

## **Jumping into Combat without a Parachute—on Purpose?**

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There is a movement within the Catholic Church to eliminate the Church’s support of Just War Theory and to adopt a strongly pacifist approach, citing Jesus’ repeated admonitions against violence and His consistent message of peace. At the April 2016 “Nonviolence and Just Peace Conference” sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and Pax Christi International, conference participants appealed to Pope Francis to declare that the traditional just war theory is obsolete and that Christians should dedicate their efforts to nonviolent peacemaking. While I very much agree that resort to legitimizing a conflict by citing just war principles should come after all attempts at peacemaking, I cannot state too strongly that officially abandoning just war teaching would be a terrible outcome for the Catholic Church and the militaries of civilized countries. It would be especially damaging to the individual soldier’s view of his profession and his proper role within it.

I served a three-decade career in the U.S. military, first in the Army, training for conventional combat and then to fight wars with nuclear weapons. In over two decades in the U.S. Air Force, I participated in planning for, simulating, and exercising for many forms of strategic conflict. In all cases, the military members with whom I served and the soldiers and airmen under my command both detested the idea of war and understood the need to limit its destructiveness.

It is critical that those who fight the nation’s wars have a set of rules that govern their behavior. For millennia, thoughtful leaders have concerned themselves with the existence of evil and violence and with ways to mitigate it. Today’s warrior ethic includes a mode of thought that incorporates the tenets of just war theory, the so-called laws of armed conflict, and international humanitarian laws, embodied in such agreements as the conventions of Hague and Geneva.

*Gaudium et spes*, the 1965 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, was one of the four constitutions resulting from the Second Vatican Council. In discussing relations between nations, the document states that “the achievement of peace requires a constant mastering of passions and the vigilance of lawful authority.” It goes on: “we cannot fail to praise those who

renounce the use of violence in the vindication of their rights and who resort to methods of defense which are otherwise available to weaker parties too, provided this can be done without injury to the rights and duties of others or of the community itself.”<sup>1</sup>

There is much to note in this short passage. First, it is primarily the leaders of nations and groups—not the military—which must be controlled in their thirst for violent solutions to issues. At least in advanced societies, the military is the last to want to resort to war.

Second, the text praises those who would eschew violence, but it also recognizes that such an approach should not preclude a resort to the means necessary to protect people who need protection.

Finally, concerning the avoidance of war, the document says further that “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.”<sup>2</sup> Critically, it concludes that “[t]hose [...] who devote themselves to the military service of their country should regard themselves as the agents of security and freedom of peoples. As long as they fulfill this role properly, they are making a genuine contribution to the establishment of peace.”<sup>3</sup>

Why are these just war concepts so important? Because they serve, first, to place boundaries on the permissible behavior of soldiers in war. Second, they recognize that, in war, soldiers see things most of us will never see and do things we hope never to have to do. Just war concepts provide soldiers with a framework to understand the basis of the violence with which they are tasked.

My argument against those who would have the Church abandon its support of just war principles is based, first, on the importance of those teachings to the proper behavior of soldiers and, second, on what I believe are well-intentioned, but terribly misguided, notions about the workability of pacifism in the modern, increasingly brutal world.

Retired Naval Postgraduate School Professor George Lucas has written that it is

an important point of professional principle and professional pride for warriors that at the heart of their practice is not death and destruction and the wreaking of havoc, vengeance, evil, and suffering. Rather it is [...] defending their comrades and fellow citizens against such evils already wrought by others that gives this vocation or calling its moral justification.<sup>4</sup>

He concludes that, “in virtually all cultures and religious traditions, the willingness to risk one’s life and even sacrifice it for the sake of saving others is considered the highest, noblest, most morally worthy intention upon which any individual can act.”<sup>5</sup>

I have spoken with soldiers who served multiple combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and with the military chaplains whose job it is to provide pastoral support and care for the soldiers’ souls. Not long ago, one of those Army chaplains discussed with me the difficulties he faced in caring for the soldiers in his unit, which had experienced an unusually large number of its soldiers killed or wounded. The unit commander had never discussed or emphasized the laws of armed conflict or tried to explain any rationale for what the unit was tasked to do and the importance of such concepts as protecting the innocent or using only the minimum necessary amount of force. Many of the soldiers had engaged in horrific battles in which numerous civilians were killed and their comrades died for seemingly no reason. The chaplain described his daily challenges of offering hope and pastoral care to scores of soldiers, in his words, “anguishing from the effects of war and the wounded soul.” It was his strongly held belief that the teaching of the concepts of just war theory in advance, with its recognition of the legitimacy of war and its emphasis on proper behavior and its moral basis, would have provided his soldiers with an emotional structure that would serve, first, as a governor on unrestrained violence so often generated in combat and, second, to soften or mitigate the damage war does to their souls. He also believed that morally neutral modes of being that ignore ethics and couch combat operations in more utilitarian terms exacerbate improper behavior and cause more moral injuries as well as frustrate their treatment.

The images of war are grotesque and sad beyond belief. Photographs of the dead in the Civil War or in World War I attest to the carnage and make us contemplate all the young lives cut short by differences in ideology. Descriptions of the Crusades and the Inquisition and recent videos posted by ISIS show us brutal and reprehensible behavior by supposedly religious people in the name of God. Images and descriptions of the heinous mass murder of the Jews by Hitler in World War II cause us to question man’s capacity for inhumanity to man.

Retired Marine Corps General John Allen has noted that the ethical standards of the military profession create an imperative—a moral redoubt and spiritual shock absorber—and that we must inculcate our young military personnel with our own moral and professional principles. These principles and standards of behavior contribute to the so-called “warrior code.”<sup>6</sup> Australian ethicist Robert Sparrow has written that “while war remains a ghastly business, when the standards are

maintained, warrior codes function to reduce the horror of war and tame the worst excesses of young men sent out to kill strangers in foreign lands with weapons of terrifying power.”<sup>7</sup>

The concepts of just war theory developed by early theologians and the related concepts of chivalry extant in the medieval period explain much of the warrior ethos as it exists today. The medieval code of chivalry included traditions involving bravery, warrior professionalism, and service to others. While these may seem quaint today, Oxford University law professor Theodor Meron has observed that “the idea that chivalry requires soldiers to act in a civilized manner is one of its most enduring legacies.”<sup>8</sup> The ability of soldiers on battlefields of the future to understand, and much more to apply, such notions will be an important challenge.

Violence, while not on as large a scale as past world-encompassing conflicts or major military deployments, is becoming more frequent on a smaller scale and far more brutal. And, advanced weapons will create new styles of war and dramatically change the relationships of soldiers to the enemy and to other soldiers.

To be fair, there are some, like retired military officer and conservative commentator Ralph Peters, who claim that just war theory and laws of armed conflict are nothing more than something for soldiers to use to justify their actions and to make us feel better about killing. Peters claims they exist merely to give us a false sense of comfort. With them, he claims, we can hide from our evil natures.<sup>9</sup> While there is a shred of truth to his argument (an argument similar to those pacifists who wish to abandon Catholic support for just war theory), I feel it does a great disservice to those soldiers who attempt to follow those rules, sometimes to their own detriment.

Aside from the notion that just war concepts are important to the individual soldier, my second argument is that it is essential to understand that the resort to violence is not always evil and that it is often—when, in fact, it is a last resort—the ethical thing to do. The Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote forcefully about pacifism and nonviolence. He begins his argument by noting that individuals cede their power to the state, which far too frequently abuses it in the form of resort to force and coercion against other states.<sup>10</sup> While it may be restating the obvious, in our Constitutional system the military does not make decisions to go to war. That is reserved for civilian leadership with—theoretically at least—advice, consent, and funding from the legislature. Unfortunately, far too frequently civilian leaders use the military for spurious and ill-explained adventures, like the 2003 invasion of Iraq. And, just as frequently, the legislature abdicates its responsibility to act as a restraint on the executive. A Congressional Research Service report shows

that the U.S. alone deployed military forces for one reason or another over sixty times in the approximately seventy years since World War II.<sup>11</sup> Add in the behavior of other nations, in particular those governed by tyrants, and the use of military force in the world is outrageously common. Niebuhr is, however, unwilling—as an I—to condemn the use of force when it is necessary for a legitimate, good purpose, saying that “a political policy cannot be intrinsically evil if it can be proved to be an efficacious instrument for the achievement of a morally approved end. Neither can it be said to be wholly good merely because it seems to make for ultimately good consequences.”<sup>12</sup>

Niebuhr points out that the differences between violent and nonviolent methods of coercion and resistance are not so absolute that violence should be regarded as morally prohibited. In discussing one of the most well-known adherents of nonviolent methods, he notes that even Mahatma Gandhi allowed that violence may on occasion be the servant of goodwill. In Niebuhr’s words, “the implication is that violence could be used as the instrument of moral goodwill if there was any possibility of a triumph quick enough to obviate the dangers of incessant wars.”<sup>13</sup> Sadly, however, we have many examples in modern history of wars that are started presumably to free an oppressed people, but end up lasting for years with enormous death and suffering of innocent people.

A further problem I have with the movement to eliminate just war theory from Catholic teaching is that, while it is based on theological grounds and is obviously well-intentioned, it is extraordinarily naïve and potentially dangerous. Matthew Shadle has observed that, while warfare has changed and weapons are more terrible, it must still be right “first to counter genocide, to protect the innocent, and to strive for a better world—and sometimes armed resistance is the only way to do this.”<sup>14</sup> It is merely naïve, wishful thinking that we can always bring about peace through diplomacy. Certainly, peace through diplomacy should come first, but there should be options to use force when diplomacy does actually fail.

Popes have often cited a need for the Church, while hewing to its core values, to adapt to living in the present. The present is, and the future will be, very dangerous and violent. This is not merely a belief, but a fact of life. Syria, Yemen, Boko Haram, Yazdis, Rohingyas, ISIS, Al Qaida, the slaughter of Christians in the Middle East, and others elsewhere for their religious beliefs, and scores of horrifically brutal groups and activities attest to the dangerous world in which millions live.

As Peter Steinfels has said:

[I]n the face of such brutal realities, one can heartily endorse every scrap of nonviolent peacemaking that can be summoned—and urge that the Church summon more. But did the participants in the Rome conference really imagine that nonviolence alone would stop all this bleeding? Is this really the moment to call for the enfeebling of one of the few recognized moral traditions of restraint?<sup>15</sup>

The pacifists argue that throughout history the just-war “concept” has primarily functioned to legitimate and perpetuate war. It seems highly unlikely to me that leaders and rulers, either past or present, based any of their war-making decisions on a just war argument, or even gave it any consideration. Far more likely, they based their decisions on international law, politics, and the demands of their constituents.

In 1982, Pope John Paul II reiterated the principle that, “in the name of an elementary requirement of justice, peoples have a right and even a duty to protect their existence and freedom by proportionate means against an unjust aggressor.”<sup>16</sup> As Bryan Hehir notes, “Just war theorists could hardly have asked for a clearer statement of the premise of the ethic. The pope asserted that he was not a pacifist, that he believed in a just peace, not peace at any price.”<sup>17</sup>

The current pope may be taken to be different. Francis certainly is a strong proponent of nonviolence and diplomacy. And he has said we should no longer damn nonviolence with faint praise by recognizing it only as a heroic witness for saints. Instead, as the Pope implies, nonviolence must become normal and natural to us—must become our very “style of politics.”<sup>18</sup> We must recognize its potential and indeed its power not just in private life, but for civil society movements and governance itself. Yet even Francis’s commitment to nonviolence is not without exception.

In an article on the current Pope’s thinking on the subject, Lazar Berman reminds us that Pope Francis says that it remains a “complex and violent world,” and so the right to legitimate self-defense, of countries and their peoples, remains unchanged.<sup>19</sup> In fact, in August 2014, Francis gave his blessing to the use of military force to halt attacks by ISIS militants on Iraqi and Syrian minorities.<sup>20</sup>

Pope Francis and the proponents of nonviolence are largely correct on the point that leaders, countries, and groups around the world resort too easily to violence. Undoubtedly, the Holy Father

would like Catholics around the world to emphasize other, nonviolent avenues; to pursue negotiation wherever possible; and to address the underlying roots of conflicts, rather than merely resort to coercion. It seems that, while he probably would prefer more concerted, well-supported, just-peace initiatives, he would like to see the just war arguments de-emphasized, but not entirely abandoned.

Well-intentioned, thoughtful Catholics (and others) make valid points about the far-too-frequent use of force in the world. I wholeheartedly agree that far more should be done with diplomacy, negotiation, and active measures to eliminate the underlying reasons for war. But for the Catholic Church, which in practice and in history is the source of just war principles, to abandon just war theory would be a tragedy, not only for those suffering oppression, but for those called on to protect them.

## Notes

1. Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes*, December 7, 1965, §78, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).
2. *Ibid.*, §79.
3. *Ibid.*
4. George Lucas, *Military Ethics: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 85.
5. *Ibid.*, 85.
6. *Ibid.*, xvi.
7. Robert Sparrow, “War Without Virtue?” in *Killing by Remote Control: The Ethics of an Unmanned Military*, ed. Bradley Jay Strawser (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 105.

8. Theodor Meron, *Bloody Constraint: War and Chivalry in Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 118.
9. See Ralph Peters, "A Revolution in Military Ethics?" *Parameters* 26/2 (1996): 102.
10. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1932), 91.
11. See Barbara Salazar Torreon, *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798–2016* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2016).
12. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 171.
13. *Ibid.*, 251.
14. See Matthew Shadle, "Why We Still Need Just War Theory," *Catholic Herald*, April 28, 2016, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/issues/april-29th-2016/why-we-still-need-just-war-theory/>.
15. See Peter Steinfels, "The War against Just War," *Commonweal*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/war-against-just-war>.
16. Bryan J. Hehir, "Just War Theory in a Post-Cold War World," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 20/2 (1992): 237–257, at 250.
17. *Ibid.*
18. See Gerald Schlabach, "Just War?" *Commonweal*, June 16, 2017, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/just-war-0>.
19. See Lazar Berman, "Just War, Just Peace: Catholic Teachings on Violence in an Age of Terror," *The Times of Israel*, August 11, 2016, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/just-war-just-peace-catholic-teachings-on-violence-in-an-age-of-terror/>.
20. See Thomas Reese, "Why Pope Francis Supports Limited Action against Islamic State," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 22, 2014, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/why-pope-francis-supports-limited-action-against-islamic-state>.