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AUTONOMOUS DRONE WARFARE

Information technology, artificial intelligence, and robots are becoming increasingly important in our society. This is also evident in the military field. Many countries are equipping their armies with drones that can operate thousands of miles away in autonomous or semi-autonomous mode. „Whoever is the leader of artificial intelligence [AI], will be the leader of the world,” Vladimir Putin said as early as 2017 (cf. Columba Jerez, 2022)¹.

Recently, it has been known that, on March 27, 2020, a Turkish drone had autonomously taken the decision to attack enemy troops in the Libyan war. The drone decided the attack following its built-in algorithm, without waiting for any human intervention (Apps, 2021; Lambert, 2020, p. 95). This news highlighted the possibility of new war scenarios and fundamental changes in the nature of conflicts (Asaro, 2012; Galliot, 2017; Tomasi, 2014). Russia is also suspected of using such kind of robots in the current war against Ukraine (cf. Kallenborn, 2022; Pati, 2022).

The Catholic Church teaches that war „is always a defeat for humanity,” (Francis, 2013; 2020 [FT], n. 261; Paul VI, 1965) “the negation of all rights and a dramatic assault on the environment” (FT 257). Robotic warfare deepens this dehumanization and, therefore, cannot be promoted as a solution. To break the spiral of

¹ In the recent phase of the war against Ukraine, started on 24.02.2022, Russia is reportedly using, among others, Lantset kamikaze drones. Ukraine also uses various types of drones.

violence, we need to overcome the attitudes that have generated it and the injustices that feed it. Francis of Assisi is an inspiring model about this.

The first part of this article examines some of the military drones currently under development, indicating the challenges they present, especially from an ethical point of view. In the second part, it is noted that those who defend autonomous military drones often have a negative anthropological conception that contradicts the Christian vision of the human being. They also justify those drones by appealing to the Just War theory, which the Catholic Magisterium already considers impracticable. In the third part, Francis of Assisi is presented as a model of a pacified society that paves the way for peace and promotes fraternal relations, instead of considering war as inevitable.

1. WAR DRONES OR “KILLER ROBOTS”

When programming a military drone, it is possible to decide the type of control that the human agent will exercise over its piloting and learning, even to the point of making them highly autonomous (cf. Lambert, 2017, p. 18-20). Based on the type of control, we can distinguish between military attack robots, that can act in autonomous mode (LAWS: „Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems” [Vilmer, 2017, p. 98]²), and other robotic military systems (RMS: „Robotized military systems”).

It is important to distinguish between an automated system and an autonomous system. Both perform actions without the timely and direct intervention of a human agent, but those of the former are predictable and have been programmed, while those of the autonomous system may be unpredictable and could eventually exceed the objectives and actions initially set by the human programmer (Jurkovic, 2017).

There are also computerized robotic systems that operate in computer networks with virus-like techniques and that could lead to serious and unpredictable cyber-wars. Such systems can spread false information to influence public opinion and the outcome of election campaigns, manipulate the financial system for criminal purposes, obtain sensitive information using deceptive methods, block the economic system of an entire country, etc. The allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election are just one example (cf. Jamieson 2020; Davis, 2021).

RMS are managed by remote control. The human operator is the only one who can make the ultimate decision to fire, as it is currently the case with intercontinental missiles. Their offensive and defensive use is generally accepted without

2 The „Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems” (LAWS), are often called „killer robots.” In a science fiction scenario, one could think of absolutely autonomous LAWS, as designed and programmed by other machines..