

PAVLO SMYTSNYUK

## The Holy See Confronts the War in Ukraine Between Just War Theory and Nonviolence<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract (English): The Holy See Confronts the War in Ukraine: Between Just War Theory and Nonviolence.** This paper explores Pope Francis' and the Holy See's reaction to the war in Ukraine, and attempts to explain the logic behind it. After introducing the Holy See's statements since the start of Russia's aggression, the author reads them through the background of Catholic social teaching. In particular, he claims that the ambiguities of the Holy See's position are due to the unresolved tension between the traditional just war approach and a tendency towards nonviolence. The latter has acquired prominence over the last decades, in particular with Francis' *Fratelli Tutti*. The author concludes that the war in Ukraine represents a pivotal moment in the Catholic Church's thinking on war and peace.

*Keywords: War in Ukraine, Peacebuilding, Just peace, Religious diplomacy, Pope Francis, Fratelli Tutti*

**Abstract (Deutsch) – Der Heilige Stuhl gegenüber dem Krieg in der Ukraine: Zwischen der Theorie des gerechten Krieges und der Forderung nach Gewaltlosigkeit.** Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Reaktion von Papst Franziskus und des Heiligen Stuhls auf den Krieg in der Ukraine und versucht, die Logik dahinter zu erklären. Nach einer Einführung in die Erklärungen des Heiligen Stuhls seit Beginn der russischen Aggression liest der Autor diese vor dem Hintergrund der katholischen Soziallehre. Insbesondere behauptet er, dass die Zweideutigkeiten der Position des Heiligen Stuhls auf die ungelöste Spannung zwischen dem traditionellen Ansatz des gerechten Krieges und einer Tendenz zur Gewaltlosigkeit zurückzuführen sind. Letztere hat in den letzten Jahrzehnten an Bedeutung gewonnen, insbesondere durch *Fratelli Tutti* von Franziskus. Der Autor kommt zu dem Schluss, dass der Krieg in der Ukraine einen Schlüsselmoment im Denken der katholischen Kirche über Krieg und Frieden darstellt.

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**Abstract (Français) – Le Saint-Siège face à la guerre en Ukraine : Entre la théorie de la guerre juste et la non-violence.** Cet article examine la réaction du pape François et du Saint-Siège à la guerre en Ukraine et tente d'en expliquer la logique. Après avoir présenté les déclarations du Saint-Siège depuis le début de l'agression de la Russie, l'auteur les lit à travers le contexte de l'enseignement social catholique. Il affirme notamment que les ambiguïtés de la position du Saint-Siège sont dues à la tension non résolue entre l'approche traditionnelle de la guerre juste et une tendance à la non-violence. Cette dernière a pris de l'importance au cours des dernières décennies, en particulier avec *Fratelli Tutti* de François. L'auteur en conclut que la guerre en Ukraine représente un moment charnière dans la réflexion de l'Église catholique sur la guerre et la paix.

## 1. Introduction

The full-scale war, which the Russian Federation launched against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has shocked political and religious leaders across the globe. This paper explores Pope Francis' and the Holy See's reaction to the war, and attempts to explain the logic behind it. After introducing the Holy See's actions and statements since the start of Russia's aggression, I read them through the background of Catholic social teaching on war and peace. I argue that the Vatican's overly cautious and sometimes ambiguous statements about the war are due to two key reasons<sup>2</sup>. The first one, which is examined in this article, is the unresolved tension between just war and nonviolence, within the recent magisterium of the Catholic Church. The presumption against war, the preference for a more restrictive application of the just war theory, and the inclination towards nonviolent means of conflict resolution – which have acquired prominence over the last decades, in particular with Francis' *Fratelli Tutti* (Francis 2020) – represent, for good or ill, a framework beyond which the Holy See cannot easily go in its assessment of the war in Ukraine. The second, with which I will deal elsewhere, is related to the Holy See's policy of neutrality, which, under Francis, shows a reluctance to see the world through a Western lens<sup>3</sup>. Both of these reasons tie a prophetic voice of the Church to its particular vocation of acting in the midst of a world marked by human fragility and political conflicts – a world in which the only available choice is often a bad one.

The Holy See is a point of reference not only for over a billion of Catholics around the world, but also for many other people and institutions, who

<sup>2</sup> As it should be clear from the context, I use “Vatican” and “Holy See” interchangeably, although the two are distinguishable entities.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. my article “The Holy See between Neutrality and Moral High Ground: The Conundrum of the War in Ukraine” (seeking publication).

appreciate its aspiration to the moral high ground, when it positions itself vis-à-vis ethical and geopolitical challenges faced by humanity. As Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino, former President of the Pontifical Council “Justice and Peace”, has put it, “it is its moral, rather than political, authority that gives to the Holy See the capacity to act on an international scale” (Martino 2008, 23). The Papacy, due to its predominantly spiritual nature, follows a particular style when commenting on military conflicts. It prefers to use abstract and hortatory language, usually opts not to “name names”, and does not see deliberating on the morality of every war occurring in the world as its task. Even in cases that the international community and Holy See undoubtedly view as wars of aggression, the Vatican will call for diplomatic solutions, rather than allude to a military one. The First Gulf War of 1990 is a good illustration of such an approach. Although it was clear that the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was in violation of international law, John Paul II did not approve of the military intervention to push Iraq out of Kuwait, and instead insisted on the necessity of negotiations and other peaceful means (Dodaro 1992, 200-09).

The way the Holy See acts internationally is, to a very large degree, influenced by the Pontiff, his style and personality. The Roman Curia acts “in [the pope’s] name and by his authority” (CIC 1983, can. 360). The pope is seen as an interpreter *par excellence* of the Church’s tradition, and his judgments are authoritative for most Catholics. At the same time, the Catholic social teaching has elaborated the principle of subsidiarity, which demands that the central authority should not meddle in matters that could be solved locally. This principle – though usually applied to political life and less to the decision-making internal to the Church (which would involve the pope limiting himself to “universal moral principles”, while delegating “prudential judgments” to bishops’ conferences, experts or laity) – remains valid when approaching armed conflicts<sup>4</sup>. However, the Holy See is concerned that the Church’s representatives, in their application of the social doctrine to specific cases, avoid politicisation. For example, speaking to the Ukrainian bishops in 2015, in the aftermath of the Russian takeover of Crimea, Francis claimed that certain issues of recent history are “questions which partly have a political basis, and to which you are *not* called to offer a direct response” (Francis 2015, emphasis added). In other words, the Church should provide its moral guidance, but abstain from getting into too much detail, especially on matters that have political implications.

<sup>4</sup> On the distinction between “universal moral principles” and “prudential judgments” regarding issues of war and peace, and the legitimacy of disagreement about the latter, see Bishops 2010, §9-12 [p. 606-07]. Cf. also *Compendium of the Social Doctrine*, which speaks of “differing [levels of] authority” of the magisterial texts, and “leav[es] to Episcopal Conferences the task of making the appropriate applications [of fundamental elements of the Church’s social doctrine] as required by the different local situations” (Justice and Peace 2005, §8 [p. 3]).

## 2. Words, deeds, and omissions

Francis has been exceptionally outspoken about the war in Ukraine. The website *Il Sismografo*, which specialises in Vatican and Catholic Church news, has documented 111 Papal statements on the war in Ukraine between February 27, 2022 and January 18, 2023<sup>5</sup>. From the very beginning of the war, the Pope has called for peace and a ceasefire. Peace was the single most important thing emphasised in all of the pronouncements made by Vatican leadership. The Holy See has several times expressed its desire to mediate.

Since March 2022, Francis has consistently condemned the war, yet his terminology has undergone some evolution. On March 6<sup>th</sup>, Francis said that what was occurring in Ukraine was not simply a “military operation” (as the Russia government claimed) but a full-scale war, and assured the world that the Holy See was available to do “everything” to stop it (Sismografo 2022). It took three weeks before Francis started using the term “aggression” (March 13), and a month before the term “invasion” was first used (March 27). Francis has usually opted not to explicitly indicate that the war was launched by the Russian Federation or President Putin, although he often mentions Russia and its President while talking about the war<sup>6</sup>. He also suggested that NATO bears responsibility for the start of the war (Francis 2022c; Spadaro 2022b).

The pope has never questioned Ukrainians’ right to self-defence. He has explicitly asserted this right in an interview in *Télam* in June 2022. It is noteworthy, that the way Francis expressed himself on this occasion reveals his desire to contemplate the legitimate defence argument outside the just war theory framework, where it has been traditionally situated. He said: “I believe it is time to rethink the concept of a ‘just war’. A war may be just, there is the right to defend oneself. But we need to rethink the way that concept is used nowadays” (Francis 2022g). On the question of the military aid, Francis has initially claimed that the right answer to aggression cannot be through armament,

<sup>5</sup> Sismografo 2023. The earliest statements have been published as a book: Francis 2022f. On Francis’ statements regarding the war in Donbas, which started in 2014, see Hovorun 2020, 9-10. Hovorun criticizes Francis for using “vague to ambiguous” language, in particular when referring to the war as “fratricidal”, which echoes the Russian description of the conflict in terms of “civil war”. According to Gaetan, “[Francis] refused to affirm Ukraine’s version of events in its contest with Russia” (Gaetan 2021, 6, cf. chapter 6, entirely dedicated to the Vatican’s position on the Donbass war). Cf. also Roccucci 2018, 228-29. At the same time, the Holy See has called to respect international law and Ukraine’s sovereignty (Ferrara 2016, 166-67).

<sup>6</sup> Francis has justified his approach in the following way: “Certainly, the one who invades is the Russian state. This is very clear. Sometimes I try not to specify so as not to offend and rather condemn in general, although it is well known whom I am condemning. [...] And I never gave the impression that I was covering up the aggression. [...] Why do I not name Putin? Because it is not necessary; it is already known” (Francis 2022b).

sanctions or strengthening military alliances (Francis 2022a). In his interview to *Il Corriere della Sera* in May 2022, when asked about arming Ukraine for its self-defence, he replied in the following way: “I cannot answer the question of whether it is right to supply the Ukrainians. I am too far away” (Francis 2022c). In September 2022, Francis went further and claimed that arming Ukraine “can be moral – morally acceptable – if it is done according to the conditions of morality [...]. But it can be immoral if it is done with the intention of provoking more war or selling weapons or discarding those weapons that are no longer needed. [...] To defend oneself is not only lawful but also an expression of love of country. Those who do not defend themselves, those who do not defend something, do not love it, instead those who defend, love” (Francis 2022e).

The right to protect oneself with force and receive military aid has been emphasised – this time within a more traditional just war tradition – by top Vatican diplomats, the Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin and Secretary for Relations with States Archbishop Paul Gallagher. In April 2022, Cardinal Parolin commented: “I see that many are sending weapons [to Ukraine]. This is terrible to think. It could cause an escalation that cannot be controlled [...]. However, the principle of legitimate defence remains” (Parolin 2022b). A few weeks later, Parolin was more specific: “There is a right to armed defence in the case of aggression”. However, this right should be exercised under certain conditions laid down in just war theory, which Parolin has explicitly mentioned<sup>7</sup>. Archbishop Gallagher’s statements went in the same direction (Ceraso 2022).

In addition to these words, there have been actions. The Pontiff has made a few symbolic gestures, which have demonstrated his support for Ukraine. The day after the start of the war, the pope walked into the Russian Embassy to the Holy See – which is unusual in Vatican diplomatic protocol. As Francis later explained, he asked to transmit a message to Putin that he “was willing to travel [to Moscow] on condition that [Putin] allowed him a tiny window to negotiate” (Francis 2022b). On the 25 March, the pope consecrated both Russia and Ukraine to the immaculate Heart of Mary. The pope also sent two high-ranking curial clergymen to Ukraine and neighbouring countries. One of them was Cardinal Michael Czerny, the Prefect of the Dicastery for Integral Human Development (Vatican’s ministry which deals with questions of justice and peace), and one of Francis’ most trusted advisors. Later on, other Vatican emissaries followed. The pope has met family members of the captured soldiers of Mariupol and was personally involved in the exchange of prisoners of war (Spadaro 2022a). Nine months after the war began, the Pontiff wrote a letter

<sup>7</sup> Püllella 2022. In an interview to *Limes* in August 2022, Parolin added, in relation to the arming of Ukraine: “I do not think it is right to ask the attacked person to give up their weapons, before asking the attacker” (Parolin 2022a, 251).

to the people of Ukraine as a sign of his affection. In the letter, he expressed his solidarity with the soldiers, “who in courageous defence of [their] homeland have had to take up arms” (Francis 2022d).

Francis tried to reach out to the Russian Orthodox Church, attempting to bring them on board in search of peaceful solutions. On March 16, 2022, the Pope had a zoom conversation with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. Later, the meeting between Francis and Kirill, planned for June 2022 in Jerusalem, was called off. Francis explained the cancellation of the meeting in the following way: “Our diplomacy understood that a meeting between the two at this time could lead itself to much confusion”<sup>8</sup>. The pope’s comments about Kirill as “Putin’s altar boy” were not taken well by the establishment of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Some other things that the pope did or said became controversial. During the Via Crucis ceremony, the cross was carried by a Ukrainian and a Russian woman. Spadaro, a Jesuit journalist, close to Francis, has described this gesture as a “prophetic” sign going “against every visible hope” (Spadaro 2022c, 427), but this has been sharply criticised by Ukrainian political and religious leaders as an act of premature reconciliation. Francis’ comments about Chechens and Buryats as principally responsible for the atrocities committed in Ukraine caused criticism on both Russian and Ukrainian sides (Lefèvre 2022).

One could thus detect a certain discomfort in how the Holy See has acted in relation to Russian aggression against Ukraine. Initially, Francis was very reserved in his comments, but as the war advanced, he has become more outspoken. The Pontiff’s words and gestures on the war in Ukraine have often been poly-semantic – they could have been interpreted in a variety of ways. They have irritated both Ukrainians and Russians as both countries have tried to get the Holy See on their side. In what follows, I will try to make sense of the Holy See’s unease in approaching this war.

### 3. From Just War to Nonviolence

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine became a conceptual *topos* for a discussion regarding the morality of war and the legitimacy of self-defence within the field of Catholic social ethics and the magisterium. On the one hand, many ethicists have claimed that Ukraine has the right to legitimate self-defence and should be supplied with weapons<sup>9</sup>. The German Catholic Justice and Peace Commission went so far as to call the delivery of weapons to Ukraine “legitimate, if not even

<sup>8</sup> San Martín 2022. There were talks about a meeting between the two leaders at an event in Kazakhstan in September 2022. In the end, Kirill cancelled his trip to Kazakhstan.

<sup>9</sup> Vogt 2022a, 1-7; 2022b, 14-15; Peterson 2021, 1-23. Justenhoven, cited in Glatz 2022.



ethically required” (Justitia et Pax Commission 2022). On the other hand, however, there were voices in the social ethics community that have advocated non-violent resistance<sup>10</sup>. Some scholars and church leaders are asking a question, like the one formulated by the Catholic social ethicist Markus Vogt: “how much [our] peace-ethical reflections of the past years as well as the guidelines of Catholic social teaching are still worth in view of the new threat scenario”?<sup>11</sup> Francis’ particular reference to the Catholic social doctrine in order to interpret the war in Ukraine has been widely debated both within Catholic Church and beyond (Liedl 2022). In what follows, I will situate the Holy See’s position on Ukraine within the context of the debate about the ethics of war and peace – which will be very roughly presented – and show the extent to which the latter permeates the way Francis and the Vatican address the war in Ukraine.

Over the centuries, the Catholic Church has elaborated what we now call the just war tradition, as part of its social teaching<sup>12</sup>. Although the Christian ideal has been a society of peace and justice, there are moments, in our imperfect world, when war can be morally justified. Over the course of history, the following criteria of the *jus ad bellum* have been formulated: just cause, comparative justice, competent authority, right intention, last resort and proportionality (Massaro 2016, 108-17). If you complied with these criteria, the war that you were waging was just, especially if it was a defensive war. The just war doctrine and the relevant criteria are embraced by the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, drawn up at the request of John Paul II. The document claims that “leaders of the State that has been attacked have the right and the duty to organize a defence even using the force of arms” (Justice and Peace 2005, §500 [p. 217]).

While there is a unity that persists throughout this tradition (thus it is sometimes described as *doctrine*), the voices that compose it – such as Augustine (who draws on Cicero), Aquinas or Suárez – differ in the ways that they address

<sup>10</sup> Dennis 2022; McCarthy 2023. Cf. also Palaver, who while insisting that the church should stick to nonviolence, even in the case of the war in Ukraine, still claims that “in the short term, military resistance and support seem to be necessary” (Palaver 2022, 402-03).

<sup>11</sup> Vogt 2022a, 2. Cf. Mabile’s observation that over the past years “[t]here was an oblivion of the non-obsolescence of war”, which “led to a lack of intellectual investment, of reflection on the way in which the Catholic Church could position itself in the face of such a conflict” (Mabile 2022a).

<sup>12</sup> The pacifism of the early Christians is a matter of debate. According to Palaver, early Christianity was nonviolent (Palaver 2022, 395). Similarly, Cahill argues that the pre-Constantinian Christians were mostly pacifists, however, she also observes that it would be incorrect to speak of the whole early church as “pacifist” (Cahill 2019a, 5-90). Johnson challenges the thesis of early Christian pacifism (Johnson 1987, chapter 1). Justenhoven and Baslez insist on the complexity of early Christianity, with both pacifist and militarist tendencies (Justenhoven 2021, 43-45; Baslez 2016, 123-34).

questions of war and peace<sup>13</sup>. Some of this diversity can be explained by the historical context in which these men lived. As Barbieri and Justenhoven observe, since “ethical teachings are necessarily shaped in part by the social and intellectual conditions within which they are articulated”, we cannot assume that there existed “a single fixed just-war framework illuminated throughout the centuries” (Justenhoven/Barbieri 2012b, 1-3).

Over the last decades, Christian – especially Catholic – social reflection has been moving away from just war theory, towards just peace, ethics of peacebuilding and, to a certain extent, towards nonviolence and even pacifism<sup>14</sup>. As Eric Gregory has pointed out, “[just war] defenders now find themselves in a minority in Christian ethics” (Gregory 2014, 55). The traditional “presumption against injustice” has lost ground to the “presumption against war and force” (Charles 2005, 335-69; cf. Shelledy 2004, 157-58). However, the just peace approach should not be seen as necessarily in opposition to the just war tradition, but rather as developing from within this tradition, in the new context, marked by nuclear proliferation and experience of the two world wars, but also by the diminishment of the temporal power of the Catholic Church and the increasing globalisation of the Holy See<sup>15</sup>. Ingeborg Gabriel succinctly argues that just war theory “aims at limiting violence and not at legitimizing it, even if [...] the term has been abused, at times also by the churches” (Gabriel 2022). Just peace ethics take it a step further and attempt, on the one hand, to restrict the permissive approach to the just war, and, on the other hand, to balance the just war approach by insisting on the prevention of wars, active peacebuilding and reconciliation<sup>16</sup>. At the same time, the just war tradition is in tension with absolute nonviolence and pacifism (Hornsby-Smith 2006, 301). As Carsten Stahn observes, “[s]eeking justice may prolong armed conflict or impede peace efforts” (Stahn 2020, 4).

<sup>13</sup> For a historical variety within the just war tradition, see Justenhoven/Barbieri 2012a. For a more systematic approach, see Massaro 2016, 108-17.

<sup>14</sup> Massaro 2016, 113; Justenhoven 2021, 65; Palaver 2022, 397. On the variety of different positions regarding war and peace within Christian social thought, see Cahill 2019b, 169-85. Justenhoven and Braun point out the regional difference in approaches: while just war thinking is popular among “Anglo-Saxon” scholars, German ethicists have tended to be more sceptical about the use of armed force (Braun 2022a, 2-3; Justenhoven 2021, 66ff. Cf. Zehfuss 2005, 91-102).

<sup>15</sup> Justenhoven/Barbieri 2012b, 4; Reichberg 2012, 1073-97. Vogt 2022b, 10-17. On the relationship between the loss of the temporal power of the Holy See and its propensity towards nonviolence, see Levillain 2016, 325ff; Braun 2020, 583-602; 2022a, 4-5. On the peace-building efforts of the papacy in the context of its globalization, see Casanova 2017, 121-43.

<sup>16</sup> Powers 2012, 275-312. A parallel with ecclesiology makes this complementarity clear: when the Second Vatican Council spoke of the college of bishops as a supreme authority within the Church, it did not reject the teaching on papal primacy of the First Vatican Council, but rather has situated primacy in a more collegial context.



A decisive step of the Catholic magisterium towards just peace was taken by John XXIII in his *Pacem in terris* [1963], soon after the Cuban missile crisis, which put the world on the brink of a nuclear war (John XXIII 1963). Political scientists David D. Corey and Josh King argue that “[t]he teaching of *Pacem in terris* concerning military force is radically at odds with the just war tradition, despite the homage that this encyclical pays to tradition as such [...]. Its teaching is quite simply that military force should never be used” (Corey/King 2013, 150). They criticise *Pacem in terris* for its idealism in claiming that “military force is never legitimate” (ibid., 155). Corey and King might be pushing the argument for the absolute illegitimacy of the use of force in *Pacem in terris* too far, which may be more correctly read as an increasing scepticism towards war in the nuclear age. However, they are right in pointing out that, in comparison with *Pacem in terris*, the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution *Gaudium et spes* [1965] presents a more balanced approach to the question of war, since it weighs both the realism of human sin and requirements of justice<sup>17</sup>. *Gaudium et spes* presents both just war tradition and pacifism as acceptable options: by allowing for conscientious objection, it makes nonviolence morally acceptable, while, by permitting self-defence, it continues the path of just war tradition<sup>18</sup>.

Parallel to the ongoing support for the presumption against war, Catholic social teaching has given its backing to the principle of humanitarian intervention. Catholic social ethicist Gerard Powers argues that in the face of genocide, “the Church had a clear answer to Cain’s question: ‘Yes, we are our brother’s keeper’”<sup>19</sup>. The magisterium of the last decades has embraced the ‘responsibility to protect’ (R2P) principle, which allows for the deployment of force by the international community, in order to protect the most vulnerable<sup>20</sup>. Humanitarian

<sup>17</sup> Corey/King 2013, 155. They argue that “if one of our ideals is just peace, then it is unacceptable for statesmen to maintain a policy of non-violence while a Hitler or a Bin Laden wreaks political havoc upon innocent populations, since the result will be neither just nor peaceful” (Corey/King 2013, 155).

<sup>18</sup> *Gaudium et spes* claims that “[a]s long as the danger of war remains and there is no competent and sufficiently powerful authority at the international level, governments cannot be denied the right to legitimate defense once every means of peaceful settlement has been exhausted” (GS 79). Cf. Hornsby-Smith 2006, 291- 304; Palaver 2022, 397.

<sup>19</sup> Powers raises some questions regarding humanitarian intervention, inviting further reflection (Powers 2012, 292-96, at 92).

<sup>20</sup> According to the Jesuit ethicist Drew Christiansen, the logic of R2P is anticipated by *Pacem in terris*’ argument that the governments that violate human rights, lack legitimacy (Christiansen 2018, 40. Cf. PT §61, 140). Similarly, Vogt argues that *Pacem in terris*, by emphasizing the role of the UN, challenges states’ monopoly on power (Vogt 2022b, 11). *Compendium*, with references to John Paul II’s magisterium, claims that “[t]he international community as a whole has the moral obligation to intervene on behalf of those groups whose very

intervention – described by Gregory as “the paradigm of justified war” (Gregory 2020, 536) – can be considered as a counterbalance to pacifism within Christian ethics.

#### 4. Pope Francis and *Fratelli tutti* (FT)

As in many other domains, Francis is original when he draws on the tradition of his predecessors. His *Fratelli tutti* has been interpreted as a Catholic rejection – even if ambiguous – of the just war theory (cf. Mabile 2022b; Faggioli 2022, 170). According to Drew Christiansen, *Fratelli tutti* “goes about as far as one can go toward critiquing just war without rejecting it wholesale” (Christiansen 2021, 6). Cardinal Michael Czerny and the theologian Christian Barone argue that Francis’ affirmation in *Fratelli tutti* of the inadequacy of the just war approach is “innovative” with respect to the previous pontifical magisterium<sup>21</sup>.

In *Fratelli tutti*, Francis argues: “War can easily be chosen by invoking all sorts of allegedly humanitarian, defensive or precautionary excuses, and even resorting to the manipulation of information. In recent decades, every single war has been ostensibly ‘justified’. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of the possibility of legitimate *defence* by means of military force, which involves demonstrating that certain ‘rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy’ have been met. Yet it is easy to fall into an overly broad interpretation of this potential right. [...] At issue is whether the development of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons [...] have granted war an uncontrollable destructive power over great numbers of innocent civilians. [...] We can no longer think of war as a solution, because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits. In view of this, it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a ‘just war’” (FT 258). Francis’ suspicion of “allegedly humanitarian, defensive or precautionary excuses”, suggests his unease not only with the responsibility

*survival is threatened or whose basic human rights are seriously violated.* As members of an international community, states cannot remain indifferent; on the contrary, if all other available means should prove ineffective, it is ‘legitimate and even obligatory to take concrete measures to disarm the aggressor’. The principle of national sovereignty cannot be claimed as a motive for preventing an intervention in defence of innocent victims” (Justice and Peace 2005, §506 [p.220]). See also Benedict XVI 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Czerny/Barone 2021, 189. The book, authored by Cardinal Czerny (Prefect of Dicastery of Integral Human Development) and Barone, is arguably one of the most valid interpretations of Francis’ social thought. The Pope wrote the preface.

to protect principle, held by Benedict XVI<sup>22</sup>, but also, and more importantly, with the idea of the moral legitimacy of a defensive war<sup>23</sup>. Finally, *Fratelli tutti*, as Francis' earlier magisterium, is critical of arms production and trade (FT 262)<sup>24</sup>.

Christian Nikolaus Braun, a scholar in the just war tradition, explained Francis' discomfort with just war theory as being related to the influence of the just peace school (Braun 2020, 590). According to Braun, Francis' just peace perspective echoes the logic of two 2020 documents by the German Bishops (Braun 2022b, 17). *The German Bishops in the World War: Statement on the End of the Second World War 75 Years Ago* and *A Just Peace* argue that fidelity to the just war theory did not permit the German episcopate to adequately condemn Hitler's warfare, and allowed the war to remain unchallenged as a habitual part of geopolitical life (Bishops 2020a; b). The just peace perspective, as articulated by the German Bishops, approaches peace in a more integral fashion, as a value that includes justice, wellbeing and sustainability, and is more radical in its rejection of violence as a way of solving conflicts (Bishops 2020b, §59, 61, 124).

Francis' preference for nonviolence is also clearly visible in his 2017 Message for the World Day of Peace, entitled *Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace*. Here Francis claims that “[c]ounteracting violence with violence leads at best to forced migrations and enormous suffering, because vast amounts of resources are diverted to military ends and away from the everyday needs of [...] people”, and invites us to pursue the politics of “active nonviolence”<sup>25</sup>.

Francis' departure from the just war approach has been criticised by scholars, who make similar arguments as those directed against *Pacem in terris*. Vogt argues that the pope's “pacifist rejection of any kind of warfare does not stand up to the

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Christiansen 2021, 5-14. Francis' skepticism towards the R2P principle might have to do not with the morality of protecting the vulnerable, but with the lack of clarity regarding who is the competent authority to intervene in a situation when the UN struggles to be an effective peacemaking body (Cf. FT 173. Justenhoven 2021, 71-77). Braun argues that “Francis' slightly ambiguous stance on R2P [...] should not be read as breaking with Benedict's more open embrace” (Braun 2022a).

<sup>23</sup> In his interview with Dominique Wolton, recorded in 2016, Francis said: “We have learned in political philosophy that, in order to defend yourself, you can make war and consider it just. But can you speak of a ‘just war’? Or even a ‘defensive war’? [...] the only just thing is peace” (Francis 2018a, 33).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Francis 2018a, 16, 61. On Francis' condemnation of arms proliferation in his 2015 speeches to the US Congress and UN General Assembly, see Massaro 2018, 159-62.

<sup>25</sup> Francis 2018b, §2 [p. 163], §6 [p. 166]. Massaro argues that although the document constitutes “perhaps the most enthusiastic advocacy any pope has yet offered for [nonviolence]”, it “raise[s] a caution about embracing perfectionistic codes of behavior such as an ethic of absolute nonviolence” (Massaro 2018, 154).

necessity of defensively opposing the excesses of armed violence and aggression” (Vogt 2022a, 2). Similarly, François Mabilie questions the opportunity of ruling out the morality of legitimate self-defence in *Fratelli tutti* 258 (Mabilie 2022a). I would suggest that some of the reasons invoked for the rejection of just wars are conditioned by an approach which appears relativistic: due to the fact that some parties present their wars as just, the conclusion is drawn that no war is ever just<sup>26</sup>. While the abuse of the legitimate defence rhetoric is undeniable<sup>27</sup> and should lead the Church’s to become increasingly discerning, it does not follow that the Church should relinquish discernment altogether. Having said that, it is also understandable that in the nuclear age, when total annihilation is a real possibility, classical approaches to war should be reconsidered (Girard 2009).

So, does *Fratelli tutti* make armed self-defence immoral, from the Catholic point of view? I would suggest that there are two passages in the encyclical, where Francis implicitly recognises the legitimacy of self-defence. In *Fratelli tutti* 240, the pope reflects on the evangelical passage in Mt 10:34-36, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword”. According to Francis, “Christ’s words do not encourage us to seek conflict, but simply to endure it when it inevitably comes, lest deference to others, for the sake of supposed peace in our families or society, should detract from our own fidelity” (FT 240). Czerny and Barone interpret this passage to mean that there are situations, in which “it is necessary to take a stand, renouncing the benefits of non-involvement, and to consider opposition to every type of oppression as a major good” (Czerny/Barone 2021, 186). The following paragraph also suggests the legitimacy of self-defence: “loving an oppressor does not mean allowing him to keep oppressing us, or letting him think that what he does is acceptable. On the contrary, true love for an oppressor means seeking ways to make him cease his oppression; it means stripping him of a power that he does not know how to use, and that diminishes his own humanity and that of others. [...] Those who suffer injustice have to defend their own rights strenuously and those of their family, precisely because they must preserve the dignity they have received as a loving gift from God” (FT 241). It is not clear whether Francis contemplates “ceasing [the] oppression” through the violence of war, which would have touched upon a debated issue of whether killing in war can be an act of love<sup>28</sup>. Although here the pope does not explicitly refer to *armed* defence, the overall logic of the argument suggests that such a defence is not precluded. For example, Czerny and Barone’s commentary does not reject the “legitimate defence”

<sup>26</sup> Cf. also Gabriel’s observation that the postmodern approach – which considered freedom and human rights as Western, and thus not universally applicable, principles – is something that has allowed Russia to prepare for this war (Gabriel 2022).

<sup>27</sup> On Russia’s justification of its aggression in Ukraine in terms of self-defence, see Kumankov 2022, 1-21.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Biggar 2013, chapter 2; Cahill 2014, 186-95.

principle, but rather insists that it should be invoked under conditions that echo classical just war criteria<sup>29</sup>. At the same time, they also seem to be critical of legitimate defence as a principle, which is more informed by retributive justice, rather than by Christian forgiveness. Besides FT 241, there is at least one instance in which the pope arguably acknowledges the legitimacy of the R2P principle. Francis' comments (and silences) on the use of force against Islamic State point out that he believes, as Massaro suggests, that "military action may be permissible under certain narrowly defined circumstances" (Massaro 2018, 157-58). Finally, in *Fratelli tutti*, Francis also claims that peace is impossible without truth, justice and mercy, which suggests that an unconditional peace is not an option (FT 227).

This short analysis suggests that there is an unresolved tension in *Fratelli tutti* between just war and nonviolence. The encyclical takes a step back from just war theory, in particular from the permissive approach to war, but it does not constitute a complete rebuttal of the theory. This tension, I argue, permeates the way the Holy See approaches the war in Ukraine, and constitutes one of the reasons for the delayed acknowledgement by Francis of Ukraine's right to defend itself militarily and be provided with necessary weapons.

Finally, a few words should be said on Francis' personal take on issues of war and peace. The pope's personal background, experience, ideological and spiritual preferences help us to understand not only his decisions and diplomatic style, but also those of the Catholic Church and the Holy See<sup>30</sup>. The name Francis, which Bergoglio chose on the day of his election to the See of Rome, is a reference to St Francis of Assisi, who was dedicated to dialogue and peacebuilding, even in the most desperate situations<sup>31</sup>. But Bergoglio also carries with him the spiritual experience of belonging to the order of Jesuits, who were over centuries engaged in attempts at reconciliation on various levels (Massaro 2021, 523-46).

Francis' pastoral approach to his ministry and communication differs considerably from many of his predecessors. Jodok Troy rightly observes that "Francis' behaviour often seems unusual for a pope" (Troy 2021, 561). According to Spadaro, Francis prefers diplomacy of prayer to that of establishment and "combines the traditional diplomatic prudence with *parrhesia*, built on clarity and sometimes on denunciation" (Spadaro 2018, 62. Cf. Spadaro 2022b; c). From his declarations related to the invasion of Ukraine, it would appear that he is more concerned with those affected by the war, than with the political leaders

<sup>29</sup> Czerny/Barone 2021, 195. The conditions are the following: that recourse to force is the last remedy, that violence is responding to (and not preventing) an on-going aggression, and that defence should be proportionate.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Gaetan 2021, 11; Mabile 2022a.

<sup>31</sup> FT 286. The Encyclical was signed in Assisi, at St Francis' tomb. See also Francis 2018a, 32-33. Cf. Thomas 2018, 16-36.



or values invoked by each side<sup>32</sup>. As one of the Vatican's spokesmen declared, Francis is not "equidistant" from those involved in the war, but "equally close" to those who are suffering because of the war (Andrea Tornielli, cited in M.C.B. 2022). What might sound like casuistry, is probably the way Francis prioritizes persons over state interests. Read from this perspective, his application of social ethics to Russia's war on Ukraine, is a way of being "equally close" to people in both countries.

Moreover, I would suggest that Francis addresses the war as a pastor, rather than as a political thinker or moral theologian. This aspect of Francis' thought has been grasped by Christiansen, who rightly points out that "[a]gainst the just war [Francis] does not offer the biblical arguments of a Christian pacifist but rather the experience of a pastor who ministers to the suffering and maimed victims of war for whom the Church is 'a field hospital'" (Christiansen 2021, 9). This might be one explanation for why Francis does not have a systematic theory of war and peace (or, indeed of other issues, such as communion to the divorced, the status of LGBT persons or synodality). He is a pastor, who contemplates his flock, not a theoretician, concerned with the conceptual consistency of his ideas.

The war in Ukraine, however, as Mabile suggests, might require a more global approach: "Pope Francis gives great importance to interpersonal relationships, he wants to move the situation in a person-to-person relationship. [...] the papal 'gestures' and the compass-less diplomacy of the Holy See seems a little light compared to the nature of the interlocutors and the issues at stake" (Mabile 2022a). Not that Francis' approach to international relations is simplistic. On the contrary, it has been pointed out that the prestige of Vatican diplomacy has risen considerably with the election of Bergoglio, after the introvert pontificate of Benedict XVI (Morozzo della Rocca 2018, 116ff. Cf. Gaetan 2021, 11). It is rather that Francis' approach, by being personal and pastoral, might be more easily prone to ideological manipulations on various sides (Matzuzzi 2021, 105).

Parolin speaks of Francis as of *vox clamantis in deserto* (a voice of one crying in the wilderness), implying a parallel between the current pope's style and John the Baptist's eccentric ministry (Parolin 2022a, 247-48). *Fratelli tutti* insists on the need for "stark and clear truth", and argues that "[w]e no longer have use for empty diplomacy, dissimulation, double-speak, hidden agendas and good manners that mask reality" (FT 226). Czerny and Barone push Francis' argument further, and claim that "[t]o elucidate the genesis of the conflict, i.e. to

<sup>32</sup> As Czerny and Barone point out, "[i]f it is true that 'realities are greater than ideas', then realities of war lived by the victims surpass the idea of who considers the war as short- or long-term advantage" (Czerny/Barone 2021, 190).



explain the causes and to narrate what really happened is both a duty of justice and a right of the victims” (Czerny/Barone 2021, 183). The way the Holy See has been speaking on the war in Ukraine, shows how difficult it is to put those principles into practice.

## 5. Conclusion

The number of the pope’s statements on the war in Ukraine, and the extent of detail with which the issues were tackled, are unprecedented compared to the way the Papacy has approached other armed conflicts. This is due not only to the global interest in this war, but also to Francis’ pastoral and communicative style. One should bear in mind, however, that not all statements by the Holy See leadership are of the same “magisterial” value. The fact that calls to peaceful solutions were made as part of official speeches and messages, while comments on Russia *vs* NATO confrontation, or on armed defence and military aid, were mostly impromptu answers to questions from journalists, speaks to the Holy See’s priorities on this matter.

In what concerns the Ukrainian right to armed self-defence, the (initial) ambiguity of the Holy See’s position can be explained by the tension between nonviolence and just war thinking within the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. Although Francis’ theology can be situated within a just peace approach, which subordinates just war theory to a major ideal of peace and nonviolence, the tension between the two principles is not fully harmonised. Francis’ reflection on the war in Ukraine, in particular his delayed acknowledgement of Ukraine’s right to receive military aid for its self-defence, might represent a pivotal moment in modern Catholicism’s reconsideration of the principles of nonviolence and just war. This war has convinced Francis and many Catholic social ethicists that the just war tradition needs rethinking rather than rejection. Concerns about the right intent of those who arm Ukraine and the fear of escalation suggest that this conflict can be usefully approached with the criteria of just war thinking. Since, as I have suggested earlier, Catholic social teaching has been contextual (e.g. affected by the big wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), it is natural that the current stance on self-defence and armament is a reaction to that specific past experience. But, as Peterson rightly points out, “the past can paralyze us, and hinder us in our work for good in the world today; it can slow us, or stop us from justified action in the present. In such moments, we are not learning from the past but living in the past” (Peterson 2021, 13). Although the exact extent to which the war in Ukraine will influence the way just war and just peace are articulated by the Holy See and Catholic social doctrine remains to be seen, this influence will be considerable.

The Holy See is mindful of the effect its position on Ukraine will have in other contexts and times. The pope's words on the ongoing war will be cited and applied to other conflicts in the future, and a too permissive application of the legitimate defence principle might constitute a setback for future Vatican's peacebuilding efforts. A question of particular importance is militarization and the arms trade. The recognition by the Holy See of the morality of providing military aid to Ukraine, though viewed as belated and overly hesitant by Kyiv, was much more explicit when compared to Vatican treatments of other cases, e.g. the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Francis is concerned that the precedent of Ukraine does not encourage a build-up of arms, of which the magisterium has been traditionally very critical.

The Holy See's interest in the ethical aspect of the war in Ukraine, is due not only to the social media's pressure upon the pope to provide some moral guidance in a divided world, but also by the Vatican's desire to play an active role in peacebuilding and reconciliation<sup>33</sup>. If the Holy See was serious about its proposals to mediate in this conflict, then it needed to keep open the channels of communication on both sides and avoid statements that could be interpreted as partisan. Thomas Princen argues that papal success in the realm of mediation is due to several factors. One is neutrality. But others are clarity, public reputation, and moral legitimacy<sup>34</sup>. Sometimes complying with one criterion means that you do not comply with others<sup>35</sup>. There are moments in which to be bipartisan would also mean to be silent about the truth on the causes of the war and those who are responsible for the aggression and, in this way, to fail the victims who need protection and encouragement. This is the lesson from the story of Pius XII<sup>36</sup>. In the long run, maintaining the high moral ground should be, for the Vatican, more important than tactical expediency.

Massimo Faggioli described Francis' pontificate as "the liminal papacy", "on the threshold between the old and the new", between "already" and "not yet" (Faggioli 2022, 167-68). I would propose that this liminality is a useful perspective to conceptualize the pope's approach to the war in Ukraine. Francis' struggles between nonviolence and "the utopia of good" (Francis 2013, 3), on the one hand, and understanding that nonviolence is incapable of protecting the weakest, on the other hand. His voice as a pastor and a prophet does not always align with the

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Cardinal Martino, who speaks of *l'action pacificatrice* of the Holy See (Martino 2008, 29).

<sup>34</sup> Princen 1992, 159ff. Similarly, Ferrara argues, that the Holy See's mediation is often successful not because of the exceptional abilities of its diplomacy, but due to its moral high-ground (Ferrara 2016, 189-90).

<sup>35</sup> See Matzuzzi, who argues that sometimes "pragmatism contrasts with the 'diplomacy of truth'" (Matzuzzi 2021, 117).

<sup>36</sup> On the Holy See during the Second World War, see Kent and Pollard 1994, 15-16; Kertzer 2022.

style of a global geopolitical actor. This struggle belongs to the specificity not only of the papacy, but of the Church itself, as being in constant tension between its political and spiritual being, between the city of sinners and the Kingdom of God.

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## Author

Pavlo Smytsnyuk is a researcher in Hellenic Studies and Religion at Princeton University. He specializes in political theology, nationalism and the religious aspects of the anti-colonial struggle, with a particular focus on Greek Orthodoxy. From 2019-2022, Smytsnyuk was the Director of the Institute of Ecumenical Studies and a Senior Lecturer at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, Ukraine. He studied philosophy and theology in Rome, Athens and St Petersburg, and holds a Doctorate from the University of Oxford (Campion Hall). Recent publications: *The Politicization of God: Soloviev, Clément and Yannaras on the Theological Importance of Atheism*. In: *ET Studies* 13(2)/2022, pp. 265-288. *A Tortuous Boundary: Polis, Civil Religion, and the Distinction between the Sacred and Profane*. In: Bodrov, A./Garrett, S.M. (ed.): *Theology and the Political: Theopolitical Reflections on Contemporary Politics in Ecumenical Conversation*. Leiden/Boston 2021, pp. 106-127. *Pars pro toto, or Who Represents Universality? The Churches of Rome and Constantinople between Particularity and Catholicity*. In: *One in Christ* 55(1)/2021, pp. 75-92. Postal address: Seeger Center for Hellenic Studies, Room 107, Scheide Caldwell House, Princeton, NJ 08544 USA. E-mail: [smytsnyuk@princeton.edu](mailto:smytsnyuk@princeton.edu).