

THE ROLE OF TIME IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE THOUGHT OF POPE FRANCIS

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ABSTRACT

This article engages with the way in which Pope Francis worked with his principle that time is superior to space, and how this influences his approach to conflict resolution. It begins by offering a short introduction to the principle itself, also in relation to another of the pope's four principles, that unity prevails over conflict. It then addresses Pope Francis's opposition to war, showing how he saw it as always a failure, given his vision of what it is to be human before God. The final part of the article critically investigates the pope's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, pointing both to the problems that have arisen from it, especially in Ukraine, and yet seeking to show the consistency in the pope's approach.

Keywords

Pope Francis; Four Principles; Time; Space; Ukraine; Resilience; Theological Anthropology

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One of the inevitable tasks faced by the papacy, at least since the Middle Ages, is to try to engage in conflict resolution.¹ Mostly, at

¹ For more on the medieval practices of the Roman curia, see the essays in Jessica Nowak and Georg Strack (eds.), *Stilus – Modus – Usus : Regeln der Konflikt- und Verhandlungsführung am Papsthof des Mittelalters / Rules of Negotiation and Conflict Resolution at the Papal Court in the Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), which point to the ways in which the church dealt with conflict of various kinds (what we might call today international, as well as local or even monastic). For ways in which what we might call conflict resolution techniques were used even earlier, in respect of doctrinal or ecclesial matters, see also Bronwen Neil, 'Addressing Conflict in the Fifth Century: Rome and the Wider Church,' *Scrinium* 14 (2018): 92–114.

least at a diplomatic level, this is done behind the scenes, with varying degrees of success.² Some of the conflicts are within the Roman Catholic Church itself, others with other Christian bodies or other faiths, but many of them are the conflicts we see or hear or read about every day – at the time of writing, especially Russia’s invasion of Ukraine or the conflict between Israel and Hamas with its devastating repercussions for the Palestinian people, especially those living in Gaza.

Arguably to a greater degree than any of his predecessors, Pope Francis engaged publicly in commenting on these and other conflicts, not always in ways that have pleased those involved in them.³ Whether the criticisms of his stance are valid or not will not be my major focus in this paper, however. Rather, I want to look at the grounds on which his stance is built, to show that at least there is a coherency to his position, even if for many it is not acceptable or popular. To do this, I will start first with a brief consideration of two of his four principles, namely that time is superior to space and second, that unity prevails over conflict. I will then look at the late pope’s treatment of conflict in *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Fratelli Tutti*, before moving on to consider his responses especially to the war in Ukraine.

1. The four principles of Pope Francis

The history of the development of Pope Francis’s four principles is long, and I have dealt with it in more detail elsewhere.⁴ Here it is worth noting the influence of Romano Guardini on Francis’s thinking,

² One of the best-known examples is the intervention of the Holy See in resolving the Beagle Channel dispute between Chile and Argentina, which almost led the Argentinean dictatorship to declare war on Chile in 1978. Given his background, it is likely that this act of mediation is not insignificant for Pope Francis. See on the dispute and its resolution, Santiago Manuel Alles, ‘De la Crisis del Beagle al Acta de Montevideo de 1979. El establecimiento de la Mediación en un «juego en dos niveles»,’ *Estudios Internacionales* 44, no. 169 (2011): 79–117, and Peter van Aert, ‘The Beagle Conflict,’ *Island Studies Journal* 11, no. 1 (2016): 307–314.

³ An example would be the criticism voiced by Major Archbishop Sviatoslav, head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, cited in Thomas Mark Németh, ‘The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Pope Francis, and Russia’s War against Ukraine,’ especially the section entitled ‘UGCC Major Archbishop Sviatoslav’s Position,’ available at <https://talkabout.iclrs.org/2023/09/18/the-ukrainian-greek-catholic-church-the-pope-francis> (accessed 11 November 2024).

⁴ Tim Noble, *Liberation Against Entitlement: Conflicting Theologies of Grace and Clashing Populisms* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022), especially pp. 162–174, with bibliography.

especially Guardini's concept of opposition,⁵ or, as my wife and I have called it elsewhere, non-synthetic dialectics.⁶ That is to say, two concepts are kept in tension (Francis often refers to it as 'bipolar tension', which is to say, a tension between two opposing poles), and both are recognised as important, without any need to synthesise them. Thus, in general, the principles deal with comparatives (time is superior to place, the reality is more important than the idea, the whole is greater than (or superior to) the parts).⁷

Time is superior to space

As elaborated in *Evangelii Gaudium*,⁸ the first of the four principles is that time is superior to space. It is worth quoting what Pope Francis has to say about this principle in full:

A constant tension⁹ exists between fullness and limitation. Fullness evokes the desire for complete possession, while limitation is a wall set before us. Broadly speaking, 'time' has to do with fullness as an expression of the horizon which constantly opens before us, while each individual moment has to do with limitation as an expression of enclosure. People live poised between each individual moment and the greater, brighter horizon of the utopian future as the final cause which draws us to itself. Here we see a first principle for progress in building a people: time is greater than space.¹⁰

Although he uses the word 'time', the concept of plenitude (or in more theological language *plēroma*) really goes beyond the chronological, just as space goes beyond the 'topical' or geographical. It is

⁵ For a very brief overview and references, see Noble, *Liberation against Entitlement*, 163–164.

⁶ Ivana Noble and Tim Noble, 'A Non-Synthetic Dialectics between the Christian East and West: A Starting Point for Renewed Communication,' in *Kommunikation ist möglich: Theologische, ökumenische und interreligiöse Lernprozesse. Festschrift für Bernd Jochen Hilberath*, ed. Christine Büchner et al. (Ostfildern: Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 2013), 273–281.

⁷ The other principle, that unity prevails over conflict, is also to some extent comparative.

⁸ The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* was the first major document solely authored by Pope Francis, and was issued on 24 November 2013. Originally written in Italian, the official English translation can be found at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html. References will be to this version, using the abbreviation EG and the relevant paragraph number.

⁹ The Spanish text reads 'una tensión bipolar.'

¹⁰ EG 222.

important to remember this, since the pope does not want to ignore the importance of the local, which is indeed at the heart of a lot of what he said and did – a synodal church necessarily involves embarking on a journey together, and all journeys have to be located somewhere, and that ‘where’ matters. Moreover, the emphasis on culture, central to the Argentinean theology of the people¹¹ that has influenced Pope Francis’s thought, is a clear indication of the role of place.

Rather, what this principle is interested in is something like the difference between a short-term approach (governed by electoral terms, for example) and a long-term approach. In the short term, which he here names ‘space’. there is the need to jockey for power, to act immediately or as fast as possible, ultimately to colonise the space. Now here it is necessary to remember the comparative of the principle – time is superior to space, it does not replace it. That is to say, within the limitations of the present moment – ‘limitation as an expression of enclosure’¹²– actions have to be taken. When the escape artist is padlocked in a box under water, they need to get out, not look to the long-term implications on society or the environment of their actions. Or, when someone hungry comes looking for food, it is not enough to promise to change the system so that they will not have to go hungry in the future, but it is also necessary to give them something to eat.

And yet, as that last example suggests, to be stuck in the moment is not sufficient or the most desirable. In terms of hunger, the word ‘fullness’ is indeed appropriate. How can a system be created that means that people do not go hungry? It is not that there is insufficient food in the world to feed everyone,¹⁵ but that it is not shared evenly and not well-used, and that is something that can be changed. But short-term

¹¹ For a brief overview of Argentinean theology of the people, see Noble, *Liberation against Entitlement*, 151–162. See also Guzmán Carriquiry Lecour, ‘The “Theology of the People” in the Pastoral Theology of Jorge Mario Bergoglio,’ in Brian Lee and Thomas Knoebel (eds.), *Discovering Pope Francis. The Roots of Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s Thinking* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2019), 42–69.

¹² EG 222.

¹⁵ ‘Global agricultural systems produce 4 million metric tonnes of food each year. If the food were equitably distributed, this would feed an extra one billion people. [The figures are taken from Matti Kummu et al., ‘Lost Food, Wasted Resources. Global Food Supply Chain Losses and their Impact on Freshwater, Cropland and Fertiliser Use’, *Science of the Total Environment* 438, no. 1 (2012): 477–89]. But while we already produce enough food for more people than currently live on Earth, it doesn’t necessarily mean we will be able to feed a growing population.’ Lauren Lewis, ‘Why Producing More Food Doesn’t Mean Less Hunger,’ at <https://www.foodunfolded.com/article/feeding-a-growing-population-do-we-really-need-to-produce-more-food#:~:text=Global%20>

approaches have created a world of entitlements, of expectations in many parts of the world that we should be able to eat what we want when we want it. Thus while some throw out food, others do not have enough.¹⁴ That all might be full requires escaping from the limitations of the current moment, or, in Francis's words, recognising that time is superior to space.

At first glance, none of the pope's principles appear to be directly theological.¹⁵ For the first three, it is true, he adduces a couple of scriptural references, but these are more illustrative than probative. The only other citation in the paragraphs (222–25) in *Evangelii Gaudium* on the principle that time is superior to space is from Romano Guardini: 'The only measure for properly evaluating an age is to ask to what extent it fosters the development and attainment of a full and authentically meaningful human existence, in accordance with the peculiar character and the capacities of that age.'¹⁶ Nevertheless, even this quotation points to the importance of the eschatological – how does an age enable people to become what they are,¹⁷ how does it open up the path

agricultural%20systems%20produce%204,an%20extra%20one%20billion%20people (accessed 20 September 2024).

¹⁴ For example, in the UK, 9.5 million tonnes of food is thrown out each year. At the same time, over eight million people are using food banks, because they cannot afford to buy food for themselves or their families. See <https://www.businesswaste.co.uk/food-waste-the-facts> (accessed 20 September 2024). Although the UK may be worse than many other countries, the problem is not unique to there. See, for example, Petra Nováková, Tomáš Hák, and Svatava Janoušková, 'An Analysis of Food Waste in Czech Households – A Contribution to the International Reporting Effort,' *Foods* 10, no. 4 (2021): 875. doi: 10.3390/foods10040875. They calculate the average waste as 57 kg a year per person, or roughly 610 000 tonnes a year. The same paper states that global food waste is in the region of 1.5 billion tonnes a year, whilst at least 11% of the world population suffers from chronic undernourishment. This is without taking into account the carbon dioxide emissions of decaying food waste, with 8%–10% of global greenhouse gas emissions associated with unconsumed food (see Introduction, page 1 of 17).

¹⁵ As Álvaro Mendonça Pimentel, 'O tempo é superior ao espaço: O princípio das mudanças sociais e eclesiais no magistério de Francisco,' *Perspectiva Teológica* 54, no. 3 (2022): 683–701, says in the introduction to his excellent essay on the principles, they appeared 'mysterious for some, abstract for others, and even far removed from a theological, biblical or Wisdom perspective' (684).

¹⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium* 224, citing Romano Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit* (Würzburg: Werkbund, 1965), 30–31.

¹⁷ For a recent book, looking at this movement from who we are to who we are to become, see Ivana Noble and Zdenko Širka, eds., *Kdo je člověk? Teologická antropologie ekumenický* (Praha: Karolinum, 2021). English translation: Ivana Noble and Zdenko Širka, eds., *Who Is the Human Being? An Ecumenical Approach to Theological Anthropology*, trans. Tim Noble (Leiden: Brill, 2026).

to *plēroma* and theosis, the fullness of human life in God?¹⁸ Or as Pope Francis puts in EG 222, ‘People live poised between each individual moment and the greater, brighter horizon of the utopian future as the final cause which draws us to itself.’

However, the question remains as to how this principle links both to the next principle, that unity prevails over conflict, and to the role of time in relation to conflict resolution in the thought of Pope Francis. It is to this that I now turn.

2. Conflict resolution

To begin with the relation between the two principles, we can turn to *Fratelli Tutti*,¹⁹ where without specifically citing the principle, the pope has this to say:

Today too, outside the ancient town walls lies the abyss, the territory of the unknown, the wilderness. Whatever comes from there cannot be trusted, for it is unknown, unfamiliar, not part of the village. It is the territory of the ‘barbarian,’ from whom we must defend ourselves at all costs. As a result, new walls are erected for self-preservation, the outside world ceases to exist and leaves only ‘my’ world, to the point that others, no longer considered human beings possessed of an inalienable dignity, become only ‘them.’ (FT 27)

Remembering the definition of space as the limitations of the moment, the problem is the self-limiting caused by the rejection and alienation of the other. Such alienation has become, sadly, an increasing common feature of our present political landscape, where practices of scapegoating the other are an everyday occurrence, even if, as

¹⁸ See Tim Noble, ‘*Theosis and Pleroma in East and West: Integral Freedom*,’ in John Arblaster and Rob Faesen (eds.), *Theosis / Deification: Christian Doctrines of Divinization East and West* (BETL 249) (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 129–147.

¹⁹ *Fratelli Tutti* is the third encyclical issued by Pope Francis, on 3 October 2020. For a close reading of the text, see Noble, *Liberation against Entitlement*, 175–215. The English text can be found at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html. At the top of the page of this document are choices for different languages, including Italian and Spanish. The translation is a good English one, but that inevitably leads to the loss of some nuances. The text will be cited according to the Vatican website, using the abbreviation FT and the relevant paragraph number (these are the same across the texts).

René Girard convincingly demonstrated, scapegoating never works in the long run.²⁰

In acting thusly, conflict is more or less hardwired into the world, because the interest is in possessing spaces – cultural, geographical, mental, perhaps even spiritual. The latter is because there is a regression to a spatial sense of divinity, a kind of twisted genius loci. Our god is god of our space, and no other god can be worshipped here – and I use lower case advisedly, for claims to be defending Christianity are blasphemous in the strongest sense of the word, for they deny the presence of the Holy Spirit at work throughout the world.

Now it is also necessary to remember that, for the pope, there are certain struggles that are legitimate. The English subheading for paragraphs 241–43 of *Fratelli Tutti* is ‘Legitimate Conflicts and Forgiveness’. The Spanish text speaks, though, not directly of conflicts but of ‘luchas’, struggles. In this sense, there is always necessarily present what the London-based Belgian political scientist, Chantal Mouffe, calls ‘agonistics’.²¹ That is to say, between competing hegemonies, competing ways of seeking to organise the world, there is always a struggle. Mouffe deliberately distinguishes between ‘agonistic’ encounters and ‘antagonistic’ ones. An agonistic approach is something like a football match, especially one that cannot end in a draw. Both sides want to win and are prepared to struggle for supremacy, but (generally speaking) they do so within the laws of the game and within the boundaries of the football pitch. If they transgress the laws, they accept the punishments (more or less willingly, of course). Thus politics is agonistic when both sides accept the basic rules of engagement in a liberal democracy and are prepared to accept the results of a free and fair vote. The alternative approach, without naming names, is antagonistic, both refusing to accept and abide by the laws of the game, and in terms of seeking out and enhancing conflict, not for the common good, but for one side’s own gain.

The expression of *agon*, *lucha*, struggle, is necessary and right. As Francis says in FT 244, ‘Authentic reconciliation does not flee from conflict, but is achieved *in* conflict, resolving it through dialogue and open, honest and patient negotiation.’ In this sense, conflict is not necessarily

²⁰ See, for example, René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. by Yvonne Freccero (London: Athlone, 1986).

²¹ Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013).

negative, but rather neutral. It can be used for good or for ill, for finding ways to reconciliation or for oppressing and harming the other. But if it is to be used for good, it will take time – ‘patient negotiation’, the pope calls it. So part of the problem and what does need time is to move from seeing conflict as antagonistic, in which only the destruction (at least in some sense) of the other will satisfy, to embracing it as potentially agonistic, a struggle between two opposing, even ultimately irreconcilable, positions that are nevertheless prepared to recognise the other as legitimate.

Unity prevails over conflict, not by creating a lowest-common denominator uniformity (let’s find something, however banal, we can all agree on), but simply by recognising that diversity is not or need not be a threat, but a blessing, a cause not of division and conflict but precisely of unity. Of course, this is what is sometimes dismissed as a utopian view, the dream in Isaiah of the lion and the calf lying down together,²² of the sword being turned into a ploughshare.²³ Even if there are enough (perhaps fake) videos on YouTube and elsewhere of strange pairs of animals adopting each other to make us hope the first could happen, the second, especially in today’s world, seems less likely. Even if realistically it would appear that it is never going to happen, the question is always ‘why not?’. The reversal to the traditional childhood cry of ‘You started it’ is all too familiar but remains childish in the worst possible sense of the term. That the world rarely appears to be other does not in itself mean that it cannot be, or that there is no eschatological vision worth holding as a goal.²⁴

It is also worth pointing out here that most of what the pope has to say about conflict is related to larger-scale problems, rather than the kind of conflicts that occur between individuals, in relationships at home or in work. On the other hand, it is probably true that most of our actual experience of conflict is at this level. The principles may be similar – the need for open, honest and patient [transparent, sincere and patient in Spanish] negotiation is a requirement for overcoming

²² Isaiah 11:6–9.

²³ Isaiah 2:4.

²⁴ One of the best introductory texts on utopia and eschatological hope remains João Batista Libanio, ‘Esperanza, utopía, resurrección,’ in *Mysterium liberationis: Conceptos fundamentales de la teología de la liberación*, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, 2 vols. (San Salvador: UCA Editores, 2nd ed., 1992), 2: 495–510 (= ‘Hope, Utopia, Resurrection,’ in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, ed. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (London: SCM, 1996), 279–290).

intrapersonal conflicts as much as ones at a larger social level, such as between unions and employers, or at an international level. However, it is helpful to distinguish between different types of conflicts, and to begin at the level of the conflicts people face most often. By learning to deal with these in a creative and constructive way, that takes time, that involves both sides ceding claims for total control of space, that privileges unity, societies can learn to be societies of conflict resolution rather than conflict initiation.

Unambiguous examples of this are, it has to be said, rare. The usual cases that are adduced are those of places like Rwanda,²⁵ South Africa, or Northern Ireland,²⁶ but in all of them conflict is present to a greater or less extent. These countries, with their direct engagement with the history of conflict between their peoples, have at least made some effort to acknowledge and deal with the suffering. In other places, the failure to deal with conflict, between a safeguarded if limited past and a seemingly free yet equally or more limited and insecure future has had a similar impact, leading people to seek security in far-right populisms that, as already noted above, create scapegoats out of even weaker minorities. Faced with these political choices, Christians will have to be engaged in conflict, for justice, for hope, for unity. This will take time, listening, trying to understand, rejecting what is evil and searching for ways forward that take seriously the fears and needs of those who feel excluded from their own history and look back to false golden ages.

This means that there will have to be responses from Christians, which is not quite the same as saying a ‘Christian response’, to situations of conflicts. Not surprisingly, the papal documents are not the places to search for concrete proposals for particular situations. But there are other ways in which the pope did respond to particular situations, so it is time now to look at how he did this and whether it is right

²⁵ See with reference to the religious dimension, Christine Schliesser, ‘Christian perspective: Religion in pre-genocide and genocide Rwanda,’ in Christine Schliesser, S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana, Pauline Kollontai, *On the Significance of Religion in Conflict and Conflict Resolution* (London: Routledge, 2020), 49–60. doi: 10.4324/9781003002888-8 and Samuel Cyuma, *Unity and Reconciliation in Rwanda: Lessons from South Africa* (Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, 2019).

²⁶ On both South Africa and Northern Ireland, as well as Palestine/Israel, see Benjamin Gidron, Stanley N. Katz, and Yeheskel Hasenfeld (eds.), *Mobilizing for Peace: Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine, and South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

to accuse him of a failure to understand, or whether he was trying to apply his principles.

3. Pope Francis and the War in Ukraine

It would probably be fair to say that the pope's stance on the war in Ukraine raised criticism, especially from the Ukrainian side, which considered him too soft on Russia and on Putin.²⁷ This at least adds another layer of conflict that needs to be resolved, and to do that would require both sides to take time to listen to each other and to try to understand each other. Here I am going to present especially what I understand to be the position of Francis, emerging from his principles. But it has to be admitted that at the level of communicating his position he was not always able to choose the happiest phrasing, and it is understandable that what people heard him saying (as opposed sometimes to what he actually said) caused considerable hurt.

There is not time to go through all of the pope's comments on the war, but it is clear that he saw his main task to call for what he termed 'the audacity of peace'. He used the phrase in a message addressed to participants of an interfaith prayer meeting for peace in Berlin, held in August 2023, where he had this to say:

We need the 'audacity of peace', which is at the heart of your meeting. Realism is not enough, political considerations are not enough, the strategic approaches implemented so far are not enough. More is needed, because war continues. What is called for is the audacity of peace – right now, because too many conflicts have lasted far too long, so much so that some never seem to end. In a world where everything speeds by, only the end to war seems slow. It takes courage to know how to move in another direction, despite obstacles and real difficulties. The audacity of peace is the prophecy required of those who hold the fate of warring countries in their hands, of the international community, of us all.²⁸

²⁷ See the reference above in footnote 3 to the article by Németh, 'The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Pope Francis, and Russia's War against Ukraine,' for more examples of this.

²⁸ Pope Francis, 'Message of the Holy Father Francis to the Participants in the International Prayer Meeting for Peace Organised by the Community of Sant'Egidio,' (Berlin, 10–12 September 2023), available at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2023/documents/20230905-messaggio-sant-egidio-berlino>

This courage to pursue peace²⁹ and simultaneously to refuse war is at the heart of Francis's vision. A Belgian church historian, Jan De Volder, argues in a recent article, however, that Russia's invasion of Ukraine 'constitutes a difficult test for Pope Francis's discourse and action, forcing him to walk a thin tightrope between the dream of peace and the logic of war'.³⁰ To refuse war is one thing, but there has to be a response to threat to life, and this is the dilemma that Francis faced, and which his critics would say that he failed to address adequately. De Volder suggests that, in line with his predecessors for the past hundred years at least, Francis engages in '(1) a vocal prophetic advocacy for peace; (2) a vocal condemnation of acts of violence combined with concrete solidarity with victims; and (3) an agent in international diplomacy',³¹ with the main difference being that his public comments are arguably at odds with the third of those strands of engagement.

Thus, Francis has followed on from the line that was developed by John Paul II, in showing a strong unwillingness to speak about the possibility, even theoretical, of just war. De Volder quotes him as saying 'No war is just. The only just thing is peace.'³² For this reason, it was hard for the pope to defend any form of war, even though he roundly condemned the Russian invasion as 'unacceptable, repugnant, senseless, barbaric, sacrilegious aggression'.³³ He also did not deny the right of Ukraine to defend itself against Russian aggression,³⁴ pointing out that '[t]o defend oneself is not only lawful but also an expression of love of country', and that '[w]ar itself is a mistake... But the right to defense

.html. The Sant'Egidio community, founded in Rome in 1968, has a long history of engagement in conflict resolution and in interfaith activity.

²⁹ A relatively recent collection of the pope's messages on peace, in Italian, is entitled *Contro la guerra. Il coraggio di costruire la pace* (Milan, Vatican: RCS Media Group, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022).

³⁰ Jan De Volder, 'Pope Francis's Contribution to Catholic Thinking and Acting on War and Peace,' *Theological Studies* 84, no. 1 (2023): 30-43, at 31.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

³² Francis and Dominique Wolton, *The Path to Change: Thoughts on Politics and Society* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2018), 27, cited in De Volder, 'Pope Francis's Contribution,' 35.

³³ He reiterated this in remarks made to Jesuits during his visit to Kazakhstan in September 2022: see <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-09/pope-francis-jesuits-russia-region-kazakhstan-journey.html#:~:text=Pope%20Francis%20offered%20that%20plea,as%20the%20Russian%20Region>, (accessed 21 September 2024).

³⁴ He was more explicit in terms of the bombing of Islamic State territories in northern Iran to protect minorities, where he specifically acknowledged the right to stop the aggressor – see De Volder, 'Pope Francis's Contribution,' 34.

yes, that yes, but one must use it when necessary.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, for Francis, violence remains a sign of failure, and the less good path.

There is, then, a deep internal logic to Francis's position. Inclusive time must remain superior to the logic of a space that seeks to exclude. His attitude is also, for some commentators, linked to his recognition that the Roman Catholic Church is no longer a European and North American church, but a worldwide church, with most of its members in the Global South (Africa, Asia and Latin America). John Allen, a noted American commentator on the Vatican, argues that the

best way to make sense of Francis, then, isn't in terms of left versus right, or even East versus West, but North versus South. Across the global South, the conflict in Ukraine is seen largely as a European affair, one without an obvious hero or villain. The pope's call for a halt to arms transfers, an end to the fighting, and negotiations that all sides could support coincides with the majority sentiment among Catholics who don't live in NATO member states.⁵⁶

For those of us much closer to the reality and with connections to those whose country is under threat, this might seem a harsh judgement, and it is almost certainly not the only reason for the pope's position, which as I have argued is more to do with his refusal of war as a solution to any problem. And yet it is a reminder that European problems are no longer the sole defining factor when it comes to papal interest. It may also lead us in Europe to reflect on our attitudes to conflicts in other parts of the world – for example, in the Congo or in South Sudan or Myanmar.

However, even if the pope's position is understandable and consistent, the question can still be reasonably asked if he is right. Francis is arguably referencing his principle that time is superior to space, calling for people to escape from the limitations of space, the desire for control and power over the moment, to look at the longer-term picture, which will require different needs to be satisfied. But on the other

⁵⁵ See <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/september/documents/20220915-kazakhstan-voloritorno.html>.

⁵⁶ John L. Allen, 'Why Pope Francis Isn't With the West on Ukraine,' *The Atlantic*, May 5 2023, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/05/ukraine-war-pope-francis-position-vatican-geopolitics/673955> (accessed 21 September 2024).

hand, the critiques of his position have come also from people who feel that they are being forced too quickly to accede to demands that they are not yet ready to accept. It is, after all, in a very literal sense, their space that is being attacked, and time is superior to space, but it does not substitute it.

Most of the critiques even from within the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church³⁷ could be read in this light, for they take the pope to task for seemingly wanting to impose on them a solution that is not, certainly in their eyes and probably in most other people's eyes, just. To this degree it seems to them that the pope is trying to box them in to a stance that they cannot in conscience take. Part of the problem here is the classic one of who gets to set the agenda in a discussion. For Francis, war is wrong, only peace is just, and therefore all steps must be taken in the search for peace, including negotiating with the enemy. For the Ukrainian hierarchs and others who share their position, war is also wrong, but there is no way in which you can negotiate with an aggressor bent on doing evil – you simply do not sup with the devil, however enticing the menu he offers you may be.

Francis would probably argue that in the end there will have to be negotiation, or a long-drawn out war costing too many human lives that might end in Russian withdrawal or remaining in occupied territory as a *de facto* ceasefire takes place. Given that, it would be better to start the process now, rather than wait. On the other hand, and equally reasonably, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic bishops might argue that there is nothing or no one to negotiate with until such time as Russia changes its leadership and war aims.³⁸

A similar dilemma faces the principle of privileging unity over conflict. Here it is perhaps worth commenting briefly on two symbolic actions that led to widespread criticism in the Ukraine. During the Stations of the Cross that take place around the Colosseum on Good Friday, in both 2022 and 2023, Pope Francis invited first a Ukrainian and a Russian young woman, and then a Ukrainian and a Russian boy

³⁷ See Thomas Mark Neméth, 'Pope Francis and Russia's War against Ukraine,' *Studia UBB Theol. Cath. Lat.* 68, no. 1 (2023): 92–109. doi: 10.24195/theol.cath.latina.2023.LXVIII.1.04, as well as the online article cited above.

³⁸ Neméth, 'Pope Francis and Russia's War against Ukraine,' 94, quotes the nuncio in Kyiv, Archbishop Visvaldas Kubokas, saying 'Reconciliation must come when aggression is stopped. When Ukrainians will be able to save not only their lives but also their freedom. And, of course, we know that reconciliation occurs when the aggressor admits their guilt and apologizes.'

to take part. From his perspective, this is a symbolic action portraying the privileging of unity over conflict. These young people were not at war, even if the countries they came from were, and in and under the cross there is a unity that goes beyond conflict. But for many in Ukraine or supporters of Ukraine elsewhere, it was perceived differently, again partly because it seemed to give superiority to space over time. It was in a sense asking for mutual forgiveness, when the perpetrator of the crime, Russia, had not made any moves even to seek forgiveness or to acknowledge that it needed forgiveness.³⁹

Francis has referred on several occasions to the story of the visit of St Francis of Assisi to the Sultan al-Malik al-Kami of Egypt during the time of the Crusades.⁴⁰ On the one hand, then, there is the need to take a first step, to open oneself to the other. But, it needs to be recalled that strictly speaking in the Crusades, as a western European, St Francis was from the side of the aggressor, and for this to work as an example, it would be necessary for Patriarch Kirill to undergo a conversion and go, in whatever is the modern equivalent of sackcloth and ashes, to Kyiv to seek pardon. Symbolic gestures only really work when the interpreters of the symbols agree over their meaning, and unity can only prevail over conflict when both sides are prepared to admit that there is a conflict.

It may be precisely here that time is needed. Whatever the justifications for the conflict,⁴¹ only over time can the courage for peace overcome the brutality and failure of war. The pope's impatience for peace is, from a more universal perspective, understandable, but it does fail to take seriously the centrality of the cultural, the 'theology of the people' to which, as an Argentinean he is so indebted. Thus it runs the risk of, and indeed has been perceived as, supporting the guardians of the 'space' over the walking together through time (literally the synodal

³⁹ With reference to the first instance, Neméth, 'Pope Francis and Russia's War against Ukraine,' 94, quotes the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk: 'For the Greek Catholics of Ukraine, the texts and gestures of the 13th station of this Way of the Cross are incoherent and even offensive, especially in the context of the expected second, even bloodier attack of Russian troops on our cities and villages.'

⁴⁰ See, for example FT 5. On this, see Paul Moses, *The Saint and the Sultan: The Crusades, Islam, and Francis of Assisi's Mission of Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

⁴¹ And in this case, clearly, from an ethical standpoint, Russia is an unjustified aggressor, carrying out a brutal war with complete disregard for the well-being not only of the citizens of Ukraine, but even for that of its own citizens.

journey), confronting, like Christian in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the many temptations, trials and tribulations of the journey.

Again, the response from Francis would probably be that war is always of 'space', a limitation and a captivity in violence. At times it may be necessary, and the lesser of two evils is not an evil but a good, but it is still a failure, and especially so to engage in stopping the aggressor without seeking peace. Although it may be true that Pope Francis never experienced directly a country under external invasion and aggression, it should be remembered that one of the defining moments for his life was his time as Jesuit provincial during the Argentinean military dictatorship in the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁴² This was a particularly brutal period, which saw some thirty thousand people lose their lives, and many more suffer torture and oppression. It is often called the Dirty War and was in effect a form of civil war. So he knew what it is to live under the threat of arbitrary aggression and violence.

Conclusion

In the final years of his papacy Pope Francis returned less often in an explicit way to his four principles, though they are, it seems to me, behind his argument in *Fratelli Tutti* and also behind his commitment to the process of synodality. But the idea that time is superior to space, or to put it more sharply that liberation is superior to captivity, is a permanent mark of this thought. This both informs and is born out of his commitment to peace. His choice of the name Francis is as much linked to St Francis's commitment to being a vehicle and a promoter of peace as it is out of the saint's commitment to a poor church for the poor.

But if the phrasing is memorable and at times helpful, any principle has to be applied in some way to concrete cases. As I mentioned above, part of the problem, as so often, is to do with who gets to define the criteria for discussion. None of Francis's four principles really help here, because all of them can be called on to support different positions. In conflict resolution, we begin with the question of who is the

⁴² Specifically, it began in March 1976, following a coup that ousted President Isobel Perón (third wife of Juan Perón – the musical *Evita* is about his second wife, who had died in 1952). It ended in December 1983 with the democratic election and installation of Raúl Alfonsín. Francis (Jorge Mario Bergoglio) was Jesuit provincial for the first three years of this period.

liberator and who the captive, and how far the liberator has to attend to the needs of the captive. Time is superior to space, but it does not and cannot entirely do away with space. I was going to write that it cannot replace space, though in a sense this is precisely the aim – to create a different reality, another possible world. And even if it is important – and I believe that it is – to follow Francis’s claim for the superiority of time, the question remains of what to do in the ‘meantime’, in the gaps.

For, to draw on another of Francis’s principles, the reality is greater than the idea. Here again it depends on how one describes the reality, but war, being under attack by an aggressor, is a reality, whilst in such situations for many people peace, however desirable, may seem like an idea which does not really correspond to any perceivable reality. And yet. This article is based on a presentation at a conference that engaged in a discussion of how to go beyond wars and anathemas⁴⁵ – the denial of the other through violence, physical and/or verbal with reference to different Christian hermeneutical traditions. Francis’s four principles are clearly a hermeneutics of peace. I refer back to the paragraph I quoted earlier from *Evangelii Gaudium*, where he first introduced them. The introduction begins ‘Progress in building a people in peace, justice and fraternity depends on four principles’. This is a framework, a hermeneutical key, for constructing a different world.

To engage with any conflict, any expression of violence at whatever level, is to seek to understand it, to ‘read’ it, and that is always a hermeneutical exercise. Thus for Francis the question is not perhaps about what is right or wrong about a given action from some more or less acceptable moral or even geo-political position. He asks rather: does this action lead to the construction of peace, justice and fraternity, both now and in the long run? And he will always answer that war cannot do that. Only by opening up to a world where peace is not only a distant goal but what shapes and moves concrete actions – that is, that engages over time – can things change. Of course, some people may not want change, or may want change for the worse, but that is not an excuse to

⁴⁵ The conference was entitled ‘Beyond Wars and Anathemas: Hermeneutics of Conflict Resolution in Different Theological Traditions’, organised by Professor Ivana Noble and her team between 5 and 6 October 2024, and supported by the European Regional Development Fund project ‘Beyond Security: Role of Conflict in Resilience-Building’ (reg. no.: CZ.02.01.01/00/22_008/0004595), and Charles University Centre of Excellence: Theological Anthropology in Intercultural Perspective (No. UNCE/24/SSH/019). I am grateful for the invitation to present at this conference and for the feedback that I received there.

give in to them. The path to peace has to be walked always, against the limitations of the given moment and the jostling for power.

This leads to the final point. Mostly, I have been following Francis in using time in a generally more chronological sense. Peace takes time, a lot of time and a lot of hard work, and it is the most challenging and most costly option, not least because the search for peace goes on alongside the space of war and the senseless killing that involves. And yet if there is one thing that even the least diligent student of theology has learned, it is that in the New Testament, there are two words for time. So far we have looked at *chronos*. But there is also *kairos*,⁴⁴ and although Pope Francis does not refer very much to this dimension, it is the most important, because it is the realisation and the acceptance that there is another way to go (synod, again). That time begins always now and is an eschatological time, that irrupts into chronological time and questions and challenges it. By accepting that each moment or space is not an opportunity for gaining power or privilege, but for allowing the fullness of God's grace to enter, conflicts can and are resolved, and unity can come to prevail over those conflicts, not at the cost of the gifts of each, but by strengthening each other and rebuilding a destroyed world.

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⁴⁴ On *kairos* and *chronos* see the relevant entries in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*; Hans-Georg Hahn, 'καίρος,' and 'χρόνος,' in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 833–839, 839–844.