

Interview with Ukrainian Theologian dr. Roman Zaviyskyy War, Peace and Military Chaplaincy: Lessons Learned from Ukraine

Roman Zaviyskyy is a philosopher and theologian and president of the Ukrainian branch of the European Society of Catholic Theology. In June, he spent two weeks in the Netherlands at the invitation of Tilburg School of Catholic Theology to get in touch with colleagues and to conduct research into Catholic thinking about peace and war (supported by the Ladies of Bethany Research Fellowship, established by the Tilburg University Fund). In this interview, I asked him to reflect on the position and tasks of military chaplains in Ukraine, his wartime experiences, questions about peace and war, and Catholic responses to the war.*

In 2019, I was part of a group of Dutch Catholic and Protestant chaplains and professors of chaplaincy studies who visited Ukraine with the aim to exchange views about the challenges of building a chaplaincy organisation in the Ukrainian army. During that visit, we were impressed by the stories about the war that had been going on in Ukraine since 2014. The stories and images of chaplains who worked in the trenches, often just offering their service on a voluntary basis supported by their churches, made a deep impression on me. Can you tell us how the chaplaincy services have developed since 2019? What is the current position of military chaplaincy in the Ukrainian army?

The major development happened in 2021 when president Volodymyr Zelensky signed the 'Act on Military Chaplaincy', drafted by the Steering Committee in the Parliament.

This act, which can be called a 'delayed de-communisation' opened up possibilities for state institutionalisation and implementation of military chaplaincy similar to the long-standing tradition of global practices in this field. In the past, the objections to state supported pastoral care in the armed forces were based on a rather post-communist interpretation of the constitutional principle of the separation of Church and State.

Apparently, this principle exists in the constitution of many countries. Nevertheless, these countries have had well-organised military chaplaincies with state support for decades, if not centuries.

What is the more specific content of this act on military chaplaincy?

This new Ukrainian act regulates relations in the sphere of implementation of the constitutional right to freedom of religion of military personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the National Guard of Ukraine, the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine and other military entities formed in accordance with Ukrainian legislation, and defines the legal and organisational principles of the Military Chaplaincy Service. A military chaplain must be a citizen of Ukraine, who belongs to a religious organisation registered in Ukraine and has received a mandate from the relevant religious organisation to carry out military chaplaincy activities.

Numerically, Military Chaplaincy Service personnel cannot be less than 0.15% of the personnel of the Armed Forces, the National Guard, other military entities, and the State Border Guard. So currently, over 700 positions of military chaplains are available. The act also envisages for interconfessional councils on military chaplaincy under the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Internal Affairs to be established as advisory bodies.

In 2019, the perspective was already multireligious, in the sense that several denominations were represented. Which religious denominations are currently represented by chaplaincy services?

Indeed, the approach is multireligious. In order to properly organise the processes to meet the spiritual and religious needs of the personnel of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the introduction of appropriate quotas for confessional representation has been planned.

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The meetings we had in the context of the visit of the Dutch delegation in 2019 with representatives of the All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations were very helpful to encourage internal discussions about adjustments of the legislation. State supported chaplains are available to anyone within the armed forces. Moreover, it is a responsibility of a chaplain to help to find a confessional chaplain in case a soldier requires a chaplain from his/her faith community. Chaplains are available even to non-believers. Currently, over 200 chaplains took the available positions as it takes time to do the necessary paperwork and formalities. What is most important, is that the process has started. Among the newly appointed chaplains are representatives of the three major branches of Christianity in Ukraine, Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism. Apart from this new development, church supported chaplains are serving the armed forces as was the case before the new Act on state military chaplaincy had come into force.

In the Netherlands, we can hardly imagine what it means to serve as a chaplain in a war such as the war you are facing now. What are the most urgent things Ukrainian chaplains do and what are their main challenges?

The motto of the military chaplaincy services is 'to be close.' On top of their own faith traditions that include relevant liturgical and sacramental practices, chaplains are charged to bring a quality of human presence and care, provide meaning amidst meaningless war suffering, secure the preservation of humanity amidst dehumanisation, mediate transcendent experience, embody compassion and transform challenges into opportunities.

Seeing the bloody onslaught of evil and the ocean of innocent suffering can be unbearable. Hatred here is a natural companion. However, chaplains are to demonstrate that hatred cannot possibly secure a victory, whereas human dignity can.

We live in a strange world where global evil has more spiritual leaders, voices and faces than the good. Orthodox soldiers struggle with the idea that the Moscow Patriarchate, having supplied Putin's regime with 'the Russian world' ideology, turned into the Patriarchate of War. Catholic soldiers are perplexed that – even though the Catholic Church in the person of the Pope sympathises with the victims of the war, it is afraid to say who started the war. So, chaplains are called upon to take care of what is meaningful and to provide motivation to protect life and human dignity.

During an international network meeting of researchers in the field of military chaplaincy in April in Brussels which I attended, chaplain Andriy Zelinskyy, a priest of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, connected virtually and shared some of his experiences as a chaplain at the front. He spoke of a 'radical destruction of space and time', even an 'ontological collapse' at 'the edge of humanity'. He called it a 'transcendental experience,' a complete change in how one perceives the world. At the same time, he testified that he did not give up his faith and was not afraid of hope or tired of love. Do you recognise these deep existential and liminal experiences from other chaplains' stories and from what you experience yourself?

Yes, experiences of chaplains are not dissimilar as they all find themselves in very similar circumstances of liminal existence, trauma, loss and moral injuries. The long-term consequences of this war will have to be dealt with in the future and this poses many challenges for all Christian communities and churches.

There is now much talk in the international public debate about arms support to Ukraine from the West. What kind of support would Ukrainian chaplains need? Can Dutch chaplains and academics working in this field be helpful in any way?

The Netherlands has a long-standing tradition of military chaplaincy. So, sharing best practices with their Ukrainian counterparts would be extremely helpful, particularly in view of special skills formation, professionalisation in an interdisciplinary setting (psychology, pastoral care, safety etc.). As the chaplaincy services are multireligious, a certain harmonisation among the denominational chaplains is a challenge as well.

In addition, transfer of knowledge is needed in the management of veterans' associations and pastoral care for the families of those who were killed. Chaplaincy is getting more challenging in the context of the widespread decline in participation in established religious traditions replaced by the prevalence of a more abstract sense of spirituality (believing without belonging).

Ukrainian resistance to Russian aggression is fully justified. There is no doubt about that for me. However, responses from churches and religious leaders are often less clear-cut. Christian positions range

from pacifism to just war. How do you evaluate the support of churches and religious leaders for Ukraine's military resistance?

Against the background of the dominant pacifist outlook in the world, your first statement was not so evident for religious people in the first weeks of the Russian invasion. We live in strange times in which political and religious leaders seem to have switched roles: politicians speak like biblical prophets, appealing to moral values, naming things as they are, while religious leaders, on the contrary, prefer political correctness and a diplomatic tone. Even many Catholic soldiers claimed that Boris Johnson is a better pope than Pope Francis, let alone the Orthodox ones. Pope Francis is not unaware that his refusal to call Russia and Putin the aggressor annoys many Ukrainians – in an interview with *La Nación*, he said that popes never condemn heads of state or entire nations.

It seems that there is also a lack of memory about the position of Ukraine and the promises that were made in the post-communist era.

Historically, this war has to do with the profound question of what you do after the collapse of an empire. After the disintegration of the European empires, eastern European nations opted for democracy, the rule of law and integration on the basis of common values. Russia, on the contrary, is stuck recreating the former empire, the USSR, with its kleptocracy and corruption.

Let us look into the veto power of Russia and Ukraine's forgotten security guarantee: The Budapest Memorandum of 1994 of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe

(OSCE). Over twenty years ago, Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons in exchange for security guarantees from the West and Russia. The US, Great Britain and Russia welcomed the decision by Kyiv to accede to the non-proliferation agreement and pledged, among other things, to respect the independence and the existing borders of Ukraine. Today, Kyiv feels betrayed – and not by Moscow alone. Nowadays, Ukrainian civilians are being bombed by the same missiles that Ukraine returned to Russia as part of the security deal. Many believe now that the deal was a mistake made by the first president of independent Ukraine. Few political realists in the West fully understand Ukraine's reluctance to make 'peace deals' with Russia, based on historical experience. While Ukraine is just another country in a series after Chechnya, North Ossetia, Abkhazia, Georgia and Transnistria, Russia has global ambitions. Ukraine-Russia and China-Taiwan issues are related geopolitically. It is a clash of civilisations. Military aggression is just one element of the Russian hybrid warfare against Ukraine. Other elements include propaganda based on lies, fake news, falsifications and engineering popularity; trade and economic pressure; energy and hunger terrorism; cyber-attacks; blaming the other side for their own crimes (downing Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 that was on its way from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, killing nearly 300 people) and, finally, using religion for warfare.

By putting forward this Ukrainian perspective you let the western world look into a mirror. We really should learn from your experiences of threat and betrayal, and also from your courageous resistance.

Unexpectedly for everyone in 2022, Ukraine became for many a sign of hope that took millions of people across the globe from darkness to light. This epic drama of heroic resistance of the Ukrainian David to the Russian Goliath reminded people that there is good and evil, freedom and dictatorship, lies and truth, life and death. It is perhaps the first time in post-modern European history that Europeans, with a European flag, have died for European democratic values – values which by many and quite often are taken for granted in the European Union nowadays. These values need our common defence and solidarity.

As you said, Ukrainians are dissatisfied with how pope Francis responded to the war. How do you evaluate this?

Both the Havana Declaration of 2016 and the recent Vatican diplomacy became part of the spiral of disappointments among Ukrainians. In these days of the war, a quote from the joint declaration of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill in Havana took on a somewhat apocalyptic flavour for Ukrainians: 'Human civilisation has entered a period of epochal changes. Our Christian conscience and our pastoral responsibility compel us not to remain silent in the face of challenges that require a common response' (paragraph 7). Neither Ukraine nor the world witnessed the joint testimony by Francis and Kirill in the Havana Declaration.

Moreover, the controversial steps of Vatican diplomacy in communicating with the Moscow Patriarchate also led to the instrumentalisation of the Holy See in the best traditions of Kremlin propaganda. As a result, the Pope began to lose moral authority among Ukrainians rapidly, and not only among them.

On the other hand, there were indeed numerous gestures of support and solidarity on the part of Pope Francis: for instance, the humanitarian action 'Pope for Ukraine' and worldwide prayer for Ukraine. Since the Russian invasion people have wondered why Pope Francis is so good at *caritas* (charity), but less so at *veritas* (truth).

In order to at least somehow explain this series of disappointments, some have resorted to the historical discourse of *Ostpolitik*, that is, the so-called Eastern policy of the Vatican. Others have argued that the Argentinian pontiff is not very versed in the subtleties of eastern Europe, and many of the employees of the Roman Curia are from Romanesque countries with a strong Russophile tradition.

Apparently, not many Ukrainians understand the complexity of the Pope's awkward position as the spiritual leader of over a billion of Catholics, who very often find themselves on both sides of the same war.

The Pope's position can also be explained from a shift in ethical thinking about war, a shift from the tradition of the just war to peace ethics, with an emphasis on nonviolent resistance.

Indeed, there has been a shift in emphasis from the classical theory of the just war, which goes back to St. Augustine, from the ethics of peace and war to peacebuilding through nonviolence. The issue of peace in the Catholic tradition of social teaching dates back to the first social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) by Pope Leo XIII. However, the encyclical by John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (1963), which was the answer to the Caribbean crisis of 1962, is considered the foundational document for

the Catholic Church in matters of peace and war. No previous encyclical has attracted such interest and acceptance among non-Catholics as *Pacem in Terris*. One of the reasons for this perception was the personality of John XXIII. When the political scientist Hannah Arendt, one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century, wrote her book about him, she called him 'a Christian on the throne of St. Peter', which sounds like an oxymoron. Other reasons were the pontiff's audacious entry into the era of 'human rights,' and the affirmation of basic rights and freedoms.

In the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, little attention was given to the issues of the Cold War or nuclear weapons, which had prompted the encyclical, or to other topics related to Catholic teaching on war and peace. John XXIII instead proposed a framework for peace building on the 'recognition, respect and protection' of human rights. Thus, he set the agenda for the Catholic Church's participation in global socio-political processes for the decades to come. Summarising the peacebuilding achievements of his predecessors, Pope Francis emphasises that in the Catholic tradition, the practice of nonviolent resistance is almost the only way of peacebuilding.

This war came as a big surprise to many, including a lot of Ukrainians. Few believed that this was going to happen and on such a scale. After World War II it was nothing extraordinary for Europeans to shift from a just war to a just peace, it was a natural move. On the other hand, legitimate self-defence is deeply rooted in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. The richness of the Catholic tradition is having these two trends in its arsenal.



How can these two approaches be made to bear fruit?

Nowadays, the Catholic Church carries out peacebuilding processes on three levels. The first level is global, international. There are several advantages that allow Catholicism to effectively support peacebuilding at the church-wide level. The Catholic Church emphasises the spiritual authority and sovereignty of the Holy See, recognised in international law as a sovereign subject (*persona sui juris*), which does not depend on the existence of a sovereign territory. Unlike Orthodoxy and Protestantism, Catholicism, not without its challenges, of course (and the Ukrainian case is just one illustration), has a high degree of centralisation, which makes it possible to unify the Church's vision of peacebuilding in all parts of the world.

The second level is national. There are more than 1.2 billion Catholics living in almost every country in the world. The question is: How do Catholic peacebuilding initiatives work? There is no universal model; each specific situation requires its own diagnosis and contextual responses. Ideally, however, the Catholic peacemaker's approach to conflict transformation draws on the strengths of Catholicism as a worldview. Local episcopal conferences and activists in many countries realise the church-wide potential and local peacebuilding initiatives. Catholic communities on the ground help activists and peacemakers support conflict prevention efforts and promote peace on the national level.

The third level concerns the communities and organisations within the Church, which consider the building and maintenance of peace as their priority mission. Leading Catholic communities

with this mission include Pax Christi International, Catholic Relief Services, the Caritas Internationalis, the community of Sant'Egidio, Apostolat Militaire International and Catholic Peacebuilding Network. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (now part of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development) should also be mentioned in this respect.

In the end, how would you evaluate Pope Francis's struggle to speak unequivocally about the war?

On Ukrainian social networks, Pope Francis is often 'accused' of unhealthy pacifism. However, in view of what I said earlier it should be admitted that although the pontiff is an exponent of a global trend that has borne peace-fruits since the Second World War, this trend is now paralyzed by an unexpected, until recently surreal, but in fact real attempt by the Russian Federation and Putin to reshape the borders on the European continent – an 18th century land grabbing in the 21st century.

However, there are still a number of factors that are little known in Ukraine, which shed some light on Pope Francis' decisions and behaviour in the context of the war. Not only did the Pope bring a Ukrainian icon from Argentina to his private chapel in Rome, carrying it close to his heart, but he also wears a scar on his heart, which, like the icon, has a Ukrainian trace.

The Catholic Church and Pope Francis, known as Father Bergoglio before his election to the papacy in 2013, had been accused of silence during the Dirty War: the killings and kidnappings carried out by the military junta who ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983. His main accuser is a journalist of Ukrainian-Jewish origin, Horacio Verbitsky, a controversial author

whose books (including *El Silencio*) in Argentina have become national bestsellers.

In Argentina, the role of the Church during the dictatorship was twofold. Several representatives of the clergy participated in the junta's atrocities. Father Christian von Wernich is currently serving a life sentence for the numerous abductions, tortures and murders he was involved in at the death camps, which were then run by the police and the military. Other members of the clergy became martyrs, such as Bishop Enrique Angelelli, who was killed by the dictatorship for speaking out publicly against its methods of abduction and murder in August 1976.

However, the absence of the provincial superior of the Society of Jesus in Argentina, Fr Jorge Bergoglio, among the public opponents of the junta's atrocities has left his role at the time open to interpretation now that he has become Pope Francis. He has called the accusations 'slander' and believes that, on the contrary, he was working behind the scenes to save the lives of priests and others whom he had secretly saved from the death squads. He claims in one instance even to have given his identity card to a dissident who looked like him, so the dissident could flee the country. Generally, the Jesuits played an important role in resisting the junta. For this reason Fr Orlando Yorio and Francisco Jalics refused to follow the order by the Jesuit provincial superior to leave their mission in the slums. Both then blamed the provincial superior, but one priest later changed his mind, while the other never forgave Jorge Bergoglio.

Regardless of the seemingly rather traumatic Argentinian experience, Pope Francis has become a global icon of forgiveness. This

experience makes him both strong and weak at the same time. It makes him weak, because his longing for forgiveness and philanthropy sometimes obscures the truth, allowing mercy to result in the erosion of truth. It makes him strong, because he knows the price the Church will pay for silence and neutrality. It cannot be ruled out that we will witness some unexpected move by the Pope at some point, even if the tactical miscalculations of Vatican diplomacy are obvious. As the late Fred van Iersel remarked, Pope Francis is now in a position similar to that of Pope Benedict XV during World War I – while trying to preserve neutrality, he became powerless and isolated.

There is, however, a more important question: will Pope Francis, in tandem with the Curia, be able to demonstrate the peacebuilding leadership of the calibre of John XXIII? This question remains open – there are still hardly any such signs!

We hope and pray for peace and justice in Ukraine. We do not know how long it will take and whether you will succeed in liberating the occupied territories. Sooner or later, we will need to think of what will happen after the war. How do you view the future?

There's a lot of talk about Ukraine joining NATO and eventually the EU to have the same security guarantee, that our other neighbours (Poland and the Baltic states) have. Apparently, the best security guarantee for Ukraine is not even NATO membership, even if this is going to happen, but strangely enough, democracy in Russia, which a lot of people in that country deserve. Since World War II, there has not been a single case of a democratic country invading the other. One of



the real reasons for the current Russian invasion was precisely the threat of the successful young Ukrainian democracy to the last two dictators in Europe, Putin and Lukashenko. Putin started his political career as a promising reformer with democratic incentives, but has, unfortunately, ended up as a dictator.

How can there be justice after so much injustice and destruction?

I find it dramatically ironic that the residential area of the city of Lviv where I live with my family, the area which was recently heavily bombed with Putin's cruise missiles, causing numerous human casualties among innocent civilians, happened to be associated with the lives of two prominent Jewish lawyers, Hersch Lauterpacht and Raphael Lemkin. Both, coincidentally, studied law at the University of Lviv (today called the Ivan Franko National University of Lviv), and they laid the foundations of international law by formulating the concepts and coining the legal terms of 'genocide' and 'crimes against humanity.' God has a sense of humour!

It is also interesting to observe the contrasting difference: while in Russia people even on state TV are dreaming of Zelensky's death or assassination, in Ukraine people are hoping for Putin to end up in The Hague, as Milošević did. So, even the sense of justice is quite different in Russia and in Ukraine. What the International Criminal Court has done by issuing the arrest warrant to Putin politically is perhaps more effective than the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia. The Ukrainians are certainly most grateful for this ardent and bold act, even though there is still a long way to go before justice has been served.

Asking this question feels a bit uncomfortable, living in the safe and peaceful West, but how do you view forgiveness and reconciliation in this context? Is any reconciliation ever possible?

It is indeed possible and we know historical examples after World War II: between France and Germany, Germany and Poland, Poland and Ukraine. In all of them, the role of the Church has been crucial. What does not help in this process is perhaps an attempt at premature reconciliation *in bello* instead of *post bellum*, so to say.

What might a good or just peace look like for Ukraine?

All wars come to an end, and so will Russia's war against Ukraine. On 11 October 2022, President Zelensky enunciated to the leaders of the Group of Seven (G7) countries a 'peace formula' to overcome the Russian threat. Today, this 10-point plan has already been welcomed by a number of countries around the globe. In June, it was also endorsed by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. In August 2023, a summit concerning the peace plan was held in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia). About 40 countries joined the meetings, and most have decided how they will make their contribution to help archive the items outlined in the Ukrainian peace plan, which presupposes territorial integrity, reparations and prosecution of the war criminals, among other things.

What is your vision of Russia after the war?

Today's Russia is a classical kleptocracy where about 700 men own about 70% of the national wealth. By stealing Russia's resources Putin's oligarchs deny basic things to ordinary Russians, while reaping the fruits of democratic societies for themselves and for their families, educating their children and enjoying the rule of law in those democracies. They do not live in Moscow and Petersburg, but in London and Paris, they do not anchor their yachts on the Black Sea coast, but in Monaco and Malta, they do not send their children to colleges in Novgorod and Novosibirsk, but to Harvard and Oxford.

This war has revealed an unknown face of Russia: the phenomenon of massive stealing by Russian soldiers of Ukrainian washing machines, children's toys and women's underwear to bring those goods back to their families in Russia. There are numerous cases of surveillance cameras being stolen, allowing their former Ukrainian owners to watch in real time the daily lives of the 'new owners' in Russia through wifi. It is funny and sad.

Putin's state propaganda keeps hiding basic facts from millions of Russians and substitutes the domestic failures by the Russian state with the rhetoric of the 'collective West wanting to destroy Russia', while at the same time, selling a cheap narrative to the Western audience that it wants to preserve the so-called 'traditional values'. Those who buy into this in the West (Catholics and Protestants alike) are as deluded as the millions of Russians who do not even get gas delivered to their homes. No matter how many Western politicians and political parties will be bribed with Russian gas and oil money, this reality cannot be changed during Putin's reign.

Given these deep-seated structures of injustice, what is needed in particular?

Since Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*, development is the new name for peace. It is impossible to build peace effectively in contexts where poverty, hunger and crime are fuelling conflicts, since there is a direct link between security, development and peacebuilding, which cannot be isolated processes. Christian identity and practice alone do not make Christians peacemakers. Priests, bishops and lay people need additional expertise, skills, competences and practice. It is obvious that spiritual orientation is the basis for peacebuilding, but this is not enough for an exhaustive profile of a peacemaker in today's world. The same applies to the service of military, prison and medical chaplains.

This war is all about faith. A soldier's faith in victory, Ukraine's faith in a soldier, the world's faith in Ukraine. For Putin and for his propaganda machine, no other goal is more important than to thwart this faith. Objectively, Ukraine has already won – because it was not afraid of the power that the whole world feared and fears. There are lessons to learn: capitalism and the free market economy do not automatically lead to democracy. Russia will not allow any country to buy Russia's natural resources without Russia using them as a weapon, in much the same way that hunger is being weaponised in Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative. The western world should not let Putin get away with war crimes. <

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