

**"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" (U.S. Bishops, *A Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*).**

## The Church's Tradition of the Just War

*As Christians came to hold power in the Roman Empire, they were faced with the problem of defending the empire from invasion. Convinced that war was inevitable, they outlined principles that, if followed, might prevent Christians from engaging in unjust wars, while allowing them to fight in ones considered just. They drew these principles from both Christian and pagan tradition. As time went on, these general principles were codified by St. Thomas Aquinas and others into what we now call the Just War Theory. The following quotes help shed light on the Church's attitude to war as well as its tradition of thinking when it comes to war, deeply rooted in classical and medieval philosophy.*

In the case of a state in its external relations, the rights of war must be strictly observed. For since there are two ways of settling a dispute (first by discussion and second by physical force) and since the first way is characteristic of man, the second of a brute, we must resort to force only when we have no opportunity for discussion. The only excuse, therefore, for going to war is that we may live in peace unharmed; and when the victory is won, we should spare those who have not been blood-thirsty and barbarous in their warfare (Cicero, + 43 BC).

Peace should be the object of your desire; war should be waged only as a necessity...in order that peace may be obtained. Therefore, even in waging war, cherish the spirit of a peacemaker, that, by conquering those whom you attack, you may lead them back to the advantages of peace...As violence is used toward him who rebels and insists, so mercy is due to the vanquished or captive (St. Augustine, + 430 AD).

Those who fight a war should have righteous intentions, so that they intend the advancement of good, or the avoidance of evil... For it may happen that the war is declared by the legitimate authority, and for a just cause, but still be unlawful through a wicked intention. Hence Augustine says (*Contra Faustum* xxii, 74): "The passion for inflicting harm, the cruel thirst for vengeance, an unpeaceful and relentless spirit, the fever of revolt, the desire for power, and such like things, all these are rightly condemned in war" (St. Thomas Aquinas, + 1274).

The fifth commandment forbids the intentional destruction of human life. Because of the evils and injustices that accompany all war, the Church insistently urges everyone to prayer and to action so that the divine Goodness may free us from the ancient bondage of war. All citizens and all governments are obliged to work for the avoidance of war. However, "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." The strict conditions for legitimate defense by military force require rigorous consideration. The gravity of such a decision makes it subject to rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2307-9).

**"The development of the doctrine of the Church on economic and social matters attests the permanent value of the Church's teaching at the same time as it attests the true meaning of her Tradition, always living and active" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2421).**

# The Development of the Just War Theory

St. Augustine (430) believed that one could be a Christian and kill one's enemies because the destruction of the enemy's body might actually benefit that person's soul. In fact, he taught that only people who loved their enemy might kill their enemy: "No one indeed is fit to inflict punishment save the one who has first overcome hate in his heart."

While Augustine never systematically dealt with the issue of the morality of war, later thinkers gathered the following principles from his various letters and treatises:

1. The intention in going to war must be to restore peace.
2. Only a legitimate authority may declare war.
3. The conduct of the war must be just.
4. Monks and clerics may not engage in warfare.

However, over the next 1000 years, Augustine's just war principles were largely ignored, and many Christians not only went to war, but believed that shedding an enemy's blood was a way of defending the faith and earning salvation.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, St. Thomas Aquinas (1274) approached the serious problem of war and peace by offering three principles for just warfare:

1. War must be waged by a public authority for the common good.
2. A just cause is required.
3. It must be fought with right intentions.

Today, the "Just War Theory" has been developed even further. In the *Challenge of Peace*, the U.S. Bishops outlined the criteria a war must meet to be considered just:

1. There must be a **just cause**, i.e. confronting a real and certain danger.
2. It must be waged by a **competent authority**.
3. War must be waged with **the right intention**.
4. War must be a **last resort** - all peaceful alternatives must have been exhausted.
5. There must be a **probability of success**, to prevent a hopeless resort to violence.
6. **Proportionality**: the destruction inflicted must be less than the good expected by taking up arms.
7. **Comparative Justice**: No state should act on the basis that it has "absolute justice" on its side.

Within war, soldiers must use **discrimination**, being sure to never target civilian populations or non-military targets. Any military action must not inflict damage disproportionate to the success achieved.