

"We appear to be witnessing a dramatic and childlike scenario," Pope Francis said in Bahrain last Friday. "In the garden of humanity, instead of cultivating our surroundings, we are playing instead with fire, missiles and bombs, weapons that bring sorrow and death, covering our common home with ashes and hatred."

It's Francis's job to say things like that, and he does it with sincerity and grace. He condemned the "childlike" whims of "a few potentates" to make war, and everybody thought that sounded fine, although nobody mentioned any names.

But here's the question. Are you a child? Do you at least think like a child? Are you ignorant and powerless? Three times "no"? Well, then, if you are a responsible adult, what did you do the last time your country went to war? (If you belong to the minority whose country hasn't gone to war since you have been alive, you may skip this question, or just use your imagination.)

The Pope means well, but he is barking up the wrong tree. The reason war is always with us is not an endless supply of evil potentates with childlike whims. It is an endless supply of human beings, most of whom don't even have evil in their hearts.

What they do have in full measure is a basic culture, older than our species itself, that sees war as natural and necessary (at least when our side does it). There are sometimes clear aggressors and defenders, of course, but the roles swap around regularly and the game never stops.

Human beings didn't invent war. They inherited it.

In the mid-20th century, the belief that human beings lived in peace before the advent of civilization began to crumble before the anthropologists' evidence that warfare was chronic and almost universal among huntergatherers. We are all descended from huntergatherers.

Then in the 1970s, primatologist Jane Goodall, studying chimpanzees in Tanzania, discovered that neighbouring chimp bands fought wars with each other. It was low-level war, conducted entirely by many-on-one ambushes, but later research revealed that the male death toll from war averaged 30 per cent per generation, and sometimes entire bands were wiped out.

Chimps did not think this strategy up, or choose it. Neither did human beings. Many other group-living predators have the same strategy: lions, hyenas, **wolves**. Traits like aggressiveness will vary among individuals, but if aggression brings advantages, evolution will work in favour of it.

So here we are, a very long time later, stuck with a deeply embedded traditional behaviour that no longer serves our purposes well. In fact, it might even wipe us out. What can we do about it? There's no point in yearning for some universal Gandhi who will change the human heart. He doesn't exist, and anyway it's not hearts that need to change. It's human institutions.

Actually, almost all the military and diplomatic professionals already know that. Even a lot of the politicians understand it, and in the past century - say, since about the middle of the First World War - a great deal of effort has gone into taming war and building institutions that can replace it.

That was what the League of Nations was about. It's what the United Nations is about, and arms control measures, and international criminal courts to try people who start an aggressive war, starting with the Nuremberg trials in 1945.

It's a work in progress, but there has been a steep and steady decline in the scale and frequency of wars in the last 50 years.

The work is far from finished, and the return of great-power war - with nuclear weapons this time - is an ever-

present risk. But nuclear war is not just a threat. It's also a huge incentive to bring this ancient institution under control, and ultimately to abolish it. Gwynne Dyer is an independent journalist based in London, England.

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