

# For the city without windows

A homelessness charity in Ukraine is now responding to the humanitarian crisis caused by Russia's invasion. Its chief executive talks to **Sarah Meyrick**

FR VITALIY NOVAK CM is on the road. He is driving from Odesa to East Ukraine, where he will be visiting refugee children who are at a summer camp in the mountains, before travelling on to London.

More than 400 children attend the camps, for three months at a time, to spread the opportunity to as many children as possible. "For the first time during the war, children can come to the summer camp," he says. "We are very happy about this."

Fr Vitaliy, a Congregation of the Mission priest, is the chief executive of Depaul Ukraine. Before the war — at a point when the homelessness charity was supporting 8500 people a year — he was director of services.

When Russia invaded Ukraine, he took the job of CEO, taking responsibility for all Depaul Ukraine programmes, which include distributing humanitarian aid, providing family accommodation, emergency shelters and day centres, and offering welfare-rights support across the country. Today, the charity engages with at least 30,000 people a month — probably more.

How did the organisation make that transition? "We jumped a lot [in terms of numbers], because we cover almost half of Ukraine, especially the war-zone regions, central Ukraine, and then refugees in the west Ukraine," he says. "So, we were meeting a lot of people on a daily basis."

At the outbreak of the war, it was natural for people to volunteer their services to help to distribute aid. "When you have total aggression on all the borders of your country, then it is, I think, something inside us, this power to activate all possibilities. You have to go to help people who are affected by the war. And so we found many people who were willing to join us."

All Ukrainians were faced with the choice between staying and leaving in the face of "this horrible war", he says. "Those who remained were dedicated to do as much as possible. So, it was like God's blessing."

That initial, spontaneous, response by volunteers gave the Depaul staff time to put in place the longer-term processes that they needed. "Now, it is organised; we have structures; we have a logistical system in place," he says. "At the beginning, when we were seeing shelling everywhere, we came to the villages, and we'd just throw down the humanitarian aid from the car and run away, because it was very dangerous. Now, we know where we can go, and we have created the centres for refugees, and we have [systems]."

How have the needs changed in the past 18 months? "The funda-



MACIEK MUSIALEK/DEC

Fr Vitaliy, of Depaul Ukraine, gives an interview in front of a destroyed apartment block in Kharkiv, last November

mental needs of every human being are food, warmth, the roof over your head. These needs are still here," he says.

But the situation is worse, because of the destruction of the country's infrastructure. "There are no jobs, because many factories are destroyed. We see that people are getting poorer and poorer, especially in the front-line zones."

Depaul is trying to help people to rebuild their houses. "People want to come back home, but sometimes it's not possible to live in this almost destroyed [country]. You know, they don't ask a lot: for every human being, the need is to have your four walls around you and a roof."

TRAUMA is a problem, he says. "We are starting to see more and more how people are traumatised; so there is this as well. It's a very deep aspect, even where people are not recognising this and they say, No, it's not the problem. But you always almost see it's going to be the big issue."

How does Depaul respond? "We are creating mobile teams, who are going to visit these villages, especially in Kharkiv, which is very close to the occupied area. For children, we have created the centres where they are coming, and can see professional [psychosocial] staff." Overall, the work is focused on Kyiv, Odesa, and Kharkiv, with further operations in Mykolaiv and Zaporizhzhia.

And their work is appreciated. "Yesterday, I visited one village where there is a couple, and we brought in [materials] to cover their house, with a new roof. [The husband] didn't believe me, that the roof and windows on his house were replaced, so that he can be back home with his wife.

"They loved the house, which was

one year ago almost completely destroyed.

"He didn't believe it, that this can happen. From this, he was so joyful, so emotional, that he had a heart attack and had to go to hospital." (The man has since recovered.)

"Another couple, they are elderly, they are crying, and they are just very happy to see that somebody is coming to help. If somebody is coming, they don't lose this hope. They feel this solidarity."

How does the charity balance the immediate needs with the longer term? "We do what is in our power, according to the need we see. We are not able to [help] everybody. So, we say, wherever we are, if we have resources, of course we will respond to these new challenges, like when the dam in Kharkiv was destroyed. We found our resources to respond there. But [the need] never goes away."

Is Depaul — a Roman Catholic charity — trusted, I wonder, given the understandable suspicion of the Russian Orthodox Church? "Yes. For years, from before the war, we were in cities like Kyiv and Kharkiv and Odesa for many years. So, people knew us, and they recognise us."

The charity is already preparing for the changing season. How do they feel about the approach of winter? "We know that it is not like a

fantasy or a fairy tale. It is real. We know it will be much harder than last year.

"We are thinking about this and a programme of winterisation. Kharkiv is the city without windows. We will be looking for funds to continue this programme before this winter. We know that it is going to be harder this time, because last year there was more enthusiasm than now, because this is long-term, and the war is not finishing yet. It means that we are in a worse situation than last year."

AS WELL as exhaustion within the team, there is a worry about compassion fatigue among donor countries. "Everybody gets tired, and the fear is they will give up on this. This is what we see. We have to be prepared for the long term, because, even if the war will finish tomorrow, the need and disaster the war has done will remain, and people will suffer for years."

Is he optimistic about the end of the war? "It's my vision and my daily prayer," he says. "But it doesn't depend on me. What depends on me I'm trying to do as much as possible. Everything we do, we do because we know — some time — it will come, the end of the war. Without help and support and . . . solidarity, people can lose the hope. And that is the most dangerous thing of all, if people lose the hope."

At the start of the war, many countries promised help. The fear is that support will dwindle. "We hope it's not only words. But we need to be here, however long it is needed. We are fighting for human values and freedom."

Depaul's funding comes from a range of sources, including CAFOD and Caritas. There have been appeals through the wider charity, Depaul International. "They are donating generously to our funds. And we are

still looking for new possibilities, because we see that this work is something we have now got experience in, and we can continue and do even better."

Without this support — from "people who are open and have generous hearts" — the work would not be able to continue. The charity also relies on the prayers of supporters. "Without prayer, you know, if your spirit is weak, you're not able to do good, and then fight for good."

Fr Vitaliy will be featuring in a documentary, *What Did you Do to the Russians?*, due to be screened this week in London. He is, I suggest, living out his calling as absolutely the right man in the right place.

"You know, at the beginning of the war, I think everybody got this question: What am I going to do during this war? How am I going to participate? Am I going to remain here or go? And, for me, it was natural. I'm here to support and help those who are in our country with humanitarian aid. I knew as a priest I couldn't go to the army, although this was a temptation."

He takes encouragement from the soldiers he meets. "They say, we are happy you are supporting our mothers, our wives, our children, behind us, to hear this news that somebody cares about our families. We're not able to do this now, because we have to fight. This dimension is very important for us."

Fr Vitaliy is a speaker in the autumn lecture series "Here I Stand: I can do no other", at St Martin-in-the-Fields, in London. He will be appearing on a panel with Lindsey Hilsum (international editor, Channel 4 News), and Emma Graham-Harrison (senior international-affairs correspondent, The Guardian and The Observer) on Monday 18 September.

Tickets: [www.smitf.org/lectures](http://www.smitf.org/lectures)

“We know that winter will be much harder than last year”