

Pope visits Russian embassy to show concern over ‘war’ in Ukraine

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ROME – Friday morning, the day after Russian military forces invaded Ukrainian territory, Pope Francis paid a quick visit to the Russian embassy to the Holy See in Rome to voice concern over what he called the “war” now taking place.

According to a Vatican statement, the pope spent about 30 minutes at the embassy “to convey his concern for the war.”

To this point, Russian officials have described the incursion as a “special military operation,” insisting it’s not a war.

A Vatican spokesman told Crux that rather than an attempt by the Vatican and the pope to mediate the conflict, Francis’s decision to visit the embassy, which is located on the main road leading up to St. Peter’s Square, was exclusively to “express his concern.”

Russian military invaded Ukrainian territory early Thursday morning, launching bomb and missile attacks at several locations throughout the country, including the nation’s capital, Kyiv. As of this writing, reports indicated that Russian forces are approaching Ukraine’s capital.

In response, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky invoked martial law and has encouraged citizens to stay indoors. Many attempted to flee the country as highways were clogged and air travel was completely suspended in Ukraine and partially in several surrounding countries.

Countless citizens spent the night in bunkers or in the subway to seek shelter from potential missile blasts, some of which have hit residential areas as Russian troops advance.

The invasion, which many fear could trigger a third world war, comes after weeks of escalating tensions between Russia and Ukraine.

For months, Russia has amassed troops along its border with Ukraine, demanding

that NATO forces withdraw from eastern Europe and pledge to never admit Ukraine or any other former Soviet nation to its membership.

Many see Russia's invasion as the inevitable result of tensions that have been building since 2014, when Ukrainian citizens ousted pro-Russian president Viktor Fedorovych Yanukovych. Russia subsequently annexed Ukraine's southern Crimean Peninsula and backed separatists who overtook large swaths of the country's eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, and conflict has been unfolding ever since.

In a move many now believe was calculated before the invasion, Putin formally declared his recognition of the People's Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk, causing international backlash and a swath of sanctions.

In the wake of Thursday's invasion of Ukraine, the European Union, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, the United States, and the United Kingdom, all hit Russia with further sanctions in a bid to pressure Putin to call off his offensive.

In a Feb. 25 statement, Major Archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church Sviatoslav Shevchuk, who spent most of yesterday inside a bunker underneath Kyiv's Cathedral of the Resurrection, said that "after passing the first day of the war, we pray for Ukraine."

Shevchuk said he has been in contact with the Greek Catholic bishops of Kharkiv, Odessa, Zaporizhya, and with priests and monks living in the occupied eastern region, and assured them of his prayers.

"In this tragic moment, all our hopes are in God. In this tragic moment, the fate of Ukraine depends on our ability to self-organize and act responsibly in person, taking responsibility for the future of our nation."

"God bless Ukraine," he said.

Shevchuk asked for God's blessing for Ukraine's authorities, military and armed forces, as well as for all those "who today are in solidarity with Ukraine in different corners of our country and the world."

"The world is with Ukraine, and Ukraine is with God. Together we will make it," he said.

Diplomatic relations between Russia and the Holy See date to 2009, when an accord was reached under Pope Benedict XVI. The current Russian envoy to the Vatican is longtime diplomat Alexander Avdeev, who also previously served as Russia's Minister of Culture.

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