

# Ukraine Army chaplain offers frontline insights

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The war in Ukraine has changed the lives of many people significantly.

Before the full-scale war began in 2022, Dmytro Semko taught Greek and New Testament at Odesa Theological Seminary and was in charge of the seminary library. Now, he serves in the Ukrainian army as a brigade chaplain.

The following interview has been edited for length.

## **What prompted you to become a chaplain?**

Chaplaincy is the natural outcome of all my previous life experience. I served in the army, received higher secular education and graduated from the seminary.

When the war broke out in 2022, I was still working at the seminary, but I was almost certain sooner or later I would serve in the army. Several times, I had the opportunity to communicate with active volunteer chaplains and sometimes thought about becoming a chaplain myself.

When I was drafted into the army, I was an ordinary soldier at first, but later the commanders found out I had technical education and the necessary military training and offered me an officer position.

I said chaplaincy service was closer to my heart, because that's what I had studied for and what I would like to do in life. They agreed, and the church gave its blessing to this ministry.

I really like my job. I serve God, and at the same time, this is exactly what

the state and my military unit expect from me.

## **Please tell us more about your work, its challenges, joys and sorrows.**

As for my duties, the state expects four things from me:

1. Meeting the spiritual and religious needs of military personnel. This may include either conducting or organizing religious events that would meet the different needs of soldiers who worship God regardless of tradition or perhaps even religion.
2. Religious educational activities, which means, from time to time, I have to conduct seminars or discussions on various topics.
3. Advising our command on certain issues—for example, how various religious factors can affect our combat operations.
4. And lastly, social activities.

Sometimes our churches or church associations help military units. For example, last year, a church from the Odesa Baptist Association sent small New Year's gifts to the military. One of the soldiers still tells me about a flashlight given to him last year he still uses. These are small things, but for some people, such help communicates love and that others are thinking of them.

I really love helping people, cheering them up and inspiring them. I want people to know their chaplain is a smiling guy. When I come to my people with a smile, they start to smile themselves, and as they say, a small ray of light penetrates their everyday life.

Sometimes, people come and tell me about their difficult personal situations. Sometimes, they ask me to talk to their buddies, who later make confessions to God. Sometimes, soldiers seek family counseling.

There have been cases when I blessed new couples, and there have been

times when soldiers have invited me to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

As for regrets, there is the realization you are changing and becoming more reserved. Because the longer this war goes on, the more losses, deaths and injuries become commonplace, and you start reacting to them differently than you did at the beginning of the war. Unfortunately, this becomes a norm of life for you. It's not that you stop being hurt, but you already perceive this reality as an ordinary thing.

Your attitude and perception of life changes. Before the war, when you faced death, it was usually because a person's life was naturally coming to an end due to age or illness. But when a young man dies of wounds in the war in front of your eyes, you realize he has a family, a wife and children who must now live without him.

An hour ago, there was a person, and now he is gone. You begin to realize the life you imagine may be much shorter than you think. And this changes your view of life and your relationship with God.

## **How do soldiers at war discover God? How is their faith formed?**

The guys say when they sit in the trenches, they pray in a way none of them has ever prayed before.

And then I ask them, "Why do you have such great faith in the trenches, but when you come back, you leave this faith behind?"

The war does not differ from the classic stress in a person's life, but unfortunately, it lasts longer and affects a much larger number of people. Whenever there is anxiety, they turn to God. As the anxiety goes away, so does faith.

However, there are those who start to think and ask questions. Then, they

turn to me and try to find out some things for themselves. My task is to guide them to God, to tell them about him and introduce God to them.

Faith is formed in soldiers as it is in all people. It's just that war is a stressful factor that can accelerate the process of a person's conversion to God or not affect this process at all.

### **How has your seminary education helped you in your work and ministry? What has been most helpful or meaningful to you?**

First of all, thanks to my seminary education, I can officially serve as a chaplain, because my diploma was officially recognized by the state.

As for what has been most useful, I have to say I perceive education as a whole package. It's like a military first aid kit. It contains many different items, but they all may be needed at one time or another. The same is true for education.

### **What would you like people to pray for you?**

When Charles Spurgeon was teaching students, he preached two sermons. One was extraordinary, almost exquisite. But it had no effect on people. The other sermon was very ordinary. But many people repented.

Then Spurgeon took the students into the basement and showed them a group of people who were simply standing and praying for him.

Perhaps this is what I would ask those who would like to pray for me to do: Keep me in your prayers as I am fulfilling my duties, so the Lord would work through me by the Holy Spirit and use me as he wishes with maximum benefit for his kingdom.