

Ukrainian military chaplains learn pluralism on the job

What to do if a soldier from another denomination asks for a prayer?

by [Marc Roscoe Loustau](#) in the [July 2024](#) issue

Published on May 24, 2024



A chaplain conducts a sacred liturgy on the frontline near Vuhledar, Ukraine, in December 2023. (AP Photo / Valentyn Kuzan)

In April 2023, 30 priests and pastors, dressed in heavy boots and military fatigues, gathered in the sanctuary of Kyiv's Saint Sophia Cathedral for a special ceremony. As they bent their heads to receive the priest's blessing, the group of clergy from across Ukraine's Christian denominations—not only Orthodox but Protestant and Catholic, too—became the first ever class of chaplains inducted into Ukraine's armed forces.

Religious leaders have ministered in the armed forces for years, even though the Ukrainian military had no official chaplaincy. Volunteers visited soldiers on an ad

hoc, unsalaried basis until 2021, when President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed legislation to formalize the program. With NATO integration now the best guarantee for Ukraine's long-term security, the legislation modeled its guidelines and regulations after NATO's spiritual support program.

In December, I traveled to western Ukraine to meet some of these new recruits. Transcarpathia is part of Ukraine's "Bible belt." Surveys show more frequent church attendance here than elsewhere in the country. While more than 70 percent of Ukrainians identify as Orthodox, in Transcarpathia there are also concentrations of Protestants and Catholics. I also wanted to meet chaplains from Ukraine's minority Christian groups and learn about how Ukraine's military institutions accommodate Christian minorities in a country with a legacy of Orthodox cultural primacy.

Junior Lieutenant Martin Andyaloshi, then just finishing his second month as a military chaplain, was in his military fatigues when we met in front of a local pizza joint in an Uzhhorod suburb. He explained, as he led me to a booth at the back, that military chaplains are required to wear fatigues even when they are on leave. He was ordained in the Greek Catholic Church in 2021 but left his rural parish near the Slovakian border to become a chaplain. He was now assigned to a corps of engineers.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine profoundly affected his worldview, and not just his, he said. "There was an existential change in the Ukrainian nation," he explained as we looked over the menus. "It was like a veil dropped from my eyes, and it dawned on me that we are one nation. I realized that there just wasn't much work left for me there [near the Slovakian border], work that would help free Ukraine."

Andyaloshi's nationalist feeling is a new one in Transcarpathia's Greek Catholic Church. Greek Catholics use a liturgy akin to the Orthodox Church, but institutionally they belong to the Roman Catholic Church. Greek Catholic theologians in Lviv, hundreds of kilometers to the north, were the first intellectuals to support the Ukrainian national movement. But historically the Greek Catholic Church in Transcarpathia has stronger ties to Hungary and Western Europe than to the rest of Ukraine.

Although we spoke Ukrainian, Andyaloshi told me his own father was a Hungarian speaker. Despite these Hungarian ties, he now feels that he can do more to help the Ukrainian nation in the military than in a rural Greek Catholic parish.

Rising nationalism across Ukraine has put ethno-religious minorities under greater scrutiny. Transcarpathia's 150,000 ethnic Hungarians have faced questions about divided loyalties. Hungary, led by pro-Russia prime minister Viktor Orbán, has blocked EU military aid for Ukraine. He routinely calls on Zelenskyy to negotiate with Russia and give up territory. Orbán claims that by calling for an immediate peace he speaks for Transcarpathia's Hungarians, bound to the Hungarian state by ties of ethnic kinship.

However, not all minority Hungarians want to give up the fight. More than 400 have joined Ukraine's army since 2022. Some units, serving in the east near the Russian border and near the front lines, even have a majority of Hungarian speakers.

On a slushy Monday morning, I met János Fülöp, a young Greek Catholic priest who had recently returned from a mission to the front lines. We met in his office at Caritas, Transcarpathia's branch of the global Catholic charity, which Fülöp has led since July. He apologized after the fourth time an employee opened his door to ask a question. "I'm still getting used to this job," he said, failing to hide his smile. This priest doesn't mind being harried, I thought.

"The bishop asked me to visit Hungarian-speaking soldiers," Fülöp said of his mission to the front lines. "But I went merely as a private minister." He insisted that "there's no comparison between what I did and official military chaplains."

Fülöp brought not only his own presence to the soldiers on the front lines but also a bag of rosaries. He had traveled to Hungary in May to see Pope Francis. The pope met with Ukrainian refugees and brought a collection of rosaries, which he had blessed personally, to send to Ukrainian soldiers. Fülöp carried these beads to the front lines.

He confirmed that there were also ethnic Ukrainians in the unit he visited. He met Protestants and Orthodox Christians as well as Catholics. Different Christians pray differently, I pointed out. Isn't it possible that some of the soldiers had not used a rosary before?

But Fülöp batted away my question. He reminded me that this was a unit of soldiers from Transcarpathia. Interdenominational marriages are a matter of course in this region. Plus, they also recited the Lord's Prayer. "A sort of ecumenical spirit happened," he explained, when he led them in the prayer.

I noticed that Fülöp did not refer to mixed marriages with evangelical or Pentecostal Christians when he explained Transcarpathia's tradition of interdenominational tolerance. For him, ecumenical prayer on the front lines was the Lord's Prayer, a form that such groups use less frequently than Christians in more liturgical traditions do.

The next day, on the street outside my hotel, pastor Yosyp Esenov laid his hands on my shoulders and let loose with a chain of improvised, staccato petitions to God. His prayer evoked the sensation of a conversation with God, and the propulsive phrasing sounded nothing like the Lord's Prayer.

The mutual friend who connected me to Esenov said he was Pentecostal. His Facebook page says he was ordained by the United Methodists. He calls himself simply Protestant. In any case, Esenov comes across as an elemental force for God, reluctant to tolerate from others anything less than his own level of total commitment. Over WhatsApp, his first message was an invitation to go with him to the front lines. When I declined the same invitation again, this time in person in the lobby of my hotel, he looked frustrated.

"Where is God in Ukraine?" he replied. "Where there is the greatest need, where people are dying, suffering, and wounded. Sure, I can send you a video from the front, but you won't hear the gunshots."

He looked ready to leave right then and there, but instead he invited me into his car and we drove through downtown Uzhhorod to meet two church members who had gone with him on a recent mission to the front lines.

On the way, I learned that, like Fülöp, he was not an official military chaplain. Despite the move to formalize chaplaincy work, he persisted in the old model of providing ad hoc, privately funded material and spiritual support to frontline soldiers.

"Like Peter, I leave my comfort zone. For me, I left local ministry," he explained.

Esenov tends to soldiers' spiritual needs on trips for his NGO, the Morning Star charitable foundation, which ferries humanitarian aid from Western Europe to Ukraine. More than once, he said, he'd left villages just before deadly Russian missile strikes. But he wasn't upset by this; he had too much to do to bother with survivor's guilt.

“You want to know what actually hurts?” he challenged, “If people haven’t heard the gospel. If I haven’t done everything I can so that they will be saved.”

He was working near the Kakhovka Dam a few weeks before Russian forces destroyed it in June 2023. He had led a caravan with food packages, driving from village to village until supplies ran out. When the villagers came out of their houses only to discover there was no food, Esenov recalled, they asked for Bibles. They asked him to stop and pray for them. The destruction of the dam killed hundreds and wiped out villages along the Dnipro River.

Esenov wept when he saw pictures of the same villages he had visited, now destroyed. “I was overwhelmed,” he said, “but then I thought maybe some had received Christ before they drowned.”

Later that night, Esenov sent me a series of pictures he had taken near the front lines. In some, he is standing with soldiers in flak jackets. He blocked their faces with Ukrainian flags to protect their anonymity. In others, he is praying, head bent to his chest, with groups of civilians.

I typed a question: “Do you pray with them like you prayed with me?”

“Prayer should always come from the heart. I always say what comes from the Spirit. People who pray with me also speak from the heart, because we love the Lord.”

Master Sergeant Anatoly Ponomarjov met with me by video from his small office at a battalion headquarters near the Slovakian border. The burly and affable Baptist pastor’s bristling hair and goatee are a perfect brown, except for two patches of white on his chin that hint at his long military career.

In the early 1980s, he served in Afghanistan with the Soviet army. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, he led an organization for veterans of this conflict, often called the “USSR’s Vietnam” after Soviet forces left Afghanistan in defeat. Because he had already organized support programs for soldiers, he became a chaplain years before the legislation establishing the current program. He began serving in 2016, and as the program began in earnest, he was in a position to mentor those who signed up, including the young priest Andyaloshi.

Andyaloshi told me about Ponomarjov—the first Baptist pastor he had ever met—because he wanted me to know about the decorations in Ponomarjov’s

battalion office. Andyaloshi referred to them as icons, but I saw that Ponomarjov's head was framed on either side by pictures of the crucifixion and resurrection taped to the bare wall. They were mass-produced postcards from a Stations of the Cross series.

"It's not typical for a Protestant," Andyaloshi had recalled, "but it's there anyway. I was humbled and my heart was open."

I saw, as Ponomarjov swiveled his camera around the room, the 12 scenes from birth to resurrection, beneath a string of twinkling red and green Christmas lights.

In Soviet times, the government targeted Baptists for being American collaborators, foreign agents, or spies. This led to a schism in the 1960s. Some congregations registered themselves at local town halls. Others refused to be monitored. These were the Baptist heroes of dissident literature by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the faithful who read their Bibles in the Gulag because they refused government interference.

Outside prison walls, Ukrainian Baptists developed a counter-Orthodox ethos. In contrast to the highly liturgical Orthodox Church, which enjoyed official recognition from the Soviet government, Baptists embraced an austere biblical faith. Into the 1990s, anthropologist Catherine Wanner says, Baptists gathered for Bible discussions to set themselves apart from the Orthodox majority's sensual, liturgical, icon-centered practice.

Baptists became less isolated and more international after the Soviet Union's collapse. Ukraine's Pentecostal megachurches drew believers from Baptist congregations, and the two churches have long blended their worship styles. Esenov is Pentecostal to some, Methodist or simply Protestant to others, because denominational identities are fluid in this sector of Ukrainian Christianity. They also form easy alliances because the government tends to lump all Protestants together. The All-Ukrainian Union of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists trains Pentecostal ministers for the chaplaincy as well.

Protestants make common cause over and against the dominant Orthodox Christian tradition. For Baptists like Pastor Ponomarjov, crossing Christian barriers is not a big deal—so long as it's not the barrier with Orthodoxy.

When I asked Ponomarjov about praying with soldiers from other Christian traditions, including Greek Catholic soldiers whose liturgical practice is so close to Orthodoxy,

his first gesture was to the inner pocket of his general issue green coat. “Although I’m a Protestant, I have a prayer book.” He pulled out a leather-bound book, a gift from Andyaloshi. He turned the book toward the screen so I could see the prayers written for every situation in life. “I can read prayers from here, but other times I pray in my own words.”

A few minutes later, after his second story about bumbling his way into an unexpected spiritual lesson, I chanced an observation. “You sound to me like a very odd Baptist,” I said, hoping that Ponomarjov was self-deprecating enough not to be offended.

“Yes, yes,” he chuckled, to my relief. “If you’re a dogmatic person, it’s going to end in tragedy for you as a chaplain.”

Prayer is never just an individual conversing with God, but always—whenever human beings come face-to-face with the Divine—there is also an institutional background. There is a historically sedimented, locally situated structure of relationships that constrains and produces prayer’s range of conceivable topics—constrains it even to the point that we might not feel comfortable engaging in a conversation at all, as opposed to memorized recitation, wordless visual contemplation, or something else entirely.

In the case of Ukraine’s military chaplains—individuals at the forefront of Ukraine’s effort to strengthen its ties to and place within Europe and the West more broadly—sometimes it seemed like they don’t want to pray at all.

The Ukrainian chaplains I spoke with do pray with soldiers. Yet they talked about it reluctantly, like it was a confession. An admission they were willing to discuss only after telling me about serving soldiers’ universal humanity.

When I asked Ponomarjov about prayer, he initially responded, “We’re like doctors. We heal whoever comes to us, no matter who they are.”

“We have to differentiate church life from military life,” he continued. “People have their own particular practices, but here it’s a different microclimate, and we have to provide them with universal answers regardless of their religion.”

I had to press Ponomarjov and others to talk about prayer. They preferred to discuss psychotherapy, which they offered to me as a tradition-neutral, scientifically

objective alternative. With so much about neutrality and humanity, sometimes I had the feeling that I was conducting interviews with Doctors Without Borders, not ordained clergy.

This war has given Ukrainian chaplains a simple but terrible incentive for bringing humanitarianism rather than Christianity to the battlefield. According to [Radio Free Europe](#), Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill has preemptively absolved Russian soldiers of sin if they die in Ukraine. [Reuters](#) and other [news services](#) have challenged the veracity of a viral photo showing Russian Orthodox priests blessing missiles. Although the image was doctored, it had already gone viral and made a huge impact. During my trip, several everyday Ukrainians, including my bus driver to Uzhhorod, talked about Russian priests blessing weapons as if this were a settled fact.

The notion, correct or not, that Russian Orthodoxy blesses unjust violence has strengthened Ukrainians' desire to bring religion closer to psychological science and embrace its therapeutic effects. Amid a broader push to contrast Ukrainian humanity with Russian inhumanity and Ukrainian democracy with Russian autocracy, chaplains are also trying to distinguish themselves from the Russian Orthodox Church on the issue of religion's proper role in a conflict zone.

During my time with Ukrainian military chaplains, I could have asked any number of questions about Russian Orthodox influences on their prayer life, questions that likely would have shut the conversation down immediately for implying that my acquaintances were in fact loyal to Russia.

Instead, I asked questions that the chaplains would respond to, even if I had to push them. And I think they did respond in the end because they had experienced prayer as a dilemma in their own professional experience. NATO procedures dictate that if a soldier from another tradition comes to a chaplain and asks for a ritual, the chaplain must find a religious leader from that tradition to perform it. But Ukraine's chaplains are also bound by the motto, "Be there." They are called to be present to soldiers in need. They can't always bring the appropriate clergy person to the emergency situations that they face.

It wasn't hard to picture a chaplain's dilemma. What to do if a soldier from another denomination asks for a prayer? Does the chaplain say yes, even though policy says not to perform rituals from another tradition? Or do they leave the soldier there,

saying, “Excuse me while I find you the right religious leader”?

There is an easy critical response here. Hearing about this preference for psychotherapeutic universalism over Christian particularism, and knowing that the Ukrainian military chaplaincy is explicitly modeling itself after NATO, we may be tempted to call this Western secular imperialism. As Ukrainians remake their military chaplaincy in NATO’s image, is this another example of a small nation capitulating its public culture to the West, with its universalistic humanist ideals and tradition-independent sciences? Are Ukrainians imposing international humanitarianism’s secular culture, at NATO’s behest, on their own society?

But we can also ask a different question, one that shows a more nuanced understanding of what’s at stake in Ukrainians’ struggle to push out the invaders who are occupying their country and murdering civilians daily. NATO integration is not only about Western imperialism, or even safety guarantees against Russia’s own aggressive, militaristic imperialism, for that matter.

Ukrainians are figuring out—under extraordinarily difficult circumstances—how to create just relations between diverse approaches to the Christian gospel in a country whose public culture has been dominated by one particular church. In this way, Ukrainians’ struggle is a lot like our own in the United States, even as we might also learn from the differences between Ukraine’s Orthodox-dominated public culture and America’s history of Protestant supremacy. To do the learning, we only need, like Andyaloshi, to humble ourselves and have open hearts.