



MISSIONARIES IN ACTION

DOMINICAN MISSION FOUNDATION

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April 2023

Vol. 60 & No. 4

The Fading of Faces



Dear Mission Friends:

It is not easy to watch—months of primitive trench warfare distilled into video montages in which soldiers are gassed, stabbed, crushed by tanks, shot through the head in front of their fellow soldiers and left face down in the mud until their bodies are collected and thrown in mass graves. It's non-stop, virtueless brutality, a tug-of-war (pun intended) over a few hundred feet of blood-soaked mud, its players numbed by hunger and trauma. Soldiers are treated as cattle, rushing them in as soon as they arrive at the front without any real training, many soon wondering what they're fighting for and whether they'll ever make it home. It can at times be seen as less of a war about one side versus the other than it is about children whose whole lives are in front of them being asked to kill each other.

No, I am not describing the evening news updates on the war in Ukraine. I'm referring to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the recent Academy Award-winning movie, the most current film rendition of Erich Maria Remarque's 1928 book about WWI



WWI crucifixions: Austro-Hungarian soldiers executing Serbians.

that was fought in filth, hunger, and desperation more than 100 years ago, leaving 17 million dead soldiers. In the movie, when the moment of the armistice struck, everybody simply stopped, gathered their things, and walked off, illustrating the pointlessness of it all. There was no need to exhibit any more bravery; there was no rousing soundtrack to indicate anyone's victory; there was no redeeming point to convey. The movie's director Edward Berger said, "I hope it helps us to understand that **nothing good can come from war**. We all know it, but we seem to be forgetting it at every turn."

Tragically, history is indeed destined to repeat itself, over, and over and... Shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Pope Francis, who has never shied away

from preaching about the absurd folly of war, invited us to reflect on how mankind ignores the lessons of history: "Various regional wars and in particular the current war in Ukraine show that **those who govern the fates of peoples have not yet learned the lesson of the tragedies of the 20th century**." His latest book, *Against War: The Courage to Build Peace*, is full of the "suffering of the victims in Ukraine, of the faces of those who suffered the conflict in Iraq, of the two world wars of the 20th century, and of the historical events of Hiroshima [and Nagasaki] ... And so many wars are going on in the world right now, causing immense pain to innocent victims, especially children," he notes. "These are the many forgotten wars that reappear from time to time before our inattentive eyes."

Note: Most of the words of Pope Francis are from various audiences he had this past year, but I have combined some quotes for emphasis and formatting purposes. LW



Left, Ukrainian POWs being paraded through Donetsk; right, Ukrainian girls being trained on the use of guns in battle.

Now, more than a year into the war in Ukraine, which began, according to Putin, as a “special military operation” but has grown to be the largest military conflict in Europe since WWII, neither side is close to victory or surrender. Rather, like the WWI movie, there is a seemingly daily tug-of-war between who’s winning, who has killed and injured the most, who has the biggest remaining cache of weapons. Even rough numbers are difficult to find or believe, but after hours of research, I think it is safe to say that about 200,000 soldiers (both Ukrainian and Russian) and about 10,000 Ukrainian civilians have been killed or severely injured. The Pope laments, “I think ...of all the soldiers who fell ... The Ukrainian mothers and the Russian mothers, both have lost their children. How many children must be killed, wounded or orphaned, torn from their mothers? I weep with you for every little one who, because of this war, has lost his or her life---in each one of them the whole of humanity is defeated. **So many innocents are paying for the madness, the madness of all sides, because war is madness.** ... When we allow ourselves to be devoured by this monster represented by war, everyone loses—we destroy God’s creatures, we commit sacrilege, and we prepare a future of death for our children and grandchildren.

What still has to happen, how many deaths before opposing forces give way to dialogue for the good of people, peoples, and humanity?”

Months earlier, the Pope preached, “I am in the midst of two peoples whom I love. I have a very great affection for the Ukrainians and their liturgy, which I learned as a boy. And I have a high esteem for the Russian people, for Russian humanism. Just think of Dostoevsky who still inspires us today [not to mention Tolstoy, Chekhov, Pushkin, Turgenev, Gogol, Gorky...]. The cruelty is not of the Russian people but of the mercenaries, of the soldiers who go to war as an adventure, and those who hire them.” There have been many reports of young Russian soldiers who had no idea they were being sent off to an actual war in Ukraine. Many of the troops on both sides have been forced into battles they didn’t care about, or stopped caring after they were steeped in, as described by Pope Francis, the “**flowing rivers of blood and tears,**” as in the WWI movie, where the 17 year old German boy Paul has lost all the friends he started with, and in the end is, according to a reviewer, “too broken in flesh and spirit to remember why the war started in the first place.”

Doubly ironic, the Russian Tolstoy illustrates war’s universal futility and its tragic pawns, writing in *War and Peace* that for opposing soldiers, “the same question arose...: ‘For what, for whom, must I kill and be killed?’” The war in Ukraine demands great endurance, not only from the tired, unwilling soldiers on both sides, but from all citizens who would stand up for goodness and truth and peace, if they could.

Last June the Pope said, “In addition to the incalculable damage ... in terms of victims, both civilian and military, there is the energy crisis; the financial crisis; the humanitarian crisis for so many innocent people forced to leave their homes and lose their most cherished possessions; and, the food crisis, which affects a growing number of people throughout the world, especially in the poorest countries. In fact, the Ukrainian conflict is having enormous repercussions in North African countries, which are 80% dependent on grain from Ukraine or Russia. The blockade of wheat exports from Ukraine, on which the lives of millions of people depend, aroused great concern. Please do not use wheat, a staple food, as a weapon of war.”



Left, trench warfare during WWI; right, trench warfare in Ukraine 100 years later...

The Pope reiterates in his book a plan first proposed in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli tutti* that “the money spent on arms and other military expenditures be used to set up a global fund to finally eliminate hunger and foster development in the poorest countries.” As logical and practical and joyfully hopeful as that sounds, would it ever be possible to pierce the stronghold of the military industrial complex?

In WWI, three million alone died at an imaginary front line that never moved by more than half a mile, a battle between the Germans and French on which *All Quiet on the Western Front* is based. Knowing that the war was all but over and that the armistice was to take effect in just a few hours, the German general, for nothing more than pride, ordered his men back into one final, hopeless battle. Those who refused to return to the battlefield were executed. One reviewer calls the movie a “horrificing indictment [of WWI] in which lives were sacrificed on the whims of powerful, thin-skinned men.”

Again, not much has changed. The Pope says he is angered and saddened “knowing that behind all the tragedies [in Ukraine] are hunger for power and arms trafficking,” calling “those who profit from war and the arms trade ‘criminals who kill humanity.’” And later he refers to “the mutual blackmail of a few powerful people [who are] silencing those voices of humanity calling for peace.” On the global phenomenon of resurging nationalism and populism, he warned against the dangers of all “-isms” because, he said, “they hypocritically sow social and political wickedness.”

Nearly every time he has had an official audience in the past year, the Pope has spoken out about the war in Ukraine, hoping to keep its victims in our prayers. “I carry in my heart all the many victims, the millions of refugees and internally displaced persons, the families torn apart, the elderly left alone, the lives broken and the cities razed to the ground. The time that passes does not temper our pain and our concern for those tormented people. Please, let us not get used to this tragic reality! Let us always have it in our hearts.”



And later, “**Please, please: let us not grow accustomed to war.**” A favorite quote of his, from Italian bishop Don Tonino Bello, is that all wars “**find their root in the fading of faces.**” When we erase the other’s face, it’s easy to use our weapons and to kill. But when we allow ourselves to see their faces, and pain, it becomes more difficult to disfigure their dignity with violence. There was a fleeting scene of hope for mankind in the movie when Paul found himself in his trench next to a French soldier who was dying. Feeling the raw hate for this enemy as he was taught, he was deeply irritated by the rattle of dying coming from his throat. After a while, though, he allowed himself to ‘see his face and his pain.’ The innate compassion he felt for the suffering of a fellow human being surfaced and he comforted him in his last moments.

The Pope actually talks about seeing a ray of hope when he visited Iraq not long ago:

“I was able to touch with my own hands the disaster caused by war, fratricidal violence, and terrorism; I saw the rubble of homes and the wounds of hearts, but also seeds of hope for rebirth.” He thought sure he’d be able to speak of hope and rebirth in Ukraine by this Easter. But “news about the war, instead of bringing relief and hope, [only] confirms new, increasingly horrendous atrocities, cruelties carried out even against civilians, women, and defenseless children.”

In raising the topic that has been veiled up till now, Pope Francis recently asked, “What about the fact that humanity is once again faced with the nuclear threat? **It is absurd.**” The immediate hope is that his words against war and against the use of nuclear weapons will be heeded, as were those of a pope 60 years ago (John XXIII during the Cuban Missile Crisis). Dedicating his entire speech to the war in Ukraine, he called for serious negotiations leading to an immediate ceasefire in the interests of the two countries involved and of all humanity. He mentioned, for the first time, both the president of the Russian Federation and the president of Ukraine, pleading with the former to stop, for the love of his people, this spiral of violence and death, and with the latter to be open to serious proposals for peace. **“Peace built on rubble will never be a real victory!** Peace is not achieved with weapons, because they don’t defeat hatred or the thirst for domination, which will just re-emerge in other ways. The only way out is peace and the only way to get there is dialogue.” He pleads with all of us to get involved responsibly.

“A violence that destroys life has been unleashed, a luciferous, diabolical violence, to which we believers are called to react with the strength of prayer, with the concrete help of charity, with every Christian means so that weapons may give way to negotiations. Everyone must commit themselves to demilitarize their own hearts,...and then to defuse and disarm violence. We must all become pacifists, demanding not just a truce that only serves to provide time to re-arm, but a **true peace.**”

Lesley Warnshuis

Just below, young soldier praying in Ukraine trench; middle, Dominican friar in Poland organizing the day’s food supplies.



*Dear Lord,
Convert the hearts of those who resort to arms and protect those who work to promote peace. May our work toward peace in our daily decision-making serve as a small act of resistance against evil; may our offering of peace to others overwhelm the world. Amen.*

Dear Mission Friends,

As I assured you in a previous article on the war in Ukraine, the fact that the U.S., among many other countries, has sent Ukraine billions of dollars and tons of weapons and ammunition does not mean that your donations don’t count for much. We have close ties to the Dominican communities in Ukraine and Poland, ensuring that your gifts are received by them directly and totally and used for humanitarian purposes only (food, clothing, baby supplies, medical supplies, and housing needs). **Our goal is to help reduce the suffering of innocent victims.**

Fr. Jarosław Krawiec, O.P., Provincial Vicar in Ukraine, wrote to us marking the sad one-year anniversary: *“Ukrainian mothers, children, the elderly, sick, and injured...have found shelter and tender care in our Dominican priories...Our ministry of mercy toward so many victims of the war...would have been difficult, if not impossible, without the financial support shown to us by...so many people of good will. We would like to thank each of you most sincerely for your compassion...”*