

Pope will visit Ukrainian Catholic basilica

Pope Francis will visit the main church of Italy's Ukrainian Catholic community in late January, showing his continued concern over the war in Eastern Ukraine and his closeness to the tens of thousands of Ukrainian immigrants living and working in Italy, the head of the church said.

Ukrainian Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, major archbishop Kiev-Halych and head of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, said the pope's Jan. 28 visit is "a sign of solidarity with the Ukrainian people, who are suffering the effects of the war" and "a manifestation of the pope's closeness to Ukrainian migrants in Italy."

Ukraine's battle against Kremlin-backed separatists has been ongoing for nearly four years since Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014.

The pope's plan for an afternoon visit to the Ukrainian Basilica of St. Sophia in Rome was announced by the Vatican Jan. 12.

The late Cardinal Josyf Slipyj began collecting funds for the construction of the church in 1963 after arriving in Rome following 18 years of imprisonment in a Siberian gulag. The cardinal died in 1984, and his remains were kept at the basilica until 1992, when Ukraine regained its independence and the church was able to take the cardinal's body home.

During his visit to the church, Pope Francis will go to the crypt to pray at the tomb of Bishop Stefan Chmil, according to information released by the major archbishop's office in Rome. In 1948, then-Father Chmil became the first Ukrainian Salesian to minister in Argentina. He spent 12 years in Buenos Aires, ministering to Ukrainian immigrants. In the Argentine capital, he met a young Jorge Mario Bergoglio and trained the future pope to assist at the Divine Liturgy.

Archbishop Shevchuk's office said there are about 200,000 Ukrainians in Italy, representing the fifth-largest immigrant group in the country.

While it is difficult to determine the exact number of Ukrainian Catholics among the immigrants, Bishop Dionisio Lachovicz, apostolic visitor, said that on any given Sunday, about 17,000 people attend the Divine Liturgy in 145 Ukrainian Catholic communities, served by 62 priests. The number of attendees increases to as many as 70,000 on major holidays, the archbishop's office said.