

# Putin's War & Pope Francis

## The attack on Ukraine poses challenges for the Vatican (Excerpt)

By Massimo Faggioli

Russia's invasion of Ukraine raises important questions for the Vatican about its role in international relations and, more specifically, about the geopolitical vision of Francis's pontificate. ...

At Vatican II and through much of the post-Vatican II period, in the eyes of Rome, ecumenism with Eastern Orthodox churches in Europe went hand in hand with the work for peace and the encouragement of political and military *detente* between the United States and the USSR.

After the invasion of Ukraine, this is no longer possible, given the formal and perhaps irreparable split within Orthodoxy, which is mostly owing to the rupture between the patriarchates of Moscow and Constantinople. Further, the Russian Orthodox Church itself has since come to serve as the religious arm of Russia's nationalist, expansionist ideology; it is not the persecuted Church of the Soviet era. But the heirs of the



KGB and the hierarchies of the Moscow patriarchate have become strange bedfellows, which does recall the days of the Soviet Union. The subjection of Russian Orthodoxy to Putin's regime has consequences that go far beyond Russia and far beyond religion: it is part of the ethno-nationalist, "revenge of God" phase of global politics [where religion has once again come to the fore in public space, including politics].

This has also widened the gap between the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church. Pope Francis speaks the language of nonviolence while Patriarch Kirill has adopted the language of the crusade. And since the invasion, relations have grown more tense not only within Eastern Orthodoxy, but also between the bishop of Rome and the Patriarch of Moscow. On March 3, Kirill met with the papal nuncio in Russia, then released a statement characterizing the Russian Orthodox Church as peacemaker but also containing a subtle warning to Rome (and others) not to interfere: "It is very important that Christian Churches, including our Churches, voluntarily or involuntarily, sometimes without any will, would not become participants in those complex, contradictory tendencies that are present on the world agenda today." In his now notorious March 6 homily, Kirill cast the war in metaphysical terms and as a response to gay-rights movements and western values. In his March 13 homily, he reiterated that view and even accused Jews in Ukraine of limiting freedom of religion for the Ukrainian Orthodox loyal to Moscow. One is tempted to remember with nostalgia the times when there was talk of "ecumenical winter," a crisis in the encounter between churches of different traditions. The relations between the Vatican and Moscow are back to square one, or worse. This lifting of the veil on the apocalyptic view of the relations with the West by Russian Orthodox leaders (Patriarch Kirill, as well as Metropolitan Hilari-

***This silence reflects the Holy See's wishes not to be perceived as favouring a particular side.***

on Alfeyev, the chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate) should be a wake-up call for leaders of the Catholic Church who have romanticized Russian Orthodoxy in the process of resisting Church reforms pushed by Western liberal theologians.

The Vatican's diplomatic efforts are also running into challenges. The icy reactions from Russian Ortho-

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dox leaders in Moscow and from Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to the Vatican's outreach reveals Putin's low regard for Rome's diplomatic initiatives. And the United States has been less than enthusiastic about the Vatican's offers to help mediate negotiations, which even within the Vatican walls don't have unanimous support. The city of Rome traditionally has been and continues to be an important neutral venue for peace talks. But the value of papal diplomacy has been reduced in the eyes of the West, in part because of the Vatican's slow reaction to Russian threats, and because of continued doubts in American intelligence circles (even after the departure of Donald Trump and his secretary of state, Mike Pompeo) about its position on China. Things could get more complicated should Ukraine survive as a sovereign and independent state, since that may actually contribute to greater radical nationalism with religious overtones. And not only in Ukraine: Russian aggression and threats to the security of the continent could further push Catholics in Europe in the direction of nationalism, continuing the trend we've seen in Poland and Hungary the last few years.

Russia's war in Ukraine, where there is clearly an aggressor and an attacked, tests the doctrine of "positive neutrality" articulated by Cardinal Parolin in 2019. But more fundamentally it tests the Holy See's overall approach to international relations. Europe has been thrust into uncertainty at a time when Pope Francis has long since pivoted the Vatican toward the "global south" and Asia, in recognition of the global Church's demographic changes. The return of great-power war in Europe may force Rome to look again at the old continent. For the foreign policy of the Holy See, the invasion of Ukraine means a return to a situation more like 1917 and the inter-war period of the twentieth century than to the age of *Ostpolitik* of the 1960s and '70s. And it could also change the long-term picture for the Vatican more than the attacks of 9/11 did.

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(Source: *Commonweal*, [Putin's War & Pope Francis | Commonweal Magazine](#) accessed 28/04/22)



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