

HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE DEFENSE AND PROMOTION OF THE HUMAN PERSON - Life, Dignity, and Peace -

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“Man is the way for the Church”¹. We open this presentation by paraphrasing the beautiful words of His Holiness, Pope John IInd by asserting in our turn that “man is the way for the army as well”. Through which we imply that the authenticity of an institution is given by its being in the service of man. The mission of the Church is that of guiding man to encounter our Lord Christ and to be, thus, saved. In fulfilling this, the Church also relies on a variety of human realities, among which the army holds a significant place. The institution of the army has as its main purpose the defense of the human being, of nations, of peoples, and of the intangible human values: life and dignity on the personal level, and peace on the social level. In our presentation we will focus on life, dignity and peace. In order to render the teachings of the Church on these matters, we will first draw an outline of the soldier, pondering on the light and darkness of our contemporary civilisation.

The Soldier Serving Man and the Church

Many soldiers - throughout history - have distinguished themselves through their spirit of sacrifice that often reached heroism and even martyrdom when their Christian faith was at stake.

In several instances in the pages of the New Testament the figure of the soldier receives special attention. Mathew describes the miracle of healing the servant in the house of a Roman centurion (*Mt* 8:5-13). The

¹ Pope JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptor Hominis* (14th March 1979), 14.

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officer's intercession for his suffering servant is thus emphasised, and also his trust in the power of Jesus. In *The Acts of the Apostles*, Peter brings to a Roman centurion the news that Christ had risen from the dead, and the latter eagerly receives baptism together with his entire family (*Acts* 10).

Martyr soldiers have been recorded since the very beginnings of the Church history. Although we know but few details about the martyr saints in our region from the early period of Christianity, we could recall those from Tomis², among whom we also count St. Marcellin, a soldier in the Roman army. For he refused to offer sacrifices to the gods, as it had been imposed through the orders of Emperor Licinius – who was attempting to re-establish the pagan cult – so he was ferociously beaten and thrown afterwards into the sea on 3rd January some time during the years 320-330 A.D.

Although set in a totally different age and place, I also wish to mention St. Martin of Tours (France) in the 11th century, renowned for his act of fraternal charity. As a young soldier, he once encountered on his way a poor freezing beggar shivering with cold. He therefore took off his own mantle and after cutting it in two with his sword, he gave the beggar one of the halves. During that night, Jesus appeared to him in his dream smiling, wrapped in the very same mantle. True love for one's neighbour is genuinely expressed through the mechanism of sharing with the others. Only by means of mutual involvement in sharing can there be offered the answer to the major challenge of our time: that of building a world of peace and justice in which every man would live with dignity. This could become true if there ruled "a world-wide pattern of authentic solidarity".³ We should emphasise that the army and its members have a special vocation for solidarity and sharing.

Light and Darkness

Shifting once again the scene, we recall that on 10th December 1940 the United States solemnly published the *Universal Declaration of Human*

² Their names are recorded in the Syrian Martyrology, in the Martirologium Hieronymianum and especially in the Constantinopolitan Synaxars, but most of them remained anonymous due to various disasters that destroyed or buried the history of their sufferings and their glorious end.

³ Pope BENEDICT XVI evoked the image of St. Martin when saying the *Angelus* prayer on 11th November 2007.

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Rights. The document reflected the response of the whole humankind to the atrocities of the World War II, affirming its own unity based on the equal dignity of all people and emphasising as the core of living together as human beings the observance of the fundamental rights of every person and of every nation: this meant a decisive phase in the difficult and involving course towards peace and mutual understanding. Yet, has mankind remained faithful to this commitment, to this promise?

Unfortunately, in spite of past mistakes and failures, humankind continues to live in strong division and powerful conflicts that *cast dark shadows upon its future*. Large areas on our planet are involved in increasing tensions, while every responsible person cannot but be alarmed at the danger caused by the fact that there is an ever increasing number of countries in possession of weapons of mass destruction. There are still many wars going on. Whole areas throughout the world are still being the scene of military conflicts and attempts that affect both neighbouring regions and nations, threatening to seize them within the turmoil of violence. Unfortunately, on a more general level, there is again to be noticed an increase in the number of *states implied in the arms race*: even developing countries use a significant percentage of their low internal product to purchase weapons. With regard to this abominable trade, there are multiple responsibilities: there are industrially well-developed countries that make a fabulous profit out of weapon trade, and there are dominant oligarchies in so many poor countries which attempt to consolidate their own condition by purchasing more and more sophisticated weapons. During such difficult times, it becomes a major necessity that every well-meant person should rally, so that concrete agreements for *efficient demilitarisation* could be reached especially in the domain of nuclear weapons.⁴

Having this opportunity, I once again renew my appeal, hoping to be the spokesman of all those desiring a peaceful future throughout the world.

Life

“Any well-regulated and productive association of men in society demands the acceptance of one fundamental principle: that *each individual man is truly a person*. His is a nature, that is, endowed with intelligence and

⁴ See VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Gaudium et spes*, 79-89.

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free will. As such he has rights and duties, which together flow as a direct consequence from his nature. These rights and duties are universal and inviolable, and, therefore, altogether inalienable”.⁵ This truth regarding the human person is the key to solving any problem concerning the promotion of peace. To teach this truth is one of the most fruitful and long-lasting ways of affirming the value of peace. One inherent requirement of promoting peace refers to the respect for life.

Thus, we quote: “To be actively pro-life is to contribute to the renewal of society through the promotion of the common good. It is impossible to further the common good without acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all the other alienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop. A society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts values such as the dignity of persons, justice and peace, but then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devaluated and violated”.⁶

The Dignity of Human Beings

Reverting to the assertion that “man is the way for the Church” we intend to emphasise that the human being represents the final purpose of society. Society, the state, all the adherent institutions do exist only for the sake of the human being. One of the documents of the social doctrine of the Church teaches the following: “The defense and promotion of the human person’s dignity have been entrusted to us by the Creator; to these men and women at every moment of history are strictly and responsibly in debt”.⁷

The respect towards the human person originates in the principle that “everyone must consider his every neighbour without exception as *another self*, taking into account first of all his life and the means necessary to living it with dignity”.⁸ “With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on

⁵ Pope JOHN XXIII, *Pacem in terris* (11th April, 1963), 9.

⁶ Pope JOHN PAUL II, *Evangelium Vitae* (25th March, 1995), 101.

⁷ Pope JOHN PAUL II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (30th December, 1987), 47.

⁸ VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Gaudium et spes*, 27.

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sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's will".⁹

From Defending the Person to the Armed Defense

Is the armed defense or intervention justified? Are they ways of serving the dignity of the human beings? During a speech delivered in 2001, Cardinal Ratzinger – then the prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith – declared that a person or a community has a right to armed defense in case of aggression, but he emphasised that even then certain fundamental rights should be observed: “The father of a family who sees his own attacked has the duty to do everything possible to defend the family, the lives of the persons entrusted to him, including, if need be, with proportional violence”.¹⁰

In order to support the same idea, the Cardinal gave a historical example, that of Poland which opposed the Nazi aggression. “According to the Christian tradition, one cannot exclude that, in a world marked by sin, there might be an evil aggression that threatens to destroy not only values and people, but also man's image as such. In this case, to defend oneself in order to defend the other could be a duty”.¹¹

There are, however, precise circumstances that impose armed defense. First, this has to be “the only possibility to defend human lives, to defend human values”¹²; then “the means for this defense [should] always respect the law. In such a war, the enemy must be respected as a man, as well as his fundamental rights”.¹³

Towards the closing of his address, Ratzinger stated that “everything must be really pondered in conscience, also considering all alternatives”.¹⁴ In the light offered by the experience of recent years, the Cardinal invites us to re-assess this tradition, bearing in mind “the new possibilities of

⁹ *Ibidem*, 29.

¹⁰ Cf. RATZINGER, Joseph, Speech on the topic *Armed Defense Might Be a Duty in Certain Cases* (14th November, 2001).

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

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destruction, of new dangers”. For instance, the right to defense cannot justify the use of atomic weapons.

Addressing the question of fundamentalism, Ratzinger stated that it all stems from “an abuse of the Name of God” – religion is being, thus, politicised and subjected to power, while becoming in itself a factor of power.

One year earlier, in 2000, His Holiness Pope John Paul II used in his *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace*, the term “humanitarian intervention”, which he then explained as follows: “Clearly, when a civil population risks being overcome by the attacks of an unjust aggressor and political efforts and non-violent defense prove to be of no avail, it is legitimate and even obligatory to take concrete measures to disarm the aggressor. These measures, however, must be limited in time and precise in their aims. They must be carried out in full respect for international law, guaranteed by an authority that is internationally recognised and, in any event, never left to the outcome of armed intervention alone”.¹⁵

The Human Person, the Heart of Peace

Building a world of good-will requires the conversion of men and women to “the truth of peace”.¹⁶

Addressing the General Assembly of the United Nations on October, 5th, 1995, Pope John Paul II pleaded that “we do not live in an irrational or meaningless world. On the contrary, there is a moral logic which is built into human life and which makes possible the dialogue between individuals and peoples”.¹⁷ Definitely a world which originates from the Everlasting Word of God cannot lack its logic, and therefore it is built on reason and not on irrationality.

This very human reason has led to the formulating of the human rights. If, nevertheless, these rights are founded on a shallow view of the person, how can they avoid becoming shallow themselves? Pope Benedict

¹⁵ Pope JOHN PAUL II, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace* (1st January, 2000), 11.

¹⁶ See VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Gaudium et spes*, 77.

¹⁷ Pope JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the United Nations General Assembly* (5th October, 1995), 3.

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XVI offers an eloquent answer: “We can see how profoundly insufficient is a *relativistic conception of the person*, when it comes to justifying and defending his rights. The difficulty in this case is clear: rights are proposed as absolute, yet the foundation on which they are supposed to rest is merely relative. Can we wonder that faced with the ‘inconvenient’ demands posed by one right or another, someone will come along to question it or determine that it should be set aside? Only if they are grounded in the objective requirements of the nature bestowed on man by the Creator, can the rights attributed to him be affirmed without fear of contradiction. It goes without saying, moreover, that human rights imply corresponding duties. In this regard, Mahatma Gandhi wisely said: ‘The Ganges of rights flows from the Himalaya of duties’. Clarity over these basic presuppositions is needed if human rights, nowadays constantly under attack, are to be adequately defined. Without such clarity, the expression ‘human rights’ will end up being predicated of quite different subjects: in some case, the human person marked by permanent dignity and rights that are valid always, everywhere and for everyone, in other cases, a person with changing dignity and constantly negotiable rights, with regard to content, time and place”.¹⁸

Conclusion

Making a review of the right to life, to dignity and to peace as perennial human values, we intended to present the convergence between the mission of the Church and that of the army as an institution, both being in the service of mankind and defending its fundamental rights. We have relied on the teachings of the Catholic Church, but have also considered the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. A crucial issue is that of the present relativistic view on the human person. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* from December, 10th, 1948, is a vivid proof of the contemporary search for a universally accepted foundation for defending and promoting the human being. This foundation receives a special light from our faith in Christ, the Incarnate Word, the Image of our Heavenly Father and an example for each human being.



¹⁸ Pope BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace* (1st January, 2007), 12.