



«I will raise the flag very high!»

From March 15 to 17, 2024, a retreat took place in Ukraine in the village of Briukhovychy (Lviv region), on the theme «The king lives in my heart and his flag is joy» for people with intellectual disabilities, their parents and friends from 27 Faith and Light communities. In total, this event brought together more than a hundred participants from Kyiv, Ternopil, Zakarpattia, Kamianets-Podilskyi and Lviv.



The retreat «I will raise the flag high!» is aimed on the one hand at parents and on the other hand at people with intellectual disabilities and their friends.

«A retreat is a time for introspection, to become aware of everything you have accumulated over time. Reconsider your values, dust off some of them, take some in your arms and be happy that they are in such good condition, plant others and enjoy your garden, water it and maintain it. This is what a retreat is», shared with joy Natalia Syrotych, psychologist and art therapist from Kyiv.

«Retreats are very important for us because they give the opportunity to be together, to share our difficulties and our joys. At a time when there is so much fear, sadness and airborne alarms, we sometimes want to close ourselves off, to go underground... Being together gives courage and strength to get through the trials that we are all experiencing. It is a place to remind us that the Faith and Light movement does not die when war breaks out but that it exists and will always be there», said **Oksana Lipetska**, a friend from Lviv.

Everyone had the opportunity to get to know each other better and build friendships.

Natalia Syrotych invited everyone to participate in several particularly interesting games, art therapy sessions and Ukrainian singing evenings. Every day, we thanked and glorified our King through prayer and dance, and through our active participation in the Divine Liturgy, presided over by the provincial chaplain, Fr. Volodymyr Bytiuha.

A friend from **Odessa**, **Sister Mykolaya Turianska** shared her thoughts with us: *«For me, retreat is a living sign from God. He reveals a new face of His tenderness, His attention, His kindness. His loving face filled me with even more love. I had a wonderful time with a friend with a disability doing these exercises, we were able to look at each other, learn to love each other and just be»*



Our entire lives are imbued with rhythms and vibrations inextricably linked to our activities. Friends with special needs are more sensitive than others to the sounds in their environment. Our physical and mental well-being depends on how we experience these rhythms. That is why Maria Kostiukova offered a wonderful rhythm therapy for friends, during which everyone was able to listen to the rhythms and sounds of various musical instruments, feel the peculiarities of their own body, express their emotions and feelings through song, dance and movement.

«Retreat is above all a cry of the soul to open up and show oneself to the whole world. We pray, we have a varied program and even music lessons. Our friends help us. During this time, parents can also relax and chat together», **Yulia Kurylyak** from Lviv, with disabilities, tells us with emotion.





The first two days of the retreat were led by Father Taras Zheplynsky, chaplain of the «Ascension of Hearts» community. Parents shared their thoughts and experiences, participating in a small sharing group to talk about the situation in their communities. Their meeting with psychologist Natalia Syrotych was very warm and particularly refreshing. They talked about endurance, resilience and learned calming techniques.



«We talked a lot about resilience, which is now the main quality of a Ukrainian that helps us hold on because war is not a sprint for which you have to gather all your strength. War is always a marathon, we must run today, tomorrow to move forward. We must not exhaust our energy from the start. This is the only life we have and we must live it!» Resilience gives us a lot of strength to hold on, overcome our daily worries, move forward together towards victory and make the choice to run this marathon with our special needs children.



«Resilience is a quality that can only be developed collectively, within a community. To be resilient, you just have to decide to be! It's fantastic! During the retreat, we learned to take care of our resources and our strengths to continue running...», **explains Natalia Syrotych.**

On Sunday, one of our guests Sister Emmanuila Kharyshyn came to meet the parents. She spoke of the community as one body, with our friends with disabilities being the heart. Each member, whoever they may be, is essential to bring the body of Faith and Light to life.

«The retreat is useful for us parents because we gain a lot of knowledge, we gain perspective on our situation, how to control our emotions, understand others and respond to our children», said a mother, **Magdalyna Keik.**

The retreat ended with a feeling of gratitude and a desire to build an even longer and closer relationship with God in our communities.

We sincerely thank the entire international family of Faith and Light for this opportunity to rejoice, sing, dance, give thanks and praise our Lord in times of war! Because as the psychologist said during the retreat: *«It is not the life that we have chosen, but the only life that we have. And we must live it!»* We lived every moment of the retreat intensely, marveling at the time we spent together in the Faith and Light family.

«The King lives in our hearts, let us be witnesses to him»

Olena Perets, interim coordinator for the province of Ukraine

