

# Facing Our History of Complacency about War

Reba Korban

While the war between Russia and Ukraine has serious implications for all Orthodox Christians, I would like to expand our conversation to include all wars because I believe there is an even deeper problem at issue. I want to focus on how we got to this point, the point where Orthodox brothers and sisters could take up arms and kill one another, seemingly without a clue that they are violating the commands of the one they claim as Lord and Savior. After this, I would like to talk about facing our history of complacency with war, and make the case that if this war is evil, all war is evil. And then explore another way forward, or perhaps a way back—a renewal, if you will, of our commitment to follow Christ and obey his commandments.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, “If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?” (16:24–26) And again we read, “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39).

This is the central paradox of the Christian faith. In grasping the temporal, we lose the eternal, and in dying, we live. This is a difficult teaching yet

an important one. Jesus says it twice in Matthew’s gospel. It brings up the question: what—if anything—are we willing to sacrifice in return for our soul?

This is the ultimate argument against all earthly power. In one sentence, Jesus destroyed all arguments in defense of violence. That kind of violence cannot save us. Because Jesus rose from the dead, we have life everlasting, and therefore we have no need to fear death and no need to inflict it. We have only to look at the examples of Jesus and the martyrs to know this. But do we truly believe and trust Jesus?

Looking back at our history as a Church in the days following our Lord’s death and resurrection, it is clear from the books of the New Testament, the writings of the early church fathers, and the stories of the martyrs that the first Christians believed the only power they were to avail themselves of was that of Christlike love. They knew what it meant to accept Jesus as Messiah and they trusted his way of saving humanity. They knew that, if they were to join him in his saving work, as his followers they must use the same means he used.

The early Christians held firm to Christ’s command to love their enemies. They believed that through the power of Christlike love, their enemies might be converted and brought to faith in Jesus Christ. So impressive

were the Christian martyrs in their love and forgiveness that many of their adversaries did convert, and the Church grew tremendously.

In the early centuries of the Church, many outstanding writers repudiated participation in warfare for Christians. Some of these writers included:

- Justin Martyr (165 AD): “We who formerly murdered one another now refrain from making war upon our enemies.”
- Clement of Alexandria (c. 200): “It is not in war but in peace that we have been trained.” “An enemy must be aided, so that he may not continue as an enemy, for by help, good feeling is compacted and enmity dissolved.”
- Tertullian (c. 160–220): “If then, we are commanded to love our enemies . . . whom have we to hate? If injured, we are forbidden to retaliate, lest we become just as bad ourselves.” “When Christ disarmed Peter, he disarmed all Christians.”
- Cyprian (250): “The hand must not be spotted with the sword and blood—not after the Eucharist is carried in it.”

There was also significant canon law regarding warfare. For example, the Canons of Hippolytus (215) state that:

The soldier [who is a Christian] . . . shall not kill anyone. If ordered to do so, he shall not carry out the order. . . . If he does not accept this, let him be dismissed [from the Christian community]. . . . The catechumen or believer who wishes to become a soldier shall be dismissed [from the Christian community].

For the first three hundred years of Christianity, the Christian community held fast to Christ’s commandment to love, including one’s enemies. To them, war and violence were totally against their Christian beliefs. They trusted Jesus and his words, namely that Christlike love has power.

It is difficult to understand this kind of love. Christlike love looks weak because we do not understand its power. What the early Christian martyrs did boggles our twenty-first-century minds. Most of us cannot fathom it and we recoil from even the slightest implication that following Christ might mean we could face that frightening prospect. Hence our attempt to justify self-defense. But as we affirm on Pascha, death does not have the ultimate victory.

For centuries, we’ve been nurtured to believe that when it comes to state sponsored violence, the way of Christ is not relevant, in spite of our prayers to the contrary. For example, at every Liturgy, we pray for “peace for the world.” And the “Service for the Increase of Love and Uprooting of Hatred and All Animosity” includes the petitions, “that we may truly love, not just our friends and brothers, but also our enemies, and do that which is good to those who hate us . . . let us pray to the Lord,” and, “That we may imitate the burning love of the Christians in ancient times for God and neighbor, and that we may be their heirs and successors, not only in image, but in true action . . . let us pray to the Lord.”

How do we reconcile our prayers with our actions? What is this Christlike love that we talk about and that the early Christians believed so strongly in? In English there is no term for this kind of love, but in Greek it is called *agape*. This is the type of love the New

Testament speaks about most (over two hundred times). Agape is the highest form of love. It is a choice of the will, sacrificial and unconditional. It is concerned with the greatest good of the other. Agape requires faithfulness, commitment, and sacrifice, without expecting anything in return. Agape does not come naturally to us in our sinful state. However, it does come naturally from God and is an integral part of him. By drawing closer to him and experiencing his love, we are able to begin to understand what this kind of love means. Only through him can we show and experience agape.

This is the love to which we, as Orthodox Christians, aspire. And this is the love the early Christian community believed in. It was clear to them that this love had power. It did not mean, however, that they would not suffer or even die. They knew worldly power could provide temporary survival, yet they chose to put their trust in eternal survival in Jesus Christ.

This was the prevailing belief in the Christian community until things began to change in what's become known as the Constantinian Shift. Emperor Constantine came to power in the early fourth century, after one of the fiercest persecutions the Christian community had so far endured. Rather than continuing to persecute Christians, Constantine legalized Christianity and began giving the Church money and property.

One can imagine what a relief the end of the persecutions must have been to the beleaguered Christian community. Of course this shift didn't happen overnight, but Constantine's decision to combine Church and state had huge implications for the direction of the developing Church. It was a source of temptation that, over time, eroded the

Christian community's resolve to hold fast to Christ's commandments against the worldly power of violence.

Compare this historical development with Christ's temptation in the desert. The devil tempted Jesus to renounce his spiritual mission and gain worldly power, which, of course, Jesus rejected. The Church, when it was tempted by the gifts Constantine offered, at some level believed that it was on the way to accomplishing its mission of converting the entire world. At the time, it was difficult to see where this would lead.

Thus, in the late fourth century, the time of Saint Basil and Saint John Chrysostom, the Church had reached the point where Christians were allowed to join the military, but if they killed anyone, they were required to do penance by refraining from communion for a period of several years. Later, that requirement was also dropped. It is not difficult to understand how this could happen, yet we must be honest and admit that what brought about this shift was not new insight into the teachings of Jesus, but a newly felt identification with the needs of the state and a new sense of obligation to defend the society the Church had become part of. Up until Christianity was legalized in 313, Christians were *forbidden* to join the Roman army. But by 416, a span of a little over a hundred years, a soldier was *required* to be a Christian in order to join the Roman army. The situation had completely reversed. Constantine and his successors had won over the Christians.

So here we are today, more than 1700 years later, in a situation where Orthodox brothers and sisters are fighting and killing one another. The war between Russia and Ukraine is only the latest war in an endless stream of wars that nations all over the world have

been fighting for millennia. It is not surprising, then, that we find ourselves facing a war between two Orthodox nations with armies made up largely of Orthodox men and women. To quote an Orthodox writer's article on the war, "The world shudders at the Russian actions in Ukraine and sees them for what they are: a horrific act of military aggression and a human-made catastrophe of enormous proportions."

As Orthodox Christians, we'd like to believe this not who we are. But *is it? Is this who we are?* We must be willing to look honestly at this question, at how we got here and what we intend to do about it.

Will we, as a Church, remain complicit in the face of this evil? Will we continue dutifully sending our sons and daughters off to foreign lands to fight and kill in our nation's wars? Or will we take heed of this sad and tragic opportunity that has opened our eyes to the carnage that is war because it has touched us so personally? By the grace of God, let us have the courage to renew our commitment to Christlike love and work for the transformation of our beloved Church.

How can this be done?

We could start by admitting that we've been complicit in our nation's wars and raise awareness in our parishes about the ways we've been complicit. For example, we could initiate a conversation about the fact that our clergy pray for the armed forces at every Liturgy, not only once, but two or three times. Growing up hearing these prayers, one gets the impression that the Church condones what they do. Of course we want our young people to be safe, but that is not the whole story. We need to be truthful, informing them about what the military actually

trains them to do. We could also teach our children that there are alternatives to military "service" and that true heroes are peacemakers for Christ rather than military warriors. Once we begin to look at the many things our youth can do to promote a peaceful world, the possibilities are endless.

My little Vermont town is home to the oldest private military college in the country, and we often have young Orthodox students attend services at our church. These are bright-eyed, well-meaning youth who want to do good in the world. But they have not been taught the truth about war. We have failed to teach them and warn them of the danger. We have allowed our precious children to be swayed by worldly power. We have failed to teach them the most basic commandment of Christlike agape love.

Our Church considers all war to be evil and the fruit of evil. We have never accepted the just war theory, as the Western Church has, because we recognize that even in a defensive war, there is deep pain, suffering, injury, and death. And yet, despite this acknowledgement, the Orthodox Church has blessed the instruments of war for generations.

All the atrocities we see in Ukraine happen in all wars. War crimes of rape, kidnapping, torture, deliberate killing, maiming, and terrorizing of civilians; displacement, starvation, environmental degradation; the bombing of hospitals, homes, and shelters. This is not new, this is what happens in war. This is what our soldiers do in war. It is not glamorous, it is not heroic, it is not honorable—and it is not "serving" anyone but the powerful weapons manufacturers that make billions of dollars profiting off war and those who have vested political interests.

If we want to talk about embarrassment and scandal, this is it: that the Church would capitulate to the secular power of the state to this degree. Is this the witness we want the world to see? That followers of Christ would be willing to wield worldly power just like anyone else?

All victims of war are God's children. In the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus is talking about the "judgement of works", he says, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (25:40).

"You did it to me." We do it to Christ! I keep a picture of an Afghan child, Ali Ismaeel Abbas, to remind me of the reality of war and its cost. Ali was twelve years old when he lost both his arms and fifteen relatives in the US bombing. He asked the American reporter who took his picture, "So this is what you meant, when you said you were coming to free us?"

How many of our youth have fought in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Syria—to name just a few—without a word of caution from our hierarchs and clergy? This is what I'm talking about. This is what has gotten us to this point, this place of war between Russia and Ukraine. It's just the latest on the list of wars in which we've been complicit for generations.

So I challenge us as a Church to think about what happens when we cross the

line to being complacent about our nation's wars, when we are silent, when we bless young men and women to go to war and kill other human beings. Isn't it only a small step further for them to enter into a war where they are ordered to fight and kill their Orthodox brothers and sisters? To whom have we taught them to give their allegiance?

I would like to end by telling a story about Saint Maximilian of Tebessa, who was martyred in the late third century in modern-day Algeria. Brought before the proconsul, Dion, Maximilian refused enlistment into the Roman army, saying, "I cannot serve, I cannot do evil. I am a Christian." Dion replied, "You must serve or die."

Maximilian said, "I will never serve. You can cut off my head, but I will not be a soldier of this world, for I am a soldier of Christ. My army is the army of God, and I cannot fight for this world. I tell you, I am a Christian."

Dion answered, "If you do not do your service, I shall condemn you to death for contempt of the army." "I shall not die," Maximilian said. "If I go from this earth, my soul will live with Christ my Lord."

Maximilian was twenty-one years old when he offered his life to God.

In this story, we find an incredible young man filled with faith and hope. Let us ask him to help us in our struggle to remain faithful. ✱



*Reba Korban* is a mother of six and a grandmother of fifteen. She is a priest's wife and a member of St. Jacob of Alaska Orthodox Mission in Northfield Falls, VT. She enjoys icon embroidery and reading about early church history.