

Christian leaders ask Kirill to urge end of war in Ukraine

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—More than 100 U.S. Christian leaders, including the leaders of multiple denominations, sent a letter to the head of the Russian Orthodox Church on March 11 asking him to use his influence to help stop the invasion of Ukraine and “prayerfully reconsider the support you have given to this war.”

The letter was addressed to Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, who is known to have a close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

“With broken hearts, we are making an earnest plea that you use your voice and profound influence to call for an end to the hostilities and war in Ukraine and intervene with authorities in your nation to do so,” the letter read.

The letter appeared to reference Kirill’s widely criticized responses to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. His initial generalized call for peace at the outset of the attack was lambasted by leaders of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church based in Kyiv, with one cleric decrying it as the words of a “religious politician” and a tacit endorsement of Putin’s justifications for invasion.

Kirill’s rhetoric has escalated since then. He referred to Russia’s opponents in Ukraine as “evil forces” in a statement and argued in a recent sermon that the conflict was part of a larger battle against sin and pressure from Western nations to hold “gay parades.”

‘The work of an immoral maniac’

“We are in the season of Lent,” the letter from U.S. faith leaders read. “In that Lenten spirit, we ask you to prayerfully reconsider the support you have given to this war because of the horrendous human suffering it has unleashed.”

Signers of the letter include Bishop Teresa Jefferson-Snorton, president of Churches Uniting in Christ and board chair of the National Council of Churches; Walter Kim, president of the National Association of Evangelicals; Michael Curry, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church; Teresa Hord Owens, general minister and president, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada; Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary emeritus, Reformed Church in America; Sister Carol Zinn, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious; and Sister Donna Markham, president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA.

Granberg-Michaelson helped organize the letter with Jim Wallis, head of Georgetown University’s Center on Faith and Justice.

“There is not, and can never be, any ethical, religious or theological justification for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,” Wallis said in a statement. “When bombs rain down on maternity wards and hospitals, as well as other innocent civilians, we should be utterly clear: this is the work of an immoral maniac who must be removed from power, and anyone who supports Putin is sanctioning murder.”

More pressure from faith leaders

The letter is one of several efforts by faith leaders to pressure Kirill, whose church has often operated in tandem with the Russian government. Last

week a group of Catholic bishops from Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales called on Kirill to help end the violence, and Romanian Orthodox priest Ioan Sauca, head of the World Council of Churches, similarly implored Kirill to speak with the Russian president.

“I write to Your Holiness as acting general secretary of the WCC but also as an Orthodox priest,” Sauca wrote in an open letter. “Please, raise up your voice and speak on behalf of the suffering brothers and sisters, most of whom are also faithful members of our Orthodox Church.”

Kirill responded to Sauca by arguing that blame for the invasion lies not with Russia but “in the relationships between the West and Russia.” He insisted Western nations have attempted to “mentally remake Ukrainians and Russians living in Ukraine into enemies of Russia.”

Kirill also dismissed Ukrainians who broke away from the Russian Orthodox Church in 2018 to form their own Orthodox tradition based in Kyiv, saying the “schism” was “pursuing the same end.”

Yet calls for Kirill to do more are also coming from inside the Russian Orthodox Church. Metropolitan John of Dubna, an archbishop of Russian Orthodox churches in Western Europe, publicly asked Kirill to “raise (his) voice” with Russian authorities against the “monstrous and senseless war.”

John also challenged Kirill’s framing of the war as a “metaphysical” battle against a liberal West, saying he “cannot subscribe to such a reading of the Gospel.”

Meanwhile, hundreds of Russian Orthodox priests recently signed a petition decrying the invasion, and one of the signers was later arrested for preaching a sermon criticizing Russia’s actions.

And in Ukraine, Russian Orthodox priests have singled out Kirill, refusing to commemorate him during liturgies and even raising the question of

initiating their own breakaway from the church.

Pressure is increasing on other Russian Orthodox leaders as well. Metropolitan Archbishop Hilarion, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church's department for external church relations who spent years trying to forge relationships with American conservatives such as former-Vice President Mike Pence, lost his teaching position at Switzerland's University of Freiburg due to his silence on the Russian invasion.