

Column: When it comes to helping Ukraine, our hearts are open but hands mostly tied

By [Denise Crosby](#)

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The Rev. Remus Anghel Orian, left, and the Rev. Alin Dogaru lead prayers for the people of Ukraine on Ash Wednesday at St. Michael Romanian Byzantine Catholic Church in Aurora. (The Rev. Remus Orian / HANDOUT)

It's a helpless feeling, isn't it, watching and reading the news and knowing there is so little we can do individually for the people of Ukraine in their courageous battle to hold on to democracy?

People want to help. In whatever way they can.

Which is why some Fox Valley businesses, like Woodman's Market in North Aurora, are taking all the Russian vodka off the shelves, a move that's noteworthy, but definitely more symbolic than effective.

Unfortunately, from what I've been able to gather, options are limited. Even World Relief Chicagoland, which is headquartered on LaSalle Street in Aurora and has resettled 230 people from Ukraine in this area since 1994 – the vast majority in the last nine years - is mostly asking for your prayers.

“God, we ask you to be present with Ukrainian people scattered across the globe, including those in our communities, churches and workplaces,” read the words under the banner headline on the group's website.

“We know that some are far from loved ones and fear greatly for friends and family,” the message says. “We believe you're with them. We ask that you help us to care for our Ukrainian neighbors well and that you would show them your love through us.”

The website also contains some information regarding family reunification, which is a lengthy and complicated process, noted Director of Development Nathan White, but otherwise, “there is not much going on” right now because critical decisions need to be made on a federal level.

“We will work to be able to respond as needed on the ground, but at this point, that can't be done,” White said. “Down the road, potentially there will be more active things the community can do.”

Down the road. That's where the helpless feeling comes in, as each evening of this past week, we have watched deadly street fighting play out on a world stage, highways littered with burning vehicles and roadways being taken over by massive lines of Russian tanks.

But we are also watching Ukrainian civilians kneel in front of those formidable armored vehicles, just one example of the in-your-face bravery and patriotism that, no matter how this despicable invasion turns out, should land each and every citizen on Time's People of the Year cover.

“People want to help,” said the Rev. Remus Anghel Orian, who took over as pastor of St. Michael Romanian Byzantine Catholic Church in Aurora last fall.



The Rev. Remus Anghel Orian leads prayers for the Ukrainian people at the end of Ash Wednesday's service at St. Michael Romanian Byzantine Catholic Church in Aurora, with the Rev. Alin Dogaru assisting. (The Rev. Remus Orian / HANDOUT)

Orian came to this country from Romania almost four years ago and still has family, including a sister and mother, in his homeland that, as of Thursday morning had welcomed nearly 120,000 mostly women and children from Ukraine.

He is asking his parishioners to donate to a monetary fundraiser for those displaced people that was set up by the Consulate General of Romania in Chicago. Rather than the church have its own fundraiser, it made more sense to direct efforts through the consulate, he said, which, in the first four days, raised \$122,000 of the \$200,000 goal that will go toward housing, food, clothing and health-related essentials for those refugees.

Other churches are also directing their members to contribute to larger organizations set up specifically to provide relief to the Ukrainian people as efficiently as possible. For example, Northbrook-based Lutheran Church Charities set up a relief fund through the Ukrainian Lutheran Church and Christian Friends of New Americans to support those staying in Ukraine as well as those displaced.

In a letter to his congregations soon after the invasion began. Rockford Diocese Bishop David Malloy asked that the faithful send money to Catholic Relief Services, the Collection for the Church in Eastern Europe and Caritas Ukraine.

And he also implored parishes to take part in Pope Francis' day of prayer and fasting for the Ukrainian people on Ash Wednesday, as well as prayers throughout "the holy season of Lent."

At the conclusion of Wednesday's service at St. Michael's in Aurora, Orian and the Rev. Alin Dogaru led the small congregation in prayers - in both English and Romanian - "for an end to the violence and for peace to return in Ukraine" while also asking God to give the people there "the courage, hope and faith to overcome these difficult moments."

Sadly, there have been dozens of other wars that have broken out across the globe since World War II that have inflicted misery and death on millions of innocents. But what we are now watching is what experts see as a tipping point in the world order: a superpower led by an authoritarian regime armed with nuclear weapons invading a peaceful neighbor with the intent of expanding its regional dominance at whatever price it takes.

It's a crisis of such magnitude, Orian believes it could bring more back to church because "at times like this, people pay more attention to their spiritual lives."

"We have a lot of problems around the world," he said. "Faith can and does bring us together."

Two years ago when we went into a coronavirus lockdown during Lent, we knew it would be a time of sacrifice, still unaware of what many would have to endure as COVID-19 upended our lives. Now, with the virus waning as the Lenten season is upon us, we are again feeling vulnerability and uncertainty in ways most of us have never experienced.

Even if the pain and suffering unleashed by an evil Russian president has not yet affected us directly, "it is a horrible situation with horrible consequences," said World Relief's Nathan White.

"We absolutely need awareness and a united response to what is occurring."

dcrosby@tribpub.com