

22 December 2021

DONBAS: Luhansk: Christmas saved for parishes not allowed a priest

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

The first Christmas services in the Roman Catholic parishes in Luhansk and Stakhanov since 2019 are due to go ahead, thanks to a Greek Catholic priest from neighbouring Donetsk prepared to make the seven-hour round trip. Parish priest Grzegorz Rapa left in March 2020 expecting to return, but the authorities of the self-declared Luhansk People's Republic repeatedly refused. The only two Masses in 2021 were both celebrated by the visiting Greek Catholic priest. Asked why Catholics have not been allowed a resident priest since 2020, Sergei Panteleyev of the Religious and Inter-Ethnic Relations Sector of the Culture Ministry said: "Our department doesn't take such a decision – it is decided at a higher level."

Roman Catholics in Luhansk and in the nearby town of Stakhanov who have not been allowed to have a resident priest since spring 2020 will be able to participate in Christmas Masses thanks to a Greek Catholic priest from neighbouring Donetsk who is prepared and able to make the seven-hour round trip to Luhansk. These will be the first Christmas services in either parish since Christmas 2019.

The authorities of the self-declared Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) in eastern Ukraine have repeatedly refused to allow the return of Fr Grzegorz Rapa to his parish since his departure in March 2020 or to allow the bishop to name another priest (see below).

The visiting Greek Catholic priest from Donetsk has held the only Masses so far in 2021 on 28 November in Luhansk and on 5 December in Stakhanov (see below).

Following Fr Rapa's departure from Luhansk on 1 March 2020, between Easter 2020 and late November 2021 no Masses were held in the two Roman Catholic parishes. Parishioners were only able to participate in online Mass shown in the churches, and were deprived of the opportunity to receive Communion – for Catholics an essential part of their faith. Or they could attend worship at Luhansk's Greek Catholic church, though services there are in the Eastern Rite only, which differs from the Mass Roman Catholics use (see below).

Roman Catholic Bishop Jan Sobilo, assistant bishop of Kharkiv-Zaporozhia who oversees the Luhansk and Stakhanov parishes, says he is "surprised" that Fr Rapa has not been allowed to return to serve his parish. "It's difficult to explain the reason," he told Forum 18. "He has served there for 28 years." He said he would be praying for a resident priest to be allowed to serve the parish in Luhansk (see below).

"Catholics in Luhansk are a registered religious community and no one obstructs their activity," Sergei Panteleyev of the Religious and Inter-Ethnic Relations Sector of the unrecognised LPR entity's Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry claimed to Forum 18. Asked why the two parishes have not been allowed a resident priest since March 2020, he said he was "not informed". "Our department doesn't take such a decision – it is decided at a higher level" (see below).

Officials at the entity's Foreign Ministry told Forum 18 that First Deputy Minister Anna Soroka was off work, while Sergei Belov was not in the office. Both had earlier rejected an appeal from the Luhansk parish for Fr Rapa to be allowed to return (see below).

The rebel Luhansk authorities insist that religious communities that have not undergone local registration are illegal. They point to a May 2015 Decree by Igor Plotnitsky, the then Head of the unrecognised LPR entity, banning mass events while the area was under martial law, and the February 2018 local Religion Law approved by the LPR People's Council.

No Protestant communities have been allowed to gain registration, so cannot meet openly in their places of worship. "The situation is still the same," a Kyiv-based Protestant who follows developments in Luhansk told Forum 18. "Nothing is better, but at the same time nothing is worse" (see below).

Panteleyev of the Religious and Inter-Ethnic Relations Sector refused to explain why the LPR authorities have refused to register any Protestant or Jehovah's Witness communities and why communities that meet without permission risk punishment (see below).

Pro-Russian rebels seized parts of Ukraine's Luhansk Region in March 2014 and the following month proclaimed what they called the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). Heavy fighting ensued. The LPR rebel administration, which currently controls about a third of Ukraine's Luhansk Region, has declared a state of martial law.

Pro-Russian rebels similarly seized parts of Ukraine's Donetsk Region in April 2014 and proclaimed what they called the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR). Heavy fighting ensued. The DPR rebel administration currently controls nearly half of Ukraine's Donetsk Region. The DPR-held area adjoins the LPR-held area of Ukraine's Luhansk Region.

In its latest report on the human rights situation in Ukraine, the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine criticised restrictions in rebel-held areas of both Luhansk and Donetsk, including "unreasonably heavy bureaucratic requirements and criminal sanctions for religious activities that are equated with extremist activity". The report noted that these restrictions continue to have "a profound impact on the rights to freedoms of association and of religion or belief" (see below).

Restrictions "a tool to obstruct religious activities", say United Nations

In its latest report, the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine noted that the restrictions on the exercise of freedom of religion or belief in rebel held areas of Luhansk and Donetsk were also a restriction on other human rights. "Freedom of association remains restricted, as numerous religious organizations were unable to operate in territory controlled by both 'republics'," its report "Civic Space and Fundamental Freedoms in Ukraine (<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/UkraineCivicSpace2021-EN.pdf>)", published on 8 December 2021, pointed out.

The UN report identified among the restrictions on religious groups "unreasonably heavy bureaucratic requirements and criminal sanctions for religious activities that are equated with extremist activity", adding that they continue to have "a profound impact on the rights to freedoms of association and of religion or belief".

"As of 31 October 2021, several religious organisations were still unable to operate as requirements of obligatory 'registration' of religious organisations remained in force, which 'authorities' used as a tool to obstruct religious activities or shut them down completely." The report noted that this has particularly affected Protestant and Jehovah's Witness communities.

Two Catholic parishes, no resident priest

The region controlled by the LPR has two Roman Catholic parishes, Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Luhansk and a smaller parish in Stakhanov [official Ukrainian name Kadiyevka]. Fr Grzegorz Rapa, a Polish priest, has served in Luhansk since 1993.

Fr Rapa left the region on 1 March 2020, intending to return for the remainder of his permitted three-month period. However, the border between the LPR and Ukrainian-controlled Ukraine was then closed because of the coronavirus pandemic. The border did not reopen until November 2020, but the LPR entity's rulers did not allow Fr Rapa to return (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2661). They claimed he did not have permanent residence – even though he lived in Luhansk for 21 years before the LPR was itself proclaimed.

Mass was celebrated in the Catholic Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Luhansk on 12 April 2020. The Greek Catholic priest from Donetsk Fr Mikhaylo Zaverchuk – who serves in both the Byzantine and Latin rites – was able to visit the parish for Easter 2020. The journey from Donetsk to Luhansk takes about three and a half hours by road. However, as relations between the rebel leaderships of Donetsk and Luhansk worsened in 2020 and coronavirus infections spread, the border was closed and Fr Zaverchuk was unable to visit Luhansk again.

During 2020 and 2021, Catholics in Luhansk and Stakhanov have gathered on Sundays for prayer services led by laypeople or for online Masses, including by Fr Rapa. However, this means that local Catholics are deprived of the opportunity to receive Communion. Receiving Communion is for Catholics an integral part of participating in the Mass.

When the Greek Catholic priest is able to visit Luhansk, Roman Catholics can also attend Greek Catholic Liturgy in their church. The Greek Catholic priest is able to enter the region as he has local registration, but does not live there permanently as his wife and family live elsewhere in Ukraine.

For Christmas, visiting priest only

The border between the DPR and LPR reopened on 18 June 2021, allowing the Donetsk-based Greek Catholic priest Fr Mikhaylo Zaverchuk to make the long journey to Luhansk again. The only Masses held so far in 2021 were the ones he celebrated on Sunday 28 November in Luhansk and on Sunday 5 December in Stakhanov.

Fr Zaverchuk plans to travel from Donetsk to Luhansk again to celebrate Christmas vigil Mass in Stakhanov on 24 December and Mass in Luhansk on 25 December, local Catholics told Forum 18 on 21 December. These will be the first Christmas services in

either parish since Christmas 2019.

This means that this is the second Christmas in a row when Roman Catholics in Luhansk and Stakhanov do not have their own resident priest to lead Christmas services.

Why can't the priest return?

The LPR authorities have given conflicting reasons as to why Fr Rapa cannot return to the two parishes in the territory they control. In early 2020, the border between the LPR and Ukrainian-controlled Ukraine was closed because of the coronavirus pandemic. Even when the border reopened in November 2020, Fr Rapa was still refused permission to return. That month, LPR authorities refused him entry at the Stanitsa Luhanska crossing point, as they also did in early April 2021 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2661), ahead of Easter.

On 17 March 2021, Luhansk Catholics appealed to the unrecognised LPR entity's head Leonid Pasechnik to allow Fr Rapa to return. Pasechnik passed the letter to the entity's Foreign Ministry. Its 7 April response – prepared by Sergei Belov, signed by First Deputy Minister Anna Soroka and seen by Forum 18 – informed local Catholics that a Ministry working group had rejected the application (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2661) in line with a 10 June 2020 Decree.

The Decree allows in only individuals with residence registration in Luhansk, who have relatives there, or are coming to look after someone who is ill or for medical treatment, education, or the funeral of a close relative.

"Catholics in Luhansk are a registered religious community and no one obstructs their activity," Sergei Panteleyev of the Religious and Inter-Ethnic Relations Sector of the unrecognised LPR entity's Culture, Sport and Youth Ministry claimed to Forum 18 on 21 December. Asked why the two parishes have not been allowed a resident priest since March 2020, he said he was "not informed". "Our department doesn't take such a decision – it is decided at a higher level."

Officials at the entity's Foreign Ministry told Forum 18 on 21 December that Soroka was off work, while Belov was not in the office each time Forum 18 called on 21 and 22 December.

Roman Catholic Bishop Jan Sobilo, assistant bishop of Kharkiv-Zaporozhia who oversees the Luhansk and Stakhanov parishes, says he is "surprised" that Fr Rapa has not been allowed to return to serve his parish. "It's difficult to explain the reason," he told Forum 18 on 20 December. "He has served there for 28 years."

Bishop Sobilo added: "We pray and ask God not to leave the people of Luhansk with no resident priest and pray that officials will open a green channel for a Roman Catholic priest for Luhansk."

"The bishop is unable to send anyone as none of the priests have permanent (or temporary) residence in Luhansk," Fr Rapa told Forum 18 on 11 December. "Only those with such permanent residence are able to enter Luhansk." He said he aims to try again in mid-January 2022 to get permission to return to his parish. "Hopes are small that they will let me in, but I will struggle to the last."

Catholic, Orthodox bishops cannot visit

Roman Catholic Bishop Jan Sobilo has been denied entry to LPR-controlled territory since he visited with the Vatican nuncio at Christmas 2019. "I have not tried again to visit recently," Bishop Sobilo told Forum 18. "There's no point as they wouldn't let me in." He said he would be praying for officials in Luhansk that they could work peacefully for the common good in 2022 and that he would once more be allowed to visit.

The unrecognised LPR entity has also denied entry to successive bishops of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine Diocese of Luhansk and Starobilsk. The then-Bishop Afanasi (Yavorsky) – who had not visited Luhansk since 2014 - tried again to visit his parish in Luhansk in mid-2020 but the rebel authorities again refused permission.

Bishop Lavrenty (Migovich), who took up his duties in May 2021, went in July to the Stanitsa Luhanska crossing point, hoping to be allowed to travel to visit his parishes in Luhansk. However, officials on the LPR side refused to allow him entry. "They said they had no instructions to allow me in," Bishop Lavrenty told Forum 18 in July (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2675).

"Nothing is better, but at the same time nothing is worse"

The LPR authorities have not allowed any Protestant or Jehovah's Witness communities to gain registration, so they cannot meet openly in their places of worship. "The situation is still the same," a Kyiv-based Protestant who follows developments in Luhansk told Forum 18 on 13 December. "Nothing is better, but at the same time nothing is worse."

Courts earlier fined Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses for continuing to hold meetings for worship. Courts handed down many such fines (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2539) in 2018 and 2019.

In July 2018, the LPR State Security Ministry banned the Ukrainian Baptist Union as a "destructive" and "extremist" organisation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2401), as well as its local congregations.

Sergei Panteleyev of the Religious and Inter-Ethnic Relations Sector refused to explain to Forum 18 why the LPR authorities have refused to register any Protestant or Jehovah's Witness communities or why those meeting for worship without permission risk punishment.

Council of Churches Baptists – who meet for worship without seeking permission from officials anywhere in the countries and territories of the region – were among those that faced raids on their meetings for worship and fines on their leaders (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2539). However, a local Baptist told Forum 18 on 21 December that their communities have faced no raids or fines in 2021.

Of the 26 items on the latest version of the LPR "State List of Extremist Materials", 18 are published by Protestants (including a Baptist-published edition of the Russian Synodal translation of the Gospel of John (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2531)), and 6 are Jehovah's Witness-published (including their New World version of the Bible (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2661)). The Russian Synodal translation of the Gospel of John has been published in many editions and is also widely used by Orthodox, Protestants and others.

The latest additions of religious books to the banned list came in July 2021. Roman Gubaydulin, the acting Deputy General Prosecutor, who is based in Luhansk, lodged a suit to Sverdlovsk City and District Court in spring 2021 to have four Protestant books declared "extremist" and banned. The books had apparently been seized from Council of Churches Baptists in or near the eastern town of Sverdlovsk [official Ukrainian name Dovzhansk], close to the border with Russia. On 18 May, the Court upheld the suit and declared the four books "extremist" (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2675). The Justice Ministry then added them to the banned list. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Donbas (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=87>)

For background information, see Forum 18's Luhansk religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721)

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