

CHRISTIANS AS SOLDIERS OF CHRIST. MILITARY METAPHORS IN BASIL OF CAESAREA

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Abstract. Basil's position regarding military service is commonly discussed from the perspective of Canon 13 (*Ep.* 188.13). The use of military topics and metaphors has received little attention. This paper explores the use of military virtues, metaphors, and scenarios in the Basilian corpus. While these do not refer to war and military duty as such, identifying Christians with soldiers, setting the military as an example of virtuous, committed service can work only when military virtues have a positive significance and combat experiences have a lesson to teach. Nonetheless such texts should not be weaponized to justify wars of aggression.

Keywords: Basil of Caesarea, Canon 13, military metaphors, asceticism, spiritual warfare.

To Stelian Tofană, without whom the Centre for Biblical Studies would not exist.

As of 24 February 2022, war returned to Europe. This tragic development confronts scholars of religion with two significant questions that require theological and ethical assessment: the right of a country to defend itself in a genocidal war from the perspective of an arguably pacifist religion, and the way religion can be instrumentalised to justify wars of aggression.

Returning to the sources of theological reflection, I have chosen to explore the reception of New Testament military metaphors in Basil of Caesarea. Basil's stance on war and the military is commonly addressed from the perspective of Canon 13, which expresses unease with military service. Referring to the authority of the (unnamed) fathers, he does not reject military service as such.¹ But given the

¹ On fourth century Christian attitudes toward the army and military service in the context of political, social, and religious changes: John F. SHEAN, *Soldiering for God. Christianity and the Roman Army*, Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2010, 279–326, on Basil's Canon XIII: 293–294, 304–305; on the latter also Valerie A. KARRAS, “‘Their Hands Are Not Clean’: Origen and the Cappadocians on War and Military Service”, in Perry T. HAMALIS – Valerie A. KARRAS (eds.), *Orthodox Christian Perspectives on War*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017, 125–158 (rather apologetical); John MCGUCKIN, “St. Basil's Guidance on War and Repentance”, *In Communion. Website of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship* (19.02.2006): <https://incommunion.org/2006/02/19/st-basil-on-war-and-repentance/> (a theological approach, critical of just war theory).