

The Changing Vision of “Just Peace” in Catholic Social Tradition

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THE ATTAINMENT OF A JUST PEACE HAS BEEN the political goal of Catholic social tradition ever since its inception and, in fact, goes back at least to Augustine. Peace is the comprehensive and ultimate category for the Catholic political vision, but justice is also necessary. “The earthly city ... seeks an earthly peace, and the end it proposes, in the well-ordered concord of civil obedience and rule, is the combination of men’s wills to attain the things which are helpful to this life” (*City of God*, 14.17). Justice consists in “well-ordered” relationships and government, and “peace” consists in a concord of human values and desires, such that justice is attained and sustained through harmonious cooperation. True justice is incompatible with the existence of violence, while true peace is incompatible with the existence of injustice. This idea is captured well by Paul VI when he says in his 1972 World Day of Peace message, “If you want peace, work for justice.” Justice and peace are interdependent, but, because Augustine had a deep awareness of the reality of sin in the world, especially in the form of the *libido dominandi*, he granted the legitimacy of armed force to reestablish a just social order which has been broken by evils such as violence, theft, or insurrection. Even so, Augustine envisions peace—and insofar as possible a just and lasting peace—as the goal of armed force (including war), when justly used by legitimate political authorities.¹

While the just war tradition inspired by Augustine has informed Catholic social teaching throughout its history, recent decades have seen a shift in the ethics of war and peace and in the Church’s peace mission. Since around the time of the Second Vatican Council, much greater emphasis has been given to nonviolent means of correcting injustice, while the validity of armed force has become increasingly marginal, especially in papal teaching. Instead, nonviolence is promoted, not only as faithful to the gospel but also as an effective strategy to protect human dignity and the common good. To develop

¹ On peace in the Catholic tradition, see Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M., “Peacebuilding and Catholic Social Teaching,” in *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter, R. Scott Appleby, and Gerard F. Powers (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010), 268-73.

this point, I first offer three general observations about Catholic social teaching and the ethics of peace and war. I then present the direction of thought represented by popes of the Vatican II era and beyond. Finally, I offer five interpretive suggestions, looking ahead to the future direction of Catholic social teaching.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING, PEACE AND WAR

Regarding Catholic social teaching, the first point is that it is a politically engaged and activist tradition. It is countercultural in that it speaks out against social norms and practices such as unjust economic inequality, militarism, and xenophobic hostility toward immigrants. Catholic social teaching sees the Church and its members as responsible to resist such injustices actively, whether through teaching, through symbolic action, or through the activities of Catholic organizations (official and nonofficial), such as Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Relief Services, the Catholic Health Association, and Network (a social justice lobby sponsored by women's religious congregations). Catholic social tradition is definitively reformist, interventionist, and hopeful about social change. It should be stressed that, in peacebuilding and other efforts for justice around the world, the work of women is pervasive and fundamental and deserves more credit and support in Catholic social teaching.²

Second, Catholic social tradition on war and peace specifically, is "restrictive" with regard to the use of violent force. Killing in war, or in other types of defensive action, is permitted but only under increasingly stringent conditions and only as a last resort—which is the very meaning of holding a "presumption against war."³ In a "classic" article, John Courtney Murray defines the purposes of the just war ethic as the condemnation of the evil of war, the limitation of this evil, and the humanization as far as possible of the means of war.⁴ Less noted is his caveat that war is ultimately irrational and that there is something inherently paradoxical in trying to justify war from the standpoint of the gospel.⁵

² See Susan Hayward and Katherine Marshall, eds., *Women, Religion and Peacebuilding: Illuminating the Unseen* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2015).

³ See Gerard F. Powers, "From an Ethics of War to an Ethics of Peacebuilding," in *From Just War to Modern Peace Ethics*, ed. Heinz-Gerhard Justenhoven and William A. Barbieri, Jr. (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 289, and Mark J. Allman and Tobias L. Winright, "Growing Edges of Just War Theory: *Jus ante bellum*, *jus post bellum*, and Imperfect Justice," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 32, no. 2 (2012): 173-91.

⁴ John Courtney Murray, S.J., "Remarks on the Moral Problem of War," *Theological Studies* 20, no. 1 (1959): 40-61.

⁵ Murray, "Remarks on the Moral Problem of War," 56-57.

Third, since the Second Vatican Council, Catholic social teaching has with increasingly frequency alluded to the global scope of its vision of justice and to the importance of considering the differing contexts around the world in which the demands of justice are concretized and threatened. In the case of violent conflict, just war theory, and the goal of just peace, these differences are extremely important. While academics in the U.S. may find just war theory to be a useful tool with which to analyze and critique national military initiatives, people in conflict zones in the global South see just war theory as spectacularly ineffective in restraining violence, much less building a just peace. Concepts like “just cause” are more likely to be in use in the ideological validation of violence than in its restraint or condemnation. Since the popes envisage global responsibilities to a global church and get advocacy and feedback from local episcopacies and Catholic organizations reflecting very different experiences of “justified” war, they must look beyond the nuances and distinctions shaping war and peace debates in the global North and look critically at the actual uses and abuses of just war thinking.

PAPAL TEACHING

Given the long-term establishment of the just war tradition in Catholic social teaching, recent papal teaching is surprising when examined as a whole. I was asked to write a background paper on Catholic social teaching and just peace for a conference on “Nonviolence and Just Peace” that was convened in Rome in April 2016, under the sponsorship of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and Pax Christi International.⁶ Aware that just war theory has been a staple in the Catholic ethics of war and peace, I expected it to provide the basic framework of Catholic social teaching on war as articulated in recent papal statements. To the contrary, I discovered that no pope since Vatican II has explicitly defended just war theory or used just war criteria to validate a specific use of force. In fact, the popes often sound as if they are condemning armed force entirely and under any circumstances. Yet, paradoxically, these same popes all retain a place for self-defense and/or humanitarian intervention, at least in principle. Therefore, it is not possible to grasp the full challenge of their message by citing selectively (either texts condemning violence or permitting humanitarian intervention or defense).

To some extent, the popes seem to be responding to recent events or the contexts of their audiences when they choose, for example, to denounce violence or to affirm the “responsibility to protect.”

⁶ For other information on the conference and follow-up, including the original background papers, see the website of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, nonviolencejustpeace.net.

Speaking in 1979 in Drogheda, Ireland, scene of thirty years of ethno-nationalist violence between Protestants and Catholics, John Paul II insisted that “Violence is evil,” “a lie,” and “the enemy of justice.”⁷ Yet in 1993, the era of ongoing genocidal violence in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, which outside intervention might have stopped but did not stop, John Paul declared that state sovereignty does not excuse “torture and murder” and that, when faced with unjust aggression against innocent civilians, “States no longer have a ‘right to indifference.’”⁸ That being said, it must be granted that by far the greater emphasis is placed on peacebuilding and nonviolence than on armed force as effective ways to attain justice. An excellent example is Pope Francis’s 2017 World Day of Peace message, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace.”⁹ Even though nonviolent means may not always be adequate to attain the just objective, it should at the very least be recognized that such means have unrecognized and untapped potential.¹⁰ Moreover, violence always brings in its wake disastrous (if unintended) shadow sides, corruptions, and consequences.

Papal denunciations of violence are very strong, seemingly without exception. John XXIII said internal conflicts “must be resolved by negotiation and agreement, and not by recourse to arms,” since 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” (*Pacem in Terris*, nos. 126-127). Paul VI said, “No more war, war never again! Peace, it is peace which must guide the destinies of peoples and of all mankind.”¹¹ John Paul II said, “Violence destroys what it claims to

⁷ Pope John Paul II, “Holy Mass in Drogheda: Homily of His Holiness John Paul II,” w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790929_irlanda-dublinto-drogheda.html. This is quoted in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 496. The pope further comments that “violence destroys what it claims to defend: the dignity, the life, the freedom of human beings.”

⁸ John Paul II, “Address to the Diplomatic Corps Credited to the Holy See,” w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1993/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19930116_corpo-diplomatico.html.

⁹ Pope Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Celebration of the Fiftieth World Day of Peace,” w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html.

¹⁰ On the constructive potential of nonviolent means of resistance to injustice and of conflict transformation, see Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); and Maria J. Stephan, *How the Catholic Church Can Bolster Alternatives to Violence* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2017), www.usip.org/publications/2017/11/how-catholic-church-can-bolster-alternatives-violence.

¹¹ Pope Paul VI, “Address of the Holy Father Paul VI to the United Nations Organization,” w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651004_united-nations.html.

defend: the dignity, the life, the freedom of human beings. Violence is a crime against humanity, for it destroys the very fabric of society.”¹² Benedict XVI said “Love your enemies” is the gospel’s “magna carta.”¹³ “Violence never comes from God.”¹⁴ Francis said that international conflicts must be resolved by negotiation and compromise, for war is the “suicide of humanity.”¹⁵ Confronting the possibility of military intervention in Syria, he protests, “War brings on war! Violence brings on violence.”¹⁶

INTERPRETATION

The content of contemporary Catholic social teaching on war and peace, at least as represented by popes of the Vatican II era and after, seems to hold two contrary and even contradictory teachings side by side. What message or lessons should we take from this?

First, Christians and Christian social ethics are accountable both to gospel values and to justice. Thus, both pacifism, strictly understood, and killing in a just cause confront us with a genuine moral dilemma. Obviously, killing is inconsistent with the teaching and example of Jesus and, even at a human level, consists in the destruction of a unique and irreplaceable human life, a life with dignity no matter what transgressions or dangers it involves.¹⁷ Moreover, just war criteria work better in theory than in practice. War *always* brings civilian deaths, human rights atrocities, the destruction of means of livelihood and social infrastructure, the destruction of families and the orphaning of children, and lasting trauma for both combatants and noncombatants. This is particularly obvious when one surveys the reality of war at the global level, where wars between nation-states have decreased but intra-state or trans-state conflict has increased and where the majority of deaths in war are now civilian.

However, the absolute renunciation of all potentially mortal force can place the agent in a position of complicity with grievous evils perpetrated against the innocent, turning nonviolent yet responsible agents into “guilty bystanders,” to borrow a phrase from Thomas

¹² Pope John Paul II, “Holy Mass in Drogheda: Homily of His Holiness John Paul II,” w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790929_irlanda-dublino-drogheda.html.

¹³ Pope Benedict XVI, “Angelus, St. Peter’s Square, Sunday 18 February 2007,” w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20070218.html.

¹⁴ Benedict, “Angelus.”

¹⁵ “Pope Francis: War is the Suicide of Humanity,” *Independent Catholic News*, www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewStory=22672.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, “Angelus, St. Peter’s Square, Sunday 31 August 2014,” w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2014/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20140831.html.

¹⁷ See Jeremy Waldron, *One Another’s Equals: The Basis of Human Dignity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

Merton. This dilemma may be impossible to resolve satisfactorily. The popes have not tried to do so. Instead, they turn our attention to alternative means of bringing a just peace, and urge us to put all possible efforts into protecting the innocent and creating peace with justice without resorting to killing.

Second, even if killing is sometimes morally necessary and justified, it is not the job of the popes as Christian leaders, pastors and teachers, to justify it. There are many others ready and able to do so. The popes' role is to build on the gospel and on shared human aspirations to open imaginations and hearts to the creative and compassionate search for peace through peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Third, the popes are challenging current proponents of Catholic social teaching, including theologians, to take the emphasis *off just war theory* (without condemning it *in toto*) and put it *onto just peace and peacebuilding*. In fact, this is the direction I already discern, not only in increasingly restrictive applications of just war theory by Christian social ethicists but in innovations “in” (but moving beyond) just war theory, such as *jus ante bellum* and *jus post bellum*.¹⁸

Fourth, a neglected point, in need of reiteration, is that nonviolent responses to violence should not be dismissed as idealistic. Nonviolence can be effective and is being effective in many circumstances, particularly when it takes the shape of socially widespread acts of resistance to or noncooperation with oppressive regimes. Maria Stephan refers to this as a “movement mindset” and shows how it could be effective even in the face of huge imbalances in control over formal political institutions or the ability to command force of arms.¹⁹ Nonviolent resistance is a form of coercion and also requires moral evaluation in terms of means, effects, and risks to the innocent.

Finally, the Roman Catholic Church, as an international organization with an infrastructure, personnel and resources that reach every society and every level of society, brings tremendous assets to global peacebuilding and to movement toward just peace. This also applies to the polarized political atmosphere here in the United States, where racism, class divisions, anti-immigrant actions, and wealth inequality are becoming more acute and more overt. Proponents of Catholic social teaching and of just peace here in the United States can learn from and adapt the methods of peacebuilding that have proven

¹⁸ See Allman and Winright, “Growing Edges,” 176-177, where Maureen O’Connell is cited as the initiating Christian theorist of the former, as they are of the latter.

¹⁹ See Maria J. Stephan, *Adopting a Movement Mindset to Address the Challenge of Fragility*, (Washington, D.C.: USIP, 2016); and Maria J. Stephan, Sadaf Lakhani; Nadia Naviwala, *Aid to Civil Society: A Movement Mindset* (Washington, D.C.: USIP, 2015). Both are available online at www.usip.org/people/maria-j-stephan.

effective internationally. These include outreach across ideological barriers, dialogue, compromise, forgiveness, reconciliation, and access to basic human needs and political participation for all stakeholders. These are strategies that are available to and should be promoted and used by Catholic institutions and organizations at all levels of U.S. society and politics. Just peace is a guiding vision with a set of commitments, dispositions, and strategies to overcome divisions and violence, enabling all to work together for just peace. This includes supporting peacebuilders globally and locally, while fostering the conditions at home that contribute to a nonviolent and constructive U.S. presence abroad. **M**