

Question: What is the Church's stance regarding just war? (Part II of II)

Part I took a look at the history of just war, if you missed it and would like a copy please email me at stpm@spc1.omhcoxmail.com

Answer: Last week, a history was given regarding the development of a just war doctrine by St. Augustine in the 4th century. Also discussed was the way Jesus responded to violence with nonviolence.

Now that we know how St. Augustine defined just war in the third and fourth century, how does the Church today define just war? As we grow and develop as human beings, our understanding of war and peace increasingly becomes clear. After Vatican II (1962-65) the Church could “no longer view war as a normal condition of human life and international relations.” (*The Catholic Peace Tradition*, 191) Instead, war was to be looked at as something that disrupted humanity and was in fact a “negation of human life.” (*The Catholic Peace Tradition*, 191) In light of the world wars and man’s new capability of total annihilation, Vatican II determined that there was a need for regulations on how governments defended themselves. The Council severely limited the doctrine of just war stating that while the defense of a society is a justifiable reason for war, the methods employed to defend that society are gravely limited. The Council felt that in light of weapons of mass destruction and the capabilities of “total war” with the use of these weapons, nations that go to war do not have the right to administer “total destruction of cities and their populations.” (*The Catholic Peace Tradition*, 192) In fact, the Council declared the use of these tactics as “a crime against God and man himself.” (*The Catholic Peace Tradition*, 192) To complement their restrictions on just war, the Council spoke out against the method of deterrence or one-upmanship. The Council admitted that while deterrence is better than war it is not something to be supported. Ultimately the Council called all countries to disarm themselves immediately and systematically. Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem In Terris* (Peace on Earth) was well aware of the dilemma the arms race placed all people in, he wrote that “humanity (should) urgently demand that the arms race cease.” (112)

The official stance of the Church regarding just war is found in the *Catechism*. It states that waging war against another is a very grave issue and that all citizens and governments are obligated to strive for solutions to problems at all costs before resorting to war. (*Catechism* 2308) The outlines for a just war conclude that to be just one must have exhausted all other means to avoid war. Being just means that even when going to war as a last resort, one must not produce evils and disorders greater than the evil that is to be eliminated, and the damage inflicted by the aggressor must be lasting, grave, and certain. (*Catechism*, 2309) War cannot be justified as a bi-product of anger. The fifth commandment teaches us that, “You shall not kill.” Killing as a result of anger is a deliberate hatred vastly contrary to the teachings of Jesus who asked us to love those who hate. Jesus addresses this issue specifically and says that, “Everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment.” (Matthew 5:22)

The Church continues to look towards the future and the prospect that someday there will be no instance in which war can justly be waged. Understanding that war is not an option is likely to bring us back to our roots and the teachings of Jesus. As explained in Part I of this article, Jesus preached radical love for neighbors and enemies alike. This love was not simply an aesthetic or surface love meant to smooth disagreements over. Jesus himself loved all and challenges us to do the same: truly love everyone with all our hearts and minds. This radical love that Jesus preached in modern terms is comparable to the love family members share with one another. If everyone in the world were to see their neighbor as Jesus did then no just war theory would have ever had to exist. Steps in the right direction have been carried out by many great men and women in the peace movement. Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton are just a few 20th century men and women who we can model our own lives after.

Thomas Merton a Trappist monk from the Gethsemani Abbey in rural Kentucky wrote in the 1960’s on peace and war. Merton believed for individuals to support nonviolence over war, all men and women need to turn to their inner selves and see the intimate bond that we share with one another. This look into our interior could, if we really tried, bring out our true selves. This true self is not marked by pride, glory, and selfishness that modern society has promoted. Instead, the true self brings the realization that in our own interior is God. Once we see this, we can begin to see that not only is God in our own interior but He is in *everyone*! Since this is the case we share an intimate bond with one another as God’s children. If we truly realize this intimate bond then the problems we face in our modern society that lead to war including but not limited to one-upmanship, suppression, and egoism are totally eliminated.

Merton realized that not everyone in the world saw this intimate bond. He believed that part of the call of the Christian was the willingness to suffer for Christ’s cause of peace instead of imposing suffering upon another. Merton did not just apply this idea to war but to every facet of our lives. (*The Catholic Peace Tradition*, 193) Borrowing from the words of Gandhi, Merton believed that the nonviolent effort was to seek the truth, for it is in truth that we find peace. It was a call to meekness, a state of being in which war is not found, and where Jesus calls us all at the Sermon on the Mount when he said, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” (Matthew 5:5)