

## POPE FRANCIS AND RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

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**Abstract.** This article aims at analysing and commenting the approach and position of Pope Francis and the Holy See in the issue of Russia's war against Ukraine (2014–) since the full-scale invasion of 2022. Statements and gestures of the Pope that joined Russia and Ukraine together, were often received negatively in Ukraine. The encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Vatican neutrality and Ostpolitik raised questions concerning peace ethics and reconciliation. The article presents guiding principles and ideas of the Catholic Church leadership on these issues and shows that there is a demand for active involvement of the Ukrainian side in the discussion process.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, Russia, Pope Francis, Vatican Policy, Greek Catholic Church, Peace Ethics, Just War, Pacifism

Russia's war against Ukraine affects not only the relationship of the churches in Ukraine to each other and to the Moscow Patriarchate, but also the way other churches face the situation. At the time of writing in April 2023, the approach of Pope Francis and the Holy See to Ukraine is still perceived as quite problematic. While Ukraine is a country with an overwhelming Orthodox majority (according to a survey conducted in November 2022 63%), the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC), which stands at 10% of the population, and the Roman Catholic Church, at 2%, make up the second largest denomination in the country.<sup>2</sup> But even

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<sup>2</sup> Razumkov Centre, *War and Church. Church and Religious Situation in Ukraine 2022 (Information Materials)*, Kyiv, 2022, 24, [https://razumkov.org.ua/images/2023/02/13/2022\\_Religiya\\_ENGL.pdf](https://razumkov.org.ua/images/2023/02/13/2022_Religiya_ENGL.pdf) (8.04.2023). Other surveys show around 70% Orthodox believers. For more data, the war against Ukraine as a theological challenge and the problems of Ukrainian Orthodoxy, see Thomas Mark NÉMETH, "Der Krieg gegen die Ukraine und die Kirchen. Anfragen an die Theologie", *Limina* 6.1 (2023) 235–256, <https://limina-graz.eu/index.php/limina/article/view/182/192> (13.05.2023); ID., "Russlands Krieg gegen die Ukraine – Eine Herausforderung für die Orthodoxie", in „*Nicht Konkurrenten, sondern Brüder ...*“ *Auf dem Weg zu einem neuen Miteinander von orthodoxer und*



apart from religious affiliation, special attention is paid to the Pope as a global player who has commented on events in Ukraine more than a hundred times since the full-scale invasion began in 2022.<sup>3</sup>

### Statements and Gestures of Pope Francis

Pope Francis' approach to the war of aggression against Ukraine can be described as ambivalent – at the very least – according to public opinion there. It was seen as a positive thing that Francis, in deviation from protocol, personally visited the Russian embassy at the Vatican as early as February 25, 2022, to advocate for peace, and sought to explore possibilities of a meeting with Putin.<sup>4</sup> As Pavlo Smytsnyuk noted in his analysis of Francis' words and deeds, he has spoken out much more frequently and explicitly about Ukraine than he has about any other recent conflicts.<sup>5</sup> After the atrocities of Bucha became known, he kissed a flag from there and expressed his sympathy and solidarity with the victims. At the same time, the Holy See is trying to stay out of the political sphere of this war. Although his statements have become more direct over time, Francis avoids directly calling Putin or Russia the aggressor.

In Ukraine – and in Orthodoxy in general – the consecration of Russia and Ukraine to the Heart of Mary on March 25, 2022, was seen as problematic. Even though the Catholic bishops of Ukraine participated in this act, it caused criticism in the churches and society, both because of joining these two countries together and because of the use of the Roman Catholic idea of Russia's conversion

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*katholischer Kirche*, edited by Dietmar SCHON (Schriften des Ostkircheninstituts der Diözese Regensburg 9), Pustet: Regensburg (forthcoming). Translations in this paper are by the author or translator.

<sup>3</sup> “Dopo la orrenda strage di Dnipro in Ucraina si attendono con partecipazione addolorata le parole del Santo Padre oggi nel corso dell'Udienza generale”, *Il Sismografo* (18.01.2023), <http://ilsismografo.blogspot.com/2023/01/vaticano-dopo-la-orrenda-strage-di.html> (3.04.2023).

<sup>4</sup> “Exclusive: Pope Francis Discusses Ukraine, U.S. Bishops and More”, *America* (28.11.2022), <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/11/28/pope-francis-interview-america-244225> (1.04.2023).

<sup>5</sup> Pavlo SMYTSNYUK, “Католицька реакція на російсько-українську війну” [The Catholic Response to the Russia-Ukraine War], *Наукові записки УКУ: Богослов'я* 10 (2023) 193–224 (forthcoming).

within an Orthodox context.<sup>6</sup> Resentment in Ukraine was intensified not only by the Francis' Twitter messages about a general guilt in the face of concrete crimes, but especially by the stations of the cross in the Colosseum on Good Friday 2022, where a Ukrainian and a Russian woman carried the cross together.<sup>7</sup> See head of the UGCC, Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk expressed clearly his negative view on this initiative: "For the Greek Catholics of Ukraine, the texts and gestures of the 13th station of this Way of the Cross are incoherent and even offensive, especially in the context of the expected second, even bloodier attack of Russian troops on our cities and villages."<sup>8</sup>

The Kyiv nuncio Archbishop Visvaldas Kulbokas also supported this criticism: "Reconciliation must come when aggression is stopped. When Ukrainians will be able not only to save their lives but also their freedom. And, of course, we know that reconciliation occurs when the aggressor admits their guilt and apologizes".<sup>9</sup>

In the face of protests, the stations of the cross were held without the originally planned texts. Myroslav Marynovych, a former dissident and vice rector of the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, expressed theological criticism. According to him, a distinction must be made between the one cross of Jesus and the different crosses of a victim and a

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<sup>6</sup> Katherine KELAIDIS, "Holy Father, You're Not Helping: The Problem with the Pope's Plan to Consecrate Russia and Ukraine to the Immaculate Heart of Mary", *Religion Dispatches* (28.03.2022), <https://religiondispatches.org/holy-father-youre-not-helping-the-problem-with-the-popes-plan-to-consecrate-russia-and-ukraine-to-the-immaculate-heart-of-mary/> (8.04.2023).

<sup>7</sup> See Thomas Mark NÉMETH, "Rom und die Ukraine. Welche Taktik verfolgt der Papst?" Ein Stand.Punkt, *Katholische Kirche Österreich* (14.04.2022), <https://www.katholisch.at/standpunkt/nemeth/ukraine-rom-krieg-karwoche> (8.04.2023) ; Pope Francis, We need to cry ... (4.04.2022), <https://twitter.com/Pontifex/status/1510942761381367809> (8.04.2023); Way of the Cross, [https://www.vatican.va/news\\_services/liturgy/documents/index\\_via-crucis\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/documents/index_via-crucis_en.html) (8.04.2023).

<sup>8</sup> "An Untimely Idea?: Ukrainian Catholic Leader Concerned by Format of Pope's Good Friday Via Crucis" (12.4.2022), <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/250955/an-untimely-idea-ukrainian-catholic-leader-concerned-by-format-of-pope-s-good-friday-via-crucis> (1.04.2023).

<sup>9</sup> "I conveyed the reaction from Ukraine to the Vatican' – Apostolic Nuncio on Ukrainian and Russian Standing Under the Cross Together", *RISU* (12.04.2022), [https://risu.ua/en/i-conveyed-the-reaction-from-ukraine-to-the-vatican---apostolic-nuncio-on-ukrainian-and-russian-standing-together-under-the-cross\\_n128281](https://risu.ua/en/i-conveyed-the-reaction-from-ukraine-to-the-vatican---apostolic-nuncio-on-ukrainian-and-russian-standing-together-under-the-cross_n128281) (1.04.2023).

perpetrator.<sup>10</sup> However, a quite similar action took place again at the 2023 stations of the cross in Rome, linking the testimony of a Ukrainian boy and a Russian boy, the former of whom faced the death of relatives, the latter displacement:

At the tenth station, the meditations are by a young Ukrainian and a young Russian. The former recounts his flight from Mariupol to Italy, with his father stranded at the border, and his return to Ukraine. There is war on all sides, the city is destroyed. The latter remembers his oldest brother who died and his father and grandfather who disappeared: 'Everyone told us we should be proud, but at home, there was only much suffering and sadness.' They ask the Lord for purification from 'resentment,' 'bitterness,' 'violent words and reactions.'<sup>11</sup>

With good reasons, many Russian intellectuals who distance themselves from the war of aggression are wary of conflating the suffering caused by the war on the Russian and Ukrainian sides, while the Holy See here gives the impression of being "above these things". It is strange in view of church abuse scandals that there is not enough awareness of how easily expressions like "forgiveness," but also the appeal to the cross, can be instrumentalized. Even if this "well-intentioned" action had primarily in mind affected individuals and not countries, this non-differentiating view and the symbolizing use of fates testifies to blind spots and has again triggered negative reactions in Ukraine. The Vatican still does not seem to understand this problem.

The pope's statement of November 22, 2022, about the cruelty of Russian troops in Ukraine also caused criticism:

When I speak about Ukraine, I speak of a people who are martyred. If you have a martyred people, you have someone who martyrs them. When I speak about Ukraine, I speak about the cruelty because I have much information about the cruelty of the troops that come in. Generally, the cruelest are perhaps those who are of Russia but are not of the Russian tradition, such as the Chechens, the Buryati and so on. Certainly, the one who invades is the Russian state. This is very clear. Sometimes I try not to specify so as not to

<sup>10</sup> Myroslav MARYNOVYCH, "The Cross of Abel and the Cross of Cain are Different Crosses", UCU (13.04.2022), <https://ucu.edu.ua/en/news/hrest-avelya-i-hrest-kayina-tse-rizni-hresty/> (8.04.2023).

<sup>11</sup> "Way of the Cross: 'Voices of Peace in a World at War'", <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-04/way-of-the-cross-meditations-rome-colosseum-pope-francis-2023.html> (8.04.2023).

offend and rather condemn in general, although it is well known whom I am condemning. It is not necessary that I put a name and surname.<sup>12</sup>

That negative reactions came from the Russian side is hardly surprising. Also, according to Stefan Kube these statements “reflect racist stereotypes.”<sup>13</sup> Members of certain ethnic groups are made scapegoats, as it were, while the actual aggressor was not named at all. The criticism was followed by an apology from Rome to Russia.<sup>14</sup>

### Peace Ethics and Reconciliation

The war against Ukraine confronts European states and societies with the need to fundamentally question their own positions. Churches are also discussing how to deal with the war across denominational boundaries.<sup>15</sup> Advocates of nonviolent resistance are often shockingly ignorant not only of the motivation of those affected, who are resisting for the sake of a life perspective, but also of the political situation.<sup>16</sup> Heinz-Gerhard Justenhoven, for example, has pointed out that by invoking the theory of civil resistance, it is precisely civil society experiences with state violence

<sup>12</sup> “Exclusive: Pope Francis Discusses Ukraine”, *America*.

<sup>13</sup> Carlo MERTENS and Raphael RAUCH, “Stefan Kube: Pope’s Remarks Reflect Racist Stereotypes”, (1.12.2022), <https://www.kath.ch/newsd/stefan-kube-aeusserungen-des-papstes-spiegeln-rassistische-stereotypen-wider/>, (8.04.2023).

<sup>14</sup> “Russian Foreign Ministry Says the Vatican Apologised for Pope Francis’s Remarks About Cruelty of Chechens and Buryats”, *Novaya Gazeta* (15.12.2022), <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2022/12/15/russian-foreign-ministry-says-the-vatican-apologised-for-pope-franciss-remarks-about-cruelty-of-chechens-and-buryats-en-news> (13.04.2023).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g. “Evangelische Kirche will Friedensethik überarbeiten”, *EKD* (7.11.2022), <https://www.ekd.de/evangelische-kirche-will-friedensethik-ueberarbeiten-76071.htm> (8.04.2023). Other recent publications for consideration: Themenheft: Der Ukraine-Krieg als theologische Herausforderung, *Theologische Quartalschrift* 203.1 (2023); Noreen VAN ELK, “60 Jahre Pacem in Terris: Relevanz angesichts des Russischen Angriffskriegs gegen die Ukraine” (24.04.2023), <https://www.feinschwarz.net/pacem-in-terris-angesichts-russischer-angriffskrieg-in-ukraine/> (4.05.2023).

<sup>16</sup> E.g. “Theologe Spiegel: Ukraine soll weiße Fahne hissen”, *katholisch.de* (13.04.2022), <https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/33901-theologe-spiegel-ukraine-sollte-weiße-fahne-hissen> (8.04.2023).

in the post-Soviet space that are being overlooked.<sup>17</sup> The German Commission *Justitia et Pax* also clearly justifies arms deliveries to Ukraine:

The right to self-defense, affirmed in the teachings of the Church and enshrined in international law, is completely undisputed in the case of Ukraine. Accordingly, wisely chosen arms deliveries are also legitimate, if not ethically required. It goes without saying that the imperatives of proportionality and international humanitarian law must be observed here as well.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that Catholic social teaching has evolved from a theory of just war to one of just peace is evident in Pope Francis' encyclical *Fratelli tutti*.<sup>19</sup> In no. 258, he addresses it as a great difficulty to be able to rely on the doctrine of just war today, since its criteria – which remain fundamentally valid – have been repeatedly abused. In nos. 240 and 241, a right to self-defense seems to be recognized, but without explicitly addressing the use of weapons. It is also clear that Francis never questioned Ukraine's right to self-defense, but his stance on this was initially ambiguous. Smytsnyuk also notes a war-related change in attitude at the Vatican on this point by acknowledging “that arms deliveries to Ukraine can be ethically justified.”<sup>20</sup> However, according to him, Francis also made clear in an interview that he places the justification of the right to defense outside the concept of just war.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Heinz Gerhard JUSTENHOVEN, “Zum Krieg in der Ukraine: Der Drang nach Freiheit”, *Herder Korrespondenz* 4 (2022) 12–15 (15).

<sup>18</sup> Erklärung der deutschen Kommission Justitia et Pax zum Krieg gegen die Ukraine (26.03.2022), <https://www.justitia-et-pax.de/jp/aktuelles/data/2022-maerz-Justitia-et-Pax-Russland-Ukraine-Erklaerung.pdf> (3.04.2023).

<sup>19</sup> Encyclical Letter “Fratelli tutti” of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship (2020), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html) (8.04.2023).

<sup>20</sup> “Ukrainekrieg: Vatikan und Konstantinopel agieren unterschiedlich”, *Information Orthodoxie* 134 (28.02.2023), 6-7 (6) <https://redaktion.kathpress.at/action/kpprod/download?&p=13626&c=98f9> (10.05.2023).

<sup>21</sup> Pavlo SMYTSNYUK, “The Holy See Confronts the War in Ukraine: Between Just War Theory and Nonviolence”, *ET Studies – Journal of the European Society for Catholic Theology* 14.1 (2023), 3–24, referring to Bernarda LLORENTE, “Interview to Pope Francis: ‘We do not come out from a Crisis on Our Own: We Need to Take Risks and Take Each Other’s Hands’” (1.07.2022), <https://www.telam.com.ar/pope-francis> (8.04.2023).

The encyclical offers a thoroughly impressive humane vision of peace but does not unfold a systematic doctrine of war and peace. The war against Ukraine has made weak points visible. According to Smytsnyuk, there is an “unresolved tension [...] between just war and nonviolence”,<sup>22</sup> which is also evident in the pope’s attitude toward the war against Ukraine. Markus Vogt also noted that Francis’ “pacifist rejection of any kind of warfare does not stand up to the necessity of defensively opposing the excesses of armed violence and aggression.”<sup>23</sup>

The slogan “never again war” invoked in *Fratelli tutti* no. 258 would certainly be signed by the vast majority of those affected by war today. This ethical paradigm reaches its limits when faced with an aggressor who is only willing to begin talks if his demands are unconditionally met. The churches must also be careful that their statements do not serve those who want to realize their purposes through violence.

### Guiding Principles and Ideas

The pope’s statements and gestures are determined by ideological and geopolitical guiding principles, some of which are anchored in the Roman Curia and some of which are shaped more by the pope’s personality.

The former includes a diplomatic tradition of Vatican “Ostpolitik” (Eastern policy) that goes far back into the 20th century and, consequently, also to the Soviet era.<sup>24</sup> This includes contacts with the Russian regime, but also with the MP, to which the Holy See assigned a role in world Orthodoxy, which has been continuously questioned by the Ukrainian side. But only the attacks of 2022 have allowed a broader discourse on this and have shown the problematic nature of this fixation. However, in 2022 it took Rome a long time to counteract the instrumentalization by the MP, which presented itself as a force for peace

<sup>22</sup> SMYTSNYUK, “The Holy See”.

<sup>23</sup> Markus VOGT, “Being Christian in a Fragile World. Revisions of Peace Ethics in the Face of the Ukraine”, *Ordo socialis* (6.03.2022), [https://ordosocialis.de/wp-content/uploads/War-in-the-Ukraine-Being-Christian-in-a-Fragile-World\\_09.03.2022-.pdf](https://ordosocialis.de/wp-content/uploads/War-in-the-Ukraine-Being-Christian-in-a-Fragile-World_09.03.2022-.pdf) (3.04.2023).

<sup>24</sup> See “Ostpolitik: Historical Background and Contemporary Challenges” – UCU Hosts Scholarly Conference with Participation of Ambassadors to the Holy SEE, *RISU* (21.07.2022), [https://risu.ua/en/ostpolitik-historical-background-and-contemporary-challenges--ucu-hosts-scholarly-conference-with-participation-of-ambassadors-to-the-holy-see\\_n131024](https://risu.ua/en/ostpolitik-historical-background-and-contemporary-challenges--ucu-hosts-scholarly-conference-with-participation-of-ambassadors-to-the-holy-see_n131024) (8.04.2023).



and claimed Rome on its side.<sup>25</sup> In any case, Francis has distanced himself from Patriarch Kirill with the reference to him as “Putin’s altar boy” and the cancellation of the meeting planned with him in Jerusalem for June 14, 2022.<sup>26</sup>

Another guiding principle of the Holy See, which has long determined its diplomatic policy, is its neutrality. There are examples of this form of diplomacy being fruitful, for example, the restoration of diplomatic relations between the USA and Cuba in 2014–2015.<sup>27</sup> As Archbishop Paul Gallagher recently emphasized, the Holy See is “neutral but not ethically indifferent”:

The Vatican’s chief aim in the Ukraine conflict was to work towards peace and possibly to act as a mediator between the two warring sides. [...] I can understand that people always want one to take sides in a conflict – but that has never helped anyone in the course of history. The Vatican has offered to help and especially to help Ukraine – but we must reserve a certain amount of openness on all sides as far as ecumenical and political dialogue is concerned. The aim must always be peace. That is a fundamental part of our Christian faith and our Christian ethic.<sup>28</sup>

Contacts were maintained with both Russia and Ukraine, and the pope wishes “to go to both parties of this conflict.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, a visit to Kyiv seems out of the question for the pope, if it would make a journey to Moscow impossible. From Rome’s point of view, neutrality serves the purpose of maintaining communication and the possibility of interaction with Russia, which is why Rome refrains from

<sup>25</sup> See Thomas BREMER, Regina ELSNER, Massimo FAGGIOLI, Kristina STOECKL, “To Stop Russian Manipulation, Francis Must Make Vatican’s Stand on Ukraine Clear”, *National Catholic Reporter* (9.05.2022), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/stop-russian-manipulation-francis-must-make-vaticans-stand-ukraine-clear>. (10.5.2023)

<sup>26</sup> Mario GALGANO and Salvatore CERNUZIO, “Papst geht in Ostergrüßen an Kyrill auf Krieg in der Ukraine ein” (25.4.2022), <https://www.vaticannews.va/de/papst/news/2022-04/papst-franziskus-ostern-russland-patriarch-kyrill-krieg-ukraine.html> (8.04.2023).

<sup>27</sup> See СМΥТСНУК, СВЯТИЙ Престол, 210.

<sup>28</sup> Christa PONGRATZ-LIPPITT and Jonathan LUXMOORE, “Gallagher Defends Vatican Neutrality in Ukraine Conflict”, *The Tablet* (4.08.2022), <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/15731/gallagher-defends-vatican-neutrality-in-ukraine-conflict> (8.04.2023).

<sup>29</sup> “Archbishop Gallagher Stresses the Need to End War in Ukraine”, *Vatican News* (25.02.2023), <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2023-02/archbishop-gallagher-stresses-need-to-end-war-in-ukraine.html> (1.04.2023).



formally condemning Russia. Smytsnyuk argues that Rome’s handling of military conflicts is also characterized by the fact that Rome “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.”<sup>30</sup>

The Holy See’s stance can be classified as one of “positive neutrality,” which is linked to other principles, such as peacebuilding. This approach is often met with incomprehension in Ukraine. Anatolii Babynskyi writes: “I would not say that the Vatican does not support Ukraine. But approaches of the Vatican are not always read correctly here, in Ukraine.”<sup>31</sup>

Major Archbishop Sviatoslav also recently tried to convey a more positive view: it was thanks to the neutrality of the Holy See that thousands of prisoners of war were released: “So the service of the supreme mediator benefits us all.”<sup>32</sup> At the same time, he pointed out the difference between the diplomatic role and that of the chief shepherd, saying, “Let the Holy Father fulfill his duty as the supreme arbiter, because we can also benefit from his position as mediator.”<sup>33</sup>

Political backing behind the scenes should not be underestimated either. For example, Ukraine’s ambassador to the Holy See, Andriy Yurash, confirmed to me that the pope had strongly supported Ukraine’s EU integration process vis-à-vis the European Commission.

Behind the pope’s behavior – but also that of the Roman Curia – there are also romantic and idealistic ideas about Russia, which – especially in the case of Francis – go hand in hand with a distancing from a “Western view”. A spiritual dimension has long been attributed to Russia, which also makes it appear as a European antithesis to the West. For decades, people in Rome have also seemed to be under the spell of a – real or supposed – “greatness” of Russia, while the authoritarian and repressive character of the state leadership – which has existed not only since the Soviet era – is not sufficiently recognized. Moscow has managed for decades to establish good relations with the Vatican, and some curial statements give the

<sup>30</sup> SMYTSNYUK, “Католицька реакція”.

<sup>31</sup> Iryna MATVIYISHYN and Joseph ROCHE, “What Has Gone Wrong With Pope Francis’s Policy on Ukraine, and How He Can Fix It”, *Ukraine World* (23.08.2022), <https://ukraineworld.org/articles/opinions/pope-policy-ukrain> (1.04.2023).

<sup>32</sup> “Kiewer Großerbischof erklärt Haltung des Papstes im Ukraine-Krieg”, *Kathpress Tagesdienst* 68. 17–18 (17) (17.03.2023), <https://www.kathpress.at/goto/meldung/2246421/kiewer-grosserzbischof-erklaert-haltung-des-papstes-im-ukraine-krieg>.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

impression that the idea is, that the war is a kind of family conflict, that can be resolved through talks and compromises.

The following statements by Francis on a flight in November 2022, for example, testify to an approach which raises questions:

What strikes me – that's why I use the word 'tormented' for Ukraine - is the cruelty, which is not of the Russian people, perhaps... because the Russian people are a great people. It is of the mercenaries, of the soldiers who go off to war as an adventure, mercenaries... I prefer to think of it this way because I have high esteem for the Russian people, for Russian humanism. Just think of Dostoevsky, who to this day inspires us, inspires Christians to think of Christianity.<sup>34</sup>

A little later, Major Archbishop Sviatoslav met him and wrote in this regard: "During the audience, I asked Pope Francis: 'Do you know what they say about you in Ukraine?' He asked, 'What?' I answer: 'That you have not read Dostoevsky properly.' 'But why?' he was surprised..."<sup>35</sup> Sviatoslav said he would explain in Rome and especially to the pope "that very often the Western world, the Roman world, the ecclesiastical, intellectual world, has romantic ideas about Russia, which were formed over the years..."<sup>36</sup>

This was also reflected in the pope's letter to the Ukrainian people. The text, written in an empathetic tone, focuses on the suffering of the victims, but also mentions the defenders:

I think too of you, young people, who in courageous defense of your homeland have had to take up arms rather than pursue your cherished dreams for the future. I think of you, wives who have lost your husbands, gritting your teeth and quietly carrying on with dignity and determination, and making every sacrifice possible for your children.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Pope Francis: "Three World Wars in One Century: Be Pacifists!", *Vatican News* (6.11.2022), <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-11/pope-flight-three-wars-century-pacifist-interview-bahrain.html> (1.04.2023).

<sup>35</sup> "UGCC Patriarch in Rome Dispels 'romantic ideas about Russia'", *RISU* (2.12.2022), [https://risu.ua/en/ugcc-patriarch-in-rome-dispels-romantic-ideas-about-russia\\_n134534](https://risu.ua/en/ugcc-patriarch-in-rome-dispels-romantic-ideas-about-russia_n134534) (1.04.2023).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> "Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of Ukraine Nine Months after the Outbreak of the War", *Vatican* (24.11.2022), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/>

This letter also referred to the Holodomor, the famine of the 1930s artificially induced by Stalin's regime, as genocide, which led to protests on the Russian side. At the same time, Francis classified the war of aggression quite generally as an "absurd folly of war" without mentioning aggressors.

While the relationship to Russia in papal statements is clearly also determined by the Vatican's environment, the geopolitical statements indicate his own views. The Latin American background combined with a negative image of the USA is evident, for example, in the criticism of Western hegemony and the call for a "view from the periphery". Francis' suggestion about "NATO barking at Russia's gate"<sup>38</sup> might have been a contributing factor in the Kremlin's reaction and unleashing the invasion, is also related to this. Although this statement was somewhat later softened by curial sources, the pope again made a similar remark in an interview for the Italian-language Swiss radio station RSI broadcast on March 12, 2023: "But there are imperial interests there, not only those of the Russian empire, but also those of empires elsewhere. It is precisely the empire that puts nations second."<sup>39</sup>

By the end of 2022, he had already stated: "This one is a world war, because it is true that when empires, either on one side or the other weaken, they need to make a war in order to feel strong - and also to sell weapons! I believe that today the greatest calamity in the world is the arms industry."<sup>40</sup>

In dealing with the war, however, it is not only the pope's cultural context and his environment's image of Russia that shine through, but also his lack of expertise on Eastern Europe or of listening to experts. Anatolii Babynskyi noted "that one of the reasons why Francis has missed the mark in his reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine lies in his misunderstanding of the nature of this war, as well as the situation in Europe."<sup>41</sup> Although as of June 2022, Rome had also seen more clearly "that Putin will not sit down at the negotiating table but will fight to

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en/letters/2022/documents/20221124-lettera-popolo-ucraino.html (1.04.2023).

<sup>38</sup> Luciano FONTANA, "Pope Francis: 'I Am Ready to Meet Putin in Moscow'", *Corriere* (3.05.2022), [https://www.corriere.it/cronache/22\\_maggio\\_03/pope-francis-putin-e713a1de-cad0-11ec-84d1-341c28840c78.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/cronache/22_maggio_03/pope-francis-putin-e713a1de-cad0-11ec-84d1-341c28840c78.shtml) (8.04.2023).

<sup>39</sup> Mario GALGANO and Paolo RODARI, "Papst im Interview mit Tessiner TV: Die Kirche ist für alle da", *Vatican News* (10.03.2023), <https://www.vaticannews.va/de/papst/news/2023-03/papst-franziskus-itv-rsi-tessin-schweiz-kirche-krieg-krankheit.html> (8.04.2023).

<sup>40</sup> Pope Francis: "Three World Wars in One Century: Be Pacifists!"

<sup>41</sup> MATVIYISHYN and ROCHE, "What Has Gone Wrong".

the last Russian,<sup>42</sup> the long-lasting overlooking of Russia's hegemonic interests is astonishing in the face of a state that "in reality, failed to guarantee security, personal safety, dignity and peace for its own population and for neighboring countries for over two decades."<sup>43</sup> It is counterproductive in this context to contribute to the narrative of the alleged violation of Russia's legitimate security interests. In this regard, Regina Elsner stated: "When the Vatican agrees to give part of the blame to the West and part of the truth to Russia, it contributes precisely to these myths, it admits that it has no idea about the situation in Ukraine and is unable to differentiate information."<sup>44</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

The war against Ukraine confronts the Holy See with new challenges. On the one hand, it is situated in an extremely complex network of relationships, on the other hand, the difficulty lies in the collision of different functions, since the pope acts simultaneously as head of a church and head of a state, as a pastor and a diplomat. While Francis has repeatedly sought to signal empathy toward Ukraine, in doing so he listens little to views from Ukraine, as the 2022 and 2023 stations of the cross show. Therefore, he has probably lost much of his moral authority in Ukraine. The ambivalent assessment of the current pontificate is widespread, irrespective of church-political standpoints, connected to a seeming resistance to criticism. The initial enthusiasm for his spontaneity as an expression of humanity and his global visions has given way to disillusionment regarding Church issues in both the conservative and liberal camps. Andrea Gagliarducci's criticism that "Pope Francis seems to fail to understand that he no longer speaks in a personal capacity but in the name of the Church",<sup>45</sup> can also be applied to the "pastorally determined" handling of Ukraine.

Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino, President Emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, pointed out that the international activity of the Holy See is

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> BREMER, ELSNER, FAGGIOLI, AND STOECKL, "To Stop Russian Manipulation".

<sup>44</sup> "Osteuropa-Expertin: Papst lässt die Ukraine immer wieder im Stich", *Katholisch.de* (26.08.2022), <https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/40729-osteuropa-expertin-papst-laesst-die-ukraine-immer-wieder-im-stich> (12.04.2023).

<sup>45</sup> Andrea GAGLIARDUCCI, "Pope Francis and the Missionary Church", *MondayVatican* (10.04.2023), <http://www.mondayvatican.com/vatican/pope-francis-and-the-missionary-church> (10.04.2023).

not based on political but on moral authority.<sup>46</sup> However, it is precisely here that it might be a problem when at certain moments in history tactical considerations must be weighed against clear testimony. Neutrality can make mediation possible, but it can also cost moral legitimacy, as the discussions surrounding the evaluation of the role of Pius XII demonstrate. For all the appeal to diplomatic tradition, the question arises as to its value when instrumentalities reach their limits. This is not least true for the leadership of the Catholic Church, which is currently going through a global crisis of confidence or, to put it more positively, a process of transformation. The tendency to view the MP as an important partner until recently is a relic from the earlier attempts at a strategic alliance with conservative forces. It is unclear whether this idea already is a thing of the past following Patriarch Kirill's legitimization of the war, or if it is awaiting revival in Vatican circles, whose attitude to Ukraine seems also to be significantly influenced by the relations to the MP. Particularly in view of internal Catholic scandals, it would be good to take the victim's perspective more clearly into account and opt for truth and justice and to better listen to the voices of local Christians instead of being aloof. This is a learning process for all involved. Despite unity in faith, the Catholics of Ukraine can also learn to better understand church authority in its contextuality and to take their own initiative. Major Archbishop Sviatoslav has made this clear in his video messages since February 2022. For example, on March 8, 2022, on the Sunday of Reconciliation, he spoke about the difficulty of "speaking of forgiveness in the midst of war," but that this was "the secret of victory".<sup>47</sup>

As Oleh Turiy stated, "this war has destroyed not only the order of world security but also the former system of interchurch and church-state relations, so they need re-thinking. We Ukrainians need to stop being objects. Instead, we need to take the initiative, to offer concrete proposals".<sup>48</sup>

Yuriy Avvakumov pointed out difficulties with a "strong structure [in the Catholic church] which has now existed for centuries and so is not flexible. I

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<sup>46</sup> Renato Raffaele MARTINO, "Les objectifs du Saint-Siège: personne humaine, justice et paix", in *The Catholic Church and the International Policy of the Holy See/ L'Église catholique et la politique internationale du Saint-Siège*, edited by Franco IMODA and Roberto PAPINI, Milano: Nagard 2008, 23.

<sup>47</sup> Major Archbishop Sviatoslav, Звернення Глави УГКЦ, 6 березня 2022 року [Address of the Head of the UGCC, 6 March 2022], <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=291709113074758> (8.04.2023).

<sup>48</sup> "Ostpolitik: Historical Background and Contemporary Challenges."

consider it our task to call those who have authority in the Catholic world to help discuss this with the Pope and bishops of other countries".<sup>49</sup>

Pope Francis' policy on Ukraine also highlights the dilemma that nonviolence cannot protect the weak and that pacifist approaches to aggressors often do not help. There is a need for critical evaluation, especially regarding the relationship between peace and justice. This is something the pope also wrestles with, but his handling of the war reveals his personal style, experience, and limitations. Important as he may be as an authority, his actions should not be equated with those of the Church which he heads. Both the churches and their representatives move "between worlds" and in the tension between different principles. This ambivalence leaves open the question of ethical considerations on different levels. Therefore, today's view also requires the questioning of guiding principles and ideas. It is to be hoped that the churches, in a reflective perspective and in exchange with academy and society, will succeed in promoting justice, peace and respect for human dignity.

*(Translated from German by David Heith-Stade)*

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

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