

WAR, PEACE AND CONSCIENCE IN THE CATHOLIC TRADITION

selected quotations

Justin Martyr, (+ 165)

“And we who delighted in war, in the slaughter of one another, and in every other kind of iniquity have in every part of the world converted our weapons into implements of peace - our swords into ploughshares, our spears into farmers' tools - and we cultivate piety, justice, brotherly charity, faith and hope, which we derive from the Father through the crucified Savior.” (Dialogue with Trypho, 110)

Clement of Alexandria (+215 C.E.)

“The Church is an army of peace which sheds no blood.” (*Protrepticus*, 11,116)

“In peace, not in war, we are trained.” (*Paedagogus* 1,12)

“If you enroll as one of God's people, heaven is your country and God your lawgiver. And what are his laws? You shall not kill, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. To him that strikes you on the one cheek, turn to him the other also.” (Prot.10)

from the Acta of St. Maximilian (+295)

Dion the Proconsul: What is your name?

Maximilian: Why do you want to know my name? I am a Christian, and cannot fight... I cannot serve as a soldier, I cannot do evil.”

D: Serve or you will die.

M: I will never serve. You can cut off my head, but I will not be a soldier of this world, for I am a soldier of Christ.

D: What has put these ideas into your head?

M: My conscience and He who has called me...

Dion: Be a soldier and accept the emperor's badge.

M: Not at all. I carry the mark of Christ my God already.

D: I shall send you to your Christ at once.

M: I ask nothing better. Do it quickly, for there is my glory...

D: Accept the insignia and serve, lest you die miserably.

M: My service is to my Lord. I cannot serve the powers of this world. I have just said that I am a Christian.

St. Augustine (+429)

“A great deal depends on the causes for which men undertake wars, and on the authority they have for doing so; for the natural order which seeks the peace of mankind, ordains that the monarch should have the power of undertaking war if he thinks it advisable, and that the soldiers should perform their military duties in behalf of the peace and safety of the community.” (from *Contra Faustus Manichaeum*, written 397)

“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.” (*Letter to Boniface*, a soldier thinking of becoming a monk, written 419)

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

“Now warlike pursuits are altogether incompatible with the duties of a bishop and a cleric... it is unbecoming for them to slay or shed blood, and it is more fitting that they should be ready to shed their own blood for Christ, so as to imitate in deed what they portray in their ministry. For this reason it has been decreed that those who shed blood, even without sin, become irregular. Now no man who has a certain duty to perform, can lawfully do that which renders him unfit for that duty. Wherefore it is altogether unlawful for clerics to fight, because war is directed to the shedding of blood.” (Summa II-II 40.2)

“It is unlawful for clerics to kill, for two reasons. First, because they are chosen for the ministry of the altar, whereon is represented the Passion of Christ slain "Who, when He was struck did not strike [Vulg.: 'When He suffered, He threatened not']" (1 Pt. 2:23). Therefore it becomes not clerics to strike or kill: for ministers should imitate their master, according to Sirach 10:2, "As the judge of the people is himself, so also are his ministers." The other reason is because clerics are entrusted with the ministry of the New Law, wherein no punishment of death or of bodily maiming is appointed: wherefore they should abstain from such things in order that they may be fitting ministers of the New Testament.” (Summa II-II 64.4)

present day Canon Law #289: Since military service is hardly in keeping with the clerical state, clerics and candidates for sacred orders are not to volunteer for military service except with the permission of their Ordinary.

Francis de Vitoria (Jesuit,1483-1546)

“Subjects who are aware of the injustice of a war are obliged to refrain from fighting, even if their prince attempts to coerce them, since one must place loyalty to God ahead of loyalty to the prince.” (from treatise, *On War*)

Alphonsus de Liguori (Italian manualist, 1696-1787)

“where a soldier understands a war to be unjust, he may not receive absolution for his sin unless he seeks, as quickly as possible, dismissal from the military and in the interim refrains from hostile acts.”

The Vatican newspaper *Osservatore Romano* editorial, August 7, 1945

"This war provides a catastrophic conclusion. Incredibly this destructive weapon remains as a temptation for posterity, which, we know by bitter experience, learns so little from history."

Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in terris* 1963

“In this age of ours, which prides itself on its atomic power, it is irrational to believe that war is still an apt means of vindicating violated rights.” (No. 127)

“Since the right to command is required by the moral order and has its source in God, it follows that, if civil authorities legislate for or allow anything that is contrary to the will of God, neither the law made nor the authorization granted can be binding on the conscience of the citizens since God has more right to obeyed than men.”

Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 1965

“For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged.(Romans 2:15-16) Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor.(Matt. 22:37-40; Gal 5:14) In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships. Hence the more right conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality.” (No. 16)

"it seems right that laws make human provisions for the case of those who for reasons of conscience refuse to bear arms, provided, however, that they accept some other form of service to the human community.

Certainly war has not been rooted out of human affairs. As long as the danger of war remains and there is no competent and sufficiently powerful authority at the international level, governments cannot be denied the right to legitimate defense once every means of peaceful settlement has been exhausted. Therefore, government authorities and others who share public responsibility have the duty to protect the welfare of the people entrusted to their care and to conduct such grave matters soberly...

Those who are pledged to the service of their country as members of its armed forces should regard themselves as agents of security and freedom on behalf of their people. As long as they fulfill this role properly, they are making a genuine contribution to the establishment of peace.” (No. 79)

Pope Paul VI, Address to the U.N., Oct. 4 (feast of St. Francis), 1965

If you wish to be brothers, let the weapons fall from your hands. One cannot love with offensive weapons in his hands. Those weapons, especially the terrible weapons that modern science has given you, long before they produce victims and ruins, cause bad dreams, foster bad feelings, create nightmares, distrust and somber resolves; they demand enormous expenditures; they obstruct projects of solidarity and useful work; they falsify the very psychology of peoples. As long as man remains that weak, changeable and even wicked being that he often shows himself to be, defensive arms will, unfortunately, be necessary. As for you, however, your courage and your work impel you to study ways of guaranteeing the security of international life without recourse to arms.

U.S. Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response*, 1983

118. Two of the passages which were included in the final version of the Pastoral Constitution (*Gaudium et spes*) gave particular encouragement for Catholics in all walks of life to assess their attitudes toward war and military service in the light of Christian pacifism. In paragraph 79 the council fathers called upon governments to enact laws protecting the rights of those who adopted the position of conscientious objection to all war: "Moreover, it seems right that laws make humane provisions for the case of those who for reasons of conscience refuse to bear arms, provided, however, that they accept some other form of service to the human community." [49] This was the first time a call for legal protection of conscientious objection had appeared in a document of such prominence. In addition to its own profound meaning this statement took on even more significance in the light of the praise that the council fathers had given in the preceding section "to those who renounce the use of violence and the vindication of their rights." [50] In *Human Life in Our Day* (1968) we called for legislative provision to recognize selective conscientious objectors as well."

119. As Catholic bishops it is incumbent upon us to stress to our own community and to the wider society the significance of this support for a pacifist option for individuals in the teaching of Vatican II and the reaffirmation that the popes have given to nonviolent witness since the time of the council.

120. In the development of a theology of peace and the growth of the Christian pacifist position among Catholics, these words of the Pastoral Constitution have special significance: "All these factors force us to undertake a completely fresh reappraisal of war." [52] The council fathers had reference to "the development of armaments by modern science (which) has immeasurably magnified the horrors and wickedness of war." [53] While the just-war teaching has clearly been in possession for the past 1,500 years of Catholic thought, the "new moment" in which we find ourselves sees the just-war teaching and non-violence as distinct but interdependent methods of evaluating warfare. They diverge on some specific conclusions, but they share a common presumption against the use of force as a means of settling disputes.

U.S. Catholic Bishops, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace: 10th Anniversary of The Challenge of Peace*, 1993

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. For as we wrote in *The Challenge of Peace*, "The Christian has no choice but to defend peace . . . This is an inalienable obligation. It is the how of defending peace which offers moral options." [5] We take up this dual tradition again, recognizing, on the one hand, the success of nonviolent methods in recent history, and, on the other, the increasing disorder of the post-Cold War world with its pressures for limited military engagement and humanitarian intervention.

Throughout history there has been a shifting relation between the two streams of the tradition which always remain in tension. Like Christians before us who have sought to read the signs of the times in light of this dual tradition, we today struggle to assess the lessons of the nonviolent revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the former Soviet Union in 1991, on the one hand, and of the conflicts in Central

America, the Persian Gulf, Bosnia, Somalia, Lebanon, Cambodia and Northern Ireland on the other.

The devastation wrought by these recent wars reinforces and strengthens for us the strong presumption against the use of force, which is shared by both traditions. Overall, the wars fought in the last fifty years show a dramatic rise in the proportion of noncombatant casualties. This fact points to the need for clear moral restraints both in avoiding war and in limiting its consequences.

We repeat our support both for legal protection for those who conscientiously refuse to participate in any war (conscientious objectors) and for those who cannot, in good conscience, serve in specific conflicts they consider unjust or in branches of the service (e.g., the strategic nuclear forces) which would require them to perform actions contrary to deeply held moral convictions about indiscriminate killing (selective conscientious objection).¹⁰

As we hold individuals in high esteem who conscientiously serve in the armed forces, so also we should regard conscientious objection and selective conscientious objection as positive indicators within the Church of a sound moral awareness and respect for human life.¹¹

There is a need to improve the legal and practical protection which this country rightly affords conscientious objectors and, in accord with the just-war tradition, to provide similar legal protection for selective conscientious objectors.

Further resources on War, Peace and Conscience in the Catholic Tradition

Richard B. Miller, ed., *War in the Twentieth Century*

Lisa Cahill, *Love Your Enemies*

John Howard Yoder, *When War is Unjust; The Politics of Jesus*

Ronald Musto, *The Catholic Peace Tradition*

and more excerpts and analyses of historical and modern Church teaching
on war and peace available at:

www.catholicpeacefellowship.org