

What the **CHURCH** teaches

Just War



**Violence never again!
War never again!
Terrorism never again!**
In the name of God,
may every religion bring upon the earth
justice and peace, forgiveness and life, love!
— Pope John Paul II

**The Catholic Position on
the Morality of War**

1. What Is War?

The starting point for deciding whether or not a war is just must begin with a definition of war. War is not merely “organized” fighting. It is not a series of skirmishes or rioting, nor is it simply the use of weapons. War is, by definition, a state of conflict between two or more sovereign nations carried on by force of arms. For war to exist, a nation must fight another nation. A true war cannot be fought against an individual or even a group of individuals.



The Bible sees peace within and among nations as a sign of the coming of God’s reign: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”

(Isaiah 2:4). In the New Testament, Jesus blesses peacemakers (Matthew 5:9) and warns that “all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52).

2. Does Catholic Teaching Forbid All Wars?

Catholic teaching recognizes the right of nations to defend themselves against unjust aggression and protect essential human rights. In *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), the Second Vatican Council states that as long as the danger of war persists, if there is no international authority with the necessary competence and power, and all peace efforts have failed, nations have the right to defend themselves (No. 79).

This teaching is rooted in the New Testament, which some-

The second, the principle of discrimination (noncombatant immunity), forbids targeting civilian populations. The Second Vatican Council taught, “Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation” (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 80).

6. Are There Any Special Considerations With Regard to Modern Warfare?

Today, more than any time in the past, the principles of proportionality and discrimination are vital. Modern war has unparalleled destructive power. In his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (“Peace on Earth”), Pope John XXIII wrote that in the nuclear age “it no longer makes sense to maintain that war is a fit instrument with which to repair the violation of justice” (No. 127).

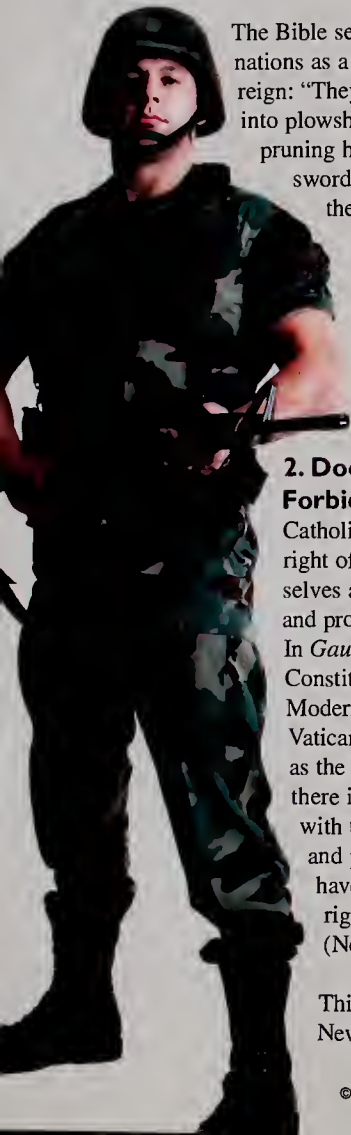
Nuclear, biological, and chemical weaponry has led popes, beginning with Pius XII, to condemn the modern theory of total warfare, which holds that any means necessary to achieve victory may be used. When the Allies engaged in obliteration bombing to hasten the end of the Second World War, Catholic theologians condemned the act because the valid goal of ending the war and saving Allied soldiers’ lives could not justify the evil means of directly killing many thousands of noncombatants. Such wholesale destruction cannot be defended; it is not the kind of “indirect” killing involved in using the minimum force necessary to defeat an attacking army.

Modern nations engaging in warfare must take special care to insure that the evil caused by the war is not greater than the evil the war is designed to eliminate.



I. What Is War?

The starting point for deciding whether or not a war is just must begin with a definition of war. War is not merely “organized” fighting. It is not a series of skirmishes or rioting, nor is it simply the use of weapons. War is, by definition, a state of conflict between two or more sovereign nations carried on by force of arms. For war to exist, a nation must fight another nation. A true war cannot be fought against an individual or even a group of individuals.



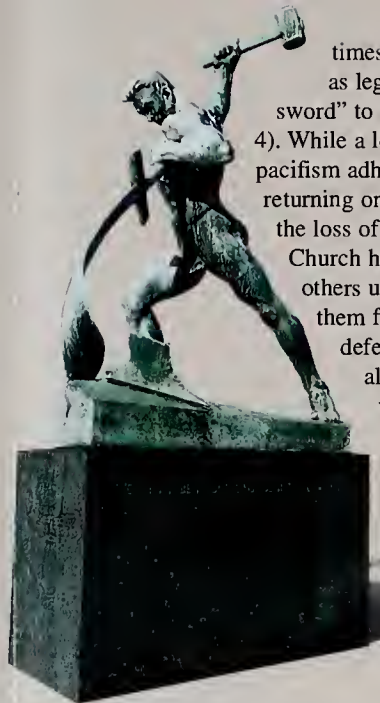
The Bible sees peace within and among nations as a sign of the coming of God’s reign: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4). In the New Testament, Jesus blesses peacemakers (Matthew 5:9) and warns that “all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52).

2. Does Catholic Teaching Forbid All Wars?

Catholic teaching recognizes the right of nations to defend themselves against unjust aggression and protect essential human rights. In *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), the Second Vatican Council states that as long as the danger of war persists, if there is no international authority with the necessary competence and power, and all peace efforts have failed, nations have the right to defend themselves (No. 79).

This teaching is rooted in the New Testament, which some-

© Rubberball

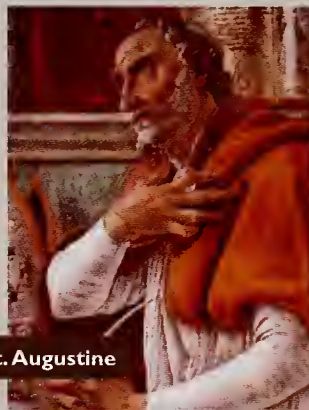


“Swords to Plowshares,” by Evgeniy Vuchetich

times speaks of civil authorities as legitimately wielding “the sword” to suppress evil (Romans 13:3-4). While a long tradition of Christian pacifism adheres to Jesus’ example of returning only good for evil — even at the loss of one’s own life — the Church holds that those who have others under their care must defend them from attack. Legitimate defense is not only a right but also a “grave duty for one who is responsible for the lives of others,” and “the defense of the common good requires that an unjust aggressor be rendered unable to cause harm” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2265).

3. Is There Such a Thing as a “Just War”?

Sometimes the circumstances of a fallen world make it necessary for one nation to battle another. In the fifth century, when Rome was threatened by barbarian invasions, St. Augustine of Hippo first articulated this principle, explaining that waging war is sometimes a tragic necessity in a sinful world, “but beyond doubt it is greater felicity to have a good neighbor at peace, than to conquer a bad one by making war” (*City of God*, IV, 15). He outlined the moral criteria that have come to be known as the “just war” theory. The intent is not to justify war, but rather to offer a systematic way of examining the issues in a moral context. This is critical, because as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) points out, “the gravity of such a decision makes it subject to rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy” (No. 2309).



St. Augustine

“St. Augustine” by Botticelli

4. What are the Criteria for Going to War?

Historically, the five criteria for the legitimacy of going to war are the following:

- **One must have a just cause, such as the protection of basic human rights or the defense of the innocent from unjust aggression (CCC, Nos. 2302 and 2304).** War cannot be used for settling a grievance, for personal gain, for domination, or acquisition of land or goods.
- **One must have a “right intention” in seeking to restore order and justice. Even those with a just grievance cannot go to war out of hatred or a thirst for vengeance (CCC, Nos. 2302-2304).** A lust for battle or the desire to inflict harm cannot be part of a just war.
- **The use of force must be ordered by a competent and lawful authority with responsibility for the common good (CCC, No. 2309).** Because war is an action between nations, an individual acting alone cannot legitimately declare war.
- **There must be a reasonable probability of success, and the expected benefits must be proportionate to the human and other costs of war (CCC, Nos. 2309, 2312-2314).** A war that cannot be won is not just.
- **All peaceful means of resolving the conflict must be exhausted. War must be a last resort (CCC, Nos. 2304, 2308, 2309, and 2317).** War must never be the first choice. It may be entered into only after all other methods have been thoroughly exhausted.

5. What Else Must Be Taken Into Account?

Two additional criteria affirmed by Catholic teaching relate to the moral limits during war.

The first, sometimes called “proportionality of means,” demands that the degree of force used must be reasonable in light of the military goal. In other words, one must not needlessly risk lives or cause more harm than one is trying to prevent.

The second, the principle of discrimination (noncombatant immunity), forbids targeting civilian populations. The Second Vatican Council taught, “Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation” (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 80).

6. Are There Any Special Considerations With Regard to Modern Warfare?

Today, more than any time in the past, the principles of proportionality and discrimination are vital. Modern war has unparalleled destructive power. In his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (“Peace on Earth”), Pope John XXIII wrote that in the nuclear age “it no longer makes sense to maintain that war is a fit instrument with which to repair the violation of justice” (No. 127).

Nuclear, biological, and chemical weaponry has led popes, beginning with Pius XII, to condemn the modern theory of total warfare, which holds that any means necessary to achieve victory may be used. When the Allies engaged in obliteration bombing to hasten the end of the Second World War, Catholic theologians condemned the act because the valid goal of ending the war and saving Allied soldiers’ lives could not justify the evil means of directly killing many thousands of noncombatants. Such wholesale destruction cannot be defended; it is not the kind of “indirect” killing involved in using the minimum force necessary to defeat an attacking army.

Modern nations engaging in warfare must take special care to insure that the evil caused by the war is not greater than the evil the war is designed to eliminate.



© Reuters

7. Do These Principles Apply Only to Christians?

While the principles of just war are part of the Catholic tradition, they are now utilized by men and women of all faiths to evaluate the morality of war. Even though somewhat imprecise and open-ended, they remain the best effort to reflect on the legitimacy of conflict in a sustained moral way.

8. What Should a Catholic Do?

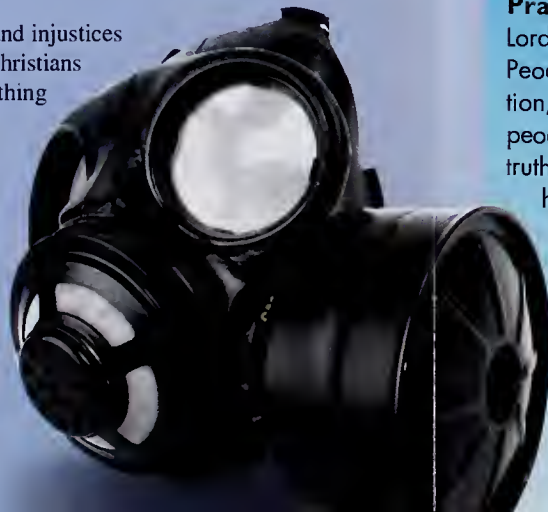
Catholics must understand and reflect upon the teachings of the Church regarding war and peace, as well as the statements of the Pope and bishops on specific events. After such reflection:

Those who believe that a specific military action does meet the moral criteria for a just war are called upon to support and endorse those policies that reflect the values of the just war tradition.

Those who believe that a specific military action does not meet those criteria may feel called upon to oppose the conflict with a variety of means allowed for in a democratic society.

If called to defend the innocent or right an existing injustice, military men and women are to "carry out their duty honorably" in order to "truly contribute to the common good of the nation and the maintenance of peace" (CCC, No. 2310).

Because of the evils and injustices that all wars create, Christians are called to do everything possible to avoid war. First and foremost, Christians must pray unceasingly for just and authentic peace.



© AFP



Specifically, pray for:

- Those in legitimate authority, that the Lord will guide their decisions regarding conflicts between nations.
- Those in the military, that God will give them prudence to do what is moral in all circumstances.
- Those who are enemies, that their hearts and minds will be opened to resolving differences by peaceful means.
- Those who are the innocent victims of war, that the Lord will give them strength to bear their burdens.

Prayer for Peace

Lord Jesus Christ, who are called the Prince of Peace, who are yourself our peace and reconciliation, who so often said, "Peace to you," grant us peace. Make all men and women witnesses of truth, justice, and brotherly love. Banish from their hearts whatever might endanger peace. Enlighten our rulers that they may guarantee and defend the great gift of peace. May all peoples on the earth become as brothers and sisters. May longed-for peace blossom forth and reign always over us all.

— Pope John XXIII

Prayer for Reconciliation

God of perfect peace,
violence and cruelty can have no part with you.
May those who are of peace with one another
hold fast to the good will that unites them;
may those who are enemies forget their hatred and
be healed.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever.
Amen.

— From the Sacramentary

Where to Go for More Information

Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition, Nos. 2263-2267, 2302-2317

Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), Nos. 77-82

Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* ("Peace on Earth"), Nos. 109-119

National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*

St. Augustine, *City of God*

"War," *Our Sunday Visitor's Encyclopedia of Catholic Doctrine*, edited by Russell Shaw, Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, Inventory No. 746, pp. 700-702

These materials and more can be found at

www.whatthechurchteaches.com

Please visit this web site for further information.

Our Sunday Visitor

200 Noll Plaza • Huntington, IN 46750

1-800-348-2440 • www.osv.com

www.whatthechurchteaches.com

ISBN: 1-59276-009-0 • Inventory Number: P11

Copyright © 2003 by Our Sunday Visitor, Inc.

2013708

What the CHURCH teaches

Just War



Violence never again!
War never again!
Terrorism never again!
In the name of God,
may every religion bring upon the earth
justice and peace, forgiveness and life, love!

— Pope John Paul II

The Catholic Position on
the Morality of War

© Covel

2013708

Prayer for Reconciliation

God of perfect peace,
violence and cruelty can have no part with you.
May those who are at peace with one another
hold fast to the good will that unites them;
may those who are enemies forget their hatred and
be healed.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever.

Amen.

— From the Sacramentary

Where to Go for More Information

Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition, Nos.
2263-2267, 2302-2317

Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in
the Modern World), Nos. 77-82

Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* ("Peace on Earth"), Nos.
109-119

National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of
Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*

St. Augustine, *City of God*

"War," *Our Sunday Visitor's Encyclopedia of Catholic
Doctrine*, edited by Russell Shaw, Our Sunday Visitor
Publishing Division, Inventory No. 746, pp. 700-702

These materials and more can be found at

www.whatthechurchteaches.com

Please visit this web site for further information.

Our Sunday Visitor

200 Noll Plaza • Huntington, IN 46750

1-800-348-2440 • www.osv.com

www.whatthechurchteaches.com

ISBN: 1-59276-009-0 • Inventory Number: P11

Copyright © 2003 by Our Sunday Visitor, Inc.