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Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted: March 16, 2006

'Thou Shalt Not Kill': A Just War

Part Six in a Series

This is the second part of "'Thou Shalt Not Kill': A Just War."

By Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted

The Catholic Sun

In the previous edition of *The Catholic Sun*, we considered the question of a just war. We saw that there are times when war can be justified in order to defend the common good and to protect the peace and well being of society. Now, let us look more closely at some additional questions related to a just war, questions occasioned by events taking place at the present time in history.

Military service at a time of terrorism

As I write these words, our country is engaged in war. We have soldiers serving in Afghanistan, Iraq and other hot spots around the world. Every hour of the day, these men and women are placing their lives at risk in service to our country and to secure a lasting peace. As fellow citizens, they deserve our prayers for their safety. In particular, we pray for the more than 2,100 people who have died, for all the injured and for the many thousands of Iraqi casualties.

Military service has always been a dangerous enterprise. At this juncture in history, our soldiers face extraordinary dangers, not from conventional military forces employed by an enemy regime but from terrorists and suicide bombers who often act with no regard for the lives of innocent people, even children.

As our soldiers face grave dangers, protests against the war on terrorism gather momentum in

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countries around the world and within our nation itself. Since there is room for diverse opinions about the legitimacy of the present armed conflict, two questions deserve special consideration at this time: the duty to defend one's country on the one hand and the right to conscientious objection on the other.

A duty and an honor

At a time when our nation's military engagements are subject to so much debate and controversy, we can too easily forget the legitimacy and even duty of defending one's country. It is good for us to ponder again our faith's teaching as given in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC #2265), *"Legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for one who is responsible for the lives of others. The defense of the common good requires that an unjust aggressor be rendered unable to cause harm. For this reason, those who legitimately hold authority also have the right to use arms to repel aggressors against the civil community entrusted to their responsibility."*

Public authorities, furthermore, have the right and duty to impose on citizens the obligations necessary for national defense (CCC #2310). When men and women are called upon by their leaders to defend their nation they may do so with honor. The Catechism speaks of the worthy nature of such service (#2310), *"If they [i.e. soldiers] carry out their duty honorably, they truly contribute to the common good of the nation and the maintenance of peace."*

A soldier's conscience

Soldiers engaged in a just war have a right and a duty to bear arms against aggressive enemy combatants. At the same time, other actions are not justifiable, such as intentionally killing innocent civilians or mistreating prisoners of war. As Vatican II stated in *Gaudium Et Spes* (#79), *"The mere fact that war has regrettably broken out does not mean that everything becomes licit between the warring parties."*

Because of the complex moral situations that may arise in time of war and because of the psychological pressures faced by soldiers, there is great need for military chaplains to assist the troops, through prayer and the sacraments, and also through conscience formation and spiritual direction.

Unfortunately, at the present time, there is a shortage of Catholic chaplains in the U.S. military. Twenty-eight percent of our military personnel are Catholic today, but only 8 percent of our chaplains are Catholic. Until we overcome the national priest shortage, then, extra efforts need to be made by the lay faithful to provide spiritual support and faith formation to our Catholics serving in the military.

Conscientious objection

While every citizen is expected to serve the common good, not all should be required to engage in military service. The Church recognizes the legitimacy of those who claim a right not to join the military because of conscientious objection. This teaching was put forth at Vatican II in *Gaudium Et Spes* (#79), "...laws should make humane provision for the case of conscientious objectors who refuse to carry arms, provided they accept some other form of community service."

Of course, it is possible that some might claim to be conscientious objectors solely for the sake of escaping military duty. But that possibility does not negate the legitimacy of conscientious objection. There are some who object to all forms of war, but those who object to a specific armed conflict represent a more nuanced position. This would usually be based on the judgment that the conditions for a just war have not been met in the conflict in question. This position deserves respect; however, it is quite difficult to craft laws that can practically accommodate it.

Is the present war on terror just?

It is difficult to give a definitive answer to this legitimate and important question. A large segment of the international community strongly supported the war in Afghanistan; a smaller but significant segment supported the war in Iraq. Just prior to the Iraq conflict, Pope John Paul II strongly urged the United States and its allies to refrain from any pre-emptive military strike and to refrain from military engagement until there was greater international consensus about the need for such.

Certainly we must do all we can to avoid war. It is the duty of all, therefore, especially of those with public authority for deciding in favor of military action or against it, to commit to military action only as a last resort. It is also important to recognize that the war on terrorism cannot be won with military actions alone.

The current situation in Iraq

Once the war in Iraq began, a new set of conditions emerged regarding the right to continue to wage conflict there. These include the need to consider the consequences of an abrupt withdrawal of troops after the collapse of the Iraqi regime. The longer that the conflict continues and that the troops of the United States and its Allies remain in Iraq, new factors are emerging that suggest the need for concrete plans for a troop withdrawal. As Bishop Thomas Wenski of Orlando stated in January of this year, "*Our policy makers and citizens must be willing to ask difficult moral questions regarding preventive war and to learn from our experience in Iraq. More immediately, our nation must engage in serious and civil dialogue in order to walk a difficult path toward a responsible transition that seeks to help Iraqis take responsibility for*

building a better future for themselves.”

It is a time for continued support of our military personnel, remembering that questioning the merits of some aspects of the war on terrorism does not imply questioning the moral integrity of our soldiers. Let us encourage efforts to find non-violent ways to wage the war on terrorism, such as denying financial and other resources to terrorists, reducing poverty, and advancing the work of justice and integral development. Let us continue to pray and to work for peace.

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