



# ‘EVERYTHING IS IN GOD’S HANDS’

Story by  
Mary Solberg

Photo by  
Rick Klein

Ukrainian Byzantine Catholic families thank schools, parishes for support during time of war in Ukraine

Father Vasyl Kadar, far left, and his wife, Kvita, came together with Father Vasyl Banyk, far right, and his wife, Natalia, at Ss. Peter and Paul Byzantine Catholic Church, Punxsutawney, in the first weeks of war in Ukraine this winter. They share a common faith that prayer will help in the prolonged war between Russia and Ukraine. Their children, pictured in the following pages, attend diocesan schools.



Love and support are apparent at Ss. Cosmas and Damian School, Punxsutawney, where Vasyl Kadar, pictured in a white shirt holding a miniature Ukrainian flag, and his sister, Uliana, standing to his right, have fun with their classmates Brielle Bargerstock, Daley McGinley, Julia Riggie, Aiden Kurtz, August Catalano, Blake Perry, Wynn McGinley, Ava Roberts, Owen Janocha, Lachlan Casaday, Rowan Shiok, Brody Stiteler and Henry Janocha.



When Russia invaded Ukraine in February, Theresa Pearce somehow had to explain to her kindergarteners at Ss. Cosmas and Damian School (SSCD) in Punxsutawney why an unjust war was raging on the other side of the globe.

Her classroom, in one small but significant way, was directly affected by the distant conflict. One of its kindergarteners, Uliana Kadar, 6, was born in Ukraine and still has a grandmother, aunts, uncles and cousins living there.

So Pearce began to demonstrate the situation as simply as she could. She snatched a water bottle from one of her students, asking all of the innocent and surprised eyes that were fixed on her, “How do you feel when somebody wants something of yours and takes it without asking?”

“That’s not fair!” the children shouted.

For SSCD Principal Heather Kunselman, the demonstration was helpful in its simplicity. It explained how Ukrainians might feel about Russia’s unwanted aggression.

“I felt it worked so well, especially for our little ones,” Kunselman says.

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For little Uliana, the class discussion helped in two ways: she gained a basic understanding of the injustice of Russia attacking Ukraine, where she was born, and she saw how much her friends cared.

Today, when asked what is happening in Ukraine, Uliana says, simply, “They’re fighting.”

But her 8-year-old brother, Vasyl, a second-grader at SSCD, goes a little deeper: “I know there’s a fight between Russia and Ukraine. I don’t know when it will stop, but it might be over this summer ... maybe.”

The Kadar children and their parents, Father Vasyl Kadar, pastor at Punxsutawney’s Ss. Peter and Paul Byzantine Catholic Church, and Kvita Kadar, have been surrounded by the love of the SSCD community since the outbreak of war in their homeland.

The staff and students at SSCD gathered for a prayer service for peace in the school courtyard, and there was a community rosary recited at Ss. Peter and Paul Church. Additionally, SSCD teacher Bobbi Young and her students made cakes decorated with Ukraine’s national colors of blue and yellow, donating them to a local benefit bake sale for Ukraine.

“If nothing else, all of our tangible support helps direct our prayers,” Kunselman says.



Blue and yellow Legos make for a spirited break from difficult times facing Ukraine. At DuBois Central Catholic Elementary, Nadia Banyk, in the red shirt at center, joins her brother, Vasyl, seated to her right, and his pre-kindergarten friends Wyatt Luzier, Lorenzo Camuso, Olivia Scicchitano and Kylee Danch.

## FAMILIES SHARE THE TRAUMA

Another Byzantine Catholic family — the Banyks in nearby DuBois — shares the Kadar’s experience.

The families enjoy a close friendship and similar history, not the least of which is the unbearable worry for their families in war-torn Ukraine. At this writing, the relatives of both families are safe.

Father Vasyl Banyk, pastor of Holy Trinity Byzantine Catholic Church in Sykesville, and administrator of Nativity Byzantine Catholic Church in DuBois, lives in Jefferson County with his wife, Natalia, and their two children, Nadia and Vasyl Jr., who attend DuBois Central Catholic Elementary School.

Not only do both priests share the same first name and approximate age (early 30s), but they attended the same seminary in Ukraine, Blessed Teodor Romzha Theological Seminary in the Eparchy of Mukachevo, located in the Carpathian region of western Ukraine.

Father Banyk came to DuBois in 2016 and Father Kadar

a year later, due to the need for more Byzantine Catholic priests in the Archeparchy of Pittsburgh.

Living thousands of miles away from home is challenging enough in such basic ways as language and culture. But with the war threatening the safety of their families in the western and southern reaches of Ukraine, daily life now includes regular phone calls and texts to their loved ones.

“It scares me. You never know what news you will receive,” Father Kadar says. “Everyone there is so afraid because 24 hours a day, seven days a week, they are so worried about what is going to happen in the next few minutes. Right now, people are scared to go outside even by themselves.”

Kvita Kadar says her feelings are “upside down.” She’s upset that one day there was peace and the next there was war.

On Feb. 24, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered troops to invade Ukraine, forcing millions to flee. UNICEF reports that many children have been killed in the conflict; another half a million need food support.

“He is a terrorist. It’s horrible; it’s terrible,” Kvita Kadar says, adding, “Now everything is in God’s hands. We just pray. We appreciate every day, and we thank God for everything.”

Father Banyk says the indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians, including children, is evil.

“We face that evil by prayer. Evil is destroyed by prayer and fasting,” Father Banyk says.

He and his wife, Natalia, are trying to protect their kids from the disturbing news coming from Ukraine. They stay in close communication with Father Banyk’s mother, grandmother and sister, who live in Ukraine, as well as

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offers its weekly Mass intention for an end to the war.

Caruso is proud that the school community has been able to provide love and support to the Banyk children and their parents, as well as to all Ukrainians.

“This has been an eye-opening experience for our students as to what true evil is in our world,” Caruso says. “On some level, the younger kids don’t understand what is happening, but our older students are outraged at the unfairness. There has been a lot of conversation in our social studies classes and among seniors in our social justice class. It’s unjust to them. But it brings out their compassionate empathy for others. A Catholic school helps them develop that.”

That kind of prayerful support is what the Kadar

Natalia’s parents and three sisters, who live in western Ukraine. Their brother-in-law is in the Ukrainian army.

They are happy with all the support from DuBois Central Catholic. Since the war began, the school system has donated \$2,300 to a Ukrainian relief fund organized by the Byzantine Catholic Archeparchy of Pittsburgh. Those funds will be sent to the Eparchy of Mukachevo for relief efforts in western Ukraine.

According to Gretchen Caruso, president of DuBois Area Catholic Schools, students have been discussing the war from a faith perspective. And the school community prays for Ukraine daily and of-

and Banyks are holding onto nowadays, especially as the war continues to rage in Ukraine. The families met recently at Ss. Peter and Paul Church, standing amid the colorful and ornate icons of the Byzantine faith.

“We appreciate any kind of help,” Father Kadar says. “The first thing is prayer. Only God can change something. God will show his power and show the whole world his truth.” †



The Kadar and Banyk families take comfort in each other as they worry about the safety of loved ones in Ukraine.

See more #StandUpForUkraine stories on the following pages.

**Ss. Peter & Paul Byzantine Catholic Church in Punxsutawney is collecting monetary donations that will directly support relief efforts by the Byzantine Catholic Church in Ukraine.**

**Donations can be made payable to:**  
**Ss. Peter & Paul Byzantine Catholic Church**  
**714 Sutton St.**  
**Punxsutawney, PA 15767**

**Monetary donations can be dropped off or mailed. Please write Ukrainian Relief in the memo line. Questions can be directed to Father Vasyl Kadar at [kadarvasya@gmail.com](mailto:kadarvasya@gmail.com).**

**Find other ways to donate to Ukraine relief at [www.eriercd.org/ukraine.html](http://www.eriercd.org/ukraine.html)**



# TO DO NOTHING IS NOT AN OPTION

Getty Images/young84



Contributed photo

State Rep. Bob Merski helps collect many items that were shipped to Poland to assist Ukrainian refugees.

Pennsylvania State Rep. Bob Merski, a parishioner of Our Mother of Sorrows Parish in Erie, put his political experience and deep Catholic faith into action over the past few months to help war-torn Ukraine.

"To do nothing is not an option," says Merski, reflecting on the millions of Ukrainians who have fled their homes since Russia's invasion on Feb. 24.

A politician and lifelong Catholic, Merski jumped into action after receiving an email from a former city councilman in Lublin, Poland, one of Erie's sister cities. Now an attorney in Warsaw, Mateusz Zacynski told Merski that Poland was welcoming refugees with open hearts.

"He said the Polish people were literally taking the fleeing Ukrainians right off the streets and bringing them into their homes. These people had nothing," Merski says.

The two men met when Merski was part of an Erie delegation visiting Lublin in 2019. Merski served on Erie City Council from 2012-19.

Erie and its large Polish population — many from Erie's eastside Catholic parishes — were compelled to respond. Merski organized a broad effort to collect monetary and material donations for Ukrainian refugees.

With the help of Father Jason Glover, pastor of Erie's Holy Trinity and St. Stanislaus parishes, Merski oversaw what became a burgeoning relief effort involving Catholic parishes, schools and individuals in the Erie area.

By the end of March, donors contributed more than nine pallets of personal care items, including

diapers, toothpaste and toothbrushes, as well as clothes and medical supplies. Erie's two Catholic universities — Gannon and Mercyhurst — also pitched in, as did the Erie Catholic School System. About \$7,000 in cash gifts were converted into more needed goods.

"The generosity was well beyond anything I imagined," Father Glover says.

At Our Lady of Peace School in Erie, maintenance employee Jozef Skibor, a native of Poland, inspired Principal Shivani Suri to encourage students and families to donate. OLP joined other parishes in the diocese in collecting funds that were sent to Catholic Relief Services (CRS).

"It's war; I don't like it," Skibor says. "But I like how the Polish people are helping the refugees."

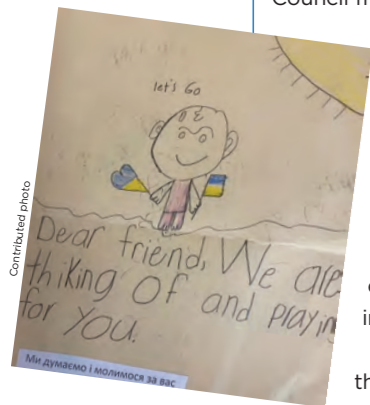
The cost to ship all of the donated items from Erie would have been prohibitive for local parishes, so Jim Berlin, CEO of Erie's Logistics Plus, offered to ship the goods to Poland.

"This is a testament to people's willingness to help during such a huge humanitarian crisis," Merski says. "It's a work of mercy."

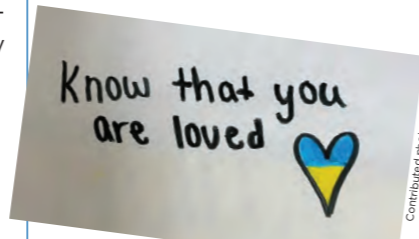
In a separate effort, the students of the six campuses of the Erie Catholic School System joined forces in a letter-writing campaign.

According to system President Bridget Philip, students created 883 personalized cards that were shipped to Ukraine, thanks to Logistics Plus. One of the greetings said, "Dear friend, we are thinking of and praying for you."

"Some of the messages made me cry," Philip says. "I am so moved by how the war in Ukraine is hitting our young kids. A 4-year-old can always make a card and pray. There is always something we can do to help others." †



Contributed photo



Contributed photo



Contributed photo

# TO UKRAINE — WITH LOVE — FROM WARREN

BY ANNE-MARIE WELSH

**WARREN** — Exactly one day after Russia began its unprovoked assault on Ukraine in February, Father Richard Tomasone received a text message from Barbora Fabianova-Hajasova, a Slovakian exchange student he had coached to a state basketball championship during the 2000-01 season at Kennedy Catholic High School, Hermitage.

She and her husband, Brano, were considering taking a refugee family into their home in Bojnice, Slovakia. What did he think?

"I told her I thought it was wonderful," said Father Tomasone, now pastor of St. Joseph Parish, Warren, and its mission church of St. Luke in Youngsville.

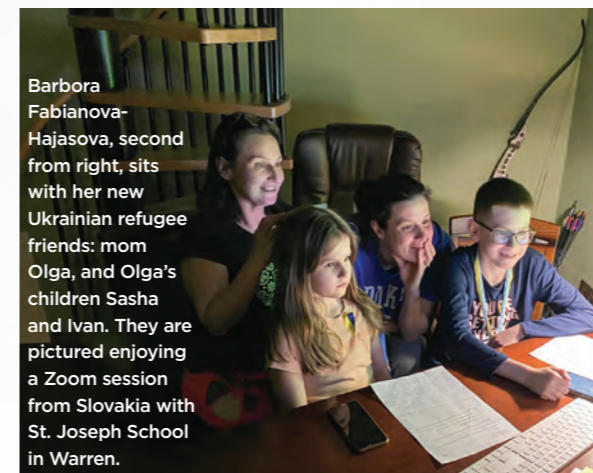
Emboldened by her former coach's support, Barbora cast aside concerns about politics and safety and welcomed a displaced Ukrainian family: a mother, Olga, and her children, Ivan, 11, and Sasha, 9. They had traveled 800 miles by car, bus and train from their home in war-torn Kyiv.

The young family left with an hour's notice, grabbing birth certificates, passports, basic clothing and textbooks, struggling to keep their wits about them as bombs fell nearby. They left their husband and father behind to fight.

Barbora is the kind of person who would have squeezed refugees into her home, no matter its size, Father Tomasone said. He has come to know her well over the years, staying in close communication.

**Father Richard Tomasone, inspired by a former student's zeal to help Ukrainian refugees, started a local campaign to raise funds.**

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Barbora Fabianova-Hajasova, second from right, sits with her new Ukrainian refugee friends: mom Olga, and Olga's children Sasha and Ivan. They are pictured enjoying a Zoom session from Slovakia with St. Joseph School in Warren.

Contributed photo



“She grew up behind the Iron Curtain,” he explained. “She understands crisis. She understands these people could lose everything.”

Once Father Tomasone began telling others about the situation, there was no stopping the outpouring of help from the Catholic community of Warren and people in the Diocese of Erie. He asked for prayers for Barbora and her refugee family and invited people to donate financially. Within a few days, he was able to wire Barbora \$5,266. Since that time, the total collected has reached \$40,000.

When the first funds arrived, Olga and Barbora asked if they could share the donations with others in need.

“We just want to help refugees,” Father Tomasone told them.

To share this message of mercy with students at St. Joseph School, Warren, Principal Carrie Pearson collaborated with Father Tomasone to organize a Zoom meeting between the school children and Barbora in Slovakia. Olga and her children were on the video call.

The students at St. Joe’s opened with a song of peace. They eagerly pulled out signs and drawings of the Ukrainian flag, and then representatives from each grade asked questions ranging from, “What were you able to bring with you?” to “Do you have family and friends who are still in Ukraine?”

Sasha and Ivan had received copies of the questions in advance and, with Barbora’s help, recounted some of their experiences, mostly in English. The fact that they had to leave



Father Richard Tomasone, pastor of St. Joseph Parish, Warren, and its mission church of St. Luke in Youngsville, helped orchestrate a video session between children at St. Joseph School and a former student from Slovakia who took in a Ukrainian refugee family.

Photo by Anne-Marie Welsh

their dog and cat behind resonated deeply with the youngsters at St. Joe’s.

Barbora and Olga wrapped their arms around Ivan and Sasha, providing encouragement as they shared not only their difficulties but also moments of respite, such as visits to the local zoo in Slovakia.

St. Joseph teacher Rita Cecco said the Zoom call was “wonderful” for her third-graders. “It makes it very real,” she said.

Before the exchange ended, Father Tomasone offered a few words followed by a blessing.

“It is a long distance between us, but because we care for everybody, that love makes it a lot shorter,” he said. “So, we’re very close to you and we want you to know that we will continue to pray for you and for all the refugees from the Ukraine.” †

**“It is a long distance between us, but because we care for everybody, that love makes it a lot shorter.”**



Waving blue and yellow flags and signs, students at St. Joseph School, via Zoom, greet a Ukrainian mom and her children who were forced to leave their war-torn country.

Photo by Anne-Marie Welsh

**Interested in supporting Warren’s Ukrainian relief effort?  
Make checks payable to St. Joseph Parish (in the memo line, write “Refugees”).**

*Mail to:*

**St. Joseph Parish  
600 Pennsylvania Ave. W  
Warren, PA 16365**

Getty Images/Jakub Lajchert