

# JUST AND UNJUST WAR

## *A MORAL ISSUE*

WAR IS A REGULAR VISITOR TO HUMAN HISTORY ; this may be a very depressing fact, but we should not assume that our efforts to eliminate it are powerless or fruitless. The marvel is, perhaps, that there are not more wars. The Christian Church has evolved a set of criteria for the evaluation of causes for conflict, with the aim of defining the circumstances where people may be justified in going to war, or even obliged to do so.

THE VALUE OF PEACE is the guiding superior principle by which the Church evaluates war in moral terms. *Anger* (the desire for revenge) should not be mistaken for the praiseworthy desire to redress wrongs and, by punishing wrongdoing, to maintain justice and to restrain vices. When we desert these orderly aims in order to destroy or seriously wound a neighbour - even an erring neighbour - it is seriously sinful. Deliberate hatred is therefore something which renders us unfit to act in the cause of justice, and must always be extirpated, not used to fuel our response to any evil, however real.

PEACE IS MORE THAN THE ABSENCE OF WAR and is not limited to maintaining, between adversaries, a balance of power which keeps them afraid to strike one another. Peace safeguards the goods of persons, establishes free communication among people, respects persons and peoples, and engages everyone in the assiduous practice of fraternity. "Peace is the work of justice, and the effect of charity" (*Augustine*).

THOU SHALT NOT KILL - the fifth of the Ten Commandments forbids the intentional destruction of human life. All citizens, all governments are obliged to work for the avoidance of war. However, should the ultimate efforts of peacemakers fail, it is impossible to deny to governments the ultimate sanction of war.

### **Legitimate Defence by Military Force (conditions for "a just war").**

At all times:

- The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain.

- All other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective.
- There must be serious prospects of success.
- The use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evils to be eliminated (a particularly heavy consideration in view of the colossal power of modern armaments).

WHO DECIDES? The decision about the moral legitimacy of armed conflict belongs to those who bear the responsibility for the common good (usually, but not always, the government). This gives us a powerful reason for becoming involved in politics! Such authorities have special responsibilities for conscientious objectors (whom the Church calls to serve the community in some other way). Vitally, the Church asserts the fact that the declaration of war does nothing to moderate the demands of the moral law. The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World remarks, "The mere fact that war has regrettably broken out does not mean that everything becomes licit between the warring parties." Non-combatants, wounded soldiers, and prisoners must be respected and treated humanely. Actions deliberately contrary to the law of nations and to its universal principles are crimes, as are the orders that command such actions. Blind obedience does not suffice to excuse those who carry them out. The extermination of a people, nation, or ethnic minority must be condemned as a mortal sin. One is morally bound to resist orders that command genocide.

The Church also condemns *indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants* as a crime against God and humanity, and the Catechism enters a serious caveat against the arms race ("*one of the greatest curses on the human race...the harm that it inflicts on the poor is more than can be endured*"). Accumulation of military power, it says, does not ensure peace; "Far from eliminating the causes of war, it risks aggravating them. Spending enormous sums to produce ever new types of weapons impedes efforts to aid needy populations; it thwarts the development of peoples. Over-armament multiplies the reasons for conflict and increases the danger of escalation."

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The conditions for a just war are widely agreed and quite plain. Clearly it is in their practical application that the problems lie. Many people today can clearly recognise the justice of the 1939-45 world conflict; before Chamberlain's declaration of war, however, many people were prepared to argue that Britain was not involved in the fate of the Czechs. Even when it

came to Poland, some still hesitated. When Hitler finally ordered the invasion of the Low Countries, most British people agreed that something had to be done! There are so many evils in the world that demand redress. In East Timor, Indonesia has for a long time been conducting campaigns which are appalling in their cruelty and injustice. No-one from the West is getting involved, despite the award of the Nobel prize to the Catholic bishop who has done most to alert the world to what is happening. The tragedies in Central Africa (especially in Rwanda) went largely unnoticed and excited little interest in the developed world. In Kosovo, we are deeply involved; but is the wholesale bombing of the Serb capital doing more than to assure the refugees more wholehearted and practical hatred than ever? Possession of a set of criteria does not solve questions of strategy, and there are still huge arguments to be gone through, particularly about the third and fourth criteria (prospect of success, and proportion between the evils to be redressed and the evils inflicted as response).

THE DANGER OF ESCALATION seems perennially present. If the intervention of an outside force (as in Kosovo) provokes greater instability in the international community, or if it flows, not from a sober desire to see justice done, but from some form of political self-interest on the part of the NATO forces, it must clearly lead on to equal and opposite reaction from other quarters. These ripple-effects are among the factors which governments and international bodies must take into account when weighing the consequences of their intervention.

**In the light of the criteria set out above, are the NATO leaders acting morally in their bombardment of Beograd and other settlements with the aim of “eroding Milosevic’s capacity to make war on the Albanian Kosovars”?**