

The Catholic Church Moves Towards Nonviolence? Just Peace, Just War in Dialogue

University of San Diego

6-8 October 2017

The Military Understanding of Peace

To answer the question of the military's understanding of peace, one might reference the eminent military theorist [Carl von Clausewitz](#) whose writings suggest that peace occurs when an adversary is compelled to submit to your will. In truth, the U.S. military does not particularly concern itself with phrases like "peace" or "war" *per se* because it views its role in a democracy as aiming to accomplish whatever lawful *mission* it is assigned by the appropriate civilian authorities.

This is consistent with the military's [enlistment oath](#) which calls upon those taking it to "support and defend the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic." To do so each person swears to "obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to the regulations and the Uniform Code of Military justice."

Let's unpack this a bit in thinking about how military members are expected to accomplish a mission they are assigned. As a matter of law, no member of the armed forces can obey an unlawful order, even to achieve an otherwise appropriate mission established by the civilian leadership. Military members are required, for example, to [abide by the law of armed conflict in the conduct of military operations](#). That said, in the American system of military justice, all orders (except those that are patently illegal) are [presumed to be lawful](#), and an individual military member disobeys them at his or her peril.

Moreover, given our pluralistic society with its very wide-range of beliefs – to include some that [Catholics might find reprehensible](#) - U.S. military law cautions that while individuals may maintain whatever personal beliefs they wish to hold, "[the dictates of a person's conscience, religion, or personal philosophy cannot justify or excuse the disobedience of an otherwise lawful order.](#)"

As a general proposition, [military members may not "quit" in the face of a lawful order](#) with which they disagree for whatever reason. Of course, enlisted personnel may request discharge prior to the end of their enlistment contract, and officers may offer to resign, but none can separate from their service until such action is approved by the appropriate governmental authorities. Unless and until that happens, military members are obliged to obey all lawful orders. In time of war, the willful disobedience of a lawful order is [punishable by death](#) (although I am not aware of any such punishment being carried out in the modern era).

In any event, the Second Vatican Council's [Gaudium et Spes](#) (*The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*) says in part that "Peace is not merely the absence of war; nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies; nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called an enterprise of justice."

Based on my experience, I think people in the U.S. military would agree with *Pastoral Constitution* on that point. They would also likely agree with the language found in the *Pastoral Constitution* to the effect that "peace is never attained once and for all, but must be built up ceaselessly. Moreover, since the human will is unsteady and wounded by sin, the achievement of peace requires a constant mastering of passions and the vigilance of lawful authority."

Further, I believe that most people in the America's armed forces (and many other militaries) would also generally agree with this from the *Pastoral Constitution*:

"Those 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."

I think it is important to emphasize that this provision speaks in terms of being an "agent" of security and freedom, as opposed to being an "independent actor" towards those ends. This means that soldiers in the military of a democracy must conform to the lawful orders of the civilian leadership. They cannot and should not use the government position they occupy and the resources they get from the government to pursue some agenda other than the lawful one they've been assigned.

Because, as the *Pastoral Constitution* recognizes, that "peace is never attained once and for all," I do not find pacifism to be a sustainable moral position. My experience of more than three decades in the armed forces is that there is evil in the world, and that evil can manifest itself in unreasoning violence that must be countered by force.

My answer to pacifism – and that, I think, of many military officers - is reflected in John Stuart Mill's [observation](#):

War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things: the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth a war, is much worse.... A war to protect other human beings against tyrannical injustice; a war to give victory to their own ideas of right and good, and which is their own war, carried on for an honest purpose by their free choice, — is often the means of their regeneration. ***A man who has nothing which he is willing to fight for, nothing which he cares more about than he does about his personal safety, is a miserable creature who has no chance of being free, unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself.*** As long as justice and

injustice have not terminated their ever-renewing fight for ascendancy in the affairs of mankind, human beings must be willing, when need is, to do battle for the one against the other. (Emphasis added.)

Nonviolent efforts are fine, but we must deal with those who *at this moment* are aiming to [kill, rape and enslave](#) the innocent. But more than that, I think a moral person has an *affirmative* obligation to do whatever he or she can do to protect the helpless, and sometimes that demands the application of organized violence proportional to the threat posed. Put another way, inaction may create “peace” of sorts, but not necessary a just one. I’m convinced that inaction can create moral conundrums when it results in harm to the truly innocent. As Mill observed in his 1859 [essay](#), a “person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction, and in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury.”

In my view, the failure to use force when it is needed only emboldens evil, and makes the goal of a just peace more distant. I believe in what I call the “[moral hazard of inaction in war](#).” Put another way, inaction, in the form of the failure to use force, can make the likelihood of the infliction of unspeakable horror upon real people almost inevitable.

I hope nothing that I’ve said suggests that the military wants war. As General Eisenhower [noted](#) in 1946, “I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity.” More recently (2008), John McCain reflects what many in uniform think when he [said](#):

I hold my position because I hate war, and I know very well and very personally how grievous its wages are. But I know, too, that we must sometimes pay those wages to avoid paying even higher ones later.

General Douglas MacArthur’s in his famous [Farewell Speech](#) at West Point on May 12, 1962 said something similar:

Your guidepost stands out like a tenfold beacon in the night: Duty, Honor, Country. You are the leaven which binds together the entire fabric of our national system of defense. From your ranks come the great captains who hold the Nation’s destiny in their hands the moment the war tocsin sounds....

This does not mean that you are warmongers. On the contrary, the soldier above all other people prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war. But always in our ears ring the ominous words of Plato, that wisest of all philosophers: “Only the dead have seen the end of war.” (Emphasis added.)

To me, as long as there is free will, there will be war because some will always choose evil. It’s a mistake to deny that reality. As the Church’s [catechism](#) points out:

Angels and men, as intelligent and free creatures, have to journey toward their ultimate destinies by their free choice and preferential love. They can therefore go astray. Indeed, they have sinned. Thus has moral evil, incommensurably more harmful than physical evil, entered the world. God is in no way, directly or indirectly, the cause of moral evil. He permits it, however, because he respects the freedom of his creatures and, mysteriously, knows how to derive good from it.

As we all know, even to counter evil, [just war principles](#) require war to be the last resort. We need pursue peaceful solutions wherever possible. But I also believe that because there is evil in the world, and that history shows unambiguously that there are also times when only force can counter it, a moral person *must* act to protect the vulnerable. .

We've heard a lot about *never* using force, and let's assume that's fine for Catholics who welcome martyrdom for themselves, but what kind of religion would we have if it called for us to stand by and allow children to be buried alive, young girls to be turned into sex slaves, and all other sorts of unspeakable horrors incited upon innocent human beings? Can we really turn our backs on such suffering?

Everyone must strive for a just peace - but it cannot and should not be a peace at any cost. The pastoral constitution speaks of the military being an agent of "security and freedoms of peoples." One can always submit to an oppressor, but that would never be a just peace. As legendary Mexican revolutionary [Emiliano Zapata](#), who famously said, "[It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees.](#)" There are people and beliefs worth fighting for, even when the price of doing so is dreadful in terms of blood and treasure. If the Church comes to embrace the view of nonviolence at any cost - to include the sacrifice of the "security and freedoms of peoples" the *Pastoral Constitution* speaks about - it's hard to see how it can hold the proverbial moral high ground.

Of course, I am also keenly aware of the fiscal of war, and the preparation for the same. For this country, about 14% of the budget goes to national defense ([although in our budgetary process, expenses find their way into the defense budget that many people may not expect](#)). Even with that investment, the Air Force's warplanes, for example, [average around 27 years old](#). Today, young Americans are flying combat missions over the most dangerous places on earth in B-52s the newest of which is [more than a half-century old](#). What parent would permit their child to drive across the country to college in a car that old?

People talk about foreign aid and other investments as being alternatives to the use of force. I would hope that would be so, but to me the case has yet to be made. As I've written in an [essay](#) elsewhere, we need to rethink the assumed effectiveness of such expenditures. Last summer, the truly nonpartisan Congressional Research Service [found](#):

In most cases, the success or failure of U.S. foreign aid programs is not entirely clear, in part because historically, most aid programs have not been evaluated for the purpose of determining their actual impact. Many programs are not even evaluated on basic performance.

In my previous essay I added this: If a program can't be shown to have actual impact, is it really unreasonable to trim them back until effectiveness can be shown? The scholarship is piling up, showing that foreign aid either [doesn't work](#), or is [affirmatively counter-productive](#).

Are the costs of today's conflicts excessive in relation to the "peace" here at home (that is, and absence of another "[9/11](#)") that the use of force against terrorists has produced? Very recently, it was [reported](#) the average American taxpayer will have paid a total of nearly \$7,740 to fund the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria over the *sixteen years* since the 9/11 attacks. This fiscal year, each U.S. taxpayer will pay about \$289 for both wars, but next year — fiscal 2018 — that number is expected to drop to \$281 per taxpayer.

When I mention these numbers to people the reaction is, quite frankly, surprise that the figures aren't greater. Still, I think the words of then President Eisenhower are always worth keeping in mind. You may recall that he [said](#):

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.

Less well known, however, are these words from the same speech:

The amassing of Soviet power alerted free nations to a new danger of aggression. It compelled them in self-defense to spend unprecedented money and energy for armaments. It forced them to develop weapons of war now capable of inflicting instant and terrible punishment upon any aggressor.

It instilled in the free nations--and let none doubt this--the unshakable conviction that, as long as there persists a threat to freedom, *they must, at any cost, remain armed, strong, and ready for the risk of war.* (Emphasis added).

Like Eisenhower, we all lament the cost of war, but at the same time we must have an "unshakable conviction" that we must defend freedom - by force if necessary. The Soviet threat has faded, but the fact remains that we live in a world where there are many people who would do us harm. We must plainly recognize that extraordinarily

dangerous threats come from those who [despise our beliefs, and who find our very existence to be an anathema](#). Again, there is real evil in the world.

So for a military person, the reality very much is, as the *Pastoral Constitution* put it, that “peace is never attained once and for all, but must be built up ceaselessly.” The military plays a central role in “building up peace ceaselessly” but cannot do so alone. But it cannot and should not be a peace at any cost.

To conclude, I believe that for the U.S. military, its understanding of “peace” may well be carving out for America and her allies a period of as much security as is possible in a troubled world. It is then up to persons of good faith – *all* faiths – to come together and devise the lasting peace the world so desperately wants. Sadly, until that time, the terrible truth is that there must be those who will “[stand ready in the night to visit violence on those who would do us harm](#).”