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Roman Globokar

Was Pope Francis a pacifist? Between the Rejecting of War and the Complexity of Moral Response to Violence

Je bil papež Frančišek pacifist? Med zavračanjem vojne in zahtevnostjo moralnega odziva na nasilje

Abstract: Throughout history, the Catholic Church has developed the concept of the “just war,” which authorizes the use of weapons to achieve just ends. In his encyclical “Pacem in Terris”, Pope John XXIII signalled a shift in the Church’s position—from advocating just war to promoting pacifism. The “Catechism of the Catholic Church” (1993) permits only “legitimate defense by military force” (CCC, 2308–2310) and no longer refers to “just war.” In the encyclical “Fratelli Tutti”, Pope Francis warns against an overly broad interpretation of “legitimate defense” and advocates the rejection of all forms of war. Like his predecessors, he calls on world leaders to end wars and establish a just peace worldwide. The only legitimate goal is the creation of a just peace. Nevertheless, the question arises as to whether pacifism is the only appropriate Christian response to concrete acts of violence. In certain extreme circumstances, when a country is attacked, might not the use of military force in defense of its people and territory be the appropriate moral response? The war in Ukraine has tested the consistency of the Francis’s teaching in practice. The author notes¹ that, as in the resolution of ethical dilemmas in other areas, Francis—regarding the ethics of peace—upholds high ethical principles (the rejection of all forms of war), while in individual cases he seeks the greatest possible good for those concretely affected (legitimate defense against violence).

Keywords: just war, legitimate defense, just peace, Pope Francis, war in Ukraine, pacifism

Povzetek: Katoliška Cerkev je skozi zgodovino razvila koncept ‘pravične vojne’, ki omogoča uporabo orožja za doseganje pravičnih ciljev. Že papež Janez XXIII. pa je v okrožnici ‘Pacem in Terris’ nakazal premik Katoliške Cerkve od zagovarjanja pravične vojne proti zagovarjanju pacifizma. Katekizem Katoliške Cerkve iz leta

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1993 dopušča le še »zakonito obrambo z vojaško silo« (KKC 2308–2310) in ne govori več o pravični vojni. V okrožnici „Fratelli Tutti“ papež Frančišek opozarja na možnost ohlapne razlage koncepta ‚zakonite obrambe‘ in se zavzema za zavračanje vsake oblike vojne. Podobno kot njegovi predhodniki tudi on svetovne voditelje vseskozi poziva k ustavitvi vojn in k vzpostavitvi pravičnega miru na globalni ravni. Vsekakor je edini legitimni cilj vzpostavitve pravičnega miru, vprašanje pa je, ali je na konkretno nasilje pacifizem edini ustrezen krščanski odgovor. Ali ni v določenih skrajnih primerih, ko je država napadena, za obrambo ljudi in ozemlja ustrezen moralni odgovor tudi uporaba vojaške sile? Vojna v Ukrajini pomeni preizkus glede dosledne izvedljivosti Frančiškovega nauka v praksi. Avtor ugotavlja, da podobno kot pri reševanju etičnih dilem na preostalih področjih Frančišek tudi na področju etike miru zagovarja visoka etična načela – zavračanje vsake oblike vojne –, v posameznih primerih pa išče največje možno dobro za konkretno prizadete ljudi (legitimna obramba pred nasiljem).

Ključne besede: pravična vojna, zakonita obramba, pravičen mir, papež Frančišek, vojna v Ukrajini, pacifizem

1. Introduction

Pope Francis has repeatedly expressed his total opposition to war. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, three books attributed to Pope Francis were published in Italian in 2022, summarizing many of his statements on war and peace: “Contro la guerra” (Francis 2022b), “Che sia la pace con te” (Francis 2022a), and “Un’enciclica sulla pace in Ucraina” (Francis 2022g). In the introduction to one of these books, he described war as follows: “War is not the solution, war is madness, war is a monster, war is a cancer that feeds on itself by engulfing everything! More, war is a sacrilege, wreaking havoc on what is most precious on our earth, human life, the innocence of the little ones, the beauty of creation. Yes, war is a sacrilege!” (Francis 2022b, 8) His positions continue those of popes of the 20th and 21st centuries since Benedict XV, all of whom rejected war as a means to achieve just ends. Of all the popes of the last century, he has come closest to pacifism, which opposes any use of force to assert one’s rights (Johnston 2024, 200). With the encyclical “Fratelli Tutti”, he explicitly rejected the concept of a “just war” and also questioned the justification of defensive war, which, in his view, is interpreted too broadly (FT, 258). However, he did not take the decisive step of strictly prohibiting any use of military force by states to protect their populations. In the wake of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, the content of his doctrine of war and peace was put to the test. Is it possible to maintain a pacifist stance in the face of a violent invasion and occupation of territory by a foreign military force? Is it necessary to give peace priority over any use of force, even when it concerns the defense of one’s own country? Is it permissible for other countries to help an invaded country by supplying weapons that will prolong the war and increase human casualties?

When Russian aggression against Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, Pope Francis' response was very restrained. He did not clearly and unequivocally condemn the aggressor, did not take the side of Ukraine as the victim, and did not explicitly support the provision of arms by other countries. A more detailed analysis of the pope's response to the war in Ukraine follows below. There are several reasons why Pope Francis was reluctant and cautious at the beginning of the Russian aggression. Many commentators highlight two main reasons for this reticence: the desire of Francis and Vatican diplomacy to maintain a neutral position in the conflict, and the unresolved tension between advocacy of the just war concept and the tendency toward pacifism in the Church's social doctrine (De Volder 2023; Smytsnyuk 2023). We could also add the distinctive style of papacy that characterized Francis, occasionally marked by contradictory and impulsive statements (Németh 2023).

In my analysis of Pope Francis's response to the war in Ukraine, I have found that this is a typical expression of his ethical paradigm. He defends fundamental ethical principles derived from the Gospel and seeks to maintain high ethical standards, while also finding concrete pastoral solutions for specific situations. At the heart of the pope's moral teaching are not clear-cut answers to complex questions, but compassionate closeness to the suffering human being. Merciful love takes precedence over objective truth. Relationship takes precedence over rules. In the concrete moral judgment, Francis relies on a method of *discernment* that has its origins in Ignatian spirituality. Discernment must always be contextual, inclusive, dialogical, and open to further improvement and criticism.

The pope upholds the ethical principle of non-violence and, at a principled level, opposes any form of legitimation of war, while allowing for protection and defense in situations where violence threatens life. In concrete discernment, however, the key factor is the *preferential option for the poor* – in this case, consideration of the victims of war. Thus, it involves engaging with the personal sphere of those most affected by certain acts, while Francis largely sets aside the institutional and political context of the issue. He addresses the issue of war primarily as a pastor, not as a politician.

2. The Pacifism of Pope Francis

Pacifism is an umbrella term for various forms of principled rejection of war. Pacifist positions are often accused of political naivety, an inability to face the reality of the socio-political situation, and an inadequate view of humanity as inherently peaceful, only resorting to violence in unbearable situations. Schockenhoff's detailed analysis shows that there are different forms of pacifism and that not all pacifist tendencies should be attributed to naivety or an overly optimistic view of humanity from the outset (2018, 518–520). Pacifist movements reject the use of military force to establish justice, but they do not reject all forms of resistance to violence. It is by no means a matter of allowing violence to go unchecked or of

failing to protect life and rights. Most pacifist movements do not advocate absolute pacifism, but rather moderate pacifism, which supports institutional solutions to tensions through just international relations that guarantee world peace. The ultimate goal of this form of pacifism is to “create a world without war,” but “on the way there, however, it regards the use of law-preserving force in a limited sense as provisionally necessary and morally permissible” (519).

In his first message for the World Day of Peace on January 1, 2014, titled “Fraternity, the Foundation and Pathway to Peace”, Pope Francis presented his optimistic view of the human person. “In the heart of every man and woman is the desire for a full life, including that irrepressible longing for fraternity which draws us to fellowship with others and enables us to see them not as enemies or rivals, but as brothers and sisters to be accepted and embraced. Fraternity is an essential human quality, for we are relational beings.” (Francis 2013b, § 1) At their core, human beings are made for fraternal relationships, characterized not by competition and violence, but by respect, mutual affection, care, and help. However, in concrete historical situations, the pope recognizes that human beings do not live according to a logic of fraternity, but in a world marked by a “globalization of indifference,” which leads to violations of human rights at various levels, as well as to violence and war.

In this message, he advocated that the international community recognize the right to peace “as a fundamental human right and a necessary prerequisite for every other right” (§ 7).² In continuity with his predecessors, he reiterated the appeal “for the non-proliferation of arms and for disarmament of all parties, beginning with nuclear and chemical weapons disarmament” (§ 7). A constant throughout his pontificate has been the advocacy of a total ban on nuclear weapons and the renunciation of further armaments and arms trade. He repeated his call for countries to spend money on poverty eradication instead of investing in armaments.³ After his visit to Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 2019, he announced that he would include a total ban on the use and possession of nuclear weapons in the “Catechism of the Catholic Church” (Paiano 2025, 101).

Pope Francis most explicitly expressed his sympathetic view of pacifism in his 1 January 2017 address, titled “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace”. As in his message for the World Day of Peace one year earlier, the pope refers to the “third world war fought piecemeal,” which includes additional threats to peace beyond nuclear war and growing military conflicts: “We know that this ‘piecemeal’ violence, of different kinds and levels, causes great suffering: wars in different

² The right to peace has not been enshrined as a fundamental human right, although it is implicitly included in Article 28 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was not until 2016, two years after Francis’ message, that the process of codifying this right was initiated at the UN with Resolution 71/189 (Paiano 2025, 99).

³ In his message for 1 January, at the beginning of the Holy Year 2025, he wrote, among other things: “In this time marked by wars, let us use at least a fixed percentage of the money earmarked for armaments to establish a global Fund to eradicate hunger and facilitate in the poorer countries educational activities aimed at promoting sustainable development and combating climate change.” (Francis 2024, § 11)

countries and continents; terrorism, organized crime, and unforeseen acts of violence; the abuses suffered by migrants and victims of human trafficking; and the devastation of the environment.” (Francis 2016b, § 2)

The pope is convinced that the cycle of violence cannot be stopped by violence, but that a different way out of our broken world must be found. His view is rooted in the Gospel attitude of non-violence, which is more powerful than violence. Non-violence is not merely a tactical posture, but comes from the inner attitude of the Christian who trusts in God’s love and power. “To be true followers of Jesus today also includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence.” (§ 3) Pope Francis stresses that advocating a pacifist stance is not about surrender, not about indifference or non-responsiveness to violence, but about a different kind of resistance to violence. It is about the awareness that hatred can only be overcome through love. He refers to examples of non-violent resistance such as Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Leymah Gbowee in Liberia and John Paul II at the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Francis reiterates that religion must never be used to justify violence: “The name of God cannot be used to justify violence. Peace alone is holy. Peace alone is holy, not war!” (§ 4)

Francis attributes a major role in achieving peace to spirituality and education. The path to peace can be achieved only through education of the heart. Pope Francis assigns a key role to the family, where individuals should learn to resolve conflicts and tensions through dialogue and peaceful means. At the same time, he does not entirely neglect the social framework for peace-building, which can be achieved by promoting fraternity and peaceful coexistence among people and nations. Francis’s characteristic bottom-up approach is also evident in this area. “The politics of nonviolence have to begin in the home and then spread to the entire human family.” (§ 5) The ideal advocated by Francis is *peacebuilding through active nonviolence*, which is based on Jesus’ Beatitudes. “Active nonviolence is a way of showing that unity is truly more powerful and more fruitful than conflict.” (§ 5)

The most systematic and comprehensive treatment of the questions of war and peace by Pope Francis is presented in his 2020 encyclical “Fratelli tutti” (FT, 256–262), where he consistently rejects the traditional concept of just war⁴ that has been the basis of the Catholic view of war for centuries. This change in Church teaching began in the 20th century due to the horrors of the two World Wars. Pope Benedict XV, at the end of the First World War, had already called for the prohibition of all forms of war. A turning point in the ethics of war and peace was

⁴ The concept of just war is based on the ancient theory of Cicero and was further developed by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. The criteria for *jus ad bellum* are as follows: 1. Military force may be used only by a legitimate authority. 2. There must be a just cause for intervention, specifically to remedy an unjust situation. 3. The intention must be just, meaning the aim is to ensure peace and justice. 4. Military intervention is permissible only if all other peaceful options for resolving the crisis have been exhausted (*ultima ratio*). 5. There must be a realistic hope of success and of improving living conditions. 6. The use of force must be proportionate to the injustice caused. For a comprehensive overview of the development and decline of the just war doctrine, see Schockenhoff 2018, 104–391. Some theologians continue to argue for the ethical legitimacy of the just war concept today, e. g. Biggar 2014.

John XXIII's "Pacem in Terris", which emphasized that in the atomic age, war could no longer serve as a means of establishing justice (PT, 126–135). The Second Vatican Council, in its Pastoral Constitution "Gaudium et Spes", no longer refers to a just war but allows only for legitimate defense against an aggressor (GS, 79–80). Paul VI and John Paul II condemned all forms of war and called on world leaders to refrain from the use of force (Sorge 2020, 356–368; Tornielli 2022b, 159–170; Paiano 2025). The 1993 "Catechism of the Catholic Church" reflects a shift from advocating the concept of just war to tolerating legitimate defense as a last resort, requiring those responsible for the common good to carefully weigh the moral legitimacy of using force in defense:

"The strict conditions for legitimate defense by military force require rigorous consideration. The gravity of such a decision makes it subject to rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy. At one and the same time: - the damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain; - all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective; - there must be serious prospects of success; - the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition." (CCC, 2309)

Francis takes a decisive step in rejecting the concept of a just war and advocating for a just peace through nonviolent means. The criteria for justifying legitimate defense, as set out in the Catechism, are also subject to overly broad interpretation and can be too readily used to justify military actions. "Yet it is easy to fall into an overly broad interpretation of this potential right. In this way, some would also wrongly justify even 'preventive' attacks or acts of war that can hardly avoid entailing 'evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated.'" (FT, 258)

In the current situation, where humanity possesses enormous destructive weapons – especially nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons – the only solution is to completely renounce war. The pope has repeatedly emphasized that even the possession of nuclear weapons is morally unacceptable, not just their use. (Francis 2022b, 70–71) "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'. Never again war!" (FT, 258) The tendency to condemn all forms of war is clearly evident.

A few paragraphs later, Francis reiterates the definitive abolition of the death penalty without exception, which he proclaimed in 2018 (FT, 263). However, he did not go so far as to advocate the complete abolition of war. Nevertheless, it unequivocally rejects military violence and calls for the peaceful resolution of conflicts. "Every war leaves our world worse than it was before. War is a failure of politics and of humanity, a shameful capitulation, a stinging defeat before the forces of evil. Let us not remain mired in theoretical discussions, but touch the

wounded flesh of the victims. Let us look once more at all those civilians whose killing was considered 'collateral damage'. Let us ask the victims themselves!" (FT, 261) The pope considers war through the eyes of its concrete victims: soldiers on the battlefield, their mothers, wives, children, numerous refugees, and wounded and vulnerable civilians. The starting point for his ethical analysis of war is the poorest and most vulnerable people. However, in the current situation, this starting point does not allow those responsible to completely renounce the use of weapons to protect these most vulnerable people. It is precisely the victims of military violence who call for the protection of life and property and therefore, in extreme cases, allow the use of weapons.

In the same encyclical, "Fratelli Tutti", Francis defends the necessity of protection against violent acts, describing it as an expression of love for the aggressor because it prevents him from continuing his evil, violent actions. "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 strenuously their own rights and those of their family." (FT, 241) The Gospel stance on nonviolence does not mean yielding to evil, but opposing it, whenever possible, with nonviolent means. In any case, the defense of one's own life must not become revenge: "no family, no group of neighbours, no ethnic group, much less a nation, has a future if the force that unites them, brings them together and resolves their differences is vengeance and hatred." (FT, 242)

Already in 2014, Francis answered affirmatively when asked on a flight from South Korea to Rome whether he approved of the US attack on Islamic State forces in northern Iraq to protect threatened minority communities. "In these cases, where there is an unjust aggression, I can only say that it is licit to stop the unjust aggressor. I emphasize the word: 'stop.' I'm not saying drop bombs, make war, but stop the aggressor. The means used to stop him would have to be evaluated. Stopping an unjust aggressor is licit." (Francis 2014)

In summary, Pope Francis has consistently advocated for peaceful conflict resolution and rejected war as a means of resolving conflicts. He has strongly opposed the arming of countries as a strategy for deterring war. He was appalled that countries had committed to spending 2% of their GDP on weapons.⁵ We know that the current agreement between NATO allies has raised this percentage to 5%. Based on historical experience, he warned against such a view: "Sometimes we are led to believe that weapons serve only as a deterrent against potential aggressors. History, and unfortunately also current events, teach us that this is not the case." (Francis 2022b, 32) He has repeatedly expressed his desire to allocate the money intended for armament to a fund for the eradication of hunger

⁵ "I was ashamed when I read that a group of countries had agreed to spend 2% of their GDP on arms purchases in response to these events. Madness! The real answer is not more weapons, more sanctions, more political-military alliances, but a different approach, a different way of managing the world, one that does not bare its teeth, a world that is globalized and establishes international relations." (Francis 2022b, 19)

and poverty throughout the world (12–13). The solution for a just peace should be found in establishing an international legal framework for resolving disputes between individual countries: “The *Charter of the United Nations*, when observed and applied with transparency and sincerity, is an obligatory reference point of justice and a channel of peace.” (FT, 257)

As a result of Francis’s efforts to promote nonviolent resistance as a basic doctrine of the Church for ensuring a just peace, the Catholic Institute for Nonviolence was established in Rome on September 29, 2024. Its mission is “to make non-violence research, resources, and experience more accessible to Catholic Church leaders, communities, and institutions in order to deepen Catholic understanding of and commitment to the practice of Gospel nonviolence” (Catholic Institute for Nonviolence 2025). Francis’s vision of the ethics of peace has been given an institutional framework for further development and deepening.

3. Responding to the war in Ukraine – A Test for Pacifism

As mentioned in the introduction, the war in Ukraine was a test of the validity of Francis’s ethics of peace. To what extent can pacifist positions be defended without compromising just peace and the protection of citizens’ lives from an unjust aggressor? How can effective resistance to unjust evil be established?

In an interview with the Italian journal *La Stampa* on November 18, 2022, Pope Francis explicitly stated that we must all become pacifists. When asked, “Do you hope that there will be a reconciliation between Moscow and Kiev?” he replied:

“Yes, I hope so. Let us not give up; peace is possible. But everyone must strive to demilitarize their hearts, starting with themselves, and then disarm violence. *We must all be pacifists*. We must desire peace, not just a truce, which can only serve to rearm. True peace, which is the fruit of dialogue. It cannot be achieved with weapons, because weapons cannot overcome hatred and the desire for domination, which will reappear, perhaps in other ways, but they will reappear.” (Francis 2022f)

His rejection of war at any cost led him to strive to prevent the use of military force on both sides at all costs. His reluctant and ambiguous response to Russia’s military aggression against the sovereign state of Ukraine has been widely criticized. Commentators highlight two main reasons for this stance: the Vatican’s neutrality and the rejection of the legitimacy of military force. (Smytsnyuk 2023; De Volder 2023; Németh 2023)

The *first reason* for Francis’s restraint in his statements regarding the war in Ukraine is the Vatican’s commitment to *neutrality* and the possibility of *mediation* between the conflicting parties. “As ‘pontifex maximus,’ a pope sees it as his role to be a bridge-builder between antagonists to promote peace in a very concrete way.” (De Volder 2023, 37) Francis did not wish to be “the chaplain of the West”

(Tornielli 2022a) and wanted to be a pope for all. At the beginning of the war, he sought contact with the Russian side in various ways in order to dissuade it from further aggression. On the first day of the war, he went to the Russian embassy to the Holy See and wanted to speak personally with President Putin, which of course he did not succeed in doing (Cernuzio 2022). He hoped that ecumenical relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, which were at their highest level in history, and friendly relations with Patriarch Kirill would contribute to the Russian Church also advocating for an end to the war. After warning Kirill not to be “Putin’s altar boy” on 16 March 2022, there was no further personal meeting between the two (Fontana 2022), and this path to resolution also proved unsuccessful. Francis sent his personal envoy, Cardinal Zuppi, to Russia to seek a way to mediate and stop the war, but these efforts also failed to bear fruit.

For a long time, he did not specifically mention Russia as the aggressor, even though on March 6, 2022, he clearly stated that this was not a military operation but a war causing death, destruction, and poverty. He called Ukraine “a battered country” (Francis 2022g, 16), and a week later referred to the city of Mariupol as “a martyred city” (17). Even later, when he spoke of “aggression against Ukraine” (18) or “invasion” (20), the aggressor remained unnamed. Francis consistently called for peace, for “an end to war” (21), and for prayers to Mary, the Queen of Peace, for Russia and Ukraine. On March 25, 2025, he consecrated both countries in a special way to the Immaculate Heart of Mary (20). On March 18, 2022, he spoke about the same fate of Ukrainian and Russian soldiers: “Let us think of the many soldiers who are sent to the front, very young, Russian soldiers, poor boys. Let us think of the many young Ukrainian soldiers.” (Francis 2022b, 26)

As mentioned above, Francis viewed war through the eyes of its victims. In this sense, we can also understand his initiative that Ukrainian and Russian mothers carry the cross together on the Via Crucis at the Colosseum on April 15, 2022. The pope sought to emphasize that war causes suffering on both sides and that victims of both nations are affected, and that Christ died for the salvation of all people. It was meant as a prophetic sign of reconciliation. This powerful gesture on a personal level, which emphasized solidarity in suffering, equated the victim and the aggressor on a political and social level. His initiative was met with disapproval by the Ukrainian political and church leadership, which contributed to a change in the original plan. The cross was still carried by Russian and Ukrainian mothers, but the text prepared jointly by Russian and Ukrainian families was not read (Németh 2023, 94–95). Sviatoslav Shevchuk, head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, stated that the idea was “untimely, ambiguous, and such that it does not take into account the context of Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine” (CNA Staff 2022). As Németh reveals in his in-depth analysis, Pope Francis’ gestures and statements, which were intended to bring the Russian and Ukrainian sides together, were received very negatively in Ukraine. “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.” (Németh 2023, 95)

As Francis himself wrote in “Fratelli tutti”, reconciliation cannot be imposed and the process of reconciliation cannot be rushed. In addition to renouncing violence, truth and justice are also important for reconciliation (FT, 227). Reconciliation is not possible while aggression continues.

After Easter 2022, the Pope changed his rhetoric: he consistently mentioned only Ukrainian victims of the war, using frequently the term “martyred Ukraine”, and no longer mentioned Russian soldiers or Russian victims. On November 25, 2022, he wrote a letter to the Ukrainian people in which he expressed his closeness and sympathy in a very moving way: “I would like to add my own tears to yours, and to assure you that I am daily close to you and bear you in my heart and in my prayers. Your pain is my pain.” (Francis 2022d) In this letter, the pope also expressed his admiration to Ukrainians for their steadfast resistance. “The world has come to recognize a people bold and strong, a people that suffers and prays, weeps and struggles, resists and continues to hope, a noble people of martyrs.” (2022d)

The fact that Francis avoided clearly condemning Russia and Putin bothered many people. He himself explained his restraint in a November 2022 interview: “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. It is not necessary that I put a name and surname. /.../ Why do I not name Putin? Because it is not necessary; it is already known.” (Francis 2022c)

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky met with Pope Francis several times and appreciated his efforts to stop the war, but he was critical of the pope’s mediating role. He stated on Italian television: “With all due respect for His Holiness, we don’t need a mediator between Ukraine and the aggressor that’s seized and occupied our territory.” (Allen 2023) Zelensky advocated for an action plan for a just peace in Ukraine. The pope wanted to be a mediator, but in the end, both sides rejected his initiative. “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.” (Smytsnyuk 2023, 8)

The pope’s impartiality and desire not to take sides risk his failing to speak out about the facts and clearly identifying who is responsible for the aggression and who is the victim. Consistent insistence on neutrality may come at the expense of protecting the victims of war. Smytsnyuk warns that the Vatican could once again be accused of inaction, as it was during World War II: “This is the lesson from the story of Pius XII. In the long run, maintaining the high moral ground should be, for the Vatican, more important than tactical expediency.” (18) De Volder shares a similar view: “But the experience of both World Wars and the criticism of the pope’s presumed silence in the face of the Holocaust has taught the papacy that this attitude is no longer an option.” (2023, 33) Németh is even more direct: “Particularly in view of internal Catholic scandals, it would be good to take the victim’s perspec-

tive more clearly into account and opt for truth and justice and to better listen to the voices of local Christians instead of being aloof." (2023, 104)

The *second reason* for restraint can be found in the unresolved tension between the advocacy of just war and nonviolent resistance as a Gospel ideal within the Church's social doctrine (Johnston 2024, 205–208). As De Volder wrote, the war in Ukraine forced Francis "to walk a thin tightrope between the dream of peace and the logic of war" (2023, 31). Francis has emphasized several times that there is no such thing as a just war (Francis 2022b, 26). and kept repeating that war is always a defeat (2022g, 20). One month after the Russian aggression in Ukraine, he emphasized that there are no winners in war, only dead and wounded on both sides. "With war, everything is lost, everything. There is no victory in war: everything is defeated. May the Lord send his Spirit to make us understand that war is a defeat for humanity, to make us understand that we must instead defeat war." (2022b, 19–20) The only solution is to work together for peace. Modern war can never be proportional to the harm it can inflict.

On July 3, 2022, he reiterated his pacifist views in St. Peter's Square: "The world needs peace – not a peace based on the balance of arms or mutual fear. That will not work. /.../ We must move away from strategies of political, economic, and military power toward a global peace project: no to a world divided by conflicting powers; yes to a world united among peoples and civilizations that respect each other." (Francis 2022g, 31)

He persistently emphasized that war is not inevitable, that we must not become accustomed to it, and that we are all responsible for the current situation. "Faced with the danger of self-destruction, humanity must understand that the time has come to eliminate war, to erase it from human history before it erases humanity from history." (Francis 2022g, 20–21) During the celebration of the greatest Christian feast, he called for an Easter truce that would lead to the end of the war: "Lay down the weapons! Let there be an Easter truce: but not to reload the weapons and resume fighting, no! A truce to achieve peace through genuine negotiations, even if it means making some sacrifices for the good of the people." (22) The appeal suggests that, for Francis, ending the military conflict to prevent further casualties is more important than completely defending Ukraine's integrity. For the sake of peace and the good of the people, politicians should compromise on their demands.

On October 2, 2022, he appealed to the Russian president to stop the spiral of violence and death out of love for his people. He encouraged the Ukrainian president to be open to various proposals for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. He urged the international community to seek solutions, primarily diplomatic ones, to end the war and prevent further escalation. He concluded with an appeal: "Please, let us allow the younger generations to breathe the healthy air of peace, not the polluted air of war, which is madness! /.../ War itself is a mistake and a horror!" (37)

He strongly opposed the logic of armament and emphasized in numerous speeches that spending on weapons is a scandal for modern civilization (Francis

2022b, 21). He spoke of a “perverse spiral of weapons” (25, 29) that promotes the logic of violence. He repeatedly renewed his call: “Let the weapons be silent!” (29) In his view, it is illusory to think that armament serves only as a deterrent against potential attackers. History teaches us that: “Those who own weapons will eventually end up using them.” (32)

Nevertheless, Pope Francis did not completely reject Ukraine’s right to armed defense. Even regarding military aid from other countries, which he was initially very cautious about, he later applied the principle of discernment and did not reject it outright. On his return from Kazakhstan in September 2022, during a press conference on the plane, he responded to a German journalist’s question about whether Ukraine could be supplied with weapons as follows: “This is a political decision, which can be moral /.../ if it is done according to the conditions of morality, which are manifold, and then we can talk about it. 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) Francis first said the question of armament was primarily a political decision, but he stated the main ethical criterion: if weapons help defend the homeland and end the war, such aid is moral. However, if arming only serves the interests of arms manufacturers and further inflames the war, then such arming is not moral. He emphasized clearly and unequivocally that at the level of principle, self-defense is an expression of love for one’s homeland.

However, Pope Francis was unable to give a clear answer on how this principle of legitimate self-defense should be applied in the specific situation of the war in Ukraine. Can his call for an end to the war and the start of negotiations also be understood as a demand for peace at any price, which would also include political compromises and concessions to the aggressor’s demands? The pope’s statement to Swiss radio on March 9, 2024, that the greatness of Ukrainian leaders would be demonstrated if they were prepared to raise the white flag and agree to a peaceful resolution of the conflict, thereby preventing further bloodshed, was met with much criticism: “I think that the strongest one is the one who looks at the situation, thinks about the people and has the courage of the white flag, and negotiates. /.../ The word negotiate is a courageous word. When you see that you are defeated, that things are not going well, you have to have the courage to negotiate. One may feel shame, but how many dead will the war end up with? One should negotiate in time, find a country that can be a mediator.” (Pullella 2024) The Vatican clarified that the pope was not calling for Ukraine to surrender, but for an end to hostilities and the start of negotiations (Cernuzio 2024). This clarification did not appease the Ukrainian side, which firmly rejected the pope’s proposal and emphasized that the condition for ending the war is the establishment of a just peace.

To the two reasons mentioned above for the reluctance and ambiguity of Pope Francis’s response to the war in Ukraine, we can add a *third reason*, which relates to the personality of Pope Francis himself, his impulsiveness, directness, and un-

predictability. His invitation to identify with the victims of war stems from his belief that encountering suffering brings about real change in human hearts and triggers compassion. As Johnston writes, “His voice is a mournful one, more so than a strategic one” (2024, 203). Many of his appeals against war had a distinctly emotional tone. He mentioned children, women, and the elderly in particular as the most vulnerable people. I agree with De Volder, who states that in his responses, Francis sought consistency with Jesus’s words and attitudes, but he was often misunderstood, even within the Church. “With his unexpected and often radical actions and statements, he hopes to awaken consciences and set processes in motion— and in this he partly succeeds — but in doing so, he also makes himself vulnerable and exposes himself to failure and criticism.” (De Volder 2023, 38)

Sharing personal views on the Ukrainian-Russian war has not always been well received. At a conference on a plane on November 6, 2022, Francis stated that he personally has “high regard for the Russian people and Russian humanism” and also “great affection for the Ukrainian people.” As a bridge builder, he described his situation as follows: “I am caught between two peoples whom I love.” (Francis 2022g, 113)

An even more critical response was received to his video address at a meeting of Russian youth in St. Petersburg on August 25, 2023, where he encouraged them to be proud of their culture and the heritage of their ancestors, mentioning the names of two imperialists, Peter the Great and Catherine II. Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk was shocked by the pope’s words and demanded an explanation, as “there is a danger that these words may be perceived as support for the nationalism and imperialism that has caused the war in Ukraine today — a war that brings death and destruction to our people every day” (Wooden 2023).

Németh believes that the origin of such views held by the Pope Francis lies in the remnants of the Vatican’s Ostpolitik and “romantic and idealistic ideas about Russia” (2023, 100–101). He regrets that Francis did not listen sufficiently to the people of Ukraine, but tried to rise above both sides. Németh comes to following conclusion: “Therefore, he has probably lost much of his moral authority in Ukraine.” (103)

The pope’s stance on the war in Ukraine has highlighted the difficulty of defending the prohibition of all war in cases of violent aggression by another country. In the final section, I will show how the pope’s words and actions stem from his fundamental ethical paradigm, which he also applies to other areas of human life.

4. Ethics of Peace in Pope Francis’s Ethical Paradigm

Pope Francis’ ethical paradigm follows—as Lisa Sowle Cahill also notes— the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the moral theology, particularly with regard to three fundamental elements of renewal: “the contextual nature of moral truth, the Gospel’s inspiration of moral theology, and the priority of the poor.” (2024, 15) Unlike his two predecessors, Francis was not a systematic theologian, nor did

he approach moral questions theoretically, but primarily pastorally. He sought to be close to people and to bring God's merciful love and affection to each person in their situation. He repeatedly and explicitly criticized the "cold bureaucratic morality" (AL, 312) practiced by many priests and moral theologians. He was particularly interested in addressing the concrete difficulties of life, for which, in his view, strictly adhering to moral norms is not sufficient. He explicitly warned bishops and priests against "sitting on the chair of Moses and judging at times with superiority and superficiality difficult cases and wounded families" (AL, 305).

Pope Francis did not seek to change the content of traditional Catholic doctrine, but rather its application to real-life situations. For him, the moral message is not limited to providing clear moral principles. Cahill concludes that Francis follows the approach of Thomas Aquinas: "Moral reason deals with truth in action. No single solution can fit every case, eliminating the need for discernment, doubt, difficulty, or compromise." (2024, 19)

My thesis is that even in the area of war and peace, Pope Francis reflects within his fundamental ethical paradigm. It is essentially the same paradigm he used in the Apostolic Exhortation "Amoris Laetitia", where he upholds the principle of the sanctity and indissolubility of marriage as an enduring ideal. In the concrete situations of people whose marriages have broken down for various reasons, the pope allows, after an in-depth process of discernment, that the divorced and remarried may also receive the sacraments (AL, 304). A similar approach was taken in the Declaration of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Fiducia Supplicans", on the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings, which sought to open the door to the blessing of homosexual couples without changing the traditional Catholic teaching that marriage is exclusively for a man and a woman. The document repeatedly stressed that marriage is "an exclusive, stable, and indissoluble union between a man and a woman, naturally open to the generation of children" (FS, 4) and that, therefore, it is not possible to confer a liturgical blessing on same-sex unions (FS, 5; 11). However, the same document allows, in concrete situations, the blessing of couples in irregular situations and homosexual couples in a non-liturgical manner (FS, 38–41). It is important to discern each case individually, which does not change the validity of the norm, but resolves the specific situation and responds to the needs of the faithful. "Decisions that may be part of pastoral prudence in certain circumstances should not necessarily become the norm." (FS, 37)

Pope Francis's ethics of peace are also shaped within this way of reasoning. War is, at the level of principle, always unacceptable, therefore there can be no just war. He expresses this most clearly in his message for World Peace Day 2017, when he wrote that Jesus "marked out the path of non violence" so that to "be true followers of Jesus today also includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence" (Francis 2016b, § 3). "Active nonviolence" is truly "more powerful and more fruitful than conflict" (§ 6) However, in the situation of direct aggression, resistance (including by use of arms) is legitimate. To repeat the pope's words from September 2022: "Self defense is not only licit but also an expression of love for the homeland." (Francis 2022e) The key criterion is the preferential option for the

poor, in this case, the victims of war.

Traditional Catholic morality emphasized the absoluteness of the ideal in sexual ethics, while in social ethics, there was always a search for balance among several ethical principles within a specific context. With his comprehensive ethical paradigm, Francis encourages a more compassionate and practical approach to sexual ethics, while in the area of peace ethics, he brings the ideal closer to the Gospel's demand for nonviolence.

Francis' ethical paradigm allows for polyvalent ethical responses in specific situations, as he has already indicated in his programmatic exhortation "Evangelii Gaudium". Fumagalli describes the "radical" nature of Francis' ethics, explaining that it is *rooted* in the Gospel and allows for different interpretations in specific situations: "The distinction made by Francis between the roots and branches of theology, between the proclamation of the Gospel and its critical argumentation, highlights the possibility and opportunity for theological pluralism, which, if it seems to those who dream of a 'monolithic body of doctrine' to be an imperfect dispersion, in reality 'serves to bring out and develop different facets of the inexhaustible riches of the Gospel' (EG, 40)." (2017, 106)

In the context of the ethics of peace, it is possible to follow the Gospel commandment of love with the aim of opposing evil in various ways. We are certainly obliged to resist evil and must prevent violence from continuing. The specific choice of which path to take depends on a concrete assessment of the situation and the available means to achieve the goal. As we have emphasized throughout the discussion, Pope Francis does not advocate pacifism at any cost. Peace must go hand in hand with justice and can only be pursued as just peace. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Vaclav Havel, and other peacemakers mentioned by Pope Francis actively resisted evil and did not retreat when violence affected their own lives. However, such nonviolent resistance is not always possible.

In line with Pope Francis's ethical paradigm, which allows for a polyvalent approach, it is possible to defend the complementarity of two forms of resistance: nonviolent resistance to violence as a sign of prophetic witness, and legitimate defense using arms as an expression of political realism. Tobias Winright refers to this complementary approach as "integral defense" (2024, 6). Legitimate defense includes both armed force and active nonviolence in protecting and sustaining a just peace. Active nonviolence remains a form of force, even if it is nonviolent. Pope Francis highlights the *power* of love and nonviolence (2016, § 3). As Wolfgang Palaver notes, nonviolent resistance also has real limitations: "This is an ethically highly questionable attitude, because in many cases it is precisely the conquerors and oppressors who want to maintain their peace built on injustice and fight the 'peace disturbers' who make visible the injustice that is often hidden at first glance – often a form of structural violence." (2023, 5) According to the Austrian social ethicist, the Catholic Church has therefore not adopted pacifism, but rather "the preferential option for nonviolence," which "in exceptional cases does not exclude military defense" (6).

5. Conclusion

As shown in this article, Pope Francis cannot be classified as an absolute pacifist, but he has come closer to pacifism than any other pope in the past century. He has advocated the Gospel stance of nonviolence, consistently emphasizing that war is always a defeat and that violence perpetuates the cycle of violence. In all cases, he has rejected war as a means of achieving rights, but he has recognized the moral justification for armed defense in response to unjust aggression as a last resort. The legitimate criterion for such a defensive measure is the protection of victims of aggression. This dual commitment – to the ideal of Gospel nonviolence and the ethical imperative to protect the vulnerable – illustrates the internal tension within his peace ethics. Rather than resolving this tension through elaborate doctrine, Francis addresses it through discernment and the principle of the preferential option for the poor. In the context of the war in Ukraine, this led him to affirm the need to stop the aggressor while simultaneously calling for an end to the escalation of armaments and insisting on negotiated peace.

His approach has been widely criticized, primarily for not examining the specific situation in Ukraine in sufficient depth and for appearing too favorable toward Russia in his effort to remain impartial and serve as a pope for all. However, the key to an appropriate solution lies precisely in his concept of just peace – for lasting and just peace, truth and justice are prerequisites. His ethical paradigm, which allows for polyvalent responses, also enables the complementarity of non-violent resistance and legitimate defense, which together form – using Tobias Winright’s words – “integral defense.” Similar to “integral ecology,” “integral defense” can also be seen as one of the valuable legacies of Francis’s papacy.

Abbreviations

AL – Francis 2016a [Amoris Lætitia].

CCC – Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993.

EG – Francis 2013a [Evangelii Gaudium].

FS – Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2023 [Fiducia Supplicans].

FT – Francis 2020 [Fratelli Tutti].

GS – Second Vatican Council 1965 [Gaudium et Spes].

PT – John XXIII 1963 [Pacem in Terris].

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