

An Orthodox Christian Standing With Ukraine

Personal reflections of an Orthodox Church deacon on Russia's war on Ukraine

By [Rev. John Chryssavgis](#)

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Igor Ivanko / Moskva News Agency

Few, if any, would go so far as to claim that Patriarch Kirill, as head of the Orthodox Church in Russia (or “the Russias,” as he likes to say), could be charged with crimes against humanity or war crimes for not preventing unwarranted and unjustifiable military aggression that has cost innocent lives in just the last few days. At the same time, many, if not most, would concur that President Putin should be charged with such atrocities.

Even with his egregious violations of conventional law, however, Putin could never destroy the international order by himself without the loyal support and moral endorsement—whether silent or explicit—of a complicit partner-in-crime. Both state and

church there dream of a larger world, a universal Russia, a “Russian World” (Russkiy Mir). But when the punching gloves and the bling vestments are removed, each is using the other for its own interests for imperialism or irredentism; and both are promoting division in an increasingly bi-polar world.

Edward Gibbon long ago derided: “So intimate is the connection between throne and altar, that the banner of the church has very seldom been seen on the side of the people.” In the end, for Putin, the church is merely instrumental, just another arrow in his quiver to reconstitute the Soviet Union, an atheist state. But this time it is under the guise of a Christian theocracy refashioned in the image of the Romanov dynasty, whose double-headed eagle has replaced the Soviet hammer and sickle throughout Russia. Just as Kirill, too, is more than happy to oblige in the re-creation of a powerful church machine aligned with and backed by the state. No blurring of church-state lines here. As for their “soldiers”—secular military and spiritual militants—God alone knows what they have been told they are fighting for.

The critical question, of course, is how the rest of us respond to this 9/11 moment for Europe and the rest of the world. Friends and colleagues have addressed geopolitical aspects or religious ideologies at stake. Without reducing a horrific crime to an academic conversation—whether sociological or ecclesiastical, psychological or geopolitical—I want to limit myself to a personal perspective and experience. I trust that the reader will appreciate my reluctance to lecture or posture on history or theology, and ecclesiology or canon law, when the invasion still rages.

As a clergyman, never in my life have I been so horrified by the pathetic reactions of leaders in my church to current events in the past several years. At the very same time as they scurried to prepare pre-Lenten sermons on the “judgment passages” in Matthew 25 or preach on abstaining from meat—which they define as animals with a backbone!—they issued the most anemic statements about the war of Russia on Ukraine, unable to go beyond the call to pray, while forgetting that Christ himself demonstrated indignation at injustice.

I was hardly as surprised when they blundered more recently through COVID-19, with responses ranging from outright asininity to blatant irresponsibility. But I could not help but compare the tepid assurances of prayers to reactions after mass shootings. And I certainly could not help but wonder why bishops who proudly parade in “right to life” marches did not take to the streets for the “right to defense” of their Ukrainian—Orthodox in so many cases—brothers and sisters. At least Pope Francis stepped outside his office and stepped inside his Fiat to appeal in person to the Russian ambassador. The Archbishop of Canterbury unequivocally condemned Russia’s attack on Ukraine as “an act of great evil.” And the Ecumenical Patriarchate is the only Orthodox Church outside Ukraine to decry Russia’s unprovoked actions as “a violation of human rights and brutal violence against human beings.”

The reality is that the Orthodox Churches have abysmally neglected over the centuries to instruct or inspire their congregations in a way that meaningfully influences and shapes civil society about assuming a stand before socio-political challenges or standing up to failures of a broken state. The truth is that through most of history they have painfully succumbed or perversely submitted to the state, hardly disposed or competent to stand beside a laity exposed to the church’s impotence and the state’s ignorance. How tragic that it was left to the

fearless protesters in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and elsewhere in Russia to expose both.

As an American, never in my life have I been so astounded by the partisan breakdown of support for and criticism of Putin, who is dismantling basic norms once taken for granted. The same ideological clash of worldviews is reflected in our own domestic context, where basic norms are likewise under threat. Still, the admiration of certain political pundits for Putin's clever strategy or worthy ideals is almost unprecedented, rivalled only by the commensurate admiration of certain Orthodox Christians for Putin's strong faith and deep piety.

I sincerely hope that fellow Americans will not be fixated on prices at the gas pump, for which the administration resorts to apologizing to the public and which the opposition reduces to accusations against the government. Hopefully we have learned from the last European war about the perils of silence and indifference, of waiting too long before confronting Hitler. Hopefully, too, we have learned that the world order—and not just Ukraine's freedom—is at stake, as embattled Ukrainian President Zelensky has bravely articulated in videos from Kyiv, crying in a wilderness.

Putin has brazenly violated the international order, just as Kirill has flagrantly ignored the ecclesiastical order by breaking communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate over its right to grant autocephaly to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine, another courageous breakaway from Kirill's Russias. The response of the global community (including the United States) will determine whether and how law prevails in the long term. And the response of the religious community (including the Orthodox Church) will determine whether and how love prevails in the long term.

If faith has taught me something, it is that, in the grand scheme of things, progress is possible and even inevitable. Whether with reluctance or resistance, Russia will at some point be forced to disabuse itself of its historical dreams or ideological destiny and walk with the rest of the world in the twenty-first century. Whether the Orthodox leaders know it or like it, the world may take a step backward for a period of time, but it will invariably move many more steps forward.

History may sometimes flatter “sophisticated” villains—secular and spiritual. But history never flatters shameless villains—who do not even pretend to charm their constituents. And if theology has taught me something, it is that, in the far-reaching perspective of God, evil never prevails over good. Sin can never be the final or perpetual word. Neither will Putin's monstrosity. Nor, quite frankly, will Kirill's passivity.

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