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**Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted: March 2, 2006**

### 'Thou Shalt Not Kill': A Just War

By Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted  
The Catholic Sun

#### Part Five in a Series

Over the past several weeks, we have considered the teaching of the Church on the Fifth Commandment, "**Thou shalt not kill**," and its implications for some specific ethical issues. We have seen that this command of God forbids some intrinsically evil acts (which are always wrong) such as abortion and euthanasia. We have also seen that it touches upon the question of the death penalty and the question of war. Neither of these is intrinsically evil (i.e. not always wrong); rather, they are actions that require us to weigh the circumstances and the moral principles for or against doing them. In the present article and the one to follow in the next edition, let us consider the question of a just war.

#### Is there such a thing as a just war?

At first glance, it may seem that God's command, "**Thou shalt not kill**" rules out the possibility of ever engaging in war. However, given the fact that we live in a world marked by injustice and violence, torn by strife and all the other harmful effects of original sin, there are times when the Fifth Commandment actually requires the use of deadly force. This is because we have an obligation to defend the common good and protect the peace and well-being of society.

The Bible itself introduces these nuances to the Fifth Commandment when it highlights which persons should not be killed, namely the most vulnerable and innocent among us. In the Book of Exodus (23:7), God says, "**The innocent and the just you shall not put to death, nor shall you acquit the guilty.**"

Certainly, we must do all we can to avoid war and to work for peace. Jesus teaches (Mt 5:9):

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**"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."** But as Vatican II taught in *Gaudium Et Spes* (#79), *"As long as the danger of war persists and there is no international authority with the necessary competence and power, governments cannot be denied the right of lawful self-defense, once all peace efforts have failed."*

### **What is a 'just war'?**

A just war is one where the strict conditions for a legitimate defense by military force have all been met. These conditions, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (#2309), are the following:

1. The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain;
2. All other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective;
3. There must be serious prospects of success;
4. The use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated.

### **Who decides that a war is just?**

When it comes to questions of life and death, and the use or not of weapons of war, all of us have a duty to promote the common good and to safeguard peace. However, some people in society bear a greater burden of responsibility because of the positions of authority that they hold in a community or nation. As the Catechism teaches (#2309-2310), *"The evaluation of these conditions for moral legitimacy belongs to the prudential judgment of those who have the responsibility for the common good. Public authorities, in this case, have the right and duty to impose on citizens the obligations necessary for national defense."*

This is why the Church has always encouraged prayers for public authorities, asking God to protect them and also to guide their thinking and decisions. The decisions made by leaders of nations, especially decisions to enter into war, have grave consequences for the contemporary generation and for generations to come.

Individual citizens bear a responsibility, on a lesser scale, for questions of war and peace. As the Catechism states (#2242), *"The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or the teachings of the Gospel."* It is generally more difficult for

individual citizens, however, to judge the legitimacy of military actions because they seldom have access to all the facts that are available to those serving in public office.

### **What is the Church's role?**

The role of the Church is distinct and different from the role of the state. The Church encourages her members to be good citizens and to participate actively in the affairs of the state, including voting in elections and serving in public office. But the Church respects the legitimate autonomy of the state and does not interfere in its internal activities. On the other hand, the Church's teachings have important implications for the ethical dimensions of a state's public policy and actions, and she exercises an important pastoral and catechetical role with her members who are citizens.

Speaking of this ethical role, Vatican II stated in *Gaudium Et Spes* (#76) that it is a part of the Church's mission "to pass moral judgment even in matters related to politics, whenever the fundamental rights of man or the salvation of souls requires." This is why the pope or bishops of the Church may speak out at a time of potential conflict between nations, taking the occasion to teach the moral principles that should guide decisions about military action and even giving their judgment about whether such action is justifiable in a particular instance. This teaching is meant to serve heads of state and others in their weighty responsibilities and also the citizens of the nations involved. Members of the Church should receive any judgment of the pope or bishops with high regard. In judgments of what constitutes a just war, however, these would not be considered infallible teaching.

There are other important issues to be considered on the issue of a just war, such as questions about military service and conscientious objection. We shall look at those in the next issue of *The Catholic Sun*.

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