

Baltimore Ukrainian parishioners offer support to their homeland



Irene Traska joins with members of the St. Michael the Archangel Ukrainian Catholic Church community to make pyrohy (pierogies) Feb. 21, proceeds from the sale of which will go to benefit people in Ukraine.

(Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

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Working inside a parish hall at St. Michael the Archangel Ukrainian Catholic Church in East Baltimore Feb. 21, a small group of parishioners was focused on the continuing crisis in Ukraine as they rolled dough, mixed filling and assembled hundreds of pyrohy (pierogies), a favorite dish of their ancestral home in Eastern Europe.

“I’ve been sick watching what’s happening in Ukraine,” said Stephanie Polischuk, a St. Michael parishioner since 1951 who was born in Western Ukraine and who has family there. “I don’t care who it is. People shouldn’t be massacred like that.”

As of Feb. 21, more than 125 protestors had reportedly been killed in violent clashes in Kiev between the government of Russian-backed President Viktor Yanukovich and Ukrainian opposition. Police forces had been trying unsuccessfully to clear protestors from “Maidan,” Independence Square.

The violence seemed to abate Feb. 21 when Ukrainian opposition leaders signed an agreement with President Yanukovich they hoped would permanently end the violence by allowing early elections and introducing constitutional changes that would reduce the president’s power.

“There’s a reason the protestors are there,” Polischuk said. “They want freedom. They want to travel. They don’t need dictatorship. We’ve had that long enough – over 70 years.”

Many St. Michael parishioners have been following developments in Ukraine via the Internet and through email exchanges with family. Proceeds from the sale of the

pyrohy they made Feb. 21 will provide emergency medical, food and clothing assistance in Kiev. Previous pyrohy sales and other fundraisers raised \$11,000 for the same cause.

To view a slideshow of the pyrohy making, navigate the arrows below.

"We are very concerned because the medical center we have been supporting has been burned down," said Irene Traska, a St. Michael parishioner who moved to the United States from Ukraine when she was 6. "It amazes me how much bravery the people have shown."

Traska has been in touch with her brother's son, an eyewitness to the violence in Kiev.

"He says it's like a horror movie with the fires and the smoke," Traska said, declining to give her nephew's name. "Perfectly innocent people walking along the street are in danger of being accosted and beaten up. Any car with a license from western Ukraine has been burned. People who are driving in to help are losing their vehicles."

Father Vasyl Sivinskyi, pastor of St. Michael and Ss. Peter and Paul in Curtis Bay, was cautiously optimistic the new agreement may relieve tensions.

"It's a better situation," said Father Sivinskyi, a Ukrainian who prepared for the priesthood during Soviet domination, a time when it was illegal to be in the seminary. "We are closer to democracy."

Ola Kulnich, wearing blue and yellow ribbons pinned to her apron in support of the Ukrainian people, welcomed the recent agreement and held out hope for the future.

"The situation should change," she said. "Ukraine is 45 million people. They should be able to decide for themselves what they want and how they want to live."

During Mass, parishioners have been offering special prayers for peace in Ukraine, Father Sivinskyi said. Beneath St. Michael's gleaming golden onion domes, Ukrainian services for the dead called the "panachyda" have also been offered after Mass in memory of those who have been killed, the pastor said.

"Many people have been calling me asking for the time of the service," he said.

The Kiev protests were ignited in November after the Ukrainian president refused to strengthen his country's relationship with the European Union. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who opposed Ukrainian ties to the EU, provided \$15 billion to Ukraine soon after. The Ukrainian Parliament then prevented opposition leaders from limiting Yanukovich's power.

Many St. Michael parishioners said they were skeptical and distrustful of Putin, who they believe wants to keep Ukraine under Russian dominance as a way of bolstering his country's power and prestige.

"The people want freedom from Putin," Polischuk said. "He has his grip on Ukraine and he won't let go."

Visit baltoukrainiancathparishes.org for information on pyrohy sales. They pyrohy sale will be Feb. 21-22. The address of the church is 2401 Eastern Ave. Baltimore, MD 21224.

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