

Russian Orthodox Church to Send More 'Military Priests' to Front Lines in Ukraine

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Alexander Polegenko / TASS

The Russian Orthodox Church [seeks](#) to increase the number of military chaplains deployed with Russian forces in Ukraine fivefold, aiming to provide spiritual support and combat what it describes as the "brutalization" of soldiers.

The Church is calling for at least 1,500 clergy members to be embedded within military units, up from the approximately 300 priests currently serving alongside Russian troops.

The proposal discussed this week was framed as a necessary measure to maintain the moral integrity of soldiers and counter what church representatives described as a "sinful spirit of vengeance" among those engaged in combat.

According to Metropolitan Kirill of Stavropol and Nevinnomyssk, additional clergy will be trained through a newly established military-focused program at the Rostov Theological Seminary. The Church intends to recruit candidates early in their education to ensure they are prepared for service at the front.

At the meeting, senior Church figures argued that the army lacks spirituality and that greater religiosity among troops would bolster their effectiveness against Ukraine. Military chaplains, they claimed, would play a decisive role in sustaining the troops' fighting spirit and pushing Russia towards victory.

Archpriest Dmitry Vasilenkov, deputy chairman of the Church's Synodal Department for Cooperation with the Armed Forces, claimed that religious faith prevents soldiers from succumbing to cruelty and strengthens their resolve.

"It is easier [for a believer] to step onto the front line and challenge death," he said. He also suggested that Ukrainian forces deliberately attempt to provoke Russian troops into committing war crimes, "driving them into sin and depriving them of God's help."

"The work of military chaplains is the main condition for victory in this war," Vasilenkov said. "The stronger the fighting spirit, the stronger the army."

Some church officials are also calling for a broader revival of religious instruction in the military, including reintroducing catechism courses and theological education for Russian army officers. Archpriest Andrey Kanev, a military chaplain in Russia's Central Military District, argued that spiritual work should have begun "yesterday and the day before" rather than in the trenches.

"Experiencing faith in war does not necessarily mean proper religiosity. There are commanders and political officers who have felt God, who have felt faith — but have not yet come to Orthodoxy. Therefore, we have a lot of work to do," he said.

Although nominally independent, the Russian Orthodox Church has long been under the Kremlin's influence and routinely backs the actions of the Russian government and President Vladimir Putin. Church head Patriarch Kirill frequently appears alongside Putin, including on Christmas Day, when he blessed crosses and icons to be given as gifts to commanders of troops fighting in Ukraine. The Russian Orthodox Church has consistently described the invasion of Ukraine as a "holy war."

A number of Russian priests who have condemned the war have been expelled from the church, with some leaving the country, often to other Eastern Orthodox nations or Istanbul.

In Ukraine, Orthodox Christianity, the country's largest religious denomination, is divided between churches that had been loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate and those under a separate ecclesiastical and canonical body.

Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 has deepened religious divisions within the Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe, particularly between the similarly named yet distinct Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP).

Following the invasion, Kyiv banned the activities of the UOC-MP due to its alleged links to the Kremlin.

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