

INTERVIEW: **Roman Marabian**

A doctor at war: bringing the light of Christ to Ukraine amid the bombs

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Gutted buildings, bombed playgrounds, and brutally mutilated bodies among the abandoned rubble. This is the bleak reality of the 'senseless war', to quote Pope Leo XVI, which is still raging between Russia and Ukraine. A war that everyone would prefer to

ignore so as not to be overwhelmed by the extent of the suffering. The war being fought on the ground cannot be traced back to a sterile map of conquered, contested or enemy territories, but is the real drama of ordinary people. These are the faces and names of men, women, the elderly, the sick and children crying out about the pain they experience first-hand. The 2025 Rimini Meeting exhibition ...Ma sono vivo (But I am alive) features direct testimonies from mothers, doctors, soldiers, teachers, the elderly, intellectuals, entrepreneurs and priests, which can be heard and read alongside the exhibition panels. The exhibition catalogue Custodire l'umano (Safeguarding humanity) Voices from Ukraine (Itaca, pp. 254), produced in collaboration with the Friends of Emmaus Association, which has been caring for Ukrainian orphans and disabled children for several years. The theme of the 46th edition of the Rimini Meeting is 'In deserted places we will build with new bricks'. In this case, the 'new brick' is a perspective that engages, rather than remaining a spectator; one that puts all its energy into protecting humanity amidst barbarism and the most gruesome violence, and caring for one's neighbour in the most atrocious trials and pain.

Hearing their stories, we see the horror of evil, but also the possibility of opposing it, of continuing to live, build, educate and love, and of taking responsibility for the present to ensure a future for our children and our people. 'After the bombings, welcoming the morning, being alive, is already a gift.' People live life as a gift and take it seriously. They are not tired of life or satiated with goodness. They understand that goodness must be fought for," says Tetiana Oharkova, a university lecturer and mother of three. In recent years, she and her husband have continued to work to "bring humanitarian aid and organise fundraisers to purchase cars and vehicles needed by civilians, as well as delivering books, teaching and meeting ordinary people". She says that staying to work in a children's library in Kherson in times of war is a heroic act.

Staying, resisting, and continuing to act as peacemakers above all else. Take Father Vitalii Novak, for example. He is a priest of the Congregation of the Mission of St. Vincent de Paul and became a military chaplain in the Ukrainian Armed Forces in July 2024. He is currently on the front line and recounts the beginning of the war as follows: "We had three clear priorities: first, prayer; second, putting away our mobile phones because constant exposure to news was like a continuous bombardment of the mind; and thirdly, communication." He continues: 'There are times when we can help with something, but there are also times when we ask ourselves: 'Are you ready to give up what you hold most dear?' A chaplain is a soldier without weapons who is always close to the soldiers. I have never prayed as much as I do now. When they leave on a mission, they tell me: 'We're going, Father. Pray for us — we only believe in the miracle of prayer.'

When they return from their posts, the first thing they say is: 'Thank you, prayer saved us.' Wherever I am, I always have a 'church on wheels', as they call it. They say to me, 'Father, let's go to the church on wheels.'

Father Novak is always ready to support the soldiers spiritually. He meets with them individually, visits widows and families left without men, and honours the fallen in cemeteries. He also celebrates the funerals of their comrades, which are certainly the most painful moments for the soldiers and the entire community. However, he also bears witness to 'the speed with which life regenerates as soon as hostilities cease' and to the fact that reconstruction begins and farming resumes in the liberated villages. He goes on to say that people say: 'Just let us return to our fields. We ask for nothing else; we can feed ourselves and help others too.'

Peace is therefore built, above all, by each person doing their job well and with love. As Roman Marabian, an officer and head of the medical service in Kharkiv who enlisted at the beginning of the Russian invasion and recently had to leave the front line due to reaching the age limit, explains exclusively to the *Daily Compass* in his native Ukrainian language.

Dr Marabian, what did being a doctor in war mean for you?

I worked in the paediatric ward for many years, treating children with serious illnesses, so moving to the front line wasn't a big change for me. I was very familiar with suffering and death; it was nothing new to me. At the front, I was a first-aid doctor.

Can you tell us about a particularly critical operation you performed in emergency conditions in the field?

My daily work involved safely transporting and evacuating the seriously wounded from the front line. I was part of the division tasked with liberating the city of Kupiansk in the Kharkiv region. When we arrived, I was tasked with setting up a temporary hospital on the second floor of a building. However, I had a feeling that it would be better to set it up on the ground floor. Ultimately, I went with my instincts and somewhat disobeyed the orders we had been given. We had just set up the operating theatre when, three hours later, the Russians launched three C300 missiles, completely destroying the second floor. Everyone inside died. 10 October 2022 is now like a birthday for us. We have already celebrated our second anniversary! It is impossible to bear the number of wounded and dead that we saw at the front emotionally, so the only way to cope was to carry out our work as doctors routinely and with a certain emotional detachment.

Where did you most recognise the light of Christ in the darkness of war?

I felt Christ's presence with me at all times. I could only entrust the work we were doing

to Jesus. I believe that the only reason we are still alive is because He was watching over us. As the oldest in terms of both age and rank, I also had responsibility for the younger doctors. None of them died. Some were wounded, of course, but they all survived, even though we operated in the most dangerous areas and were constantly under bombardment. The Russians targeted us because they could see the cross on the ambulance, so we repainted the first aid vehicles green to camouflage them. Some were hit, yet those of us inside survived. How else can this be explained except by the fact that the Lord hears our prayers? Another thing: even when we found ourselves in remote places in difficult conditions, the Father answered our prayers by sending us the right people to help us, such as those who provided cars and medicines. In short, the help of these people was a tangible sign that God had heard our prayers and was showing us His love.