

FAREWELL TO A SON: A MEDITATION ON DEATH, SACRIFICE, AND ETERNAL LIFE IN THE FACE OF WAR*

Rev. Mykhailo Dymyd
Ukrainian Catholic University, Lviv

On 18 June 2022, my wife, Ivanka, and I said goodbye to our son, Artemii, who was killed in Russia's war with Ukraine. The brutal death of a soldier fighting for our freedom and homeland is a shared wound inflicted on all those who are part of the Ukrainian family. This war has brought physical death to the lives of both Ukrainians and Russians in a particularly cruel way. It has also forced us to confront the deeper meaning of death.

Meditating on death, I view it through the concept of eternal life, a concept that escapes human understanding. As I contemplate this mystery, I explore death through the lens of parenthood, where both fathers and mothers embody a ministry of nurturing life. This discussion, however, reaches beyond the confines of our immediate families. It encompasses local leaders, presbyters serving their communities, military commanders, educators – of both students and youth – and all who hold positions of guidance within their communities.

* This meditation was presented at the “Rethinking Leadership: Spiritual Leadership in the Time of War” seminar series held at Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford, on 29 September 2022. The series was made possible with the support of the Polish National Foundation, in collaboration with the Two Wings Institute, the Oxford Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict, the Centre for Democracy and Peace Building, the Oxford Polish Association, and the Polish Institute in London. Marcin Mochocki, Krzysztof Niewiadomski, and Michał Łuczewski assisted in preparing the final version of the text.

/// Abraham, who at the Lord's Call Was Ready to Sacrifice His Son Isaac

In Genesis we read: “Then God said: ‘Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you’” (Gen 22:2).¹ God commands a sacrifice to be made not only by Abraham, but also, in the history of the human race, by every human being – for all humanity is called to a ministry in the special way of offering its own sacrifice.

In the Christian worldview, sacrifice should not be seen as something distant, as something done on a one-off basis, limited to giving or doing something to achieve peace. Above all, sacrifice is something personal that requires the involvement of the whole person and leaves a mark on their life – it is in this context that we must understand God's invitation to Abraham. God the Father wants to communicate to us (not only personally, privately, but also as His people) a call to make a special sacrifice. At the same time, we should not deceive ourselves that it is easy to sacrifice the most precious thing in our lives – every great goal requires from us an equally great sacrifice. The biblical account of the patriarch Abraham shows that he was prepared to give up everything for God, even the most important value in his life, embodied in the form of a son. The Lord accepted this sacrifice in a spiritual way because, as we know, a physical sacrifice was made of the ram, which, entangled with its horns in the bushes, stood behind Abraham (cf. Gen 22:13)

In the search for a personal encounter with God, especially in holy places (in today's Ukrainian reality, we are also talking about places where people are tortured and where they die), we should be ready to make our own sacrifices together with others, with our fellow human beings. If we embrace sacrifice and the gifts of the Holy Spirit which we have received for this ministry in the holy sacraments, we will be able, with God's help, to become fathers and mothers of many generations of a noble human nation. Death is transformed into life through resurrection in the places of God's presence. This is because the resurrection of Christ has become also the guarantor of our resurrection: “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins” (1 Cor 15:17).

Thus, sacrificing one's own son means giving up not only part of oneself; it also involves other people and goes beyond our own “self.” We give away not only the past, not only the present, but also the dreamed future of our own lives.

¹ Throughout the paper, biblical passages are quoted from the New American Bible, Revised Edition.

/// Sacrifice of God the Father in the Death of His Son on the Cross as an Example of Christian Parental Service

Another example of a father sacrificing his son in Scripture is God the Father, who, in his boundless love, in order to save the fallen human nature, participates in the death of his Son on the cross. John the Evangelist writes: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). It is not only an example of God’s boundless and unfathomable to our reason love of humanity, but also a fundamental dogma of the Catholic faith. Faith in the resurrection of Christ leads us to faith in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, since Christ, the Son of God, “one of the Trinity,” in the Holy Spirit has revealed God the Father to us. This apostolic faith the Church solemnly confesses in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

Continuing with this topic, it is also worth recalling an article by Father Petro Oktaba, “Kozel vidpushchennya y Ahnets’ Bozhyy: rozmova z Petrom Oktaboyu” [The Scapegoat and the Lamb of God: A Conversation with Petro Oktaba] (2018). Oktaba writes about the participation of God the Father in the Sacrifice of the Son as “the mutual desire of the Father and the Son to renew God’s covenant with human beings by giving them a reward at the price of His death and blood” (Oktaba 2018, own trans.).

St Paul writes in Philippians 2:6–8 that Jesus Christ, “[w]ho, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, [...] he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.” In a supreme act of humility, the God of the Universe, who became man, died for his creation. By means of *kenosis* (Gr. κένωσις – humiliation, self-emptying), Christ adopted human nature with all of its limitations – with the exception of sin – and emptied himself to the point of suffering and death on the cross.

The Father blessed Christ’s willingness to die, and the Son understood its meaning. By analogy, we can see that our enlistees and volunteers who – on various fronts – fight and care for their Fatherland, on a spiritual level reflect (consciously or not) the “mutual desire of the Father and the Son” in sacrificial patriotic love. By all this I mean that according to human standards they could try to avoid this dangerous and difficult task. From my own experience, I can say that our son Artemii has flown in from New York to stand up for his homeland. And he has not been the only one...

This willingness to make a “burnt offering,” a total sacrifice, is not a retaliation for the centuries-long submission of the Ukrainian people to the deliberate policy of the Russian state aimed at their spiritual destruction. This bestowment of oneself made for one’s nation as a whole is a reward “at the price of [...] death and Blood” (Oktaba 2018). In turn, this will provide a positive stimulus to the development of a free nation of like-minded people who fully experience their belonging to the culture of the great nations of Europe and of the world.

Already in 1995, the International Theological Commission issued the document *Select Questions on the Theology of God the Redeemer*, in which it mentioned the necessity of suffering or death to achieve higher goals. The same thought can be seen in many testimonies, especially in those of people who survived the “Ukrainian underground” during the Second World War and those who, because of Ukrainian patriotism or fidelity to their Church, were condemned to long years in the Siberian gulags. I personally have heard from Nadia Mudrej² that we would have to shed blood for Ukraine to become a completely free and independent state. The Vatican document reads:

So much of the search for liberation, freedom, [...] what might be called a “redemption” from the ambiguities of the human situation, are attempts to avoid and ignore suffering and death. The way of Jesus of Nazareth indicates that the free gift of oneself to the ways of God, cost what it may, brings glory to ourselves and also to God. The death of Jesus is not the act of a merciless God exacting the supreme sacrifice; it is not a “buying back” from some alienating power which has enslaved. It is the time and the place where a God who is love and who loves us is made visible. Jesus crucified tells how much God loves us, and affirms that in this gesture of love a human being has given unconditional assent to God’s ways. (International Theological Commission 1995)

The *Catechism of the Ukrainian [Greek] Catholic Church* by its very title (*Christ – Our Pascha*; see Synod of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church 2016) points to the paschal foundations of faith. Christ through his death “trampled death” and through the resurrection “has granted life eternal” (Synod of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church 2016: 3). The crucifixion

² Nadija Mudra was a liaison officer of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, geneticist by profession, member of the Union of Ukrainian Women. She served a 25-year sentence in the gulags of Kolyma. She lived and died in Lviv. See Kupezyk 2013.

and death of Jesus Christ became salvation for sinners in the face of eternal death. Oktaba notes that “the blood of Christ [...] saves sinners from death, without having anything to do with the punishment for sins” (2018). Thus, the offering of Jesus, our Divine Saviour, is understood as voluntary, noble, and blessed by the Father, as an act of giving oneself for the victory over death: to “trample death down with death,” as we sing in the troparion of the feast of Pascha.

“The resurrection of Christ [...] is the Father’s response to the Son’s sacrifice. It is the purpose of Christ’s sacrifice” (Oktaba 2018). He is the promise of overcoming decay and death: “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (Jn 11:25–26). We should therefore look at death and sacrifice through the prism of our faith: what is the Lord preparing us for in his providence through sacrifice and also through death in this life? Great are our prospects!

Pope Benedict XVI, in one of his catecheses during a general audience, said the following words:

However, let us ask ourselves: how is it possible to think of an omnipotent God while looking at the Cross of Christ? At this power of evil which went so far as to kill the Son of God? Naturally, what we would like would be a divine mightiness that fitted our own mindset and wishes: an “omnipotent” God who solves problems, who intervenes to prevent us from encountering difficulties, who overcomes adverse powers, changes the course of events and eliminates suffering. (Benedict XVI 2013)

In the *Catechism of the Ukrainian [Greek] Catholic Church*, we read: “In accordance with his plan, God acts in the world; he sustains the world in existence and leads it to its final fulfilment. This action of God is referred to as the Divine Plan (Providence) of God” (Synod of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church 2016: 112). In his providence, the Lord has also provided the communication of his revelation in writing – through the Bible. Therefore, the Church teaches us to receive with faith and respect both Scripture and oral tradition (Synod of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church 2016: 37–38). Faith in the Almighty God leads us to accept that God’s providence is different from our plans for life, and that the ways of the Lord are not our ways (cf. Is 55:8). God’s Omnipotence – in all its fullness – is also incomprehensible to the human reason. It is not an automatic,

arbitrary force; it is marked by parental love and freedom, and is essentially personal in character.

The Creator, having fashioned humanity freely out of love, calls us to love – the highest creative expression of a person. For this God grants us freedom. [...] As God's gift, freedom is strengthened through every free choice of the good. On the other hand, it is limited when humanity becomes dependent upon evil which is a consequence of its renouncing the good. (Synod of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church 2016: 136–137)

God, having created free beings in his image and likeness, and giving them the freedom of choice, forewent part of his power and entrusted it to us.

It is for this reason that our human fatherhood and motherhood should, in the practical dimension of the Christian life, resemble the sacrificial and free love of God the Father. Whenever we are not certain of the rightness of our actions, let us strive to understand the image of God the Father – how he acts towards his Son, how he acts towards us, how he acts towards every person and nation. In other words, on a spiritual level, our parental ministry should reflect God as a loving Father who witnesses and participates in the sacrificial decision of Jesus Christ to “give his life for many” (Mk 10:45). As the Apostle Paul himself notes: “giving thanks to the Father, who has made you fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light. He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:12–14).

At the same time, it is important to look at the Trinitarian perspective from another angle: of how the Son of God submitted himself to the Father in order to be the head of his body, the Church. And this is precisely about the Church in the Trinitarian dimension, “initiated in the eternal plan of the Father, becomes a reality in the Incarnation of God's Son and is manifested at the descent of the Holy Spirit” (Synod of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church 2016: 271). In the same context, “the bearer of God's grace in the world is Christ's Church. Through the ministrations of the Holy Mysteries, by means of sanctification and blessing, she apportions grace to those who believe in Christ” (Synod of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church 2016: 267). “The Source of all grace is God the Father. From the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit, the grace of God descends upon all creation and sustains its existence” (Synod of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church

2016: 266). If we look at God the Father in the light of the Gospel and the Church's teaching, we see that the destiny of parents is first of all to sow, live, witness, and at the same time leave room for the Holy Spirit to transform our good intentions and sacrificial service.

It is worth recalling here another example of the biblical Father – the one who organised a feast to celebrate the return of the (younger) “lost son” (Lk 15:11–32). The Father had arranged everything so well that his elder son, who was outraged by the return of the younger one, could not publicly express his indignation. Parenthood in God is always linked to freedom, as St Paul writes about it in his second letter to the Corinthians: “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17).

It is also worth pointing out certain dangers, constantly present in this dimension of parental ministry. With regard to priests, we, unfortunately, often encounter manifestations of clericalism.³ On the other hand, among biological parents one can notice manifestations of irresponsible parenting. Other inappropriate uses of one's authority or a certain position in society include the phenomenon of bullying junior soldiers in the army or bureaucratism.

To sum up the above considerations, it is worth pointing out that a very important element of the Father's mission is to “leave room” for Jesus in his free love – that also should serve as a model of parental attitude towards our children. This means that we should give a lot of freedom to our children (spiritual or biological), not being afraid that they will make mistakes, always wait for them, enjoy their company, and encourage the family and the community to rejoice in their successes. In this dynamic relationship, one cannot do without the active presence of the Holy Spirit, who is the author of this co-action between man and his Creator.

In our ministry, we should act courageously (without unnecessary fear and doubt), feel with our hearts, be responsible for our words and actions, without forgetting that the Church is present everywhere: in the temple, in the family, while driving a car, in restaurants and in bed. Thus, each service is part of our overall sacrifice, our burnt offering. It is also important to be aware that every Christian is a witness (Gr. μάρτυς), that is, a person who lives Christ and testifies to him with his life, with words and actions of such a person being useful and fruitful only if they are permeated by the grace of God in the Holy Spirit.

³ The term clericalism refers to a deviant view of the clergy, an excessive respect and a tendency to grant them moral superiority (Senz 2018).

/// The Sacrament of the Most Holy Eucharist

In the third part of this paper, I propose to reflect briefly on the sacrament of Holy Communion, which Christ performed at the Last Supper, unveiled in the sacrament of Pascha, and continues to perform in the ministry of the Church – “as it was in the beginning, is now and always shall be.” Christ, already seated on the throne, repeats his sacrifice and, in the anamnesis of the Holy Eucharist, sanctifies our imperfect sacrifices. We also receive the pledge of eternal life when we have our share in the Body and Blood of the Lord: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day” (Jn 6:54). This means that the Common Feast, the Eucharist, turns those who attend into “brothers and sisters in Christ” and simultaneously opens the possibility of participating in a deeper knowledge of and conversation with our Divine Saviour, especially in situations of our suffering, death, and the great destruction brought by war.

Participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice prepares people to persevere in personal patience, as well as in the practice of sacrificial service in the daily turmoil of life. At the same time, people who trust God completely have the hope that God is responsible for the consequences of all that happens and that this leads to eternal life. We realise that God’s providence in whatever concerns our future (specifically, the question of our salvation) may be better and brighter than what we ourselves expect and imagine!

When we say goodbye to our loved ones (sons, daughters, friends... “on the altar of our Fatherland”), we encounter, on the one hand, the mystery of the suffering in the martyrdom of a son or a daughter, and on the other, the inner certainty that this is a situation in which death can no longer be called death (in its merely earthly dimension), because it has lost its destructive properties and transformed into the “victory of the spirit over the body.” It functions as an actual iteration of “the mystery of the death on the cross, the burial of Jesus Christ” through the prism of our Christian faith, which leads us to the resurrection. Consequently, the Eucharist as a sacrament also relates to the Eucharist as spirituality, when the spiritual consciousness of the human person is expressed in his or her sacrificial service. This can be seen in the case of the self-sacrifice of parents in today’s wartime circumstances and in their willingness to give up what is most precious and closest to them in their lives.

Summing up the role and ministry of parents in relation to the issue of death and eternity, we can be convinced, even after the tragedies in Bucha and Izium, that life conquers death. We also experience, in the spiritual

sense, through war realities that our Christian faith is mainly expressed by our deeds. One of the most effective and powerful methods of fighting evil on a large scale is prayer. Prayer keeps Ukraine fighting! The heroic struggle of the majority of Ukrainians against the Russian occupation in the twenty-first century is impossible without the help of God! Human logic cannot fully explain Ukraine's resistance and perseverance in the face of the destruction that the enemy inflicts daily on the various fronts of the anti-Ukrainian war.

I will conclude by asking rhetorical questions about the Christian ministry of each of us: what is my personal struggle? What is my personal victory in the battle against evil? Which "front" am I on? Do I have the right tools, the willpower, the training, the right information, the friends? Regardless of our current situation, each of us is called to come to our own front with Christian courage to stand up to evil and not merely wait somewhere in the rear. In other words: what are the goals and values for each of us personally, for our families, for the Church, the community, the country, for the nations of Europe, and the world?

*Translated by Mykhailo Dymyd, Marcin Mochocki,
and Michał Łuczewski*

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/// **Rev. Mykhailo Dymyd** – co-founder and first rector of the restored Lviv Theological Academy-Ukrainian Catholic University (1994–2000). Ukrainian religious leader, scientist, doctor of oriental canon law, professor of the department of pastoral theology of the Ukrainian Catholic University. Chaplain of Maidan, journalist, student of Patriarch Josyf Slipyj. Author of many books and articles. Father of the hero Artemii Dymyd, who died in the Russian-Ukrainian war on 18 June 2022.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8385-7928>

E-mail: dymyd@ucu.edu.ua