

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY – TUESDAY, 18TH FEBRUARY, 2025
PROFESSOR TINA BEATTIE – writer and Catholic theologian

Good morning.

As Europe's leaders gathered in Paris to discuss the deepening crisis in Ukraine, one absent European leader was undoubtedly watching and praying. Pope Francis is seriously ill in hospital with a chest infection, but he follows world affairs with a passionate concern.

As leader of the world's nearly 1.4 billion Catholics and ruler of its smallest state – Vatican City – the pope is both a religious and a political figurehead. Pope Francis has repeatedly spoken out against the injustices of the current global order, condemning an ideology that promotes economic growth while laying waste the environment and widening the gulf between rich and poor. Earlier this month, he wrote a letter to the bishops of the United States, calling on them to stand against the new Government's proposed mass deportations of migrants.

His stance on Ukraine has been criticised by those who argue that only a decisive victory for Ukraine will end the war. Soon after the Russian invasion in 2022, he said, "It's wrong to think that this is a war between Russia and Ukraine and that's it ... This is a world war." He often refers to a "Third World War played in piecemeal", expressing his concern that conflicts between powerful nations have an impact on the world's poorest peoples.

However controversial his interventions in politics might be, Pope Francis shares with his modern predecessors an opposition to all war. They point to the high toll that modern warfare, fuelled by the arms trade, inflicts on the lives of the innocent, and the threat of uncontrollable escalation. Pope John Paul II called war "a defeat for humanity". He spoke of the "absurd and always unfair phenomenon of war, on whose stage of death and pain only remains standing the negotiating table that could and should have prevented it."

At issue is the sometimes irreconcilable conflict between justice and peace. For some, justice demands that Ukraine has a right to fight against Russia's invasion whatever the cost, and the international community has a duty to support it. For others, the toll of suffering and death is too high a price to pay, and a compromised peace is the only solution. In the violence and chaos of global politics, sometimes the best is the enemy of the good.

Popes may not be offered seats at the negotiating table when the world's leaders gather, but they have a duty and a right to speak out in times of crisis. It's often said that religion and politics don't mix, but when Christians say the Lord's Prayer, we pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. That surely calls for a recognition that the Christian faith is profoundly political.