

**Presentation for the virtual assembly
of the Conference of European Churches
“The role of religion in the on-going conflict in Ukraine”,**

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For 4 months the world can observe the war of the Russian Federation in Ukraine. We can ask ourselves: is it really a Russian-Ukrainian war or something more? And even more important for our context: what should be the role of the Churches and their faithful in this conflict of the states? Before I come to the situation in Ukraine, it would be useful for the explanation of my vision to remind you of two citations from Pope Francis.

The first one is on the role of NATO: at the beginning of May the pontiff talked about “the barking of NATO at Russia’s door”. He supposed that there was a broader context of the current war. This is a confrontation not only between two concrete neighbour states, but also involvement of the transatlantic military-political bloc into this conflict on the territory of the former Soviet Union.

I can’t help but tell you an anecdote about this confrontation that was told with a specifically Odessa humour. Two men have a conversation on the current war. One emigrated from Ukraine some decades ago, the second has been living in Ukraine till now. The first asks: “I have heard that Russia is fighting against NATO. And what are the results of this struggle?” The second answers to him: “Yes, it is a really serious war. The Russian army has already lost over 30 thousand soldiers killed, many weapons etc.” His colleague asks again: “And what about the second part of the conflict?” The answer was surprising: “The NATO troops have not yet arrived on the battlefield”.

From this story we can see different levels of the current conflict. First of all it is the struggle between two armies of the concrete states. On the other hand, it is an imaginary war of Russia against the greatest evil of this world. If we speak about the “evil” from the Church perspective, we should not think about NATO. Instead we cannot but remind ourselves of the words of Jesus Christ: “My Kingdom does not belong to this world” (John 18:36).

Even harsher are the words from the first Epistle of St. John: “We know that we are God’s children and that the whole world is in the power of the evil One” (1. John 5:19). This kind of rhetoric became usual in the sermons of Patriarch Cyril. I know his speeches

from the time 20 years ago and this kind of criticism was usual for him already in that time. But instead speaking in biblical terms on the “fallen world” he is criticizing the Western world or western civilization as a whole.

The Pope is seeking for possible explanation and rapprochement of positions with the Russian side – both the patriarch and the president. Often it is at the expense of the Ukrainian side. Here it would be enough to remind the case with the “Way of the Cross” service on Good Friday in Rome. In the situation of the Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine it seemed for many impossible that two women of Russian and Ukrainian origin read together a meditation on the passions of Christ. But in the light of the Resurrection of Christ the earthly matters such as life of concrete human beings can seem to be not really important. This could be a possible explanation of the Vatican’s position.

However we should see here an important difference between the criticism of the NATO expansion from the positions of Pope Francis and of the Patriarch Cyril. The first tries to be over the conflict whereas the second thinks in the paradigm of symphony with the Russian state. I would even say that Patriarch Cyril subordinates his Church to the state power.

Here comes the time to remind the second citation of Pope Francis. After many attempts for possible rapprochement we have heard harsh words of Pope Francis again, this time critical to the patriarch of Moscow. In his explanation of the previous conversation with Patriarch Cyril the Pope said: “A Patriarch cannot become Putin’s altar boy”. He added: “I don’t understand any of this. Brother, we are not clergymen of the State, we cannot use the language of politics, but of Jesus. We are shepherds of God’s own holy peoples, which is why we must seek peace and silence the weapons”.

From my perspective between these two citations of the Pope there is a large distance. We can be critical to the expansion of NATO to the east. But the Church should have another language than the states and international law in its explanation of the military conflict. The church should not subordinate its activity to the will of the state.

After these reflections on the broader context we come to the positions of the Ukrainian Churches in the current situation. I belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and explain as soon as I can my understanding of its position. I believe that our leadership is thinking in a similar way as Pope Francis is. On the one hand we can remember the situation as in May 2015 our Primate Metropolitan Onufriy refused to stand up during the reading in

the Ukrainian Parliament of the names of the Heroes. In that time he explained his behaviour through attempts to bring closer an immediate end to the war. Only a year after occupation of Crimea and Donbas' territories one could believe like the Pope today: "We must seek peace and silence the weapons". In that time, after the "Revolution of dignity" one could suppose that the conflict was first of all between two parties of Ukrainian society and the Russian participation was only an additional factor.

The situation of 2022 and the reaction of our Church leadership was very different. Already on the first day of the Russian invasion our Primate Metropolitan Onufriy called it a "fratricidal war" and called all faithful of our Church to defend our state. He said: "First of all, I call on you to intensify penitential prayer for Ukraine, for our army and our people, I ask you to forget mutual quarrels and misunderstandings and to unite with love for God and for our Motherland".

This appeal is not in the line of the mentioned "symphony" between the state and the Church, as it seems to be in the Russian context. The observers can give you many examples of tension between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian state. It was especially remarkable in the presidential term of Petro Poroshenko. The conflict around the granting Tomos of autocephaly in 2019 was an outstanding example of the confrontation between the Church and the state.

From our perspective the state should not impose its will and its position in the church matters. With the words of the Pontiff, "we cannot become altar boys" or serving instrument in the hands of the state, the Church cannot subordinate itself to the state. I believe that this attitude of dissociation from being an instrument in the hand of the state is a very important feature for the identity of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in the last 30 years. The Church and its leaders should be with their faithful and for them and not for the state.

But in the last years there were a lot of critics of our Church in the public sphere of Ukraine. In the situation of the on-going conflict with Russia many people were inclined to think in the framework of symphony or cooperation between the Church and the State: either you are together and ready to serve the Ukrainian state, or you make the same with the Russian state.

That is why on May 27. 2022, only one month ago the Council of our Church made a crucial decision. This Council is the highest body of our Church with representatives from bishops, clergy, monks and lay people. Its main decision consisted in radical change of our

statute. It proclaimed its independence and self-governance from the centre in Moscow. The main goal was to reject all the features that have connected our Church to the Church in Russia. Since now we are not depending on the decisions in Moscow at all.

This radical change of status of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is now not formed. In the World Orthodoxy there is no procedure of receiving the autocephalous status that would be acceptable for all the local Churches. Besides, three years ago in Ukraine there has been established another church structure which is usually called “Orthodox Church of Ukraine”. Its autocephalous status granted by the Patriarchate of Constantinople is recognized by four local Churches from 14. Nevertheless, the existence of this Church gives cause for some experts to describe our current status as a “grey zone”.

In any way nowadays our Church is in the process of transition. On the one hand it has not been possible any more to maintain its connection to the Moscow Patriarchate with Patriarch Cyril as its Primate. On the other hand there is no accepted procedure of receiving a new autocephalous status. But most important is concurrent relationships to the newly established “Orthodox Church of Ukraine”. This conflict has been existing for 30 years and needs time and patience for its resolving.

The time of the war brings us new challenges. We need to find a solution that would be acceptable for us, for our leadership and believers for decades after the war. There is a tangle of different aspects in our relationships with other churches, with our state and with the civil society of Ukraine. But what is most important is to remain a Church of Jesus Christ and not to become an “altar boy” of the state – both of Russia and Ukraine.