

War and Peace

By His Eminence Metropolitan Nikitas

While the pages of history have been filled with issues related to war and peace, the very recent past has made these matters part of our daily lives. Each evening, the television commentators report on the war in Iraq, just as newspapers and magazines feature articles related to the same. The subject of the war goes far beyond the mass media and has even reached into the hearts of theological dialogue. As in past wars, Churches and other religious bodies have taken positions on the matter, trying to defend these with texts and writings.

In some theological circles and religious communities, many aspects of war are discussed, including the theology of “a just and necessary war”. This expression finds its basis in the writings and teachings of St. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 A.D.), who tried to crystallize Christian principles regarding just war. His attempts to place this matter into the heart of Christian teaching came as a result of situations in a complex and developing society. He and others attempted to codify a set of rules for a just war. This expression continued to develop and grow in the western Christian traditions, as theologians tried to address the morality of the use of force. Various persons wrote on the matter, even trying to distinguish between justifiable and unjustifiable war. The idea of a just and necessary war, though, did not find the same fertile ground in the Eastern Orthodox “phronema”. Rather, few if any of the great Eastern Fathers write in support of a just war. It was only in support of national movements and usually connected to the ideas of liberty and freedom that clergy not only wrote but also actively participated in war-related actions.

It is necessary to mention that only in recent times has the Church begun to address a host of ethical issues related to war. Many of these matters did not relate to the life of the average person, as time, world political situations and religious conflicts have changed. For the most part, the Canons of the Church do not mention war and do not attempt to justify military actions. The Canons and Patristic writings discuss other matters of faith, dogma and administration. War, murder, killing and other similar actions are seen as being in direct conflict with the teachings of Christ and have no part in Christian life. In order to better understand these points, one may examine the canonical tradition of

the Eastern Orthodox Church. Below, are examples from the writings of one of the great teachers and hierarchs of the Church.

“Our fathers did not think that that killing in war was murder, yet I think it advisable for such as been guilty of it to forbear communion three years.” (St. Basil the Great)

“That he who gives a mortal wound to another is a murder, whether he were the first, aggressor, or did it in his own defense.” (St. Basil the Great)

In these two brief examples, one sees that the Fathers of the Church equate any kind of killing with murder. Some go even so far as to state that even acts of self-defense are murder. The Fathers believe and teach that there are peaceful solutions to the problems and issues of life. This is reflected in a writings of St. Justin the Martyr-Philosopher, who states:

“We who are filled with war, and mutual slaughter, and every wickedness, have each through the whole earth changed our warlike weapons into implements of tillage, - and we cultivate piety, righteousness, philanthropy, faith, and hope, which we have from the Father Himself through Him who was crucified; and sitting each under his vine, i.e., each man possessing his own married wife. For you are aware that the prophetic word says, “And his wife shall be like a fruitful vine.” Now it is evident that no man can terrify or subdue us who have believed in Jesus over all the world.” (Dialogue, Chapter 10, St. Justin)

It necessary that one remember that with the coming of Christ and the preaching of his message, there is a reversal, of sorts, in many things. He stated “You have heard it said to those of ancient times, ‘you shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ And, “You have heard that it was said, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” “You have heard that it was said, ‘you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5) These words of Christ and one of the key features of his message, unconditional love, cannot be made to fit into a harmony with a theology of war.

The history and life of the Church are filled with a host of military Saints, who are often portrayed in armor and holding weapons. One should, however, carefully study the lives of the Saints and see that

they put down their weapons, and changed the course of their lives. The issue for them was not war or a battle. For the Christian soldier, as for every true believer, the issue was that of spiritual warfare. It is this which is the high calling of every person who identifies himself a Christian.

While the teachings of the Orthodox Church have not been crystallized, as those of the western Churches, it is evident that the East has no underlying theology of a just war. Recent efforts by His All Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, have shown that dialogue is the only means for resolving issues of conflict. His words to the participants of the Conference on Peace and Tolerance, Istanbul, Turkey, February 8th, 1994, clearly reflect this message. He stated:

We, at the Ecumenical Patriarchate, will continue our efforts to be peacemakers and to light the lamp of the human spirit. We, as the Bride of the Resurrected Bridegroom, wish only to remain a Church – a Church, however, that is free and respected by all. We, like all of you who have gathered here in peace and tolerance, wish to be a religious and spiritual institution, teaching, edifying, serving pan-anthropic ideals, civilizing, and preaching love in every direction. We assure you, fellow travelers on the road to peace, that we will always work with you – not only in the spirit of peace and tolerance, but more so, in the spirit of divine love itself. The Ecumenical Patriarchate belongs to the living Church that was founded by the God of love, whose peace “surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7). We “pursue what makes for peace” (Rom. 14: 19). We believe that “God is love” (1 Jn 4: 16), which is why we are not afraid to extend our hand in friendship and our heart in love, as we proclaim “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 Jn. 4: 18).