Opinion

NCR Voices



Ukrainian servicemen from the air defense unit of the 93rd Mechanized Brigade fire an anti-aircraft cannon from a front-line position near the town of Bakhmut on March 6, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine. (OSV News/Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty/Reuters/Serhii Nuzhnenko)



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Eleven years ago today, Pope Francis came out onto the loggia of St. Peter's basilica and introduced himself to the world. In those first moments, when Francis asked us to pray for him before he imparted the apostolic blessing, and bowed his head, we knew this papacy might be different.

When he asked us all to pray for his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, and led the crowd in the piazza and Catholics worldwide in the "Our Father," "Hail Mary," and "Glory Be," prayers every child knows, we knew we had a pastor. The next day, when Francis announced he would not be living in the apostolic palace, it began to dawn on us all that this pontificate might be very, very different.

Different it has been, in ways we could not have imagined 11 years ago. Writing about this papacy has been the most professionally rewarding experience, and taking on Francis' critics has been a most personally satisfying task. Francis has brought a renewed commitment to the essence of the Gospel to our church which, filled with sinners, translates as evangelical mercy. He has reminded us that our service to the poor is the measure of our fidelity. Francis has carried forth the key teachings of the Second Vatican Council. He has consistently differentiated our Catholic faith from the ideologies of our day, from racist nationalism on the right to gender ideology on the left.

Today, however, it is necessary to criticize Francis for his recent comments about Ukraine. In an interview released last week, the pope said, "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 Vatican press office issued a clarification noting that the pope was repeating the image of the white flag because the interviewer had used it first. Matteo Bruni, director of the press office, said:

> The Pope uses the term white flag, and responds by picking up the image proposed by the interviewer, to indicate a cessation of hostilities, a truce reached with the courage of negotiation. Elsewhere in the interview, speaking of another situation of conflict, but referring to every situation of war, the Pope clearly stated: "Negotiations are never a surrender."

The "white flag" metaphor, however, is only part of the problem.

Pope Francis speaks with Andrii Yurash, Ukraine's ambassador to the Holy See, during a meet

Pope Francis speaks with Andrii Yurash, Ukraine's ambassador to the Holy See, during a meeting for the ambassador to present his credentials to the pope at the Vatican in this April 7, 2022, file photo. (CNS/Vatican Media)

There are three problems with the pope's approach to the Ukraine situation. One is endemic: We want a pope who articulates moral issues, but no one wants a pope who advocates war or who chooses one part of the human family over another. As I wrote previously about the pope's early comments about the war, "There is the conundrum: What does empathy for the people of Ukraine entail at this moment, when the heart of Putin shows itself to be immune to the pope's prayers for peace? Is it realistic to hope that a man who traffics in morally obscene lies to justify his own acts of aggression is likely to be moved by moral concerns at all?" The pope must witness to peace and acknowledge moral truths, and those two tasks are at odds in Ukraine's supremely justified effort to defend itself from unjust aggression.

The second problem is that the pope's pleas for peace, and denunciation of war, often fail to consider how they will be received. As theologian Tobias Winright wrote at La Croix International,

> I have often wondered, though, how a Ukrainian soldier or civilian who took up arms to defend his or her fellow citizens must feel whenever the pope and others have emphasized nonviolence and condemned the use of armed force. If I were in such a person's shoes, would I feel like 'a moral failure' because I had used armed force to repel an invasion?

Lowering the morale of troops fighting a just war may not be the pope's intent but it is a real consequence.

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Similarly, is there any doubt that Russian president Vladimir Putin and his cronies will put the pope's "white flag" comment to use in their propaganda? George Orwell diagnosed this problem long ago: In certain situations, pacifism is objectively pro-fascist. The war in Ukraine is such a situation.

The third problem is the hardest: The pope misjudges the value of negotiation. There may be other countries for whom negotiations with Putin might prove fruitful. Ukraine, or any other former Soviet satellite, is not one of them. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has rightly understood this from the beginning: Putin cannot be trusted.

Francis is not the first person to naively think negotiations can always work. (And naivete is not the worst attribute in a religious leader!) British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain really thought he had achieved "peace in our time" when he returned from Munich having sacrificed Czechoslovakia to the Nazis in exchange for a paper promise by Hitler to forswear further territorial claims. Chamberlain is often dismissed as a naïve lightweight, but he was a man of substance. Like most people, he had been horrified by the carnage of World War I and so he wanted to believe a little too desperately that his good-faith negotiations would preserve the peace. The problem was that his good faith was not matched. Zelenskyy understands what Chamberlain did not and the pope does not.

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Deciding when to go to war, or when to seek negotiations to end a war, and determining what terms are acceptable, these are complex moral judgments. One must consider not only what is just but what is feasible. One must consider how the eventual peace terms might, or might not, be honored or enforced. One must weigh the moral and human cost of continuing the war against the moral and human cost of capitulation or appeasement or compromise. These judgments belong to statesmen not to clerics because the exercise of prudence in such situations is difficult, and it is not given to pious platitudes about peace. Francis is well advised to remember the words of a sage Jesuit: "We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them" (*Amoris Laetitia*).

The Holy Father would also be well advised to consider the powerful statement from the Synod of Bishops of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, issued in February, that begins with the words of the prophet Jeremiah, "Rescue the oppressed from the hand of the oppressor." Their moral and spiritual analysis was thoughtful, sophisticated and profoundly Christian. The statement came from the church's shepherds in Ukraine, men whose flocks are threatened daily by this terrible war. Their Christian witness ought not be discounted or disrupted by a careless choice of words in an interview.

So, on this his anniversary of election, I wish Pope Francis many more years of life and governance. *Ad multos annos*. And perhaps far fewer interviews.