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Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, the Death Penalty, and War

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Introduction

In his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (FT) Pope Francis puts forth a vision of universal solidarity, a love that excludes no one. On the basis of this vision he reflects upon and critiques various aspects of our modern world. He expresses strong criticisms, for example, of neoliberal capitalism, excessive individualism, consumerism, xenophobia, racism, and narrow and aggressive forms of nationalism. Francis also reflects extensively on issues concerning violence, with particular attention to the death penalty and war. In his reflections on violence he both draws upon and deepens the insights and teachings of previous popes. It is these teachings of Francis concerning violence and his expansive conception of nonviolence, rooted in his vision of universal solidarity and communion, that will be the focus of this essay.

Pope Francis and the Death Penalty

Pope Francis in FT simply and firmly declares that the death penalty is ‘inadmissible’ and should be abolished. (no. 263) He grounds his opposition most fundamentally in a universal affirmation of human dignity. “The firm rejection of the death penalty,” says Francis, “shows to what extent it is possible to recognize the inalienable dignity of every human being and to accept that he or she has a place in this universe. If I do not deny that dignity to the worst of criminals, I will not deny it to anyone.” (no. 269)

Pope Francis’ unequivocal rejection of the death penalty is the culmination of a process of recent rethinking concerning capital punishment in papal teaching, a process that began with Popes John XXIII and Paul VI and intensified during the papacy of John Paul II. In his 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II declared capital punishment to be acceptable only in cases of “absolute necessity,” when there truly is no other way to protect society. John Paul also suggested that these cases of absolute necessity in modern circumstances are “very rare, if not practically non-existent” (no. 56). Francis goes further and removes even that slight amount of ambiguity with his straightforward affirmation that the death penalty is “inadmissible” and his firm call for its worldwide abolition.

Pope Francis in FT also expresses opposition to mandatory life imprisonment without possibility of parole, as well as calling for reform of prison conditions. “All Christians and people of good will,” Francis says, “are today called to work not only for the abolition of the death penalty, legal or illegal, in all its forms, but also to work for improvement of prison conditions, out of respect for the dignity of persons deprived of their freedom. I would link this to life imprisonment...A life sentence is a secret death penalty” (no. 268). For Francis, all punishment must have as its goal rehabilitation and be open to at least the possibility of the offender being reintegrated back into society. Only in this way can human dignity truly be respected.

Recent Catholic Teaching on War and Nonviolence

A process of critical rethinking concerning war, analogous to that concerning capital punishment, has also been taking place in recent papal teaching. The fruits of this rethinking are seen in FT. In

this process concern for human dignity and the call to universal solidarity have again played central roles. And here too a practice that was previously accepted in certain circumstances has begun to be more deeply, firmly, and unequivocally rejected.

Pope John XXIII. The recent process of papal/episcopal rethinking concerning war, like that concerning capital punishment, began especially with Pope John XXIII. In his 1963 encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John stated that it was “contrary to reason to hold that war is now a suitable way to restore rights which have been violated.” (no 127) While not rejecting traditional just war approaches, Pope John expressed doubt that any modern war could meet just war criteria given the dangers posed by modern weaponry to innocent civilians. He stressed instead the need to focus on peacebuilding through respect for a holistic conception of human rights. He also called for the development of a democratically organized “worldwide political authority” that would have sufficient power to effectively prevent war, including the authority to enact the social and economic reforms needed to address the systemic injustices that are often at the root of armed conflict (nos. 137-141).

The rethinking of Catholic approaches to war that Pope John XXIII initiated was taken up and further developed by the Second Vatican Council. In the 1965 document *Gaudium et Spes* the Council proclaimed the need to “undertake an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude” (para 80) This new attitude included affirmation of the legitimacy of principled nonviolence as a Catholic option, a stricter application of just war criteria, and a reaffirmation of Pope John XXIII’s call for the creation of a strengthened democratic international authority which would be “endowed with effective power to safeguard, on the behalf of all, security, regard for justice, and respect for rights” (no. 82).

Pope Paul VI: The papal critique of war and violence was further developed by Pope Paul VI, emphasizing the need to proclaim “at the top of our voice the absurdity of modern war and the absolute necessity of peace” (Paul VI, 1978). Along with condemning war between states, Pope Paul also sought to discourage revolutionary violence. In his 1975 encyclical letter *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul declared: “The Church cannot accept violence...as the path to liberation, because she knows that violence always provokes violence and irresistibly engenders new forms of oppression and enslavement... We must say and reaffirm that violence is not in accord with the Gospel, that it is not Christian” (no. 37). Such bold statements in opposition to violence in general (rather than focusing on distinctions between justified and unjustified violence) would become common in the teachings of subsequent popes.

Pope John Paul II: The papacy of John Paul II saw deepened attention to the negative consequences of all wars, a further move away from the use of just war language, and an increased emphasis on the power and effectiveness of nonviolent action to challenge repressive regimes. John Paul made many strong condemnations of all war and violence:

Today, the scale and horror of modern warfare - whether nuclear or not - makes it totally unacceptable as a means of settling differences between nations (John Paul II, 1982, p. 55).

Is it not necessary to give everything in order to avoid war, even the ‘limited war’ thus euphemistically called by those who are not directly concerned in it, given the evil that every war represents, its price that has to be paid in human lives, in suffering, in the devastation of what would be necessary for human life and development... (John Paul II, 1983).

It is essential, therefore, that religious people and communities should in the clearest and most radical way repudiate violence, all violence (John Paul II, 2002).

To attain the good of peace there must be a clear and conscious acknowledgement that violence is an unacceptable evil and that it never solves problems (John Paul II, 2005).

Violence is a lie for it goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of our humanity...; do not believe in violence; do not support violence. It is not the Christian way. It is not the way of the Catholic Church (John Paul II, 1980, no. 10).

Nothing is resolved by war; on the contrary, everything is placed in jeopardy by war. The results of this scourge are the suffering and death of innumerable individuals, the disintegration of human relations and the irreparable loss of an immense artistic and environmental patrimony. War worsens the sufferings of the poor; indeed, it creates new poor by destroying means of subsistence, homes and property, and by eating away at the very fabric of the social environment....After so many unnecessary massacres, it is in the final analysis of fundamental importance to recognize, once and for all, that *war never helps the human community*, that violence destroys and never builds up, that the wounds it causes remain long unhealed, and that as a result of conflicts the already grim condition of the poor deteriorates still further, and new forms of poverty appear (emphasis in original) (John Paul II, 1993, no. 4).

Pope John Paul II also highlights the effectiveness of nonviolent action. The end of communist systems in Eastern Europe, he stresses, was brought about by “the nonviolent commitment of people who, while always refusing to yield to the force of power, succeeded time after time in finding effective ways of bearing witness to the truth. This disarmed the adversary, since violence always needs to justify itself through deceit, and to appear, however falsely, to be defending a right or responding to a threat posed by others” (John Paul II, 1991, no. 23) “Those who have built their lives on the value of non-violence,” John Paul states, “have given us a luminous and prophetic example” (John Paul II, 2000, no. 4).

While frequently criticizing all war in very strong terms, it should nonetheless be noted that Pope John Paul II appears to leave open at least the possibility of a legitimate limited use of force or threat of force to prevent massive human rights abuses such as genocide. Any such use of force, he stressed, would need to adhere to very strict guidelines, especially concerning noncombatant immunity, would need to be very limited in scope, and would need to be conducted “in full respect for international law, guaranteed by an authority that is internationally recognized” (John Paul II,

2000, no. 11). In other words, John Paul seems to envision some type of UN-authorized peacekeeping mission with authorization to intervene to prevent serious human rights abuses.

Significantly, such a possible use of force is never described by John Paul as ‘war,’ but appears rather to be viewed by him as constituting a separate category, perhaps better thought of in terms of international policing. There is therefore no contradiction, in John Paul’s mind, between his bold, broad critiques of war and the possibility of support for limited multilateral police action in extreme circumstances. And even in this context, John Paul stresses that humanitarian intervention and the obligation to “disarm the aggressor” should not be understood as inevitably requiring the use of military force: “The Holy See does not cease to recall the principle of humanitarian intervention, that is not necessarily a military intervention, but every other kind of action aimed at ‘disarming’ the aggressor” (John Paul II, 1994).

Pope Benedict XVI: Like Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI made many blanket comments condemning war. “The Church,” said Benedict, “emphatically rejects war” (Benedict XVI, 2006). “War, with its aftermath of bereavement and destruction,” he asserts, is “a disaster in opposition to the plan of God” (Benedict XVI, 2007). Prior to becoming pope, responding to a question about Pope John Paul II’s outspoken opposition to the Iraq War, then Cardinal Ratzinger stated: “There were not sufficient reasons to unleash a war against Iraq. To say nothing of the fact that, given the new weapons that make possible destructions that go beyond the combatant groups, today we should be asking ourselves if it is still licit to admit the very existence of a ‘just war’” (Ratzinger, 2003). Thus Pope Benedict, like Pope John Paul II, suggests the very strong likelihood that no modern war can be legitimate.

Pope Benedict provides various reasons for his rejection of war, including the reality of effective nonviolent alternatives, the overwhelmingly negative humanitarian impacts of war, and the ways in which the use of violence undermines human dignity. “To put one’s trust in violent means in the hope of restoring more justice is to become the victim of a fatal illusion,” Benedict had stated in his earlier role as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. “[V]iolence begets violence and degrades man. It mocks the dignity of man in the person of the victims and it debases that same dignity among those who practice it” (Sacred Congregation, 1984, xi, par. 7).

Pope Francis on War and Nonviolence

In FT Pope Francis strongly reaffirms and takes even a step further the official Catholic critique of war and violence. “Every act of violence committed against a human being,” Francis states, “is a wound in humanity’s flesh; every violent death diminishes us as people. . . Violence leads to more violence, hatred to more hatred, death to more death. We must break this cycle which seems inescapable” (no. 227).

Francis emphasizes that the building of peace is a “never-ending task” (no. 232). A key part of building peace, he argues, is overcoming economic and social inequality: “[I]nequality and lack of integral human development make peace impossible” (no. 235). Francis also argues for the positive role of nonviolent social conflict in pursuit of justice and challenges understandings of forgiveness or reconciliation that do not include ending injustice and holding wrongdoers accountable for the harm that they have done:

We are called to love everyone, without exception; at the same time, loving an oppressor does not mean allowing him to keep oppressing us, or letting him think that what he does is acceptable. On the contrary, true love for an oppressor means seeking ways to make him cease his oppression; it means stripping him of a power that he does not know how to use, and that diminishes his own humanity and those of others. Forgiveness does not entail allowing oppressors to keep trampling on their own dignity and that of others, or letting criminals continue their wrongdoing. Those who suffer injustice have to defend strenuously their own rights and those of their family, precisely because they must preserve the dignity they have received as a loving gift from God (no. 241)

With regard to war, Francis asserts that “war is the negation of all rights and a dramatic assault on the environment” (no. 257). The “first victim of every war,” he says, “is the human family’s innate vocation to fraternity” (no. 26). Francis criticizes “all sorts of allegedly humanitarian, defensive or precautionary excuses” that are put forth to justify war, as well as the “manipulation of information” that wars generally involve (no. 258).

Francis acknowledges the presence of a notion of “legitimate defence by means of military force” in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, but argues that this notion has often been misused to improperly justify unjust wars. He also strongly suggests, like Pope Benedict XVI, the extreme unlikelihood that any modern war could meet the criteria of the just war tradition, especially the criterion of noncombatant immunity. At the conclusion of his reflections on war, Francis boldly states: “We can no longer speak of war as a solution.... Never again war!” (no. 258). Both war and the death penalty, Francis says, “are false answers that do not resolve the problems that they are meant to solve and ultimately do no more than introduce new elements of destruction into the fabric of national and global society” (no. 255).

Francis’ critique of war has been expressed in numerous additional contexts besides FT. In each case his language is unequivocal, condemning all war. “War,” Francis says, “is the suicide of humanity because it kills the heart and kills love.... Wars are always madness” (Francis, 2013). Asserting that there are always alternatives to war, Francis declares:

[W]ar is never a satisfactory means of redressing injustice and achieving balanced solutions to political and social discord. All war is ultimately, as Pope Benedict XV stated in 1917, a "senseless slaughter". War drags peoples into a spiral of violence which then proves difficult to control; it tears down what generations have labored to build up and it sets the scene for even greater injustices and conflicts.... War is never a necessity, nor is it inevitable (Francis, 2014).

A major contribution that Francis has made to Catholic Social Teaching on issues of war and violence are his reflections on nonviolence as a way of life and on the power of nonviolent actions. In his 2017 Message for the World Day of Peace, Francis presents the most lengthy, sustained reflection on nonviolence that has ever appeared in official papal teaching documents. In this document Francis calls upon Catholics to “make active nonviolence our way of life” and expresses his desire that “nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms” (no. 1) The ultimate grounding of commitment

to nonviolence for Christians, Francis contends, is Christological, the lived example of Jesus. “To be true followers of Jesus today,” Francis declares, “includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence” (no. 3).

Francis stresses in this World Day of Peace message that nonviolence is a powerful and effective way of actively opposing injustice: “Nonviolence is sometimes taken to mean surrender, lack of involvement, and passivity, but this is not the case...The decisive and consistent practice of nonviolence has produced impressive results” (no. 4). Francis mentions the efforts of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Muslim leader Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan who formed the world’s first nonviolent army in opposition to British colonialism; the women of Liberia who led a successful nonviolent movement that helped to remove a dictator, end a civil war, and elect the first woman as president of an African nation; and the ending of communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe through active nonviolence. Additional examples such as the overthrow through mass nonviolent action of dictatorial regimes in the Philippines, Chile, Serbia, Bolivia, South Africa, Indonesia, and numerous other cases could also be added. Indeed, never has the historical evidence for the power of nonviolent action been stronger.¹

Reflections on the Current State of Papal Teaching on War and the Death Penalty

As we have seen, a process of rethinking has taken place in official Catholic teaching with regard to the death penalty and war. In the case of the death penalty, that process has resulted in a clear and unequivocal rejection of this previously accepted practice. This rejection, in which the death penalty is condemned as ‘inadmissible,’ has been expressed in both a papal encyclical (*Fratelli Tutti*) and in a recent revision of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Official Catholic teaching now calls on all Catholics to reject the death penalty and to work for its abolition. While it is evident that not all Catholics have embraced this message, the teaching is nonetheless clear and increasingly known.

With regard to war, a similar transformation in official teaching has been taking place. The language of popes has become firmer and increasingly unequivocal in the rejection of all war. Knowledge of this fact among Catholics, however, is arguably much more limited than is knowledge of church teaching on the death penalty. Many Catholics, particularly in the United States, do not seem to be aware of the depth of recent papal critique of war and still uncritically assume that a ‘just war’ is possible, despite the very deep doubts on this topic expressed by recent popes. Similarly, the influence of papal teaching on the actions of Catholics serving in the military has clearly been minimal. While both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI condemned the Iraq War as not meeting ‘just war’ criteria, for example, only a handful of Catholic soldiers refused to participate in the war. More strikingly, almost no bishops publicly called upon soldiers to refuse to participate or pledged support for those who did. If the possibility of a ‘just war’ in contemporary circumstances is basically non-existent, as papal teaching has suggested, should any Catholics be joining national militaries in the first place? Should there, in the United States, be ROTC programs on Catholic campuses? Should not official Catholic teaching reclaim the dominant teaching of the early church which prohibited Christian participation in military service? (Hornus, 1980; Cadoux, 1982; Driver, 1988).

There is clearly much work that needs to be done to make papal teaching on war more widely known and embraced, including among the episcopate, and much education about alternatives to

war, including the power of mass nonviolent action, needs to be undertaken. Too often blind nationalism and uncritical acceptance of violence seem to prevail over papal teaching and, even more, over the nonviolent example and teachings of Jesus.

There is also need for the further clarification of Catholic teaching on the use of force or threat of force more broadly. As seen above, Pope John Paul II made a distinction between ‘war’ on the one hand, which he unequivocally rejected, and multilateral armed police/peacekeeping efforts on the other, which he viewed as sometimes justified to prevent genocide or other major human rights abuses. Pope Francis, like Pope John Paul II, speaks of the obligation to “disarm the aggressor,” but is rather ambiguous concerning what methods of doing so are to be deemed legitimate. “In these cases where there is an unjust aggression,” states Francis, “I can only say this. It is licit to stop the unjust aggressor. I underline the verb: stop. I do not say bomb, make war, I say stop by some means. With what means can they be stopped? These have to be evaluated” (Francis, 2014a). If any openness to the use of armed force is to be maintained (and it is unclear whether Francis intends this or not), the criteria certainly require deeper discernment. What constitutes the essential differences, for example, between a justified ‘humanitarian intervention’ or ‘police action’ and an unjustified ‘war’? Unless the criteria are sufficiently clear, there seems to be a grave danger that these criteria for ‘just intervention’ can be deeply abused just as the criteria for ‘just war’ so often have been. Christian theologian Walter Wink has argued compellingly that when the Church allows for any use of violence, this limited acceptance of violence opens the door in practice to a widespread acceptance of violence that far exceeds what the Church intends. Therefore, asserts Wink, it is essential that the Church reject all violence. Says Wink:

I resisted committing myself without reserve to nonviolence for so many years. I have slowly come to see that what the church needs most desperately is precisely such a clear-cut unambiguous position. Governments will still wrestle with the option of war, and ethicists can perhaps assist them with their decisions. But the church’s own witness should be understandable by the smallest child: we oppose violence in all its forms...That means, the child will recognize, no abuse or beatings. That means, women will hear, no rape or violation or battering. That means, men will come to understand, no more male supremacy or war. That means, everyone will realize, no more degradation of the environment. We can affirm nonviolence without reservation because nonviolence is the way God’s domination-free order is coming (Wink, 1998, p. 144).

If the Catholic Church is to continue to accept the possible legitimacy of Catholic participation in some very limited forms of violence (e.g. as part of multilateral ‘humanitarian interventions,’ as Pope John Paul II suggested), then it is crucial to explain why and how the negative implications that Wink warns against -- a much more widespread acceptance and practice of violence than church leaders intend -- can truly be avoided. I would suggest that these implications almost certainly cannot be avoided and that a fuller embrace of principled nonviolence, which Pope Francis himself has pointed to in his 2017 World Day of Peace reflection, would in fact be the most effective and faithful choice that the church can make.²

Conclusion

Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti* asserts that the death penalty is ‘inadmissible’ and should be abolished worldwide. The pope also presents a firm critique of war, making numerous statements condemning all war. In both cases Francis has reaffirmed and deepened critiques that have been growing in strength in papal teaching since the 1960s. Much work, however, remains to be done to educate Catholics (and others) about these teachings and to more fully explore their many and far-reaching practical implications.

Endnotes

¹ For books exploring the theory and recent history of nonviolent action, see Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000); Gene Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (Boston: Porter-Sargent, 2005); Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.)

² For a fuller discussion of some of the issues raised in this paper, see John Sniegocki, “Pope Francis, Nonviolence, and Catholic Teaching on War,” *Expositions: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 13:2 (2019), 152-173, <https://expositions.journals.villanova.edu/issue/view/182>. For a discussion of the challenges of moving Catholic social teaching from the realm of theory to practice, see John Sniegocki, “Implementing Catholic Social Teaching,” in *Faith in Public Life*, College Theology Society Annual Volume 53, ed. William Collinge (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 39-61.

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