

A Disarmed and Disarming Peace

Giovanni Cucci, SJ – Marco Giordano Portoso

A Significant Combination

Pope Leo XIV began his pontificate with these significant words: “Peace be with you! This is the peace of the Risen Christ. A peace that is *unarmed* and *disarming*, humble and persevering.”¹ He repeated the concept a few days later to people working in the media: “*Disarmed* and *disarming* communication allows us to share a different view of the world and to act in a manner consistent with our human dignity.”² It is also found in the conclusion of his address to the Congolese people whom he received after the beatification of Floribert Bwana Chui, a layman and martyr killed on July 8, 2007, in Goma: “This African martyr, in a continent rich in young people, shows how they can be a leaven for a ‘*disarmed and disarming*’ peace.”³

The mention of this combination in three public circumstances in such a short space of time, and then repeated on many other occasions, is significant: a fact that is certainly striking, especially when compared with the words of previous popes.

<https://doi.org/10.32009/22072446.1225.8>

1. Leo XIV, *First “Urbi et Orbi” Blessing*, May 8, 2025 (<https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/messages/urbi/documents/20250508-primabenedizione-urbietorbi.html>); italics added. Translator’s note: the Italian word “*disarmata*” may be translated either with “disarmed” or “unarmed.”

2. Id., *Address to Media Professionals*, May 12, 2025 (<https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/may/documents/20250512-media.html>); italics added.

3. Id., *Address to pilgrims from the Democratic Republic of Congo*, June 16, 2025 (<https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/june/documents/20250616-pellegrini-congo.html>); italics added.

Pope Francis has used this combination on several occasions. The first time was in a homily on the Second Sunday of Easter 2020, referring to the Risen Lord's affectionate attention to the apostle Thomas: "Today the unarmed and disarming love of Jesus revives the heart of his disciple."⁴ Then in his homily on Christmas Night that year: "God was born a child in order to encourage us to care for others. [...] His unarmed and disarming love reminds us that our time is not to be spent in feeling sorry for ourselves, but in comforting the tears of the suffering."⁵ Subsequently, on Palm Sunday the following year: "God has revealed himself and reigns only with the disarmed and disarming power of love."⁶ On that occasion, the concepts were associated with mercy: "The Spirit of the Risen Jesus [...] frees us from fear and instills the courage to go out and meet others with the unarmed and disarming force of mercy."⁷ On the fourth centenary of the death of St. Francis de Sales, Pope Francis said, referring to divine love, that God "draws us in, with this unarmed and even disarming love. Because when we see this simplicity of Jesus, we too cast aside the weapons of pride and go, humbly, to ask for salvation."⁸ On another occasion, he referred to the "unarmed and disarming power of the Risen Lord, capable of alleviating the sufferings of wounded humanity."⁹

4. Francis, *Homily on the Second Sunday of Easter*, April 19, 2020 (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200419_omelia-divinamisericordia.html).

5. Id., *Homily on the night of the Lord's Nativity*, December 24, 2020. (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201224_omelia-natale.html).

6. Id., *Homily on Palm Sunday*, March 28, 2021 (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20210328_omelia-palme.html).

7. Id., *Address at the prayer meeting with bishops, priests, consecrated persons, seminarians, and pastoral workers*, Church of the Sacred Heart, Manama (Bahrain), November 6, 2022 (<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/november/documents/20221106-chiesa-bahrain.html>).

8. Id., *General Audience*, December 28, 2022 (<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2022/documents/20221228-udienza-generale.html>).

9. Id., *Address at the meeting with bishops, priests, missionaries, consecrated men and women, and pastoral workers*, Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul (Ulaanbaatar,

Saint John Paul II used this combination on only one occasion, when, in a message to the Capuchins, he wrote that “lived ‘minority’ is an expression of the unarmed and disarming strength of the spiritual dimension in the Church and in the world.”¹⁰

The individual terms – “disarmed/unarmed” and “disarming” – recur frequently in papal speeches, but the combination is numerically lacking. In fact, it was never used by Benedict XVI. These words are used in various contexts, although the most repeated link, which seems to characterize Leo XIV, is that of peace, the gift of the Risen One. Beyond the numbers, it is important to emphasize the weight of the words of Pope Leo XIV: his use of this combination in his first message to the world is certainly not accidental or improvised: it is a strong invitation to lay down everything that can lead to attitudes of violence and abuse, in order to inaugurate paths of peace and justice.

Disarm to Generate Peace and Life

Disarming to generate peace and life is a dominant theme in Sacred Scripture: countless texts from both the Old and New Testaments show how instruments built to kill are radically changed in their intended use, transforming them into generators of good. The multiplicity of references necessarily requires a selection that certainly cannot be said to be exhaustive. Emblematic in this regard is the passage from Isaiah 2:2-4 (and the parallel in Micah 4:1-4): the solidity of the mountain of the Lord and its becoming a meeting place for many peoples opens this passage, which seems to want to redeem the episode of the Tower of Babel (cf. Genesis 11:1-9).¹¹ The narrative develops a twofold contrast: the conversion

Mongolia), September 2, 2023 (<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/september/documents/20230902-mongolia-clero.html>).

10. John Paul II, *Message to the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin on the occasion of their General Chapter*, October 22, 2003 (https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2003/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20031029_cappuccini-stuoie.html).

11. Cf. L. Alonso Schökel – J. L. Sicre Diaz, *I profeti*, Rome, Borla, 1984, 132.

of weapons and the learning of the Lord's commands – “He will judge between the nations and arbitrate between many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks” – which must be implemented in life at the expense of the “art of war” (cf. Isa 2:3-4).

The eschatological context in which the Lord's action takes place is interesting. It is he who judges the nations with justice, and peace will reign in his universal kingdom. Only when this condition is fulfilled will men no longer need weapons and, indeed, will be able to convert them into instruments that generate life, such as plows or sickles. Thus, a happy conclusion, full of hope, is proposed: “The people may give in to arrogance and sin, but the Lord always remains faithful. There is, therefore, a glimmer of hope. It is the hope that can be glimpsed in this oracle of salvation [Isaiah 2:1-5], one of the most beautiful songs to universal peace.”¹²

Other texts present a situation that seems to go in the opposite direction to the indications just mentioned. For example, in the Book of Joel (4:9-10), “the peaceful citations of Isa 2:4 and Micah 4:3 are turned into a call for war. It is a total war in which even the weakling fights, believing himself to be a warrior.”¹³

But the contradiction is only apparent. The tools that should be used to cultivate the land and produce food are transformed to wage a war against the Lord that will be lost from the outset. On the “day of the Lord,” this negative change of use will reveal its utter futility (cf. Joel 4:4-8).

In this and other passages – such as Isaiah 59, for example – we must not be surprised by the image of a warrior God, reading literally what is described: “His weapons are justice and salvation, which he comes to plant: he does not overcome evil with evil, but with the power of good. But he is also clothed with zeal and vengeance: zeal for the oppressed and vengeance for the oppressors. Vengeful justice seeks to bring about salvation.”¹⁴

12.N. Calduch-Benages, *I profeti, messaggeri di Dio*, Bologna, EDB, 2013, 47.

13.E. D. Mallon, “Joel – Obadiah”, in R. E. Brown – J. A. Fitzmyer – R. E. Murphy (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1993, 403.

14.L. Alonso Schökel – J. L. Sicre Diaz, *I profeti, op. cit.*, 411.

More important than the armor itself is the combination with the virtue to which each of its elements is linked and the purpose for which it is described. In this case, the panoply consists of four elements, to which four virtues are attributed: justice, salvation, vengeance and zeal.¹⁵ Since these are worn and lived by the Lord himself, this can only be a source of hope and comfort for us. Help can only come from God, and it is he, and he alone, who can act against enemies to restore justice: “With anthropomorphic metaphors, Sacred Scripture speaks to us of our relationship with God and vice versa. However, God does not declare war on us; his intentions are peaceful (cf. Jer 29:11; Isa 26:3, 12; 45:7). It was humanity that broke the peace with God and with each other.”¹⁶ This refutes any possible religious justification for violence and war.

A Possible Container for Violence

It is significant that in the Decalogue, the prohibition against taking the name of God in vain is followed by a punishment from Him: “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name” (Exod 20:7). This punishment is not mentioned for the other commandments, as if to emphasize the seriousness of this transgression. To make wrongful use of the name of the Lord means, among other things, to appropriate his name to endorse personal interests, violence, wars and murders, as in the excesses of fundamentalism, terrorism and abuses of religious authority. Scripture distances itself from such perversions, denouncing their gravity, but at the same time revealing their presence throughout history.

From this perspective, even the violent passages of the Bible, when read in context and discussed with those who are knowledgeable on the subject, find their meaning and point to a path, including a historical one, from violence to nonviolence. These passages remind every man and

15.Cf. A. Oepke – K. G. Kuhn, “πανοπλία”, in G. Kittel – G. Friedrich (eds), *Grande Lessico del Nuovo Testamento*, vol. VIII, Brescia, Paideia, 1972, 828-848.

16.J. Vilchez Lindez, *Sapienza*, Rome, Borla, 1990, 252.

woman, whether believers or nonbelievers, that aggression and hostility are part of life in every age and place, but that they can be dealt with in different ways. And that, in the face of the defeat of the righteous, the prospect of life after death becomes an inescapable promise of a fulfillment that is impossible in the temporal horizon. The Bible, in its millennial writing, presents a path of progressive education of humanity, initially entering into human categories to show another horizon: that of peace, mercy, forgiveness and compassion proper to divine life.

The culmination of this journey is the story of Jesus, his way of dealing with the conflicts and adversities of life, as shown in his teachings in the Beatitudes and in his passion, death and resurrection. Christ's death on the cross, taking evil upon himself and invoking not vengeance but forgiveness, blessing those who curse him, is the definitive interpretation of how to deal with rejection and violence. Jesus, by offering himself, becomes a victim unjustly put to death and, with his resurrection, decrees the end of bloody sacrifice, taking upon himself the fate of all those oppressed and forgotten by history and transforming spears into sickles once and for all.

Commenting on John 19:34 – “One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water flowed out” – St. Augustine notes that with that gesture “it was as if the door of life had been opened, from which flowed the sacraments of the Church, without which one cannot enter into that life which is true life.”¹⁷ The soldier wanted to confirm Jesus' death with a violent gesture, but, contrary to all expectations, that gesture caused life to flow from his side.¹⁸ The real battle, the battle between life and death, was

17. Augustine of Hippo, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*. Homily 120, 2; cf. G. Barbaglio, *Pace e violenza nella Bibbia*, Bologna, EDB, 2011; G. Ravasi, *La santa violenza*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2019.

18. The Greek verb *nyssō* does not mean “to open,” but rather “to strike,” either hard or softly. However, we note that the “opening” of Christ's side can have a twofold justification: blood and water flow from it, and Jesus invites Thomas to put his finger in it (20:25). The verb *exēlthen*, “flowed out,” is the same as that found in the prophecy of Ezekiel [47:1], in which water “flows out” of the temple and becomes a stream that irrigates the Earth.” (X. Léon-

won by Christ once and for all with meekness and trust in the Father (cf. Luke 23:46). And he allows every person of good will to share in that victory.

In this sense, St. Paul reiterates the invitation to “put on the whole armor of God” (cf. Eph 6:10-17; 1 Thess 5:8 and 2 Cor 6:7) to fight a battle that is not so much material as spiritual, so that believers do not give in to “the wiles of the devil” (Eph 6:11). He is the enemy to be defeated. In Eph 6:12, in fact, it is specified that “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” It is a superhuman battle, which the risen Lord has certainly already won once and for all and for everyone, but for the individual believer it is still to be achieved in daily life.

In his letter to the Romans, in a passage that was decisive for Augustine’s conversion (cf. Rom 13:11-14), it is curious that Paul twice refers to putting on a particular garment: first, putting on armor, but not for offense, rather the armor of light; and then to put on Jesus Christ, “in the sense of a union with Christ, through the Spirit, a union that penetrates, determines, and transforms the personality of the believer, conforming it to God’s will for him in the order of redemption.”¹⁹ We must not remain in a state of slumber but be vigilant, because salvation is drawing nearer every day: “His nearness is an incalculable closeness. Therefore, his chronological proximity is an ever-looming arrival; indeed, it is already a presence that overwhelms us.”²⁰ Wearing “the armor of light” (v. 12b), we are not led to reprehensible behavior, which is listed here in pairs (cf. v. 13b), but we are invited to act as those who live “in broad daylight” (v. 13a), without fear or shame.

Dufour, *Lettura dell’evangelo secondo Giovanni*, Cinisello Balsamo [Mi], San Paolo, 2007, 1125 ff.).

19.S. Légasse, *L’epistola di Paolo ai Romani*, Brescia, Queriniana, 2004, 670.

20.H. Schlier, *La lettera ai Romani*, Brescia, Paideia, 1982, 637.

The Disarming Power of Mercy and Love

A Gospel passage that shows in a sublime way how Jesus' words and actions can disarm violent intentions is the story of the adulterous woman (cf. John 8:1-8). The stark contrast that emerges is also attested to by the history of this passage, which was accepted with difficulty and resistance in John's Gospel. It is a text that seems to say that mercy can transform anything, because it is the place of God's omnipotence. "Many ancient codices omit it. At a time when adultery was considered one of the unforgivable sins in the Church, Jesus' attitude, which does not even impose a salutary penance on the adulteress, could only be disconcerting. I understand that someone might have had more reason to remove this passage from the Gospels, if it was there, than to put it there, if it was absent."²¹ And if this passage was ultimately included in the canon of Scripture, it is because it was recognized that this is indeed how things happened.

At the insistence of his interlocutors that he express his opinion on the harsh punishment of stoning prescribed by the Law of Moses (cf. vv. 3-5), Jesus responds by standing up and uttering a phrase that has become famous: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (v. 7). The departure of the scribes and Pharisees (cf. v. 9a) reverses the initial roles: from accusers they become accused. However, the most eagerly awaited encounter only takes place at the end (cf. vv. 9b-11), when Jesus and the woman are the only ones left on the scene. Jesus seems to want the woman herself to declare the departure of the scribes and Pharisees, and so, with the absence of the accusers, the condemnation also disappears. St. Augustine's comment is well known: "Decidedly, this is the voice of justice. [...] Only the two of them remained: the poor woman and mercy. And the Lord, after striking them with the arrow of justice, did not stop to watch them fall, but, turning his gaze away from them, *once again he bent down and wrote*

21.R. Cantalamessa, *Passa Gesù di Nazaret*, Casale Monferrato [AI], Piemme, 1999, 110 ff.

on the ground (John 8:8).”²² The fruit of this dialogue restores dignity and life to the woman, who is invited not to repeat the mistakes of the past.²³

Many who read these verses rightly imagine that the accusers of the adulteress already had stones with them with which to stone her, should Jesus have chosen to agree with the *sic et simpliciter* application of the *Torah*. Whether or not the stones were in their possession is not specified. However, we can safely say, without distorting the meaning of the Gospel, that Jesus’ words, rich in mercy and love, disarm those people, who are forced to leave. They, who had already behaved violently toward that woman and had used her to accuse Jesus, were defeated without violence by the words of the Master. There is a twofold disarming for them: from the stones, if they had them with them, but even more so from the physical and verbal violence that they certainly manifested.

Jesus does not condemn the woman or those who accuse her, but both are referred to their own conscience, to the truth within themselves. In this way, the word of truth and freedom brought by the Son of God can be realized. Those scribes and Pharisees are called to convert their hearts, which are ready to point the finger, relying on the Law; that woman is invited to sin no more and to live her life as a renewed person.

We can therefore understand the fundamental importance of this passage for the combination of disarmed/disarming. Jesus’ words and gestures in the face of the accusers of the adulteress become disarming towards those who, disarmed, walk away without carrying out the deadly action they had planned. If we want to talk about the good use of weapons, we can well say that the weapons of mercy and love are those used by the Master to put an end to all violence and promote dignity and life.

22. Augustine of Hippo, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, Homily 33, 5.

23. “Jesus’ final words are therefore not lax, as if he were condoning adultery, but on the contrary constitute a call to live out the fidelity that had previously been mocked” (J. Zumstein, *Il Vangelo secondo Giovanni*, Turin, Claudiana, 2017, vol. 1, 376).

Conclusion

At the beginning, we noted that the combination of these two terms, “unarmed/disarmed” and “disarming,” is not unique to Pope Leo XIV. However, the fact that he used them in his first message after his election and in many subsequent meetings makes us look at this combination with great attention. Furthermore, the flexibility with which this combination can be applied to multiple realities of communal life – political, economic, moral and spiritual – highlights how this choice is strongly biblical and brings hope.

We hope that Leo XIV’s Petrine ministry will touch the hearts of rulers and help to disarm the arsenals of the powerful, but also the weapons of pride and selfishness that every person discovers within themselves in daily life. May it help us to take up the good and disarming weapons of mercy and love, hope and justice. And may we not hear the harsh warning of the Psalm: “I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war” (Ps 120:7)!