

EXCERPTS ON THE CHURCH'S TEACHING ON WAR AND PEACE*

An essential component of a spirituality for peacemaking is an ethic for dealing with conflict in a sinful world. The Christian tradition possesses two ways to address conflict: nonviolence and just war. They both share the common goal: to diminish violence in this world.

Our conference's approach, as outlined in *The Challenge of Peace*, can be summarized in this way:

- 1) In situations of conflict, our constant commitment ought to be, as far as possible, to strive for justice through nonviolent means.
- 2) But, when sustained attempts at nonviolent action fail to protect the innocent against fundamental injustice, then legitimate political authorities are permitted as a last resort to employ limited force to rescue the innocent and establish justice.

...
“Christian non-violence is not passive about injustice and the defense of the rights of others.”¹ It ought not be confused with popular notions of nonresisting pacifism. For it consists of a commitment to resist manifest injustice and public evil with means other than force.

The just-war tradition consists of a body of ethical reflection on the justifiable use of force. In the interest of overcoming injustice, reducing violence and preventing its expansion, the tradition aims at: a) clarifying when force may be used, b) limiting the resort to force and c) restraining damage done by military forces during war.

The just-war tradition begins with a strong presumption against the use of force and then establishes the conditions when this presumption may be overridden for the sake of preserving the kind of peace which protects human dignity and human rights.

...
First, whether lethal force may be used is governed by the following criteria:

- **Just Cause:** force may be used only to correct a grave, public evil, i.e., aggression or massive violation of the basic rights of whole populations;
- **Comparative Justice:** while there may be rights and wrongs on all sides of a conflict, to override the presumption against the use of force the injustice suffered by one party must significantly outweigh that suffered by the other;
- **Legitimate Authority:** only duly constituted public authorities may use deadly force or wage war;
- **Right Intention:** force may be used only in a truly just cause and solely for that purpose;
- **Probability of Success:** arms may not be used in a futile cause or in a case where disproportionate measures are required to achieve success;
- **Proportionality:** the overall destruction expected from the use of force must be outweighed by the good to be achieved;
- **Last Resort:** force may be used only after all peaceful alternatives have been seriously tried and exhausted.

These criteria (*jus ad bellum*), taken as a whole, must be satisfied in order to override the strong presumption against the use of force.

¹ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace*, (Washington, D.C.: USCC Office for Publishing and Promotion Services, 1983), no.73.

Second, the just-war tradition seeks also to curb the violence of war through restraint on armed combat between the contending parties by imposing the following moral standards (*jus in bello*) for the conduct of armed conflict:

- ***Noncombatant Immunity***: civilians may not be the object of direct attack, and military personnel must take due care to avoid and minimize indirect harm to civilians;
- ***Proportionality***: in the conduct of hostilities, efforts must be made to attain military objectives with no more force than is militarily necessary and to avoid disproportionate collateral damage to civilian life and property;
- ***Right Intention***: even in the midst of conflict, the aim of political and military leaders must be peace with justice, so that acts of vengeance and indiscriminate violence, whether by individuals, military units or governments, are forbidden.

...

We...recognize that the application of these principles requires the exercise of the virtue of prudence; people of good will may differ on specific conclusions. The just-war tradition is not a weapon to be used to justify a political conclusion or a set of mechanical criteria that automatically yields a simple answer, but a way of moral reasoning to discern the ethical limits of action. Policy-makers, advocates and opponents of the use of force need to be careful not to apply the tradition selectively, simply to justify their own positions. Likewise, any application of just-war principles depends on the availability of accurate information not easily obtained in the pressured political context in which such choices must be made.

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