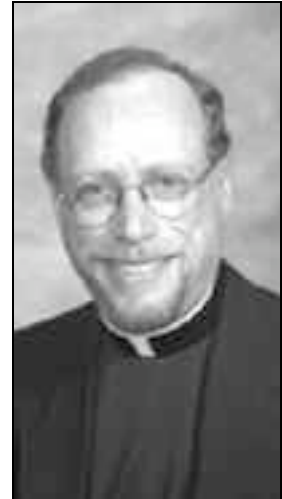


Catholic moral tradition and a new kind of war

By Father Jack Bonsor



Our leaders tell us we are at war. War is state-conducted violence to subdue an enemy. This is a new kind of war.

Our enemy is not another nation, but obscure and hidden terrorist networks. Locating and attacking this enemy will be difficult. The risk of harming the innocent (collateral damage) looms large.

The use of lethal violence as national policy raises the most serious kind of moral questions. As citizens of a democracy we bare some responsibility for our nation's actions.

Catholics turn to the Church for guidance. What does the Church teach about war? How might the Catholic moral tradition inform the decisions we face?

CHURCH DOCTRINE(S) ABOUT WAR

As with all difficult moral issues, there are no simple answers to these questions. Across the centuries popes, bishops and moral theologians have held a variety of sometimes contradictory views about participation in war.

Jesus taught that we should not answer violence with violence. He followed that teaching on Holy Thursday and Good Friday when he offered no resistance to his unjust arrest and execution. Jesus was a victim of state violence. So too were the early Christian martyrs.

During its first centuries the Church opposed warfare and Christian participation in the military. But this changed when, rather than being an enemy of the Roman Empire, Christianity became the Empire's official religion.

In the 4th century, St. Augustine argued that, as police can use violence to protect citizens from criminals, the state can make war against an unjust aggressor. Indeed, love of neighbor might require war.

Augustine's approach was generally accepted in the western church. However the pacifism of early Christians did not totally disappear. For example, the vocation to religious life involved a refusal to participate in war.

During the Middle Ages moral theologians and canon lawyers sought to specify the condition for a just war and to regulate conflict in order to minimize harm. Thus "The Truce of God" limited the times when war could be conducted.

Church leaders also used just war theory to initiate “holy wars.” At the end of the 11th century Pope Urban II proclaimed a crusade against Islam to recapture the Holy Land.

In the wake of the Reformation, Catholic and Protestant churches used civil power to make war on one another.

The secularism that contemporary Catholic commentators so frequently decry rose, in no small part, as a strategy to rest civil power from church control and thus end Christian-on-Christian violence.

St. Thomas Aquinas specified three conditions for a just war. First, the cause must be just. Second, war can only be conducted by legitimate authority. Finally, there must be right intention (e.g., to resist aggression or restore what had been unjustly seized).

Following Augustine, St. Thomas held that charity might require war to protect the innocent or assure the common good. Catholic moral theology and Church teaching have, for the most part, adopted this approach.

However the destructive character of modern war led many within the Church to wonder if it can ever be just. Pius XII (1939-1958) taught that self-defense against unjust aggression is the only justification for war. Even then Pius thought modern war might be worse than the injustice suffered. There must be some proportionality between the injustice suffered and the means to correct it.

He also taught that Catholics could not in good conscience refuse to participate in a war of national self-defense declared by legitimate authority (Christmas Message 1956).

When John XXIII (1958-1963) wrote about war and peace in *Pacem in Terris* he did not evoke just war theory. Pope John opposed the use of nuclear weapons and focused on the international human community rather than on the nation state.

He called on Catholics to look beyond our own nation and to see ourselves as members of and responsible for the entire human family.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) called for “an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude” (*Gaudium et Spes* 80).

In contrast to the teaching of Pius XII, the council stated that individuals could refuse military service on the basis of conscience (78). In the years since the council there has been an increasing interest in pacifism among Catholics.

Pope John Paul II has restated the just war theory. Self-defense alone justifies the use of arms. The pope seems to hold that the use of nuclear weapons never meets the test of proportionality. That is, nuclear destruction is so terrible that no situation can justify it. (World Day of Peace Message, 1982; Address at United Nations' University in Hiroshima, Appeal for Peace at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial).

John Paul II has also rejected the use of violence to correct social injustice. However he and many of the men he has elevated to high ecclesial office have been remarkably tolerant of right wing regimes that use violence against their political opponents.

THE PRESENT CRISIS

Where does this leave us? What of the present crisis?

1. Our tradition and the teaching of the magisterium do not offer one clear answer about how Catholics should respond to our nation's war on terrorism.

This ought not surprise us. Church teaching offers principles that must be applied to ever changing circumstances.

The ethical traditions of Aristotle and St. Thomas underscore the importance of prudence, i.e., the capacity to apply principles to concrete circumstances. Sincere and informed people sometimes disagree.

2. The Catholic tradition contains a variety of sometimes contradictory perspectives. The pacifism of early Christians has reappeared in recent years.

Some Catholics hold that Jesus' message and manner of life preclude the use of violence. Others contend that sinful and unjust circumstances sometimes require the reluctant and careful use of force.

The fact is that both these approaches occur among contemporary Catholics and have warrants in our tradition.

3. While the teaching of the magisterium and moral theologians has changed over the centuries, some principles are clear:

- War is a last resort.
- Force may be used by nations to defend themselves against unjust aggression.
- The conduct of war and its outcome must be proportionate to the injustice suffered. This is why recent Church teaching has rejected the use of nuclear weapons. The destruction they do is disproportionate (excessive) to any injustice.
- The just conduct of war prohibits attacks on the innocent.
- Catholic citizens may only cooperate with a just war. We are responsible in conscience to make an informed judgment about our nation's policies. Strong feelings of patriotism and anger cannot dispense us from taking the time to make a considered and prayerful judgment.

4. Do present circumstances meet the requirements for a just war?

- The terrorist attacks of September 11 were clearly unjust aggression against innocent life.
- The American government has both the right and duty to protect us against such attacks. It is a matter of self-defense.
- Our nation's response must be proportionate. That is, the actions we take must be carefully targeted against those who threaten our safety. We cannot use tactics that harm the innocent.

So while Catholics can support this “war on terrorism,” our support is not a blank check for any and all military and covert actions.

Finally, political rhetoric in a time of war tends to facile claims about good against evil. The attacks of September 11 were profoundly evil acts. But the terrorists are an extreme manifestation of a more widespread phenomenon. Why is there such hatred toward the United States?

Perhaps we are disliked because we are free, democratic and prosperous. It is also possible that others experience our economic, political and military power as abusive and oppressive.

We may conclude our nation's war against terrorism is just. Can we draw the same conclusion about our economic and political policies?

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