

Remembrance Day this year takes on special significance as we mark the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Armistice that signaled the end of what came to be called the Great War and, more commonly now, the First World War. From the beginning, the focus of Remembrance Day ceremonies was on the courage and generosity of Canadians and others who died in that utterly devastating war with its notorious trench warfare.

Over time, the meaning of Remembrance Day in Canada has come to embrace the members of the military as well as civilians who died or were wounded in the Second World War as well as in all subsequent hostilities in which Canadians have been involved up to and including Afghanistan.

The purpose in setting aside a day every year to recall the sacrifice made by so many in the defence of our country and our values is to keep alive the memory of what they did and, in remembering, to renew our sense of the preciousness of the things for which they fought and, in so many cases, died.

As Canadians, we have been enormously fortunate in the absence of any large-scale war on our soil. Like most of you, I have not known war firsthand. I have, however, read a number of books about the two World Wars and have been appalled at the suffering and destructiveness they have entailed for the

military and civilians alike. It is important that in remembering the names and lives of those who died, we also remember the evil and destructive nature of war. It is a brutal and cruel force that kills and maims human beings and devastates cities and countries. It leaves psychic as well as physical scars on most of those whom it touches.

Our culture puts an enormous emphasis on the present and on the future. As positive as that can be, it can also lead to the kind of amnesia that exposes us to repeating past follies. "Those who cannot remember the past," as the saying puts it, "are condemned to repeat it."

The theme of remembrance is associated in our country and perhaps especially in our city with the Holocaust. Toronto has been one of the major centres for Jewish survivors of the camps. The Holocaust Remembrance Week has been celebrated now for several decades. During it, Jews and others try to keep alive in the broader community and especially among the young an awareness of the all but unimaginable hate and violence unleashed against the Jewish people – men, women and children - by the Nazis in the course of the Second World War. In spite of such efforts, anti-Semitism continues to be very much alive as the recent attack on the synagogue in Pittsburgh attests. Since the Second Vatican

Council, the Catholic Church and especially the popes have committed themselves to confront the history of the Holocaust, including the role played in it by traditional Christian anti-Semitism, and to condemn and reject all forms of hatred and prejudice against the Jews.

Last Monday, Pope Francis met with a group of Jewish men and women who were attending a conference in Rome. He lamented the recent resurgence of anti-Semitism and declared, "A Christian cannot be an anti-Semite." "It would be a contradiction of faith and life," he said. "We are called to commit ourselves to ensure that anti-Semitism is banned from the human community."

"The Holocaust must be commemorated," the pope declared, "so that there will be a living memory of the past. Without a living memory," he added, "there will be no future, for if the darkest pages of history do not teach us to avoid the same errors, human dignity will remain a dead letter."

What the pope says applies to all the terrible things we do to one another - whether in our families, our church or our country. This is true whether the issue is prejudice or violence and whether it is directed against indigenous peoples, racial and ethnic minorities, the poor, women or children.

Our primary motive in celebrating Remembrance Day is to remember and honour and give thanks for the sacrifices of those who have defended us in time of war. It should however include a desire to work for peace, peace in our hearts, in our families and in our relations with one another.

In 1965, Pope Paul VI became the first pope to address the general assembly at the UN in New York. His topic was peace, which he saw as the great challenge facing the United Nations and the world at that time. “No more war, war never again,” he pleaded. “It is peace which must guide the destinies of peoples and of all mankind.” “Peace,” he added, “is not built solely by means of politics and the balance of forces and of interests. It is constructed with the mind, with ideas, with works of peace.” It demands an interior conversion.

In the biblical tradition, forgetfulness of who we are before God and of all that he has done for us is a major sin. At the heart of the Eucharist is an act of memory. We remember the life, teaching and, above all, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Remembering him moves us to gratitude and inspires us to renew our commitment to the kind of life to which he calls us, a life marked by goodness and generosity, forgiveness and peace, compassion and love.