

## **“Justice and Peace in the Face of the War in Ukraine”**

Until a few months ago, many people in our Churches oriented themselves quite naturally to the guiding principle of Just Peace. The rejection of "Just War" seemed clear and convincing. Church action was clearly oriented toward justice and peace.

The guiding principle of Just Peace is based on the Old Testament notion of peace (shalom): Peace and the pursuit of justice belong inseparably together. In Psalm 85, we read that “righteousness and peace will kiss each other” (Ps 85:11). The prophet Isaiah predicts: “The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever” (Is 32:17).

Just Peace is thus both a vision and a guiding principle. It is the biblical vision of an eschatological promise that will shape a new reality. At the same time, however, it is an ethical guiding principle, too, that we can use in the here and now: All people are called “to take the initial steps towards a messianic peace [...] in order to create a more reasonable and humane world” (The German Bishops 2000, A Just Peace, point 56).

In the course of our lives, we repeatedly experience that peace without justice is a fragile state. A lasting peace, in which people can live in security and in an untroubled relationship with each other, is only possible in justice.

But what orientation does the guiding principle of Just Peace provide for our practical actions in the face of the war in Ukraine, as well as in the face of the many other wars around the world?

In the war in Ukraine – as in many other current wars – it seems impossible to achieve justice and peace at the same time. One seems possible only at the expense of the other. But, if this is so, how should justice and peace be related to each other? We are experiencing it right now:

We can either say: The killing, the dying and the destruction has to stop as soon as possible. There needs to be a ceasefire immediately. How much injustice are we then prepared to accept for peace in Ukraine?

Or we ask the other way around – if we endorse military force as a legitimate response to aggression or even consider it necessary: Is it possible that precisely this kind of struggle against injustice allows war to continue and causes suffering and destruction itself?

A Just Peace seems infinitely far away at the moment. We experience military violence that brings suffering, death, and destruction. This cruel war makes us angry, sad, and furious. Who would not want to strike back and put an end to this injustice, to force the Russian government to end the war?

In this situation, the Ukrainian government continues to call for weapons. Can we ignore this call? Stand by those who are being attacked and thus put an end to the

terrible injustice. This, and nothing else, is what most of us want. Justice and peace for the people of Ukraine!

Especially since Ukraine's right to self-defense is indisputable and justified under international law. We do not want to stand idly by and watch Russia's aggression, we rather want to do something to counter it. Supplying weapons seems to be a suitable way of doing so. Discussing ethics of peace in Church and beyond, many people are now arguing that weapon deliveries are ethically justifiable and, above all, morally imperative. More and more often, we hear that we should abandon the concept of Just Peace and instead return to talking about Just War.

Many people hope that the violence produced by our weapons will save people and that a Just War will bring peace, that military might will bring justice.

From this perspective, peace seems only possible again when the injustice is remedied, and the territorial integrity of Ukraine is restored, when the aggressors are punished.

Such an understanding of justice often reflects the intuitive desire for retribution for wrongs done: Putin must not win. This war of aggression, which cannot be justified by anything, must not go unpunished.

However, I think it is important to ask: Do we sufficiently consider possible consequences and repercussions in this reactive orientation of our action, with which we want to establish justice? Is military force the most appropriate way to end war and restore peace?

The military struggle against the aggressor Russia and weapon deliveries are both justified with the evil that has already happened. But are we sufficiently aware of the new evil caused by our own violence? Violence and counter-violence, even if the latter is legitimate under international law – such as Ukraine's right to self-defense – are driving a spiral of violence that threatens to spiral out of control.

Military violence is never innocent, no matter how and by whom it is used. It is not a neutral instrument that can only be used for good through good intention and measured application. Violence always has its own dynamics and consequences: Grief, anger, hatred, rage, powerlessness as well as thoughts of revenge. Consequential effects which, in the long run, make it much more difficult to achieve a lasting peace.

If we advocate and support the military struggle against Russian aggression, which cannot be justified by anything, is there not a danger that we will absolutize the struggle for justice to such an extent that other questions and criteria may not be sufficiently considered? This includes:

- The proportionality of our own and enemy casualties: Hundreds of people die every day. Thousands are wounded. Millions of people have been displaced

and are fleeing. On both sides, people are forced into war. People who cannot simply leave the country, the embattled cities, and who cannot flee the horrors of war. How many innocent civilians, how many soldiers have to die until we escape the logic of war? Are the casualties worth it?

- What is the most important thing that we fight for in this unjust war against the Russian army: Is it about victory (at any cost)? Territorial integrity? National self-determination? Our own values? What are we willing to accept to kill and die for? Is it about saving as many lives as possible or are other goals more important?

What really takes priority influences warfare and eventual peace negotiations.

- How much military violence is needed to end the war with weapons? Would we be prepared to ultimately use this violence as a last resort and to bear and take responsibility for its consequences?

I think it is important that when we advocate for or against a military solution to the war in Ukraine, we are always aware of our own ignorance of the consequences of our action:

Are we making a real contribution through military support to quickly end the dying and the continued destruction of lives and cities? Or do we contribute with every delivered weapon to the fact that the war is (merely) prolonged and waged ever more brutally – and causes ever more casualties?

At the moment, the war seems to be developing into a long-lasting conflict with high casualties for both sides. Even a military reconquest of occupied territories is very likely to cause numerous civilian casualties and even more suffering and destruction.

If one relies on a military solution to the war, then I think it is necessary to answer the following question: How can a peace enforced by military violence be shaped in such a way that living together in reconciliation becomes possible? How does one avert the danger that such a peace could develop into a new source of violence?

From a Christian perspective, it is important to ask: Is there a biblical message that supports advocating to end the war militarily and thus violently? And if so, which texts? How do these texts relate to biblical texts of nonviolence?

As Church, is it our job to advocate violence? Should we not rather talk about what hope and consolation there is, even if we do not know what is right.

To put it in a nutshell: What "peace policy collateral damage" are we willing to accept in the course of our commitment to justice? Is the military enforcement of justice

considered so fundamental and ethically imperative that the goal of ending war, death and destruction as quickly as possible must be subordinated in every case?

The Russian government seems to subordinate everything to its interests and its desire for power and seems to abandon any reverence for life. It does not seem to attach much value to the lives of the Ukrainian people as well as to the lives of its own soldiers. I think this is a tragedy, a great injustice which cannot be justified by anything.

But do we have to follow this logic of violence?

Putin argues that he had no alternative – a typical statement of a warmonger. I think it is wrong to use the same argument in reverse for us as well. Rather, the opposite must apply: There are alternatives to war. The end of peace must not be the end of peace policy.

That is why I think it would be wrong to abandon the guiding principle of a Just Peace and to talk about a Just War instead. War is never just. There is no such thing as a good war. War is always bad.

In my opinion, therefore, it cannot be the task of the Church to legitimize military violence – of whatever kind! Not even if we do not know how to end violence, if we do not know how to deal with autocrats.

The less we trust in a non-military solution of the conflict, the more we ourselves will be captured by the spirit of military violence.

A spirit that I fear will ultimately render us incapable of peace. A spirit that corrupts our humanity, our Christianity.

As long as military violence is seen as a normal political means and is always considered as an option, it is very likely that we will ultimately remain trapped in the logic of violence. A logic of violence that – for the sake of justice – creates new, unspeakable injustices, or at least puts up with them.

Therefore, I think it is important to break the compulsion to imitate violence and enmity even in this war. And that we just do not repay evil with evil. This is the only way to create freedom of movement again, which leads out of the system of violence and the belief in military solutions.

If we renounce belief in military solutions, however, it must not remain an ethics appeal without practical consequences. Rather, a rejection of military violence also requires a clear commitment to action. Instead of simply following a military security logic, we should be committed to a good and viable practice of peace.

In order to achieve such a practice of peace, it takes a lot of energy and creativity to develop options for civil action. However, this energy and creativity are only really

released when we are willing to act free of violence. A freedom from violence, that must also be repeatedly called for by political leaders though.

At this point, we as Churches are particularly called upon, as Christians in our commitment to civil society. What can we do as Church, what can each and every one of us do to support non-violent and civil peace building?

The atrocities inflicted on the people of Ukraine (and still being inflicted with each passing day of war) are intolerable. We must resist the violence caused by Russia. In doing so, however, we should be absolutely careful not to create injustice and violence ourselves through our own engagement. In my opinion, therefore, the better options are to encourage and support nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience, to promote civil society structures, and to focus on negotiated solutions.

I am aware that every commitment to peace requires courage. Especially the non-violent commitment to peace. Even a civil, non-violent resistance will cause casualties. People who resist military aggression in this way will experience violence. People will die in a nonviolent struggle against an occupying regime. And yet I believe it is right to follow the path of nonviolence and not to rely on a military solution to the conflict. I am convinced that the path of nonviolent resistance will ultimately cause fewer casualties and less destruction than the prolonged continuation of war. Even if nonviolent resistance fails, the structure of civil society will remain more effective to resume the struggle another day.

Yet, what is peace worth to us?

If the war is not to end in brutal attrition or even nuclear catastrophe, then all parties involved will have to engage in negotiations.

Certainly, the first step toward de-escalation, which is absolutely necessary for this, will be extremely difficult for each party to the conflict. Especially since the step of ending military force suggests that they have given in and lost the military struggle.

Yet is there a reasonable alternative to negotiations?

Continuing the war until the loss of life and destruction is so immense that one side is forced to surrender is not a reasonable alternative for me.

Is it possible that in the current situation at least a cold (negative) peace, serves justice more than the enforcement of justice serves peace? Not every peace is just. A ceasefire, a negative peace in Ukraine would certainly initially be to the detriment of justice. In the beginning, at least, it would be based on unjust conditions, on dictatorship and repression.

But it could save countless lives and minimize suffering and destruction. Wouldn't this be the most important thing? Maybe the weapons have to fall silent first, so that things can change for the better.

If the weapons fall silent, that is no guarantee for real peace though. But it would be a first step on this path. Only this step creates the prerequisite for dialogue and non-violent change to begin.

I believe it is essential to seek ways other than military force to end the war, to support the people in Ukraine and the resistance in Russia as much as possible through civic engagement. For me, this includes, among other things

- that every person in the areas affected by war and violence must be given the opportunity to build a new life in another, safe place. No one must be forced to stay in a war zone. Our full solidarity with refugees is needed.
- There needs to be a consistent call for internationally negotiated solutions that provide at least a perspective for peaceful coexistence between the two nations and enable the path to restoring justice.
- The right to conscientious objection must apply everywhere and to everyone. Anyone who refuses to serve in the armed forces on grounds of conscience and who is threatened with persecution for doing so needs our help. The human right to conscientious objection must also be protected in countries at war. Those who are persecuted as conscientious objectors and deserters must be granted asylum immediately.
- Nonviolent resistance must be promoted – whereas non-violence does not mean abandoning resistance and is not to be equated with defenselessness, passivity, and inaction. People must know the different methods and forms of nonviolent resistance and be supported and trained in their use.
- Civil society engagement in Russia and Ukraine must be promoted.

I think that we need at least a situation of temporary absence of violence so that we can effectively advocate for more justice, so that other forms of civil resistance can be established and become effective, and violence and hatred can be transformed. That in this way justice will prevail and a Just Peace can grow. This seems impossible to me in the fire of missiles and the hail of shells.

I think, it is our job as Church to talk about what hope and consolation there is, even if we do not know what is right.

We can gather for peace prayers and devotions. Together, we can remember God's promises of peace and pray for peace, even if it currently seems that we do not immediately get what we ask for with the prayers for peace. But we can trust that God is at work in the world and that our prayers will be answered. Perhaps by God opening hearts and directing minds to ways of peace, unity and reconciliation. Perhaps by awakening in us an intense compassion for the victims of war. Perhaps by

filling us with outrage at the suffering caused by war and encouraging us to act. Perhaps this is one way in which God "works" – by moving our hearts to action.