

## **LENT COURSE 2022**

**Session 1 Catholic Teaching and Ukraine**

**8 March 2022**

**Fr Ashley Beck**

### **Introduction**

I originally planned this Lent course to spend three sessions on the synodal process, in response to what we have been doing in recent months, with the remaining two to help give people some formation about Holy Week (in response to some requests about three years ago). However the war in Ukraine has created a crisis for the Catholic Church as it has for everyone else, so it seemed right to spend one evening on that, especially as we have in Lent talks etc over the years looked at various questions to do with war and peace in relation to Iraq, Afghanistan and other issues.

### **Teaching background**

A great deal is being written and said about President Putin's invasion of Ukraine since 24 February, and I wrote a brief piece for the newsletter about some of the issues the weekend before last. I don't want to duplicate what has been said elsewhere or suggest that I know much about some of the political issues: I simply want to focus on Catholic teaching about war, international relations, the support of refugees and the conduct of public and political life: as these are vast subjects we will only begin to look at them this evening. As you know I run the only degree in Catholic Social Teaching in the UK and Ireland at St Mary's University, where we cover these issues as well - and some students may be joining us through livestream and on Zoom. Those who teach in Catholic universities worldwide are trying to show support and solidarity and I was in an international Zoom meeting last Friday which included two academics from the Ukraine Catholic University based in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv (= Polish Lvov, Austrian Lemberg). We heard very moving accounts from them

The war is dominating news media and I suppose some people who go to church might seek here some sort of escape from the war, as from other issues in the world. This isn't an option for committed Catholics, as we hold that our faith is about the whole of life - the God whom we worship has revealed a lot to us about how we should live, and that includes killing people and bombing towns. In addition there is an important religious dimension to this war, often neglected in the media, and that is something all Catholic should know something about....

I am going to try and keep to arguments about conduct; this isn't a sermon and there are plenty of other people able to express moral outrage. It also goes without saying that we should all be supporting the various initiatives in this country aimed at supporting both people in Ukraine and those fleeing the country

### **Catholic teaching and the key issue**

In terms of basic teachings I think there are various points to make:

1. The actions of the Russian Federation are **utterly at odds with Christian teachings about war** - not only the *Just War* doctrine which has been important in western Christianity, but the whole body of Christian teaching, including that of the Orthodox Church. This is an unprovoked war of aggression; the claims of the Putin government about attacks on Russian speakers in Ukraine, or that the country is run by fascists or neo-Nazis, are demonstrably false. The Russian government is actively lying to its own people and shutting off voices of dissent in countless ways. I find it incomprehensible that the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church does not appear to recognise this. Moreover the Russian government is acting in defiance of international law and treaties to which it is a signature, such as the Charter of the United Nations.
2. Moreover there is growing evidence that **the way in which the Russian forces are fighting the war** (*jus in bello*) contradict Christian teachings, particularly in terms of the type of weapons being used and the targeting of civilians (in spite of official denials).
3. The Catholic Church, unlike the government of the United States, supports the work of **international courts** to try those accused of war crimes and crimes against universal human rights. Those responsible for this war need to be tried, even in their absence. The case for doing this would be stronger if the USA and NATO had not been guilty in the past of similar crimes. International law as understood by the Church severely curtails notions of national sovereignty, a moral truth no longer really accepted by the government of this country or the Conservative party.
4. Christian tradition, by and large, has affirmed **the right to self-defence**. So instinctively we tend to applaud the clear courage of the Ukrainian armed forces and civilians; this right is also affirmed in the UN Charter and other international agreements. In the *Catechism* and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* this right is seen as a duty, bound up with the obligation to protect and defend the innocent. The *Compendium* commends those who serve in armed forces in self-defence of their countries. However the Christian tradition does not see it as an *absolute* right;. The reason it is not absolute is that Christian teaching does *not* sanction the use of force if the action is futile; that is, an action which has little or no chance of success ('There must be serious prospects of success', *Compendium* 500). I hope you can see now how difficult this issue is. We *want* to be able to support and defend the men, women and children who are victims of cruelty and violence; moreover this wish accords with much of how we have been brought up in terms of our own history, particularly with regard to the Second World War. We understand how this is seen as a duty. On the other hand it does mean that in terms of our teaching some countries in that war who chose not to carry on fighting the armies of the Third Reich after they were invaded (Denmark, for example) were acting in accordance with Christian teaching. It is made more complicated still by the judgment we need to try and make with regard to futility. When the Russians invaded on 24 February it might have been easier to criticise acts of self-defence because it might have looked then as if the Russians, because of their overwhelming military superiority, would win a quick victory: this is certainly what the Russians thought, and Putin's strategy may have depended on this. The extent of opposition to the invasion has certainly weakened the 'futility' argument, but in the long term it still seems to be the natural interpretation of our tradition, however painful this is for the Ukrainians, and painful for us to say to them. It is to do with the important moral concept, crucial in our tradition about war, of *proportionality*. Can we really affirm that an attempt to defend national independence and the rights people enjoy in a democracy, are really worth immense civilian casualties? For this reason I was uneasy when *The Tablet* reported last weekend that at the celebration of the Divine Liturgy in the Ukrainian cathedral here in London, at which our own archbishop preached a very moving homily, there were a lot of collecting boxes for money to buy weapons. Now for Christians who are absolute pacifists (such as the *Catholic Worker*

movement) the issue is clear, if painful; for others it is more nuanced because we have to make a prudential judgment about whether something is in the long term futile or not. Incidentally the Church's teaching documents affirm the value of the pacifist position and insists that the rights of conscientious objectors are protected. To sum up, I think this question is at least for me undecided and not entirely clear at the moment; this means we should be very cautious about encouraging the Ukrainians to fight back.

5. Christian teaching about the unacceptability of war is closely linked to what we teach about the conduct of **international relations**, as we have often reflected in talks given in this parish. Sharing sovereignty, cooperation, solidarity, negotiations, diplomacy, trying to listen to others: these are 'goods', they are virtuous ways for countries to act. When these things have been valued the world becomes a less violent place. It is interesting that Putin has unintentionally brought about unity among his opponents - first, among the people of Ukraine, including Russian-speakers (like the President), and second, among the western nations, particularly the European Union which has since its inception been based on the principles outlined above. We see ever more clearly the need for a united Europe, which the Catholic Church has affirmed for many years - that's why Ukraine should become a member of the EU as soon as possible. However as I have indicated before I don't think you can say the same about NATO as far as Catholic teaching is concerned. While it certainly served as a defensive alliance when it was set up, what we teach about dialogue and commitment to peace was infringed in the years following the fall of Communism in 1989/1990; opportunities were missed, and its expansion into Eastern Europe has been a propaganda gift to Putin and his supporters. None of this justifies his actions, nor does it make Russia and NATO morally equivalent now, but it is something we should be open about, and Western leaders should admit their mistakes. Moreover there is a serious problem from a Christian point of view: NATO is an alliance committed to the threat to use nuclear weapons. The Catholic Church has condemned unequivocally the nuclear deterrent, overlooked by so many Catholic politicians: while I can see why countries like Poland value NATO, overall it is a very flawed force in the world, and bears some responsibility (but not the primary one) for where we are now. Benedict XVI and Francis have both called for international organisations to be strengthened, given real teeth - but they should be genuine bodies rather than military alliances. The problem, of course, is that giving the UN greater power demands right attitudes on the part of its most important members, who have a veto in the Security Council. Bodies like the UN and the EU are only as strong and responsible as their members, but the principle of cooperation remains important
6. The world's reactions to **refugees** is already central to our engagement with this conflict, and this is likely to become a more critical issue in the next few months. In his last encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, which we looked at week by week last Lent, Pope Francis stressed how the migrant, the refugee, is not only central to how we understand love in the world, but also a model for the pilgrim Church. Well over a million Ukrainians have left the country in the last two weeks; all over this country large amounts of money and other items have been raised to help them. Three observations: (a) at least in the Eastern European countries in the European Union this massive migration has challenged and changed attitudes towards refugees; past hostility has been replaced by great generosity. (b) While this is welcome it's unfortunately probably the case that there shift is not because people have suddenly started listening to the pope's teaching; rather, it is probably because the Ukrainians are Europeans, and fellow past victims of Russian / Soviet domination. An important article at the weekend (Malik) pointed out that what has happened must not fuel a sense of European superiority or exceptionalism. The Russians behaved in the same sort of way towards Muslims in Chechnya and Syria. (c) It has exposed the anti-migrant policies of the Conservative party: while the Johnson government has

changed its policies repeatedly in response to public opinion, in terms of the generosity which Christian teaching calls for we are lagging seriously behind EU countries; this is, of course, what Brexit was and is all about. This is what some of you voted for in the 2016 referendum.

7. One of the bad things which happens when a war breaks out, even if many countries are not directly involved, is that normal political life either comes to an end or is sidelined. Political leaders are felt to have more important things to worry about than home affairs; moreover we are often bombarded with bogus calls for national unity. The best example in modern times was the postponement of the enactment of Irish home rule legislation in 1914 when the First World War broke out. Wars can be a very convenient distraction for politicians troubled by problems at home. Since the Catholic Church stresses both **the value of the political vocation and the importance of high standards in public life** in relation to truth-telling, accountability, transparency and the avoidance of corruption, then this issue matters for us. As it happens, with the possible exception of the President of Ukraine, most national leaders engaged in this crisis face serious domestic political problems (Putin himself, Johnson, Biden, Macron, with the new German Chancellor needing to prove himself). Catholics should not be taken in by this. If a political leader is shown to be a self-seeking liar one month, he does not cease to be the next month if there is an international crisis. His character flaws and sins remain. Moreover the moves being taken against very rich Russians who have (with the encouragement of politicians from all parties, but the Conservative party above all) bought up much of London, have exposed the extent to which our political life has been corrupted to an alarming degree. The financial and political support given by supporters of President Putin to the *Brexit* campaign and the Conservative party are not accidental; they are also in line with how Putin's aggressive policies accord with the political Far Right all over the world and former President Donald Trump and his supporters in the US in particular (and Trump still enjoys considerable support among American Catholics). The condemnations of Putin by the Prime Minister and other leading politicians ring rather hollow; again, the Church should not be afraid to point this out.
8. As you know the next two sessions in this programme are about the **synodal process**. Perhaps it is easy to think that this process of dialogue and reflection is a bit of a luxury as we come (perhaps) out of a pandemic and face this terrible war in Ukraine. But actually what the Holy Father is calling for is closely bound up with how we should respond to this war. What the pope has said, and if you read his biographies you can see how he has tried to live this out throughout his ministry as a priest and a bishop, is that the need for dialogue and listening is inescapable. You don't stop, however difficult; you don't give up. What we teach about war only being ever acceptable as a last resort, along with other strict conditions, mean that we have to take negotiation and diplomacy seriously. There have to be serious negotiations now, without preconditions. We might well distrust Putin, for very good reasons, but we still have to negotiate. And negotiations demand, usually, concessions and compromises. You would think that people in the UK and Ireland would know this above all because of the history of Northern Ireland and the peace process; what the pope says is also in line with the unsuccessful attempts of his predecessor Benedict XV in the First World War to get people to negotiate without preconditions. My anxiety, in relation to Catholic teaching, is that NATO leaders may not be encouraging the Ukrainians to negotiate.

These eight issues seem to me to be central to how as Catholics we have to respond to this serious international crisis; of course there are others and much more to be said. What we need to do is to pray for the fighting to cease.

I would recommend good sources of information in Catholic media, particularly the blog *Independent Catholic News* and *The Tablet*, *The Pastoral Review* and the American Jesuit journal *America*; also the websites of the Bishops Conference ([www.cbcew.org.uk](http://www.cbcew.org.uk)) and *Pax Christi* ([www.paxchristi.org.uk](http://www.paxchristi.org.uk))

