

EPP Working Group
INTERCULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Vilnius Meeting on the occasion
of the visit of His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

Special Intervention

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Your Holiness,
Speaker of the Seimas,
Prime Minister,
Eminences and Excellencies,
Members of the European parliament and of the Seimas,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor to participate at this august conference discussing the reaction of religions in society to conflict and the scourge of war. I thank the government officials and the members of the European Parliament who have organized this conference and I especially thank His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew who, with his presence, gives even more importance and value to this discussion.

Since February 24, 2022, when Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine began, we have found ourselves here in the heart of Europe coming to terms with the need to deal with an entirely new situation.

As Christians, we know peace is not simply the absence of war, but requires a respect and lived communion with each of our neighbors. The only way forward is through forgiveness and reconciliation and that only love creates true peace.

But the atrocities that we witness challenge us each day. There are eight million people who have moved as internally displaced persons, many of them have crossed Ukraine's borders seeking refuge abroad. The number of children who have been separated from their families and taken far away cannot yet be calculated, while the growing number of orphaned children, as well as deaths of innocent children continue to break our hearts. We are weighed down by the images of massive destruction and the death tolls that the war has brought.

What we face today is a new kind of war. Although we have long dreaded the nuclear threat, in some ways the weapons of this war are no less horrific. We are faced with a "hybrid war," - a war waged not only with traditional military weapons, but joined by an informational war and then an economic war, as well as acts of terrorism. One thing it is not, nor can it ever be, is a religious war.

We are particularly concerned that the narrative of war has been colored by religious connotations. The bellicose homilies of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow have left us appalled. At the same time, we are comforted by the stance of so many men of peace, starting with Pope Francis.

As early as March 13, 2022, less than a month after the start of the conflict, Pope Francis stated after the Angelus prayer, "God is only the God of peace, he is not the God of war, and those who support violence profane his name. Now let us pray in silence for those who suffer, and that God may convert hearts to a steadfast will for peace". We know from the statements of the Moscow Patriarchate and those of sister churches who cannot recognize themselves in accepting and even blessing the war, that the war in Ukraine is also a cause of ecumenical division.

Two years ago the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople published the document entitled *For the Life of the World. Toward a social ethos of the Orthodox Church*. This is the first compendium of social doctrine written for the Orthodox world. In that text, we read that "while unequivocally condemning violence of any kind, it nevertheless recognizes the tragic necessity of individuals or communities or states, using force to defend themselves and others from the immediate threat of violence," but without systematically defining the concept of a "just war."

In the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church, we read that "a war of aggression is intrinsically immoral. In the tragic case where such a war breaks out, leaders of the State that has been attacked have the right and the duty to organize defense even using force of arms." This use of force, to be lawful, must meet precise characteristics, starting with the fact that "all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective. (n. 500)"

In the face of the war of aggression taking place in Ukraine, what comes to mind, reading these passages, is that one can work toward a social doctrine that integrates the Orthodox approach and the Catholic approach, thus giving an even firmer basis to this practical unity that we are experiencing in the course of this war.

Reflecting on the war in Ukraine, we cannot fail to notice that with the work of the Pan-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations, a true ecumenism of charity has been set in motion, because everything, even divisions, become secondary in a war, and our task as men and women of faith is to make the exceptional unity that is realized in a time of crisis a long-lasting brotherly cooperation that moves us forward on the ecumenical path.

These are signs to be read. Today more than ever, Christian unity is a fundamental goal in order to ensure true unity of Europeans. Christian unity, indeed, could make it possible to overcome, through forgiveness, the wounds of history that are ever present in our battered lands, and especially in those, such as Ukraine, which historically have been lands that have bridged East and West.

If Christians were united, there could be no proclamations of just wars, but there would only be the justice of peace. If Christians were united, Europe itself would be more cohesive, rooted in those Christian values that the world wants to deny, but which are present and alive in every European nation.

Therefore, alongside the efforts of understanding and study needed in the ecumenical journey, alongside the ecumenism of charity, we must embody the Christian calling that is able to overcome any narrative of war: that we are all brothers and sisters, *Fratelli tutti*.

Our ecumenical efforts, our mutual understanding, our questions about how to be Christian in times of war, and modern warfare, are meaningless if we do not start from the main source from which we all drink, which is our common faith in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life, differences are healed. It is in the spreading of his word that we find the strength to reconcile even with our enemies, and to build, amidst a thousand difficulties, a more just world.

And if there is one perspective that Christian denominations must take in times of war it is precisely to put Christ back at the center of their preaching. In Jesus we understand the profound dignity of the human being, and with Jesus we know that no war can be the solution – what we need is conversion of hearts and reconciliation. But for this to come about, we must continue to pray – to pray and to work for the miracle of peace.

Thank you!