

A BEACON OF HOPE?

WHY AMERICAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS OPPOSE HONORING ZELENSKY

September 26, 2026 • St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church & National Shrine • New York City

The St. Nicholas National Shrine has announced that Ukrainian President **Volodymyr Zelenskyy** will receive its 2026 “**Beacon of Hope Award**,” honoring what organizers describe as his leadership in defending freedom and human dignity.

But many American Orthodox Christians and Orthodox hierarchs are asking a fundamental question:

WHAT ABOUT THE UKRAINIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS WHO SAY THEY ARE BEING PERSECUTED BY HIS GOVERNMENT?

THE RECORD

A LAW RESTRICTING RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

In August 2024, Ukraine's parliament adopted legislation restricting religious organizations determined to have ties to Russia. The Ukrainian government says the law protects national security and establishes a judicial process rather than simply banning worship. Critics, including representatives of the UOC, have argued that the law threatens the continued existence and property of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

THE UOC FACES POSSIBLE DISSOLUTION

In 2025, Ukraine's State Service for Ethnopolitics and Freedom of Conscience designated the UOC as affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church. Human Rights Watch reported that the state service then initiated legal proceedings seeking dissolution of the UOC's Kyiv branch, potentially affecting property rights and access to places of worship.

CLERGY HAVE BEEN INVESTIGATED AND CONVICTED

Ukraine's security service reported opening **180 criminal cases involving UOC clergy** since Russia's full-scale invasion, with **38 clerics convicted** according to a September 2025 report. Ukrainian authorities say these cases involve offenses ranging from treason and justifying Russian aggression to other criminal conduct.

Earlier U.S. State Department reporting documented **70 criminal investigations involving UOC clergy**, 19 convictions, and citizenship removals in cases involving alleged collaboration or pro-Russian activity.

CHURCH PROPERTY HAS BEEN SEIZED

The Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra became a major flashpoint. The Ukrainian government ordered the UOC monastic community to leave portions of the state-run complex, while UOC supporters protested the government's actions.

WHY THE AWARD IS CONTROVERSIAL

For Orthodox Christians who believe the UOC remains the canonical Orthodox Church in Ukraine, honoring Ukraine's president while his government is pursuing legal action against that Church creates a profound contradiction:

Can an Orthodox institution present a political leader as a “Beacon of Hope” while Orthodox Christians in his country face investigations, property seizures, criminal prosecutions, and the possibility of losing their Church's legal status?

That question is not simply political.

IT IS A QUESTION OF CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY.

ROCOR's Synod of Bishops recently expressed concern over the planned award and the unease it has generated among Orthodox Christians in America, specifically citing concerns about the treatment of Orthodox believers in Ukraine.

THIS IS NOT ABOUT RUSSIA OR UKRAINE.

IT IS ABOUT THE FREEDOM TO CONFESS CHRIST.

Pray for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Pray for peace.

Pray for all Ukrainians and Russians suffering in this war.

And ask whether honoring a political leader is consistent with the Church's responsibility to defend religious freedom and stand with persecuted Christians.