Opinion
Guest Voices



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is pictured with Pope Francis during a private audience at the Vatican in this Feb. 8, 2020, file photo. (CNS/Gregorio Borgia, Reuters pool)



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Pope Francis has launched a peace mission aimed at finding a settlement of the Russia-Ukraine war, upsetting Ukraine's allies with his refusal to insist that Russia leave Ukraine as a starting point for negotiations. For their part, the Russians simply ignore the pope.

Western supporters of Ukraine accuse the pope of moral equivalency, treating both sides as equal. This is nonsense.

Just four weeks into the war, the pope condemned the "the violent aggression against Ukraine" and the "senseless massacre where every day there is a repetition of slaughter and atrocities," in his Sunday Angelus in March 2022. "There is no justification for this!"

The Vatican has always said that it wants a "just peace." When America Media's Gerard O'Connell asked Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the Vatican's foreign minister, what a just peace meant for the Vatican, Gallagher said it meant a withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory.

This is not to say the pope holds the West blameless. In June of last year Francis told La Civilta Cattolica, a Jesuit publication, that a couple of months before the war an unnamed "wise" diplomat had expressed concern to him about NATO. "They are barking at the gates of Russia," the diplomat said. "And they don't understand that the Russians are imperial, and they will not allow any foreign power to approach them. The situation could lead to war," concluded the diplomat.

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While Francis made clear that this was the diplomat's opinion, it is hard not to conclude that Francis agreed with him. He seems to believe, as many in the Global South do, that NATO somehow either provoked or failed to prevent the war.

Francis has also noted "the interest in testing and selling weapons" to combatants in the war. There is no question that the American military-industrial complex is profiting in Ukraine, financially as well as strategically: The Russian war machine is being severely degraded without the loss of a single American life.

But responding to those who accuse him of being pro-Putin, Francis told La Civilta Cattolica: "No, I am not. It would be simplistic and erroneous to say such a thing. I am simply against turning a complex situation into a distinction between good guys and bad guys, without considering the roots and self-interests, which are very complex."

The pope acknowledged "the brutality and ferocity with which this war is being carried out" by the Russian side. "While we witness the ferocity and cruelty of Russian troops," he said in the La Civilta Cattolica interview, "we should not forget the problems, and seek to solve them."

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The pope is not cheering on either side in this war, which is an essential quality needed in a mediator. The pope has appointed Cardinal Matteo Zuppi as a special envoy for peace in Ukraine. Both sides have used the Vatican for facilitating exchanges of prisoners, which is a good sign.

With Ukraine unwilling to give up any of its territory — including Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014 — is there something else that would appease Russia and allow Putin to save face in defeat? I think there is: nuclear weapons.

The West has always feared the Red Army sweeping into Europe — indeed, it's the reason NATO exists. Because the U.S. and Europe were unwilling to pay for enough conventional weapons to stop what they considered a formidable force, they relied on tactical nuclear weapons as a deterrent to the Red Army's invasion.

We now see that the Russian army is a Potemkin army, more show than substance. If Ukraine all by itself can hold off the Russians and score victories, NATO would wipe the floor with them without using tactical nuclear weapons.

This military reality calls for a rethinking of NATO's nuclear policy. As part of settling the Ukraine-Russia war, NATO and the U.S. should do two things: First, swear off the first use of nuclear weapons in Europe. Second, negotiate the elimination or at least reduction of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.

Ukraine will have to agree to not "officially" join NATO. The war has already made Ukraine part of NATO unofficially. Ukraine would continue to receive weapons, but no NATO troops can be deployed on Ukrainian soil.

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Putin, as an authoritarian autocrat, can continue this war indefinitely. We must give him something to get him to stop. He could save face by telling his people that the war succeeded in forcing NATO into this deal.

There is a temptation to let the war go on as long as Russia is stymied and suffering huge military losses in the speculative hope that it will bring down Putin. But Ukraine is also suffering both military and civilian losses.

The pope reminds us to look at "the human side of the war," the impact on people's lives, the deaths, the refugees, the widows and orphans. The war cannot be examined only in terms of "geopolitical calculations." Too many people are dying. The pope is right in calling for peace. Unnecessary tactical nuclear weapons in Europe would be a cheap price to pay for it.

This story appears in the **War in Ukraine** feature series. View the full series.