

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Highly respected participants of the 30<sup>th</sup> Colloquium of European Parishes in Lviv. It's a great pleasure for me to stay here today and to have an opportunity to share a couple of ideas concerning my own pastoral experience with you. I am father Stepan Sus, chief military chaplain of Lviv Eparchy of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church and Father Superior of the Saints Peter and Paul Garrison Church in Lviv.

Over 65 years our church was a silent witness of the history of the city of Lviv. It was built in 1630, and each epoch has left its breath within its walls. It was closed by the Communists and used as a book depository. Over 3 million books lived in it for 65 years. Thanks God, in 2011 the books were saved, they got a new depository, and new life was instilled in the church. That was a special year for our country. We were moving somewhere, but all Ukrainians understood that the direction was wrong! On November 21, 2013 the Revolution of Dignity started. The door of the church was open round the clock, the singing gallery of the church became the drugstore, with people bringing medications there, which were sent to Kyiv to the Maidan. We were raising money to help those wounded during the Revolution of Dignity. At that time people saw that the Church is something more than just coming there and praying. Everybody understood that the Garrison Church became a place of meeting, empathy, mutual help, a place where everybody felt that God is with us! I remember the nights when the church was full of students waiting for the buses to go to Kyiv to the Maidan and to fight for dignity. Students were holding plastic head protectors and wooden shields in their hands. But their hearts were full of something more. Some of them did not return home alive! The Maidan became their life – the place of their meeting with God, the place of fighting for something better, different, for the future! And then came the war. We would never have thought that the word known mostly from books and movies would become so much alive and close to us. The war touched each and everyone of us, it affected our friends. Over those years of war our military parish has absorbed everything the Ukrainian people lives with! Since war is also life. People die during war, but they also get married, give birth to children, want to be happy, drink coffee, look at the sky. Our parish sensed all that. We had days when we went to the cemetery 3 times a day to pay last respects to our heroes. And on that very day we had matrimony ceremonies, our service men who stayed alive after the war were getting married. I have asked God many a time how this all should be combined. Particularly, in the moments when at the funeral and at the wedding we could see the same people because they were all friends to each other. Only God knows what a priest feels in such moments! But that is life!

The words 'always standing together' have become our motto. We cannot change the lives of all people, I cannot change the lives of our service men, but I can be standing together, staying side by side with them! And standing together also means great responsibility. I can recall one night which I had to stay with a mother of our officer who had perished in the war. He was the only son in the family. His father had left the family. Before that I had been given a call by his commander who asked me to go together with him to notify his mother about the death of the son. That was a sad picture. After that the mother was just lying on the floor of the apartment and crying. I was sitting side by side with her and just praying. That was the moment when you are lost for words. The first thing I managed to do was to communicate with the father, he came home on getting to know about the fact. I

asked him to get back into the family where they had lost their only son. Certainly, we lived through the funeral ceremony together, we all lived through the void which is left when something is just stolen from you. It seemed to us and still seems to us even now that the war is just stealing our service men. Sometimes we even failed to understand when they perished. 3 years elapsed. This woman and man came up to me on the 3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of commemoration of their son and said that they had decided to adopt a child – a boy. And what is of interest is that they told that had arrived at such decision only because all this time they had felt how much God loves them, sending different people who knew how to be standing together with them all the time! I know that there is one more family that has done the same.

On the last Saturday of each month we have a meeting with all the families of the service men who have perished in the war.

Every day we pray for the service men who have perished and for those who are defending Ukraine;

Every time when there is a commemorative date of one of the service men, we invite the family to the Divine Liturgy the Garrison Church, place a photo of the service man there;

We are trying to involve the families of service men in different pilgrimages, excursions, just leisure activities;

We provide material assistance to the families which have lost someone during the war or where somebody is wounded and requires help;

The war has shaped several types of military families, if we can call it that way:

- families where somebody perished in the war;
- families with wounded service men;
- families with service men gone missing, whose relatives keep waiting daily for their return;
- families with service men having some mental problems;
- families where service men, as the result of the war, have become addicts (alcohol, drugs, gambling).

Our duty as pastors of the Garrison Church remains the same – to stand together!

# SAINTS PETER AND PAUL GARRISON CHURCH IN LVIV





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# OUR CHAPLAINCY TEAM

