

«A Gift and a Challenge»: The Concept of Peace in the Social Teaching of the Church

„Dar i zobowiązanie”:
koncepcja pokoju w myśli społecznej Kościoła

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Abstract: This article aims to present the essence of the Catholic concept of peace based on the critical analysis of sources from social documents of the Church and papal teaching and literature on the subject. Based on the biblical foundation and personalistic anthropology, the vision of peace appears intensely realistic and integral, first embracing its internal harmony and then extending into social relations. A novelty compared to other approaches is the linking of peace with the category of the common good. Peace in Catholic social thought is presented as a key element of the social order, which is moral by nature. In the context of some contemporary pacifist trends, the need to de-ideologize concern for peace is emphasized.

Keywords: peace; the right to peace; Catholic Social Teaching; principles of social life; pacifism; truth

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest prezentacja istoty katolickiej koncepcji pokoju w oparciu o metodę krytycznej analizy źródeł w postaci dokumentów społecznych Kościoła i nauczania papieskiego oraz literatury przedmiotu. Oparta na biblijnym fundamencie oraz na antropologii personalistycznej wizja pokoju, jawi się jako głęboko realistyczna i integralna, obejmując najpierw jego wewnętrzną harmonię, przedłużaną następnie w relacje społeczne. Nowością w porównaniu z innymi ujęciami jest powiązanie pokoju z kategorią dobra wspólnego. Pokój w katolickiej myśli społecznej jest przedstawiany jako kluczowy element ładu społecznego, który z natury ma charakter moralny. W kontekście niektórych

współczesnych nurtów pacyfistycznych podkreślono potrzebę odideologizowania troski o pokój.

Słowa kluczowe: pokój; prawo do pokoju; nauczanie społeczne Kościoła; zasady życia społecznego; pacyfizm; prawda

Introduction

The range of issues pertaining to war and peace has occupied and continues to occupy an important place in the Church's social teaching both in Catholic theological reflection, and in the magisterial dimension, that is, in the official documents of the Church. A telling example of the latter is the singling out of this issue in the structure of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, the most important document on the mission of the Church in the world (Second Vatican Council 1965).¹ The issue of peace is addressed in the annual papal messages announced since 1968 for the World Day of Peace, established on the initiative of St. Paul VI. The *Magna Carta* of the theology of peace is the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, published in 1963, showing the relationship between peace and respect for human rights. One chapter of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, which should be considered a contemporary exposition of the Church's social thought, is also devoted to peace. The chapter in question is Chapter XI, entitled "The Promotion of Peace" (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, 488-520 [pp. 213-26]).

Although the issues of war and peace have most often been correlated in the social doctrine of the Church and accompanying theological reflection, today the Church's social thought gives firm priority to the teaching on peace. It can be assumed that starting with the teachings of Pius XII, Pope of the World War II and Cold War period, and especially his successor St. John XXIII, the mainstream statements of the Magisterium of the Church, as well as academic research, began to oscillate around the issue of peace. It is also important to recall in this context the now somewhat forgotten Benedict XV, Pope of the

¹ This author has devoted several earlier studies to the subject of peace and it is worth citing them here – on the one hand as an extension of the present considerations, and on the other as precursors for some of the issues raised here. They present, among other things, the issue of war, including humanitarian interference, which in some cases can be considered to be a defense of values, including peace, and thus treated as just or ethically justified (Gocko 2005). In addition, contemporary threats to peace are analyzed from the perspective of Christian anthropology, especially cultural anthropology, in which the question of cultural identity occupies an important place (Gocko 2006). Finally, the Church is shown as a subject of special concern for peace in the modern world. The ultimate foundation of peace, on which all social life is grounded, and at the same time the basic reason for the Church's concern for peace, is the human person (Gocko 2016).

Great War period, elected a month after the Sarajevo bombing, whose teaching on peace is being rediscovered and appreciated, and he himself is sometimes called the prophet of peace or the first Catholic pacifist.

I. Realism and a Universal View of Peace

Before undertaking a more detailed analysis of the concept of peace in the social thought of the Church, two introductory remarks of a substantive nature should be made at this point. First, the Christian view of war, and perhaps above all (thinking positively) of peace, is a *profoundly realistic* one. It is true that man has always longed for peace, but this desire has sometimes lost out to anger or hatred. Inwardly torn man has led to divisions between people and whole nations, giving rise to all sorts of assaults, aggressions, and wars. Therefore, the Church constantly proclaims that everything possible must be done to avoid resorting to the tool of force and violence, and thus also warfare. The reality of the world in which we come to live today indicates that certain actions involving the use of force are inevitable. This issue will be addressed more extensively in the last part of these considerations.

The second distinctive aspect of the Christian vision of peace is that *peace is one*. As St. John Paul II wrote years ago in one of his Messages for the World Day for Peace, “there can be only one peace” for it is a “value with no frontiers” (John Paul II 1986, 1). Thus, it is about the kind of peace that a person discovers first within him- or herself, and then extends it in interpersonal relations in the family, neighborhood, and workplace. This peace carries over into community-wide and international relations. Given this, since the source of unrest and war is the human heart, a kind of disarmament must first take place within it. This perspective is the essence of the Christian message: it is not dangerous that man has a weapon in his hand, but that he has a heart armed with hatred and aggression. This is the crux of the matter.

The issue of peace is among the most complex and ambiguous concepts in human thought. A broad range of meanings can be stretched between the notion of peace as an *armistice during war*, inherent in classical Graeco-Latin thought, and the vision of peace as the *fullness of life and the fulfillment of justice* (Mal 2:5), which in turn was proclaimed by the Judeo-Christian tradition and taken over by the social thought of the Church. The two approaches differ diametrically: in the former, the natural state is a state of war; in the latter, it is a state of peace.

2. Biblical Foundations of Peace

In a biblical-theological perspective, true peace is ultimately “God’s gift to man” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005, 488), and is a basic attribute of God (cf. Judg 6:24) (Pace 2005). The Hebrew word שלום (*shalóm*), etymologically meaning “fullness” and “completeness,” expresses the concept of peace in all its fullness of meaning. Peace is the fruit of God’s blessing on His people: “May [the Lord] turn His face toward you and give you peace” (Num 6:26). Peace brings fertility (Isa 48:19), prosperity (cf. Isa 48:18), happiness (Isa 54:13), liberation from fear (Lev 26:6) and deep joy (Prov 12:20).

שלום (*shalóm*) foreshadows the Messianic times and the Messianic vision of peace, when “they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks” (Isa 2:4). The Messiah’s kingdom is a kingdom of peace. He Himself has been called “the Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6). Jesus is “our peace,” as St. Paul will say (Eph 2:14). And He Himself proclaims: “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God” (Mt 5:9).

Based on a theology of peace rooted in the Bible (Léon-Dufour 1990), statements by the Magisterium of the Church, beginning with St. John XXIII, emphasize the interdependence between the gift of spiritual peace and the obligation of Christians to lay the foundations for social and political peace. Peace as God’s gift, originating in human hearts, must find its extension in social structures, must transform the entire fabric of individual and collective life.

3. Peace in the Context of the Common Good and Human Rights

The view of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which defines peace as the “stability and security of a just order” and portrays it – along with respect for the human person and social well-being and development – as one of the three essential elements of the *common good*, is particularly pertinent. The catechism adds that these three elements of the common good must be read integrally, for they are interdependent. Without respect for the human person, and therefore his or her rights, but also without ensuring a certain level of well-being, there will be no peace and no genuine concern for the common good. Likewise, without peace, the person and his or her rights cannot be fully respected, and ensuring his or her well-being and development becomes impossible or at least severely limited (Catechism 2010, 1909).

Not only are the essential elements of the common good interdependent, but the same reciprocal bond can also be pointed out between the right to peace and other human rights. Respect for human rights is a condition for peace, and respect for human rights is impossible without peace. There is no error of

petitio principii here, since peace is, so to speak, a prerequisite – necessary, though not sufficient – for the respect of human rights, and the right to peace is, in a sense, a guarantee for the respect of all other rights (Nagórny 2004).

4. Peace as the Foundation of Social Order

The second feature that characterizes contemporary Catholic teaching on peace is that it is inscribed in the broader perspective of *social order*, which by its very nature has the character of moral order. In this light, one recalls the conviction formulated in the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* that a lasting peace is based on four pillars, or fundamental values, and at the same time principles of social order, which since the time of John XXIII used to be called the “John quadrilateral.” These are truth, freedom, justice, and communal love – with the latter being referred to interchangeably as solidarity (John XXIII 1963).

These four pillars: truth, freedom, justice and communal love/solidarity express and summarize everything that can be said about building a social order based on respect for the dignity of the human person and concern for the common good. Through them, the call to preserve peace, which is not given once and for all, takes on an unusually clear shape. For it is not a question of peace “of sorts,” but of order and harmony in social and international life, and of such security for all which is based on truth and justice, which finds expression in respect for freedom, and which reveals its fullest expression in love. Building social life on these pillars of social order is also the best safeguard against aggression, violence, war, and all armed conflicts.²

Of these four pillars of peace, as defined by John’s quadrilateral, the reference made by John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* to peace or, better, the link between peace and the truth about man, should be considered particularly significant, also because of the theological and moral profile of these considerations. First, that is because the nature of the two realities shows analogous characteristics. In both cases, one can point to their absolute (divine, supernatural) and moral (natural, human) nature (John XXIII 1963; John Paul II 2003). Secondly, the link between truth and peace makes it possible to recognize the latter as the fruit of many attitudes and ethical principles based on the message of the Gospel.

² It is worth recalling at this point a slightly different vision of the foundations of peace proposed by Pope Francis in his exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* in the form of four principles guiding the development of social coexistence and peacebuilding. He refers to them as evangelical criteria and formulates them as follows: the first principle – time outweighs space; the second – unity outweighs conflict; the third – reality is more important than ideas; the fourth – the whole outweighs the part (Francis 2013, 221-37; Drożdż 2018, 63).

5. Peace and the Truth about Man

Pope Wojtyła expressed his deep conviction that truth *strengthens peace from within* whenever it leads to full respect for man in his nature and destiny (John Paul II 1985; Juros 1987). Consequently, therefore, at the genesis of the *right to peace* stands neither the will of society nor the decision of the state. Nor does the fact of being a subject of the right to peace depend on the social or state-wise status of man. The *raison d'être* of the right to peace lies in the status belonging to the human person.

In this context, Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2006 Message for the World Day of Peace, cited St. Augustine's definition of peace as "*tranquillitas ordinis*" (Augustinus 1955, XIX, 13), that is, as a reality flowing from order that finds its locus in divine reason (Wnętrzak 1998). Peace, then, means a situation that "ultimately enables the truth about man to be fully respected and realized" (Benedict XVI 2006, 4).

The coupling of peace with the full truth about man, and therefore with the discovery of his own identity in all dimensions of his existence, should not be regarded as an expression of the idealistic rhetoric of papal documents, but is a testimony of fidelity to a consistent concept of man, who has come to live in a world also marked by violence and war. Man's identity must also include the truth of his sinfulness, which distances, but does not cancel, the prospect of creating an ideal society, free of violence, wars and oppression, as it is difficult to cure people of the temptation of selfishness. This only confirms that peace does not belong to the category of easy goods, and its achievement in social life demands embarking on a path marked by hardship and the need for patience.

The pursuit of peace on the part of man is a call for him to discover of his own identity, and thus to learn about his own nature, to confront his own self, with the manifestations of the culture he discovers around him and co-creates himself. In this context, John Paul II stated that man's question about the value of peace must ultimately be combined with a reflection on the meaning of his existence in its personal and communal dimensions (John Paul II 1982).

Therefore, the Christian concept of peace presupposes its rooting in the deepest layers of the human person, where man's relationship to the good, to others and, ultimately, also to God is resolved (John Paul II 1984). It is man's nature, it is his heart that is the place where the desire to live in peace is born. This means that the basis for building peace should be found not so much in the assumptions of a political philosophy, an economic system or a religious creed, but rather in a reality based on the assertion of the dignity and rights of every human person.

Such a close connection between peace and human nature indicates, as already mentioned, the *moral character* of peace. Although socio-political, tech-

no-economic or military conditions are important in the discourse on peace and significantly influence its shape, they are not of primary importance compared to anthropological-ethical points of reference. Peace is primarily a moral event (John Paul II 1992; John Paul II 1986; Francis 2014).

The analyses presented above confirm that the Catholic concept of peace is based on *personalist anthropology*. The foundation of peace, on which all social life is built, is the human person. This means that the first threat to social order is the loss of the truth about man, the loss of man's own identity, which will also result in a flattening of the horizon of human peace.

6. Christian Vision of Peace vs. Pacifism

In the last part of the analysis of the Christian concept of peace, it is worthwhile to dwell a little more on the need to *de-ideologize* the concern for peace. This issue sometimes raises misunderstandings and leads to the identification of the Catholic ethics of peace with uncritical pacifism. As already mentioned, the concept of peace in the social teaching of the Church is thoroughly realistic. The Church, making the promotion of peace one of the main dimensions of its mission in the world (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2005), points out that violence and aggression constantly accompany interpersonal relations; they also take the form of armed conflicts on an international scale, and petrify into structural violence on the scale of nations, as well as in the international level. Hence, while emphasizing the Church's concern for peace, it should be noted already at this point that it is not preaching the cult of *peace at any cost*, that is, not at the expense of the fundamental moral values of man and society.

The ethics of peace is far from indiscriminate pacifism, which should be regarded as a form of an ideological takeover of peace efforts, for maintaining peace at any cost can lead to various kinds of capitulations, including the abandonment of justice and safeguarding of human rights. Moreover, it can lead to emboldening unjust aggressors by giving them an even wider scope for destructive action. Giving up on standing up to acts of violence can lead to even more violence. The fathers of the last Council remind in this context with great realism that "a monumental struggle against the powers of darkness pervades the whole history of man. The battle was joined from the very origins of the world and will continue until the last day, as the Lord has attested" (Second Vatican Council 1965, 37).

The right to defense in the mainstream Catholic tradition was not considered alien to Christian thought. On the contrary, it was affirmed and contextualized by relating it to current cultural and historical conditions, which – it must be emphasized – are always marked by sin. Pacifism as a distinguishing

feature of Christians was evident only in the initial period of the history of the Church, and as an attitude of renunciation of violence, it resulted from a simple transfer of the Gospel message of love, which included the postulate of active avoidance of violence given the complex socio-political situation they found themselves in. This was the sense given to the Sermon on the Mount (Second Vatican Council 1965) or the words addressed to St. Peter: "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Mt 26:52).

Christians of the first centuries were aware that they were mere "foreigners" within the Roman Empire. Their daily concern was spiritual warfare and the hope of Christ's imminent return, rather than defending the empire with weapons in hand. It was only the awaited Kingdom of God that was to become their true homeland. Refusal to kill was seen as an absolute imperative by Christian writers and apologists such as Tertullian, Lactantius, and many others. For a disciple of Christ, the proper attitude was, above all, martyrdom (Torre 1989).

Due to the limited scope of this study, a more detailed discussion of the nature, history or typology of pacifism will be omitted here. Certainly, pacifism seen as a theoretical position (philosophical, moral and religious) is something else from pacifism as a social movement (Zwoliński 2003). The otherwise legitimate axiom of non-use of force put forward by various pacifist movements often appears as a manifestation of lofty ideals detached from political and social reality and historical conditions (Torre 1989).

Pope Paul VI came to some very interesting insights when observing the contestation of the Vietnam War. On the one hand, he saw the features of "tactical" pacifism, whose goal is to overpower or weaken the enemy. This was the profile of many European pacifist movements of the second half of the 20th century: they were of leftist persuasion, often inspired and financed by the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the Pope pointed to the ideological side of pacifism, which in turn weakened the sense of justice, duty and sacrifice in the hearts of young people. He also made a distinction between the Church's position on world peace and that of pacifism: "The peace of Christ ... is not fear of might and resistance ..., [nor is it] cowardice tolerant of the misadventures and deficiencies of man with no fortune or defence" (Paul VI 1969). Peace is not pacifism, but a value that must be sought and which, as already emphasized, recalling the "John's quadrilateral," safeguards other values: the value of life, truth, justice, freedom, and love. The Pope felt obliged to speak out on this subject, since this ideology was introducing schisms within the Church (Mroczkowski 1993).

John Paul II, for whom pacifism was a form of *ideologization* of peace efforts and a form of *utopia*, spoke in a similar vein: "Christians know that in

this world a totally and permanently peaceful human society is unfortunately a utopia, and that ideologies that hold up that prospect as easily attainable are based on hopes that cannot be realized, whatever the reason behind them. It is a question of a mistaken view of the human condition, a lack of application in considering the question as a whole; or it may be a case of evasion in order to calm fear, or in still other cases a matter of calculated self-interest” (John Paul II 1982, 12). Concern for peace must therefore lead to a rejection of “any kind of pacifism which is cowardice or the simple preservation of tranquillity” (John Paul II 1984, 3).

Conclusion

In the Christian conception of peace in the social teaching of the Church shown here, the anthropological perspective should be considered essential. This is because various forms of aggression, war, terrorism and other forms of threats to peace are not realities that are born outside of man. Although they take the form of “structures of evil and sin,” they always have their origin in human minds and hearts. They find their profound source in divisions between people and entire nations, which, in turn, can take their origin from a misread vision of man.

As has been shown, peace is that reality which modern man affirms with a commitment that can hardly be compared with any other area. This same man is also increasingly realizing that for the promotion of peace, it is no longer sufficient to act only on the political or economic level, as it is born out of consideration of the ethical dimension. There will be no real peace if modern man is deprived of fixed points of reference as a result of the crisis of traditional values, the weakening of basic social structures and the crisis of culture in general. This means that an equally important, if not more important task, in addition to external actions aimed at stabilizing the situation of peace and creating the appropriate infrastructure for this (procedural, executive, if necessary also military), becomes the concern for the *internal structure of peace*, read on the basis of an integral concept of the human person and the objective hierarchy of values, and therefore in an ethical perspective. The vision of peace as an anthropological-ethical perspective stems from a deep conviction that the quality of the world around us is determined not by well-equipped military, but by the state of the human spirit.

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