

The Challenge of Peace

The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response was published in 1983 and, although the world is much different today, the letter's lessons remain relevant. Written during the height of the Cold War, its primary focus was the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. Because the Soviet Union no longer exists, we will not focus on nuclear weapons as such, although we recognize that nuclear proliferation remains a grave concern. Rather, we will focus on the philosophical and theological foundations underlying the bishops' teachings on justified war, as well as their overall just war doctrine.

Foundations for a Justified War

The Challenge of Peace opens with the recognition that people hold differing points of view concerning armed conflict. The bishops acknowledge that the Church's tradition concerning war is "long and complex," and that its teachings "seldom give a simple answer to complex questions" (number 7). In other words, there is no single Catholic response to war. People can and do have differing perspectives, which must be dealt with honestly and with respect.

The bishops acknowledge this diversity by noting that their teachings in the pastoral should not be taken as the "last word." Recall that, although the principles of CST [Catholic social teaching] (human dignity, common good, solidarity, etc.) embody universal truths, the actual application of these principles can differ depending upon particular circumstances. In light of this, the bishops maintain that their teachings on warfare do not carry the same moral authority as their teachings concerning universal moral principles or formal Church teaching. In fact, they clearly state that not every teaching in the pastoral carries the same moral "weight," and that people "of good will" can disagree about how their conclusions should be applied. However, they also caution that while not always binding in conscience, their moral judgments should be given "serious attention and consideration" by all Catholics as they seek to determine whether their own positions are consistent with the gospel message (numbers 9–10).

Having delineated the "limits" of the pastoral, the bishops identify human dignity as the ethical foundation for their teachings on war:

At the center of the Church's teaching on peace and at the center of all Catholic social teaching are the transcendence of God and the dignity of the human person. The human person is the clearest reflection of God's presence in the world; all of the Church's work in pursuit of both justice and peace is designed to protect and promote the dignity of every person. (Number 15)

Stressing the dignity of human life and repeating the claim that all people have a duty to promote this dignity by working for justice and peace, the bishops then quote the following warning from the Second Vatican Council:

Men of this generation should realize that they will have to render an account for their warlike behavior; the destiny of generations to come depends largely on the decisions they make today.¹

The bishops' point here is that war should not be taken lightly. When we speak about war we are, by definition, speaking about the taking of others' lives through violent means. As such, Christians should



approach any discussion of war with a sense of “fear and reverence” because we are speaking about the taking from another human being God’s preeminent gift, the gift of life.

The Just War Doctrine

The U.S. bishops begin their explanation of the Church’s just war doctrine by claiming a “presumption in favor of peace.” This presumption can be summarized as follows: (1) we should do no harm to our neighbors; (2) how we treat our enemy is the “key test” of how we love our neighbor; and (3) taking even one life is a prospect that we should consider “with fear and trembling” (number 80). The bishops argue that when faced with a serious international crisis, our first inclination should be to seek a peaceful resolution, not immediately go to war. The decision to go to war “requires extraordinarily strong reasons” for overriding the presumption in favor of peace, and even a justifiable defensive war should be accepted only “as a sad necessity” (number 83).

With this “presumption in favor of peace,” the question remains, “Can war ever be justified?” The bishops, drawing upon the Church’s historical tradition, maintain that although regrettable, war can be waged for the express purpose of restraining evil and protecting society from those who seek to do it harm. In making this claim they cite Saint Augustine’s “classic case” of war being justified when it is fought to protect the innocent,² as well as the Second Vatican Council’s claim that “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” (number 81).³

Thus, although the bishops maintain a presumption against war, they acknowledge situations where recourse to war can be morally justified. Assuming that war can be justified, what moral principles must one consider in the decision to go to war, and what moral principles must govern its conduct? The bishops here speak of the *jus ad bellum*—the law for going to war—and the *jus in bello*—the law in war.⁴

[The *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* principles are examined in great detail in the book from which this article was excerpted.]

Endnotes

1. Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, in O'Brien and Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought*, number 80.
2. The bishops cite Augustine, *City of God* (Book IV, C15): “War and conquest are a sad necessity in the eyes of men of principle, yet it would be still more unfortunate if wrongdoers should dominate just men.”
3. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, number 79.
4. These just war principles can be found in *The Challenge of Peace*, numbers 84–110.

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