

# In Ukraine, where Caritas is hope

## JOURNEY TO CHARKIW WITH FATHER LUCA BOVIO

November 15, 2022 Gigi Anataloni Fuori carta



Ukraine, Poland  
Luca Bovio

Father Luca Bovio's photo

**As winter approaches, with Fr Leszek and Rika, a now well-tested and close-knit group, I travel to Ukraine to bring aid we have collected. With the car full of humanitarian aid and with permits from Caritas we cross the border without great difficulty. As soon as we enter Ukraine, we are immediately struck by the lack of light, not only the natural one for the now very short days, but also and above all electric light. The streets are dark. They tell us that 40% of energy production across the country is out of order following the latest attacks on power plants in October. Fuel and food, on the other hand, are easily found, only at doubled prices.**

We spend the first night in the city of **Lutsk**, less than two hours from the Polish border. We are received as guests by the bishop of the diocese, H.E. Vitaly Skomarovsky. During dinner he tells us about the current situation in his diocese. Lutsk, despite being far from the territories of conflicts which are taking place in the east and south of the country, was hit in recent weeks to damage the power plant, thus causing a partial loss of electricity. In addition to this, the biggest problem that must be faced here is the reception of refugees who have arrived from the east of the country. Every week, at the Caritas centre of the diocese, aid is distributed to over 300 families. Thanks to the generosity of various benefactors we can leave a sum that will help the purchase of food and basic necessities.

A family explains to us that in their basement they have internet access thanks to a neighbour who lives on the ground floor and who has placed the router in a favourable position for the signal to arrive. Another cellar is organized as a meeting space for children. Those who live in these conditions in various parts of the city are the people whose homes are completely destroyed or seriously damaged. A lady explains to us that her apartment on the sixteenth floor has no windows at all, destroyed by the shock wave of the explosions. Even if the windows were whole or repaired, she would still choose to stay in the cellar because the upper floors of buildings are the ones most exposed to explosions.

After this touching visit, which ended with hugs and the promise that we would not forget them, we went to visit a parish priest in a suburb of the city. He tells us that there were about a thousand Catholics in his parish. Now only 4 or 5 still come for Sunday Mass, all the others have run away. Some elderly people live in the parish halls and feel safer here than in their own homes. In the garage he shows us the remains of some rockets that fell near the church which fortunately was not seriously damaged. He shows us a bunch of razor-sharp shrapnel from cluster bombs. They hit everything around the area of the explosion.



The night, despite the alerts that arrive on mobile phones, passes peacefully and finally the following day in daylight we can see the city with our own eyes. We are accompanied by the young bishop Pavlo Hončaruk. The big central buildings of the city are almost all without windows due to the explosions. Some are repaired with wooden panels; others are destroyed and without glass.

We arrive in the evening, wrapped in a very thick fog. The city is completely in the dark not only because of the electricity rationing, but also and above all because of not giving reference to the attackers who have been pushed back to their border, just 30km away. By September, they had arrived just 10km from the city centre only to be pushed back behind the border again. Father Wojciech, a Polish priest who has been working here for 6 years, is the diocesan director of Caritas, through which aid is distributed to the population.



After the arrival we are accompanied by two Caritas volunteers in a heavily affected working-class area of the city. Hundreds of people live in the cellars of those buildings. We meet them there. Going down a narrow ladder illuminated by the torch of the mobile phone, we meet the first families who have been living here for the past eight months. They are large families, made up of grandparents, parents and children, sometimes even very young. The rooms are heated either by the pipes of the still intact main heating system, or by some wood-burning stoves. The beds are built on wooden pallets used for goods and softened by mattresses or blankets. What strikes us is the simplicity with which these people live, managing to smile when they meet us, thanking us continuously for everything we do. One of them tells us: «Father, there are people who are worse off than us». We are guided through the corridors of the cellars. The surnames and the number of members of that family who live in that cellar are written on each door with chalk. A cellar is equipped with a toilet raised on pallets and it is used by dozens of families.





With the bishop of Lutsk, Mgr. Vitalij Skomarovs'kyj

The next day, early in the morning, we get in the car to reach the capital Kiev, where, in recent days, the number of attacks has decreased. Unlike July when we arrived here last time, we notice fewer roadside checks. The city still shows the wounds of previous attacks on buildings and infrastructure. Taking a walk in the evening, in the very central park of the city, we see the new bridge destroyed by a rocket a few weeks ago. The inhabitants of the city live normally, tells us the apostolic nuncio, mgr. Visvaldas Kulbokas, who kindly hosts us. Electricity is connected for only a few hours a day, and the large districts of the city have to take turns to receive it. There are many very high popular buildings, sometimes with 30 floors, where thousands of people live. The lack of energy interrupts the use of the elevators, forcing people to walk to their apartments. The next day, before leaving the city, we briefly visited a parish of the Pallottine fathers under construction.



After a few hours of travel and after making sure of the situation we reach **Charkiw**, the second largest city in Ukraine. The city is in the extreme east of the country, just 30 km from the border with Russia. Before the outbreak of the conflict, Charkiw had more than 3 million inhabitants, today they are just over a million. Here the attacks have been almost uninterrupted since February and the city, as well as the province, is showing all its wounds.



Bombed school in Korobochkyne

We quickly head to the villages outside the city in a south-easterly direction. We reach a village, **Korobochkyne**, accompanied by a Polish television crew who, having learned of our presence, joined us to make some recordings. We go to a heavily affected school. The director welcomes us and shows us the damage caused to the building. She tells us that the Russian soldiers also took away the older pupils' shoes, leaving only the small ones. When asked what she needs most urgently, she replies that the children may return to their villages and to school as soon as possible. In addition to the destruction of buildings, two soldiers explain to us that the biggest problem is that of the mines. In the fields around the city many mines have been placed which make any attempt at cultivation impossible and very dangerous. We receive an appeal for the army to take care of securing the territory. We also now understand why so many corn and wheat fields are left unharvested.



In the afternoon, we have the opportunity to see in the city where aid from Caritas is being distributed. The line of people is impressive. They tell us that, on average, in one afternoon they distribute aid to more than 2.000 people, 30.000 in two weeks. To help as many people as possible, the distribution is regulated with a coupon system whereby the beneficiaries can collect the goods once every two weeks. Everyone gets 1 kg of pasta, milk, canned meat. The children in line are invited to draw pictures and for this they receive chocolate, sweets and notebooks. Not only the elderly receive this aid, but also the adults left without work, a real plague left by the war. Among these, a teacher tells us that with shame

he has to receive this help to survive, but he would prefer to work and pay for the groceries out of his own pocket. There are 4 points of this type organized by Caritas in the city of Charkiw.



At the end of the day we return to Kiev before 11pm just in time to avoid the curfew which lasts until 5am.

We spend the penultimate day of our trip in a home for orphaned children run by Benedictine nuns in a village, in the central west of the town of Balyh. To reach them we pass near the towns of Zytomyr and Vinnica. In the house live 9 children, from 3 to 12 years of age, without parents or with difficulties that do not allow them to live in a normal family environment. The anticipation for our arrival is anxious. During the trip we receive videos and messages from the children encouraging us to join them as soon as possible. In the evening we are welcomed with great joy. An exquisite dinner prepared by the nuns and the gift of beautiful hand-embroidered clothes, according to the typical culture of those regions, surround the festive and noisy company of the children.



The next day we return to Poland, luckily without being stopped for long at the border (the previous time we waited for ten hours). During the trip we received many other requests for help; among these some came from the city of Kherson liberated a few days ago. Winter is just beginning, but we are sure that many of you will continue to help. Someone told us: «Fathers, you have some very good guardian

angels who have always protected you during this journey». That's right, we have been aware of it. However, the guardian angels protect us even more when someone prays to them and for this we are also grateful for the many prayers that have not been missed and will not be missed.

*father Luca Bovio imc*



Minefields around Korobochkyne