

THE APPEAL OF A RADICAL THEOLOGY OF PEACE THOMAS MERTON – *PACEM IN TERRIS* – POPE FRANCIS

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Abstract

The standpoint of the Vatican on the war in Ukraine, pointing to the victims on both sides of the front and demanding an end to the fights, irritates international diplomacy. This article wants to show that this position is grounded in *Pacem in Terris* and *Gaudium and Spes* and may have been informed by US Trappist monk Thomas Merton. In the second part, a summary of his pamphlet *Peace in the post-Christian Era* is given. In the third part, the Vatican Documents of 1963 and 1965 are summarized. In the fourth part, a sketch of Pope Francis' peace theology is made. In the conclusions, the continuities and innovations of this radical peace theology are indicated. Adapted to the conflicts of our time, this theology confronts us with the tragedies of war and portrays a vision of peace that invites us to change our behaviour and mindset.

Keywords: Thomas Merton, Pope Francis, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Pacem in Terris*, Peace, War, Ukraine

1. A Pope of Peace who Irritates

On Good Friday, the Friday before Easter, Christian churches commemorate the death of Jesus on the cross. The pope, who is also

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the bishop of Rome, traditionally celebrates this feast in the Colosseum, the antique arena where Christians were brought to death during popular plays. The way of the cross, passing different scenes to re-enact the suffering of Jesus, always had the goal of bringing this suffering closer to life, society and the time of the faithful. Under Pope Francis, these scenes have become more political in character and content, and they address social problems in our societies. In 2022 and 2023, one scene caused international and diplomatic tensions. In 2022, the meditation at the thirteenth scene was written by a Russian and a Ukrainian family, and the cross was carried by a Russian woman and a Ukrainian woman. In 2023, the text at the tenth scene was written by a Ukrainian youngster and the prayer was by a Russian youngster. In both years, this choice led to outrage by Ukrainian diplomatic and church leaders who were of the opinion that Russia had to be condemned as the aggressor in the war more clearly and that victims and perpetrators could not be put side by side as easily as was done in the ceremony.

This irritation came in addition to the inconvenience generally felt about the role of the Vatican in the Ukrainian conflict – let's call it the war that is fought there. It is expected that the Pope speaks out more clearly against the aggressor, the Russian Federation, and its president Vladimir Putin in person. The pope keeps the door open to the Russian Orthodox Church and its leader, patriarch Kyrill – it is regarded as an ungracious sign of ecumenism. The diplomatic initiatives of the Vatican are considered insufficient. In the meantime, the pope keeps talking about peace and disarmament while at the same time Ukraine is surrendered by an aggressor and should have the right of defense and thus of weapons, or not? In short, papal speech and acts are not only characterized as 'too little, too late' but also as inappropriate and not realistic. Some analysts therefore, are of the opinion that the pope has made himself diplomatically irrelevant in this conflict, in this war. Still, in my eyes, what the pope does is exactly what is important: to work on reconciliation and try to see the opponent as a human being.

The teachings of this pope on war and peace in various encyclicals, letters and speeches, moreover, is more coherent and groundbreaking, and because of that more solid and radical (in the original sense of *radix* – rooted) than many people think at first sight. The result is astonishing: a completely new way of teaching of the Church appears that inspires and motivates action. It does require, however, some concentration to understand (and accept) these new ideas. But, as always in church teaching, there are also some continuities. This

contribution focuses on three publications to indicate these continuities and innovations. First, it concentrates on Thomas Merton's *Peace in the post-Christian era*. The suggestion is, that it is this essay or pamphlet that inspired both *Pacem in Terris, Gaudium et Spes*, and Pope Francis (see also Van Iersel 2018). Then, a summary of *Pacem in Terris* and *Gaudium et Spes* is given. Finally, a description of Pope Francis' theology of peace is made on the basis of a publication by Pax Christi Germany. In the conclusions, not only parallels and new directions in church teaching become clear, but also the input and value of this radical peace theology in the current debates and conflicts around the globe.

2. Christians and Peace

The Trappist Monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968) wrote his book on peace in the post-Christian era in 1962, but it appeared much later after his death. The reason why is explained in the introduction (of the Dutch edition) by the American peace activist Jim Forest (1941-2022), who knew Merton very well. Merton wrote his book in a hot phase of the Cold War: the Cuba Crisis played up, the United States and de Soviet Union renewed and expanded their arsenal of atomic weapons, the Berlin Wall was just built, and the first steps into the Vietnam War were set. But also, in the United States itself, there was a lot going on: McCarthy's hunt after 'communists', everybody who promoted peace and international detente, had just ended and the struggle for civil rights of the coloured population came up. And with John F. Kennedy, for the first time, a Roman Catholic was president of the United States; a sign that the Church became more and more accepted as part of American society. In this context, with so many interests and potential pitfalls, the abbot-general of the Trappist order forbade the publication of this critical and political work of Thomas Merton. But Merton sent copies of his manuscript to his friends and also to the pope.

When we read the fiercely written text of Merton, we understand why his text was censored: he writes out of a deep contemplation on the problems of his time and draws radical, completely independent, and for sure no easy conclusions. His emotional argument can be sketched at a few points. First, he protests against the arms race of his time. This policy, in his eyes, only results in tension, turmoil, distrust and hatred instead of the balance of power that was the goal of the policy. Through the arms race, the people at both sides of the Iron Curtain, in East and West, are caught in a totalitarian system of fear, which is needed to get social and political support for the arms race.

Furthermore, he points out that the United States are the cause for a lot of violence in the world to maintain its own (material) welfare. For Merton, this shows a moral deficit: politics, society lack the arguments to build a more peaceful world, and there are not enough arguments to curb its own violence. Democracy should be strong enough so that it can be defended without weapons, or said differently: who would or could conquer a country with a robust democratic culture? The proclaimed need of an arms race thus points at the deficiencies of democratic societies.

Meditating the arms race – it was possible to destroy the world several times with the nuclear weapons at disposal – Merton comes to a condemnation of the concept of a just war. He values the concept but concludes that every modern war after World War II, even if it should be ‘just’, with the weaponry available, would become unjust very soon. The mass destruction that is possible with modern weapons, whether nuclear or conventional (he points at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also at Dresden and other German cities), is most unjust because these weapons do not discriminate between military and civilians. According to Merton, Saint Augustin was wrong in his theory about the just war, as the Church Doctor thought that the ‘good’ could be achieved with violent means. But these violent means inevitable evoke everything that is most evil in the human being (Achterhuis 2008). In times of nuclear weapons, this is very dangerous. As every war in our times will lead to a nuclear war the goal must be to abolish war as a means to solve international problems, not to justify modern war with a theory from antiquity.

With this last goal in mind, Merton is of the opinion that Christians of his time do not feel the appeal of the message of the Gospel. They follow the arguments of the military-industrial complex so much, that they fail to proclaim their own message. That is why his book carries the title *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. The problem with Christianity, according to Merton, is that the interests of the West, NATO and the Church have merged. That is why the churches no longer weigh their own interests on the basis of faith, but on the basis of a ‘scientific realism’ that propagates deterrence, they comply with the arguments that justify the arms race and the diabolic picture of ‘the enemy’. But, as Merton argues, as soon as we take over the methods of our adversary, we are already occupied by evil. Christians choose the option of war because they are blind and have opinions that support it. Other options that could relax international relations (such as prayer, faith, or Christian social action) are not under consideration or

even put into practice because the West feels itself secure through their superior position in the arms race. Merton poses critical questions at this machiavellistic power play: is there still hope for sincere Christian behaviour when the death of others is included, where are values like sacrifice for someone else, Christian justice, and the emphasis on the common good? He concludes: among Christians, disproportional violence has become the norm, charity has become exotic, and the individual is forgotten in weapons of mass destruction.

According to Merton, war must be a compelling problem of conscience for every Christian. He gives this thesis a spiritual and theological foundation. When God has become human, no Christian is ever allowed to be indifferent to the faith of other people. Christians have the duty to treat every other person as if it were Christ Himself, and to respect the life and rights of our neighbors. Christianity as the revelation of love means further that love is the key to life itself and to the whole meaning of the cosmos and history. When Christians are without love, thus use violence or comply in deterrence and arms race, they bereave all other people of access to this central truth that gives meaning to existence. The fight against war for Merton, moreover, is not only against the climate of war in society, but also against our own violence, fanaticism, and greed. That is why the Christian fight for peace may not be confused with defeatism. This fight asks for a deep spiritual mood and must be rooted in spiritual and moral principles that are now based on fear (already uttered by Merton in 1949 – Merton 1952, pp. 70-72), which leads to distrust and violence. Every Christian has the duty to build an international community in which the right of other people is respected and guaranteed.

3. *Pacem in Terris - Gaudium et Spes*

One year after Merton finished his manuscript, in 1963, Pope John XXIII published his letter *Pacem in Terris*. Although it was written during the Second Vatican Council, the encyclical was not part of it. The idea of the encyclical is that true peace can only be attained when the divine order is maintained in public life. Therefore, the pope points out several aspects of these principles for public life. He starts with the dignity of the human person and the rights that follow from this: the right to live in dignity, to adhere to moral, cultural, and religious values, for marriage, and for association in economic and political life. There are also some duties that follow from this image of man, most of all the duty to respect the rights of others and to collaborate to bring the rights of each other into practice. The development of the person

should also stay in the center of the relationship between the person and the 'political community' of which he is a member. Political communities should respect and defend the natural rights of the person, sustain him in his development as a person, and keep the general wellbeing of all members of the political community in mind.

In the second part, the pope deals with the right order of relationships between political communities. As persons, they are bestowed with rights and duties, and in their relationships, they should maintain truth and justice – central concepts in Catholic Social Teaching. Then, the pope addresses several potential conflicts in international relationships and suggests solutions for them. Among these conflicts are the treatment of minorities in national states, political refugees and migration, solidarity with developing countries in the south, and respect for the freedom of other states. The theme to which the pope devotes the most attention is that of disarmament. He complains that so many resources are devoted to the arms race, while citizens and countries are suffering from shortages. As a result, the pope continues, people live in fear and this fear, is real as these weapons can destroy the world and humanity. For the well-being of the world, the pope therefore asks for a ban on these weapons and to build a world order based on mutual trust instead of weapons.

This is something that was already addressed in the introduction and that is developed further in the third part of the encyclical. In the introduction, the pope notices that it seems as if the mutual relationships of states can only be based on violence, whereas the divine order proposes another basis. The relationships between states have become more intense the encyclical notices, problems in one state affect the well being of another, economic relationships make states more dependent on each other. The pope appeals to the states to keep the universal well-being of humankind in mind and concludes that international and multinational organizations are needed to provide this orientation on the universal bonum commune. He therefore strongly supports these international institutions, above all the UNO, so that states solve their mutual problems through consultations and international juridical agreements, and not by brute force. Since then, this has been a continuous theme in Catholic Social Teaching on peace.

The standpoints presented in *Pacem in Terris* were repeated and radicalized in *Gaudium et Spes*, the last document of the Second Vatican Council signed by Paul VI. Chapter 5 of the second part, with the title 'some very urgent problems' deals with the care for peace and the

promotion of the international community. Because of the unity and interdependence of humankind, the pope stresses that we can only live together when we are devoted to peace – which for Christians is the fruit of justice and charity. Every Christian is called to promote these values – in his personal life as well as in his social and political life – so the council praises those who are committed to non-violence. Looking at the destructive power of the modern weapons arsenal, the council condemns their use for the complete destruction of cities or peoples and also condemns the arms race that refrains from providing the necessary means to the poor and creates tensions instead of diminishing them. Christians should therefore strive to abolish war, develop trust and fight hatred among the nations, and support the international institutions that can contain the tensions between the nations and instead work for the international common good.

4. *Mensch des Friedens*

The theology of peace of Pope Francis has three important lines. The first line is an absolute ban on nuclear weapons. This is nothing new for the Church, because the opinion that nuclear weapons, because of their indiscriminatorial character (they do not discern between civilians and military, between guilty and not guilty) and because of their disproportional destruction (also on the long term and the consequences for the environment), are morally condemnable, has existed since Vatican II, as we have seen above. During the period of the Cold War, nuclear weapons were, however, tolerated – implicitly and by various bishop's conferences – as a means of deterrence, although their use was condemned. Nuclear weapons were also accepted in the *status-quo* situation of the Cold War, from which the Church strove for the diminishing and abolition of these weapons and the expansion of civil and juridical structures of consultation and diplomacy. Because these ideas were not put into practice by the international state community, Pope Francis radicalizes the position of the Vatican: he not only condemns the use of nuclear weapons and their use as a means of deterrence, but also the possession and the (technical and scientific) development of these weapons – radical abolishment. With this change, of course, the pope wants to direct a way to a world free of nuclear weapons: there is no more space for nuances, loopholes, and excuses, if we want to have a future as human beings, these weapons must disappear from the globe.

The second line is one of interreligious dialogue, or, more precisely, an interreligious peace theology. Four elements can be discerned from

this theology. To begin with, a positive valuation of religious pluriformity. The pope assumes that God speaks to humans in a plurality of cultures and languages and that this is also visible in religious diversity. And because God is love, religions have the obligation to promote good things in people. Then, the pope criticizes fundamentalism. Religions that are connected with worldly power and interests, or that are so rigid that they limit people's freedom of choice, are rejected – also in the Church itself, as we know. That's why he, thirdly, points to a wrong understanding of 'mission' that is associated with colonialism and proselytization and is looking for a mission in dialogue that pays respect to the other. And lastly, Francis gives examples of peace activists from Catholic and non-Christian traditions alike (e.g., M. Gandhi), especially when they, grounded in prayer, search in dialogue for the common wellbeing. For Francis, Christianity is still important, but he wants to promote it in an equal dialogue with the world and prevent abuse of religion by political and economic systems.

The last theme in Francis' peace theology is the absolute taboo on violence, which abolishes the traditional teaching of a just war and transforms this to a teaching of a just peace. The pope urges that EVERYTHING should be done to prevent a war. The use of violence to solve problems is irrational in the face of the enormous power of destruction that goes along with modern weapons. Therefore, we can no longer talk about a 'just war', as the churches have done for decades and centuries. Consequently, he condemns arms trade and production and urges that the resources are used to diminish inequality in the world. Francis discusses the alternative of non-violence as a means and as a goal. Violence only leads to more violence whereas dialogue and the commemoration of the victims of previous conflicts should lead to a reflection on a peaceful way of life. In this reflection, as discussed above, he wants to integrate insights from other world religions. Finally, he wants that the roots of conflicts are addressed (exploitation, human trafficking, discrimination, manipulation for private interests, and economic inequality) thus eliminating the reason to take up weapons.

5. Principal Peace Ethics

Popes never say who was their direct inspiration or ghostwriter, and the same is true for documents of a council. Therefore, it is a guess that Merton was an inspiration for John XXIII, *Gaudium et Spes* and Francis. It is, however, striking that with *Pacem in Terris* and *Gaudium*

et Spes a more radical/principal peace theology than before was declared that continues in Francis, and that Merton was one of the rare authors in the Catholic world who proclaimed this theology already in the early 1960's. Continuities are the prevention or better abolition of war as a means to solve conflicts, criticizing the arms race and prohibiting weapons of mass destruction, the transformation of the doctrine of a just war, the praise of non-violent action, and the idea to prevent war by solving the roots of conflicts. But most of all, the idea that peace is the fruit of a spiritual life makes an appeal to Christians to see the enemy as a person (already proclaimed after WWI – Sengers 2016, pp. 165-169). The new developments of Pope Francis are most of all the radicalization of these themes and the interreligious dialogue. For our times, and the present conflicts, I cannot say that I agree with their position (and concrete conclusions in the present political situation are left open by Pope Francis), I feel the appeal of Merton, the doctrinal documents and Pope Francis. If Christians say they are people of peace, how seriously is this taken by the faithful, by churches and by Christian political parties?

Thinking about what could be at stake in this principal peace theology, I want to suggest that it cares about the souls of people. It is this that all condemnations, disapprovals, and reservations in this theology want to preserve, an aspect sometimes forgotten by all 'rational' arguments in the theory of war and violence. When someone is killed, a piece of the perpetrator also dies. When we no longer see the human in our adversary, and only speak about him in abstract and deprecatory words, no justice is done to the other/Other. When we eliminate our emotions like compassion, sympathy and charity, we admit that evil will take power over us. When we destroy nature and culture through gun violence in the long term, we damage creation. It is said that extreme situations, like war, bring to the fore the best characteristics of people like heroism, sacrifice, courage, and perseverance, – especially in relation to your own group and comrades (Melissen 2023). More often, however, in these extreme situations, the worst characteristics in people show up: hatred, prejudices, blind uncontrolled violence, and retaliation – especially in relation to the other group. And these negative aspects might be politically justified, valued by medals and letters of esteem, the military stays behind with a feeling of emptiness that he has to carry with him for the rest of his life. That is why Merton, popes and council emphatically show a different way, the way of peace, to start with Christians, but also to other religions, and finally to all political communities and societies.

These damages – to the soul, to Creation and to our neighbour – are most visible in the use of weapons of mass destruction. Merton, the popes, and the Council especially have nuclear weapons in mind. Whoever thought the use of these weapons was obsolete was brought back to reality due to the nuclear rhetoric in the war in Ukraine and the cancellation of the agreements between the Russian Federation and the United States on the ban of nuclear weapons. But also, conventional weapons do not distinguish between civil and military victims – think about the use of scattered munition and landmines in Ukraine. In the argumentation of the texts analyzed, I miss a story from the Bible that explicitly criticizes the use of this kind of weapons the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18,16-19,29). God wants to destroy both cities because of their sinful behavior, but Abraham poses the question to God: ‘Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?’. Then Abraham starts to deal with God: will the cities be destroyed when there are 50 righteous, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10? God promises not to do it. Finally, these ten are taken out of the cities which are then destroyed in what can be called a chemical attack of immense proportions. God was on the verge of committing a war crime, and Abraham asked him not to sacrifice the good for the bad people. The question of Abraham could also have been posed in Dresden, Hiroshima, and Mariupol.

The thoughts of Merton, popes, and Council make clear that war is won by morals as well, ultimately not by brute force alone. That leads to dissatisfaction that continues for decades, there are examples of centuries, that do not bring sustainable peace. Wars are also won by morals: how are (wounded or death) enemies treated, are you able to limit the use of violence, can you discern between civilians and the military, don’t you attack the Red Cross? This is all written down in international agreements. But a war is also won by morals that rise above ordinary laws of war: can you see the adversary as a human being, are you prepared to negotiate in every situation, are you willing to empathize with the troubles of your adversary, and can you think about the construction of peace already during the conflict? In the war in Ukraine, we see that morals matter very concretely. The one who commits to juridical, ethical, and religious norms is sympathetic to the world; information about war crimes by Ukrainian forces was held back by Amnesty International. But these higher morals and ethics should not only be maintained from a tactical or publicity point of view you should really believe in them and live after it. That is what our

texts discuss, and when you take this seriously, it becomes very difficult to start a war. And that is the intention of these texts.

In the present context, the position of Merton, the popes, and the Council poses a problem, a dilemma. What about Ukraine, what do they want to tell us? May civilians, may the country not defend itself with weapons? Should they only utter peaceful protests? Is it the fault of Ukraine (and maybe of the West as a whole) that they did not take seriously the grievances of the Russian Federation and solve the root of the conflict? Is it okay or not okay that the West delivers heavy weapons to Ukraine, thereby increasing the risk of escalation? To be honest, that cannot be the intention of the radical peace theology discussed in this paper. I admit that for me it is difficult to accept conclusions like this and I do not know if these conclusions are correct (as far as I know Pope Francis never called to stop arms delivery or that Ukrainians should stop fighting and switch to nonviolent actions). There are, however, two points that make me agree with their position. First, as discussed above, I see their appeal as a care for the soul, as an ideal that we should aspire to, as a way that we should go. As long as we live in a broken world, we should hear this ideal of a peaceful world and try to adapt it to our own existence. Second, you may say to your brother and sister, to your neighbor, 'until here and no further' and draw this red line with clear measures, including violence. But mind the first part of the sentence: also, our adversary, a fellow human, brother or sister, a child of God, is a victim of a system that diminishes his personhood. This insight should limit and regulate the use of violence to the minimum.

6. Conclusion

From a perspective like this, Merton, the popes, and the Council confront us with the tragedies of war (about tragedy, see Sloomweg 2023). Nobody aspires to a war, I know very few soldiers who are warlike. But there are violent conflicts, and we have to be prepared for them. Everybody in the military learns to use violence in a controlled and proportional way. But everybody knows that when something happens to you or to your unit, these limits break down. It is, of course, fine that there are rules and agreements that regulate the actions on the battlefield. But we also know that battles are won when you trespass these lines. In these tragedies, excuses, rationalizations, conflicts of interest, and lies, the radical peace theology portrays a future that is not yet there but, in the light of the many victims and damage caused by war, should be there, we should make work of it. And that is why

the example given by the pope in the Colosseum irritates: to put Russians and Ukrainians together, to let them talk and pray with each other, to portray them as humans and victims, and to reflect their suffering in the story of the meaningless suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. It irritates us because it reminds us that what we are doing is wrong, and therefore it is important that he sets this sign.

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