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Pope Francis gives his blessing to visitors in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican after the midday recitation of the Angelus prayer Aug. 25, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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"Please, let no Christian church be abolished directly or indirectly: the churches are not to be touched," Pope Francis said about a Ukrainian law banning the Russian Orthodox Church, which President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed Aug. 24, Ukrainian independence day.

"I continue to follow with sorrow the fighting in Ukraine and the Russian Federation," Francis told visitors and pilgrims gathered in St. Peter's Square Aug. 25 for the recitation of the Angelus prayer.

But, he said, "thinking about the legal regulations recently adopted in Ukraine, a fear arises for the freedom of those who pray, because those who truly pray always pray for everyone. One does not commit evil because one prays."

Ukrainian lawmakers approved a bill Aug. 20 to ban the Russian Orthodox Church and its affiliates in Ukraine. The law requires the Ukrainian Orthodox Church affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate to sever all ties with the Russian Orthodox Church or face a process that would lead to its disbanding.

Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow has publicly blessed Russian President Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine and consistently has expounded the "Russian World" or "Russkii Mir" ideology, which claims Ukraine as part of the religious, cultural and political sphere of Russian influence.

Speaking at the Vatican Aug. 25, Francis said, "If someone commits evil against his people, he will be guilty of that, but he cannot have committed evil just because he prayed."

"Let those who want to pray be able to pray in the church they consider theirs," the pope said. "Please let no Christian church be abolished directly or indirectly: the churches are not to be touched."

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The Ukrainian Embassy to the Holy See, in a statement posted a few hours later on X, said the pope's concern "is unfounded. The law in no way concerns 'the freedom of one who prays.'"

Instead, the tweet continued, the law aims "to establish logical and reasonable restrictions that are necessary in a democratic society" to protect the nation, "which is facing aggression on a vast scale by a state that uses the church, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church — both in Russia and through its affiliates in Ukraine — as a weapon and a launching pad of aggression not only against Ukraine but also against the civilized world."

Ukraine "respects and observes the principles of freedom of conscience and religion," the embassy's post said.

The Religious Information Service of Ukraine, which was founded at the Catholic University of Ukraine in Lviv, reported Aug. 21 that Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, said the law "is not a ban on the church, but a means of protection from the danger of using religion as a weapon."

According to the archbishop, RISU wrote, the law aims "to protect the religious environment of Ukraine from the instrumentalization and militarization of religion, which has become characteristic of the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in the context of war."

RISU also quoted Viktor Yelensky, head of Ukraine's State Service for Ethnic Policy and Freedom of Conscience, as saying that once the leadership of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate has severed ties with Moscow, it could unite with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which is recognized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, or it could determine its own canonical status.

Yelensky said he had spoken to Metropolitan Onufriy of the Moscow-affiliated church, and "I told him that we do not demand that he join another church. I said that we do not demand to switch to a new calendar, etc., that we are only talking about severing ties with Moscow," RISU reported.