

# The Church's Just War Theory

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The Gloriette Monument to Just War, Schönbrunn Palace Garden, Vienna

At first hearing war seems antithetical to Christianity since the Fifth Commandment states, "Thou shalt not kill." However, the intent of the precept forbids the purposeful taking of human life (*Catechism*, #2307). Each person has a duty to preserve his life, and therefore has a right to legitimate self defense. Although an act of self-defense may have a two-fold effect — the preservation of the person's life and the unfortunate taking of the aggressor's life — the first effect is intended while the second is not.

In preserving its own life, a state — citizens and their governments — must strive to avoid war and settle disputes peacefully and justly. Nevertheless, "governments cannot be denied the right of lawful self-defense once all peace efforts have failed" (Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* [*Gaudium et Spes*], #79). Such a right does not entail a *carte blanche* permission for any and all acts of war. Just war theory establishes moral parameters for the declaration and waging of war.

St. Augustine (d. 430) was the originator of the just war theory, which St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) later adapted and explicated in his *Summa Theologiae*. St. Thomas maintained that a war may be waged justly under three conditions: First, the legitimate authority who has the duty of preserving the common good must declare the war. For instance, according to [the U.S.] Constitution, only Congress can legitimately declare a war. A private individual, no matter how much clout he may wield, does not have the right to commit a country to war.

Secondly, a just cause for war must exist. St. Augustine, quoted by St. Thomas, said, "A just war is wont to be described as one that avenges wrongs, when a nation or state has to be punished, for refusing to make amends for the wrongs inflicted by its subjects, or to restore what it has seized unjustly."

Finally, St. Thomas said the warring party must have the right intention, "so that they intend the advancement of good or the avoidance of evil." St. Augustine noted, "True religion looks upon as peaceful those wars that are waged not for motives of aggrandizement or cruelty, but with the object of securing peace or punishing evil-doers, and of uplifting the good." An evil intention, such as to destroy a race or to absorb another nation, can turn a legitimately declared war waged for just cause into a wrongful act.

Obviously, since the Middle Ages, warfare has changed dramatically, as witnessed by World War II and the conflicts which have followed it. Therefore, we can expand St. Thomas' and St. Augustine's theory to the following: In preparing to wage a just war, a country must meet the following criteria:

(1) Just cause — The war must confront an unquestioned danger. "The damage inflicted by the aggressor or the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave and certain," asserts the *Catechism* (#2309).

(2) Proper authority — The legitimate authority must declare the war and must be acting on behalf of the people.

(3) Right Intention — The reasons for declaring the war must actually be the objectives, not a masking of ulterior motives.

(4) Last resort — All reasonable peaceful alternatives must have been exhausted or have been deemed impractical or ineffective. The contentious parties must strive to resolve their differences peacefully before engaging in war, e.g. through negotiation, mediation, or even embargoes. Here too we see the importance of an international medial body, such as the United Nations.

(5) Proportionality — The good that is achieved by waging war must not be outweighed by the harm. What good is it to wage war if it leaves the country in total devastation with no one really being the winner? Modern means of warfare give great weight to this criterion.

(6) Probability of success — The achievement of the war's purpose must have a reasonable chance of success.

If a country can meet these criteria, then it may justly enter war. Moreover, a country could come to the assistance of another country who is not able to defend itself as long as these criteria are met.

However, the event of war does not entail that all means of waging war are licit; essentially, the "all is fair in love and war" rule is flawed. During war, the country must also meet criteria to insure justice is preserved.

(1) Discrimination — Armed forces ought to fight armed forces, and should strive not to harm non-combatants purposefully. Moreover, armed forces should not wantonly destroy the enemy's countryside, cities, or economy simply for the sake of punishment, retaliation or vengeance.

(2) Due proportion — Combatants must use only those means necessary to achieve their objectives. For example, no one needs to use nuclear missiles to settle a territorial fishing problem. Due proportion also involves mercy — towards civilians in general, towards combatants when the resistance stops (as in the case of surrender and prisoners of war), and towards all parties when the war is finished.

While these are "just criteria" — they still are wrenching. It seems paradoxical that the Christian religion which promotes love justifies a violent action to establish justice. No good person wants war. Yet at times we — as an individual, community, or nation — must confront and stop an evil. Pope John Paul II in an address to a group of soldiers stated, "Peace, as taught by Sacred Scripture and the experience of men itself, is more than just the absence of war. And the Christian is aware that on earth a human society that is completely and always peaceful is unfortunately a utopia and that the ideologies which present it as easily attainable only nourish vain hopes. The cause of peace will not go forward by denying the possibility and the obligation to defend it."

While the criteria for waging a just war are reasonable, our modern methods of warfare complicate their application, especially in the areas of proportionality (that the good achieved by waging war must not be outweighed by the harm), discrimination (that armed forces ought to fight armed forces and strive not to bring harm to non-combatants), and due proportion (that combatants use only those means necessary to achieve their objectives and show mercy to all once combat has ceased).

To prevent war, a nation (or an organization like the United Nations) may impose an embargo or issue sanctions against a government in hopes of moving that government to a peaceful resolution of a situation. Such a sanction presumes that the government would desire to pursue the best course of action for the welfare of its people and thereby "give in" rather than let its citizens suffer. If the government did not concede, the sanction would move the people to rise against the government.

Sadly, we have seen how prolonged embargoes do not really hurt the government, but the innocent people. In countries under embargo, no one sees starving leaders without proper medical care or housing; sadly, the innocent victims are the ones suffering. Worse, the recalcitrant government twists the meaning of the sanction to its own benefit, so that the people consider the imposer of the sanction as the unjust aggressor, and the government and country as the victim. Starving people do not see the global issue. Therefore, embargoes must be carefully monitored and evaluated as to the effectiveness.

The development of weapons of mass destruction has further complicated warfare. The Second Vatican Council recognized, "The development of armaments by modern science has immeasurably magnified the horrors and wickedness of war. Warfare conducted with these weapons can inflict immense and indiscriminate havoc which goes far beyond the bounds of legitimate defense" (*Gaudium et Spes*, #80).

During the Cold War, the technology of warfare "advanced," and continues to do so, so that armaments — whether nuclear, biological or chemical — have the capability of even greater destruction than anything witnessed during World War II. Obviously, adherence to the criteria of proportionality, discrimination and due proportion is harder than ever.

While affirming the right of a country to defend itself, the Catholic Church condemns indiscriminate "total war": the state of war between two parties does not justify or make fair the use of any means to wage the war. Vatican Council II therefore asserted, "Every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their

inhabitants is a crime against God and man, which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation" (*Gaudium et Spes*, #80). Unfortunately, war will always involve the loss of innocent life or the destruction of non-military property; however, the purposeful intent to commit such actions or to wage indiscriminate warfare is not morally justifiable.

War is not simply waged between countries. The enemy is not always known. Battles have given way to acts of terrorism. An evil person with some political agenda could obtain or produce a weapon of mass destruction which could then be used against an innocent population without notice.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Sometimes "making peace" may well include fighting evil, even if it means the sacrifice of life. Most importantly, the world community must eliminate the evils which prompt acts of war, and destroy the weapons of mass destruction which will lead to our own mutual destruction.

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