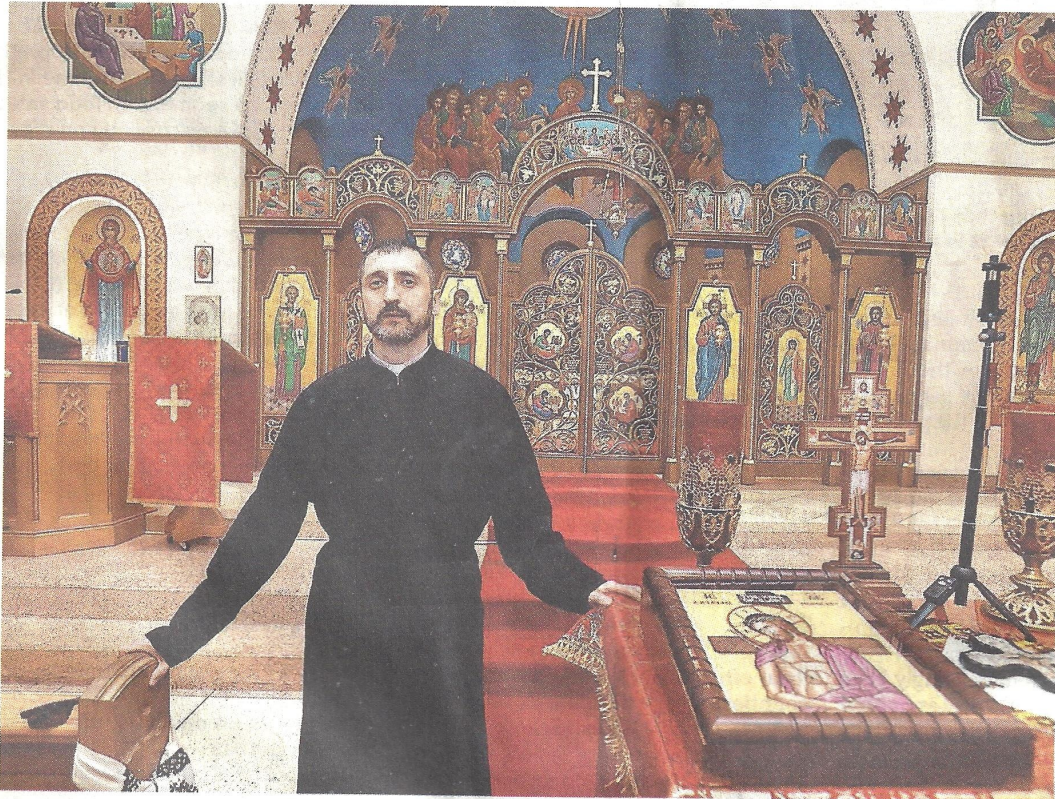# 'PRAY WITH US'

The Rev. Vsevolod Shevchuk, 40, is the pastor of Holy Ghost Ukrainian Catholic Church in Akron.
KAREN SCHIELY/AKRON BEACON JOURNAL

Ukrainian pastor in Akron fears for homeland after Russian invasion

Mark J. Price
Akron Beacon Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

The pastor of Holy Ghost Ukrainian Catholic Church hasn't been able to sleep much at night.

The Rev. Vsevolod Shevchuk, 40, known to Akron parishioners as "Father Sal," is deeply troubled by the Russian invasion of his native Ukraine. He is worried about the safety of his relatives who still live there and he fears for the future of his home country.

On Thursday morning, he received a text message from his father, who was preparing to take cover in a bomb shelter in Kyiv as Russian troops neared the capital of Ukraine.

"If I can, I'm going to keep you updated," his father wrote. "Please pray for us."

Shevchuk has been doing just that. He has opened the Brown Street church to worshippers all day, celebrated the Divine Liturgy each morning and led a special rosary dedicated to peace in Ukraine.

"We encourage people to come and pray with us and support us," he said.

Shevchuk has been pastor of the Akron congregation since 2013. Holy Ghost is a Byzantine Rite Eastern Catholic Church in full communion with the worldwide Catholic Church.

Born in the western Ukrainian city of Stryi, he came to the United States at age 17, attended St. Basil's Seminary in Stamford, Connecticut, and graduated from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Initially here on a religious visa, he and his wife, Halyna, became U.S. citizens last summer. They are the parents of three children: Yuriy, 10, Anna, 6, and Sophia, 1 month.

Priest fears for relatives in Ukraine

The family has many relatives living in Ukraine, but the priest requested that they not be identified out of concern for their safety.

"I really have fear for them," he said.

Many Ukrainians fled warfare, genocide, famine and persecution in the former Soviet Union. Now conflict has swept the region again.

"This church was a place where we would welcome and try to help those refugees who had to leave everything behind," Shevchuk said. "Oftentimes, they would just have a suitcase when they came. It was a lot of traumatic experience for many of those folks."

Ukrainian immigrants founded the Akron parish in 1915. The church, which serves 60 to 70 families, has many second- and third-generation Ukrainians as well as worshippers who aren't of Ukrainian descent but "love the way we worship

The Rev. Vsevolod Shevchuk, pastor of Holy Ghost Ukrainian Catholic Church in Akron, prays Thursday evening with his son Yuriy, 10, during a special rosary for peace in Ukraine. KAREN SCHIELY, AKRON BEACON JOURNAL

Pastor

God," Shevchuk said.

The priest is fluent in English, Ukrainian and Russian. All services are celebrated in English, and the congregation no longer considers itself an ethnic parish, he said.

"We try to be open to new times and challenges," the priest said.

And these times are challenging.

Shevchuk shared a note from Bishop Bohdan J. Danylo, eparch at St. Josaphat in Parma, who asked pastors to take up a collection to aid the people of Ukraine as they defend their territory, history, language, customs and honor.

"Our most powerful weapon is our ability to pray," Danylo wrote. "To pray for the successful defense of all that is good, right and holy. To pray for the safety of the Ukrainian people and nation. To ask the Most Holy Mother of God to intercede on their behalf, to drape her mantle (veil) over them, to show us once again that she is our protector as she has so often in the past."

What will Russia do next?

Shevchuk worries that Russia will attempt to depose Ukraine's democratically elected leaders and install a puppet government. He fears that religious leaders and Ukrainian patriots will be among those targeted.

Russian President Vladimir Putin might be in for a surprise, though.

"What Putin is not expecting is that the Ukrainians are fighting back," Shevchuk said. "There will be a bloodshed. I'll let you know that Ukrainians won't give up easily. Those soldiers will fight him today defending Ukraine. A lot of their grandparents were persecuted and suffered for Ukraine."

This isn't just a war against one nation, he said. If Putin can impose his will on Ukraine, what might he do next?

"Ultimately, who knows, Russia may say, 'Well, give us back Alaska,' " Shevchuk said.

He said a lot of Ukrainians believe their country was duped into giving up its nuclear weapons after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. At the time, the nation had the world's third-largest arsenal.

Ukraine destroyed its weapons with the understanding that its territorial sovereignty was guaranteed in a 1994 Budapest agreement signed by the United States, Great Britain and Russia, he said.

"A lot of Ukrainian people feel tricked," he said. "They appreciate a lot what the U.S. is doing, but a lot of people say that it's not enough. There should be tougher sanctions, not only from the U.S., to stop the aggression."

Diplomacy clearly has failed Ukraine, he said. Humanity needs to unite to restore the peace.

"It's a time for the entire community of people to fight off the evil powers," he said.

Shevchuk is quick to point out that he is not a politician.

"I'm a simple priest," he said.

"Father Sal" is doing what he can do. He is putting his trust in God and he is praying — just like his father asked.

The pastor has been flooded with text messages and phone calls from concerned people voicing their support. He has appreciated hearing from other Roman Catholic priests who have expressed solidarity with the Ukrainian church.

"That's kind of what we need to know," he said. "We are here but we are not alone. People still care and are willing to stand by our side."

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Do you wish to help?

Mail contributions to:

Holy Ghost Ukrainian
   Catholic Church
1866 Brown St
Akron, OH 44301

Write
'Ukrainian Relief"
in the check memo line