

18 May 2023

OCCUPIED UKRAINE: "Disappeared" clergy still "disappeared" after six months

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

On 16 November 2022, troops of Russia's National Guard seized two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests, Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta, in Berdyansk. Six months later, there is no information about where they are, their state of health – or if they are still alive. Asked why they had been seized, the Russian Berdyansk Police responded: "That's all rubbish. Ask [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelensky's special services – they're responsible." An Orthodox Church of Ukraine parish's Easter service was banned because the priest refused to transfer to the Moscow Patriarchate.

Two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests seized in Berdyansk in Zaporizhzhia Region in late 2022 appear to remain in Russian detention - if they are still alive. Forum 18 has not been able to find out where Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta have been held, what their state of health is, or whether they have been released at an unknown location.

Troops of Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) seized the two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests, Fr Levytsky and Fr Heleta, on 16 November 2022. The Greek Catholic Donetsk Exarchate has had no news of Fr Levytsky and Fr Heleta since Russia's National Guard seized them (see below).

Fr Bohdan needs regular medication for a health condition. "Being under arrest and being tortured pose a very serious threat to his life," the Greek Catholic Exarchate warned shortly after he was seized (see below).

Asked why Fr Levytsky and Fr Heleta had been seized and what the police were doing to try to find them, the man who answered the phone of the Russian Berdyansk Police responded: "That's all rubbish. Ask [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelensky's special services – they're responsible." He refused to give any evidence for his claim and put the phone down (see below).

Forum 18 was unable to reach Ruslan Sleptsov, acting head of Zaporizhzhia Region's Rosgvardiya, or other officials there (see below).

On 9 May, Russian occupying forces in Berdyansk seized the pastor of the Community of Christians Protestant Church Ilya Kuvshinov. They searched his home, seizing his computer, and also searched the home of his parents. They freed him a day or so later (see below).

Russian forces have seized, tortured, and killed religious leaders since the start of their February 2022 renewed invasion of Ukraine (see below).

The Russian occupying forces have banned many religious communities from meeting for worship in parts of Ukraine they claim to have annexed since their renewed invasion in February 2022. Some individuals and communities continue to meet for worship secretly to try to avoid possible repercussions (see below).

However, the level of control over the exercise of freedom of religion or belief varies from place to place. "In the occupied territories, each settlement has its own authority and a lot depends on it - whether they close places of worship or allow people to gather," a resident of the occupied territories told Forum 18 (see below).

A Protestant in the occupied territories says that the Russian occupying forces have now closed most Protestant churches. "So people gather at home, trying not to attract the attention of their neighbours, because denunciations in these territories are a common thing," the Protestant told Forum 18 (see below).

The Russian occupation forces have banned Fr Platon Danyshchuk, Orthodox Church of Ukraine priest of Holy Trinity Church in the village of Dobropillya in occupied Kherson Region, from leading worship in the church. On 15 April, the day before Orthodox Christians celebrated Easter, "a representative of the occupation administration tried for a long time to persuade our priest to renounce the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and enter the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate," a fellow priest told Forum 18. The

Russians banned the parish's Easter service and all future services following his refusal (see below).

An official of the Russian Kherson Regional Administration told Forum 18 that she had no information about the ban on worship at Dobropillya's Orthodox Church and pressure on the priest to join a different religious community (see below).

In Zaporizhzhia Region, soon after Orthodox Easter (marked on 16 April), the Russian occupying forces forcibly closed Grace and Truth Pentecostal Church in the village of Vesele not far from Melitopol (see below).

"They allowed one last service and then that was it," a Protestant in the Russian-occupied territory who runs the In Occupation Telegram channel told Forum 18. "In one of the church's buildings they broke all the locks. They forced the cross to be taken down from the front of the church building" (see below).

Also in Zaporizhzhia Region, the Russian occupying forces forcibly closed a Protestant church in Ernohodar, a town close to the nuclear power station. "They were driven out of the building where they had held worship services and were banned from meeting in future," a Christian news Telegram channel noted. "They were told that if they wanted to pray they should go to a Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox church" (see below).

The Zaporizhzhia Diocese of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine found out in January that the Russian occupation authorities have been using its church in the town of Vasylivka as a morgue for their dead soldiers. "This is sacrilege," a diocesan representative told Forum 18 (see below).

Roman Catholics in Makiivka in Donetsk Region gather for worship in the small church without a priest, with laypeople leading a liturgy of the word. The occupation authorities in both Donetsk and Luhansk Regions have refused to allow the Roman Catholic priests to return to serve their parishioners (see below).

On 20 April, the pro-Russian occupation Berdyansk.Aktualno channel published a video filmed in the city's empty Roman Catholic church making lurid claims about the parish, including that the priest had misused personal data of parishioners "and even biological material". Forum 18 was unable to reach Yuliya Vachenkova who made the video. "We all know it is manipulation," exiled parish priest Fr Mateusz Godek told Forum 18 (see below).

Berdyansk: "Disappeared" clergy still "disappeared" after six months

Two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests seized in Berdyansk in Zaporizhzhia Region in late 2022 appear to remain in Russian detention - if they are still alive. Forum 18 has not been able to find out where Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta have been held, what their state of health is, or whether they have been released at an unknown location.

Troops of Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) seized the two Ukrainian Greek Catholic priests (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793), Fr Levytsky and Fr Heleta, in Berdyansk on 16 November 2022.

"These two priests decided to stay with their people in the temporarily occupied territories," the head of the Greek Catholic Church, Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, said on 1 December 2022 in an appeal for help to diplomats and human rights defenders. "They served both the Greek Catholic and Roman Catholic communities, bringing a light of hope to people under occupation. They were arrested, then some military items were planted in the church (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793), and they begin to accuse these fathers of illegal possession of weapons." He feared that Russian troops were torturing the two priests.

Russian forces have seized, tortured (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784), and killed religious leaders (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793) since the start of their February 2022 renewed invasion of Ukraine.

The Greek Catholic Donetsk Exarchate has had no news of Fr Levytsky and Fr Heleta since Russia's National Guard seized them. "We have no information about them," a Greek Catholic Exarchate spokesperson told Forum 18 on 16 May 2023, exactly six months after the Russian military seized the two priests.

Asked on 18 May why Fr Levytsky and Fr Heleta had been seized and what the police were doing to try to find them, the man who answered the phone of the Russian Berdyansk Police responded: "That's all rubbish. Ask [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelensky's special services – they're responsible." He refused to give any evidence for his claim and put the phone down.

Forum 18 was unable on 18 May to reach Ruslan Sleptsov, acting head of Zaporizhzhia Region's Rosgvardiya, or other officials there, as no officials at Rosgvardiya in Moscow or Rostov-on-Don would give the contact details. The man who answered the phone on 18 May of the press officer at Rosgvardiya's Southern District (which includes the five annexed regions of Ukraine) put the phone down before Forum 18 could ask about the six-month detention of Fr Levytsky and Fr Heleta.

Fr Bohdan needs regular medication (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793) for a health condition. "Being under arrest and being tortured pose a very serious threat to his life," the Greek Catholic Exarchate warned shortly after his 16 November

2022 arrest.

All other Greek Catholic priests have left Russian-occupied parts of the Exarchate, the spokesperson told Forum 18 on 16 May 2023. For example, in November 2022 Russian forces expelled Greek Catholic priests (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2799) Fr Peter Krenický and Fr Oleksandr Bogomaz from Melitopol. The spokesperson added that if they publicly commented on how Greek Catholics might or might not be able to in 2023 exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief in Russian-occupied territory, this "would threaten our faithful".

Occupying forces detain then release Berdyansk pastor

At 1 am on 9 May, Russian occupying forces in Berdyansk in Zaporizhzhia Region seized the pastor of the Community of Christians Protestant Church Ilya Kuvshinov. They searched his home, seizing his computer, and also searched the home of his parents, local Christian Telegram channels note. The Church has existed since the early 1990s and gained Ukrainian state registration in 1993.

The Russian forces released Pastor Kuvshinov, Christian Telegram channels noted on 11 May, adding that he was back at home in Berdyansk with his family.

The man who answered the phone of the Russian Berdyansk Police had put the phone down on 18 May before Forum 18 could ask why Pastor Kuvshinov had been detained.

"Denunciations in these territories are a common thing"

The Russian occupying forces have banned many religious communities from meeting for worship in parts of Ukraine they claim to have annexed since their renewed invasion in February 2022. Some individuals and communities continue to meet for worship secretly to try to avoid possible repercussions.

However, the level of control over the exercise of freedom of religion or belief varies from place to place. "In the occupied territories, each settlement has its own authority and a lot depends on it - whether they close places of worship or allow people to gather," a resident of the occupied territories told Forum 18 in mid-May.

One leader of a religious community whose place of worship has been forcibly closed continues to lead worship at home. "Sometimes the boldest believers will come to join the leader," an individual who knows the leader told Forum 18 from Ukrainian government-controlled territory in mid-May.

A Protestant in the occupied territories says that the Russian occupying forces have now closed most Protestant churches. "So people gather at home, trying not to attract the attention of their neighbours, because denunciations in these territories are a common thing," the Protestant told Forum 18 in mid-May.

"There are prayer houses that continue their services, gathering at their own risk, but this is a matter of time. Believers continue to pray, hold services, but in a simplified form, some in apartments, some at home, but faith helps people to live in new conditions and a new reality," the Protestant added.

"The Easter liturgy, to the great sorrow of the faithful, never took place"

On 26 January, the Russian military seized Fr Platon Danyshchuk (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2808), Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) priest of Holy Trinity Church in the village of Dobropillya in occupied Kherson Region. The Russian military released him in early February (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2820).

However, the Russian occupation forces kept up pressure on Fr Platon and his community, especially as Easter approached. They tried to pressure him to change jurisdiction from the OCU (which is recognised as canonical by the Ecumenical Patriarchate) to the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (which does not recognise the OCU as canonical).

On 15 April, the day before Orthodox Christians celebrated Easter, "a representative of the occupation administration tried for a long time to persuade our priest to renounce the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and enter the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate," Fr Ioan Zamarayev of the OCU's Kherson Diocese wrote on Facebook the following day. He described it as "the saddest Easter" for villagers.

Fr Platon refused absolutely to join the Moscow Patriarchate, Fr Ioan noted. "This time they did not arrest him and throw him into the dungeons for the second time, they simply forbade him to hold a service, in fact depriving our Ukrainian community of its church," Fr Ioan wrote. He described Fr Platon as "a favourite not only of his fellow villagers, but of the entire local area."

"They promised to send a Moscow Patriarchate priest to replace Fr Platon. The Easter liturgy, to the great sorrow of the faithful, never took place, and in the future, it is unlikely that Fr Platon will be allowed to continue serving."

An official of the citizens' complaints department of the Russian Kherson Regional Administration – who did not give her name – told Forum 18 on 17 May that she had no information about the ban on worship at Dobropillya's Orthodox Church and pressure on the priest to join a different religious community.

"They allowed one last service and then that was it"

In Zaporizhzhia Region, soon after Orthodox Easter (marked on 16 April), the Russian occupying forces forcibly closed Grace and Truth Pentecostal Church in the village of Vesele not far from Melitopol.

"They allowed one last service and then that was it," a Protestant in the Russian-occupied territory who runs the In Occupation Telegram channel told Forum 18 in mid-May. "In one of the church's buildings they broke all the locks. They forced the cross to be taken down from the front of the church building."

Also in Zaporizhzhia Region, the Russian occupying forces forcibly closed a Protestant church in Ernohodar, a town close to the nuclear power station. "They were driven out of the building where they had held worship services and were banned from meeting in future," a Christian news Telegram channel noted on 5 May. "They were told that if they wanted to pray they should go to a Moscow Patriarchate Orthodox church."

Church members managed to salvage some church property. "All they were allowed to do was to take their possessions from the church building." The Russian occupation authorities "usually do not even allow that" and confiscate property "for their own use".

The Russian occupying forces in Melitopol in Zaporizhzhia Region have remodelled the city's Grace Baptist church raided during a Sunday service (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784) and seized in September 2022, local Christian Telegram channels note. They removed the cross from the top of the building, repainted the front brown and posted four portraits of soldiers high up on the facade of the building. They turned the building into an administrative centre.

"In place of something bright and joyful is the brown colour of the ongoing operation," the Tserkov Novosti Telegram channel noted on 11 May (<https://t.me/icerkov/3056>). "The cross, the symbol of Christianity, has been cut down."

An official of the Russian Melitopol City Administration – who did not give her name – would not put Forum 18 through on 17 May to its Head, Galina Danilchenko. Forum 18 received no responses to its written questions about why Russian forces have closed and confiscated places of worship in the city.

The Russian occupation forces have used other seized places of worship for their own purposes. Holy Trinity Evangelical Church in Mariupol in Donetsk Region, which survived the 2022 fighting in the city, is now being used to house Russian military officers, Petro Andryushchenko, an advisor to Mariupol's exiled mayor, noted on Telegram on 16 May.

Russians use seized Orthodox Church as a morgue

The Zaporizhzhia Diocese of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine found out in January that the Russian occupation authorities have been using its church in the town of Vasilivka as a morgue for their dead soldiers. "This is sacrilege," a diocesan representative told Forum 18 on 18 May. The representative added that their other churches there appear to be empty and unused.

In June 2022, Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officers raided a Baptist church in Vasilivka and recorded the details of all those present. The officers told them that they were closing the church as a "destructive sect" and no further meetings would be allowed (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784). They seized the keys to the building.

Almost all Orthodox Church of Ukraine Zaporizhzhia Diocese priests left Russian-occupied territory in late 2022. "Some left on their own, others were deported," the diocesan representative told Forum 18.

"The Russian occupation authorities questioned our priests for several hours," the diocesan representative added. "They pressured them to transfer to the Moscow Patriarchate and take Russian passports. When they refused, the Russians told them they had to leave and they were not allowed to take anything with them." Several priests remain in Russian-occupied territory, but are unable to conduct any priestly ministry.

No Catholic priests in Donetsk or Luhansk

The Roman Catholic priests who served parishes in the occupied Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk are still unable to return to their parishes (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2721). The parishes exist with no priest and have to listen to Mass on the radio, depriving parishioners of the opportunity to receive Communion, a key part of the Mass for Catholics.

The Roman Catholic parishes in Luhansk and Stakhanov have not been allowed to have a resident priest (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2661) since 2019 when parish priest Grzegorz Rapa left in March 2020 expecting to return, but the authorities of the self-declared Luhansk People's Republic repeatedly refused to let him back. The illegal entity claimed that Fr Rapa did not have permanent residence – even though he lived in Luhansk from 1993 (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2661), 21 years before the Luhansk People's Republic was proclaimed in 2014.

Polish Catholic priest Fr Mikolaj Pilecki was the only Roman Catholic priest in the territory of the Russian-controlled Donetsk People's Republic after 2014. He served the Catholic parish of St Joseph in Donetsk, as well as the parish of St Joseph in nearby Makiivka and two other Catholic parishes.

Fr Pilecki – a priest of the Society of Christ - was not in the region when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and has not been allowed to return, the Ukrainian branch of his religious congregation noted on 19 March. Parishioners in Makiivka gather for worship in the small church without a priest, with laypeople leading a liturgy of the word.

Occupiers broadcast disinformation about Berdyansk's Roman Catholic Church

Russian occupation forces often broadcast disinformation about religious believers and communities in occupied Ukraine which do not support the renewed invasion. In one example, on 20 April the pro-Russian Berdyansk.Aktualno Telegram channel published a film making unsubstantiated claims about the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Roman Catholic Church in Berdyansk.

Berdyansk's Catholic community re-formed in 1996. Its newly-built church (<https://www.facebook.com/100080474841220/videos/1284485955301993/>) – replacing a church destroyed during the Soviet period - was consecrated in October 2013. Parish priest Fr Mateusz Godek told Forum 18 he was not in the city when Russian forces occupied it in February 2022 and has been unable to return.

"The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church was not just a religious community," the exiled Ukrainian town administration stated on Facebook on 21 April (<https://www.facebook.com/berdmisk/posts/pfbid02hV3b7AzU8uv5WUX2FZG4Lpqt7JWiSnFxmRzYFaR3r82ku12TZaHA4oz8y9o5G4Fol>). "Here the needy could receive support, and residents and guests of the city had the opportunity to hear organ music. From the very beginning of the occupation, the church provided shelter and assistance to all who needed it."

However, the pro-Russian occupation Berdyansk.Aktualno channel claimed that "It turns out that there was a dark side to the activity in the church. Totally ugly .." The presenter Yuliya Vachenkova claimed that the parish priest had misused personal data of parishioners "and even biological material". Such claims are a common theme of Russian disinformation (<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/weapons-of-mass-delusion/>) about Ukraine. She also claimed that it was "very likely" that the church had housed a "subversive unit" of the Ukrainian military.

Vachenkova also said the priest had been close to the city's two Greek Catholic priests, Fr Ivan Levytsky and Fr Bohdan Heleta, who have been "disappeared" by the Russian occupation forces (see above). She also repeated claims that the two Greek Catholic priests had hidden arms and explosives (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793) in the Greek Catholic Church.

The pro-Russian occupation Berdyansk.Aktualno channel also claimed that "The servants of the Catholic church in Berdyansk fled, leaving the parishioners without a shepherd."

Shortly after Russian occupation forces arrived in Berdyansk, in March and April 2022 they seized a Ukrainian Orthodox priest and a Lutheran leader. Both were freed after some time. The head of Berdyansk's German Lutheran Church, Artur Kozhevnikov, was detained for around a month (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2793).

The Lutheran community is able to irregularly use its church building, and held a service on Easter Sunday, 9 April 2023, a Lutheran told Forum 18 on 18 May. Many churches in occupied Ukraine have been seized by Russian forces (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2784).

Vachenkova, the Berdyansk.Aktualno presenter, visited the now empty Catholic church for the 20 April film, claiming that the church "had no historical claims". It had "symbolically", the presenter claimed, been built close to a Russian Orthodox Church and opposite a Soviet-era Eternal Flame monument commemorating war dead.

The presenter also, without any evidence, claimed that items found in the church were for use in "terrible" occult rituals. Among the items shown were normal Catholic vestments, an icon of Christ, and various Christian books and recordings. She said an investigation was underway, but did not say what activity was being investigated or who was investigating it.

Fr Godek dismissed the short film. "We all know it is manipulation," he told Forum 18 on 18 May.

Vachenkova's phone was switched off each time Forum 18 tried to call on 18 May. (END)

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