shells, half-destroyed buildings with scotch tape stuck crosswise on windows (so as not to smash into small pieces during a cannonade). A deserted town that lies between two civilizations of the world has become a line of demarcation.





It is a place where volunteer help can often get through due to the influence of the military chaplain, where there are no problems with alcohol among soldiers because few people want to die drunk, where after the OSCE's arrival [Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe] even the ground shakes of explosions.

During my visit to the front, a young officer listens to the complaints of a peasant woman who left the village after it was attacked. Now she has returned to care for her house. Responding to my question: *'probably you have some claims against the military men, who settled in your house?'* the poor woman tearfully replies: *'No, I have no claims against the soldiers, I complained about my neighbour. While I was out he stole 35 jars of honey, a water pump, generator...'*

Later during the day there was a service by the priest, arriving on an armoured vehicle at the conflict line, where death is breathing at you face-to-face: confession, blessing, talks about God, rosary, talks about life and listening, listening...

After an exhausting day and a modest dinner, come visits of soldiers from yet another forlorn situation. And from military police looking like an intergalactic force in comparison with my soldiers: high-quality clothes, all possible systems of protection, tactical glasses, military gadgets... That is the truth: the further from war, the more showmanship.

Their officer boldly reproaches the officer from my forlorn group: *'People complain of the fact that your drunk soldiers have burst a bombshell near the neighbour's house! Get it right...'*

And the young officer replies: *'Yes, there was such a problem before, but not now. Some guys drank, that's true, but then I found the reason for it – a stubborn old man was selling them hooch. I had already asked him not to sell alcohol to our soldiers and there were no results. Later I demonstrated to the old man the effect of an RPG bombshell explosion in his backyard and promised that the next time it will explode right inside his house...'*

I thought, that was the language of war, and went to sleep.

By an officer's order the soldiers had prepared a place for the chaplain in one of the occupied houses. Among the soldiers, who were lying on the floor, there was a military bed by the wall and freshly-nailed icons above it. I understood at once that the soldiers had respect for a chaplain.



There was the constant noise, the voice of a radio receiver in one's sleep: *'Someone is going through the mine field, flashes on the horizon, constant 'crawl' of the enemy's raiding groups, alarms, bombardments...'*

The tasks of the military chaplain's headquarters sector were arranged according to the religious needs of soldiers (approximately 6000). Only some of them had their own chaplains, the others turned to the sector chaplain for their needs. Besides that, there were additional voluntary commitments – work with local people, psychological help and sometimes negotiations with the enemy (taking away bodies of prisoners).



Sometimes it happened that, at 6 AM a military gasoline tanker (there was no other transport) was outside, already waiting for the priest to take him for confessions. *'Guys should confess before Easter'*, said the severe officer as he turned towards the priest.

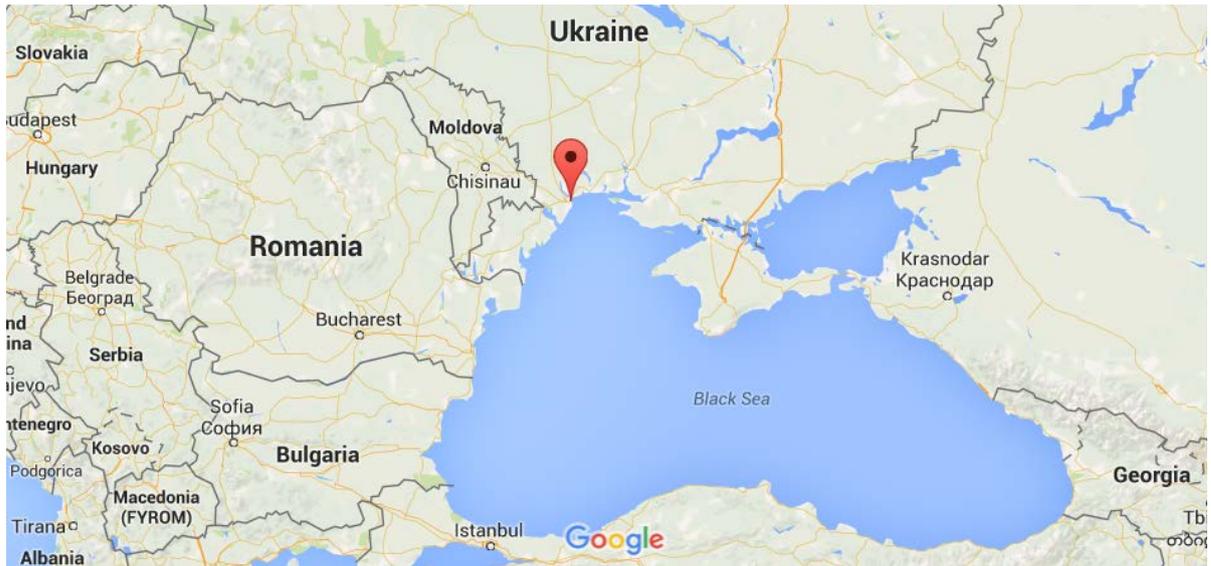
But the most painful thing for me was having to refuse Sunday public worship several times, there was no time...

Now in Odessa, with the help of the community of the Society of the Catholic Apostolate, a centre to help victims from the consequences of war in the east of Ukraine is being created.

Nevertheless, souls that have been broken by the war cannot easily forget.



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