

CLIFF NOTES

by Fr. Clifford Smith

WHAT IS A JUST WAR?

Since the end of the Second World War humankind has been faced with the very real possibility that we are now technologically capable of destroying our planet and every living person on it. War is no longer romantic or glorious, but might be necessary for the sake of preserving human rights and human dignity.

The Catholic tradition advocates peaceful solutions to conflict whenever possible and normally counsels against all use of force. But it also recognizes that, in a disordered world, it is sometimes necessary. To help discern whether a cause justifies a response of force, Catholic teaching has developed and refined a theory of just war.

The just-war (*or limited-war*) theory starts with the assumption that we should do no harm to our neighbors. Just-war teaching has evolved as an effort to prevent war. Only if war cannot be rationally avoided does the teaching then seek to restrict and reduce its effects. By establishing a set of conditions, which must be met, the decision to go to war may be morally permissible. Such a decision, especially today, requires extraordinarily strong reasons for overriding the presumption in favor of peace and against war.

First in 1983 in *The Challenge of Peace*, and again in a 1993 document, *The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace*, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops reflected on the conditions for a just war as follows:

Just cause. War is permissible to preserve conditions necessary for decent human existence and to secure basic human rights. War is acceptable only when there has been a serious and public evil, only to confront "a real and certain danger," that is, to protect innocent life, or in response to acts that violates the basic rights of whole populations.

Competent authority. War must be declared by those with responsibility for public order, not by private groups or individuals.

Comparative justice. Which side is sufficiently "right" in a dispute, and are the values at stake critical enough to warrant war? Do the rights and values involved justify killing?

Right intention. War can be legitimately intended only for the reasons set forth above as a **just cause**.

Last resort. For war to be justified, all peaceful alternatives must have been exhausted.

Probability of success. This is a difficult criterion to apply, but its purpose is to prevent irrational resort to force or hopeless resistance when the outcome of either will clearly be disproportionate or futile.

Proportionality. This means that the damage to be inflicted and the costs of war must be proportionate to the good expected by entering into.

As Vatican II made clear, *"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."*

*"But it is one thing to undertake military action for the just defense of the people, and something else again to seek the subjugation of other nations. Nor does the possession of war potential make every military or political use of it lawful. Neither does the mere fact that war has unhappily begun mean that all is fair between the warring parties" (**Gaudium et Spes**, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, #79).*

The Christian has no choice but to defend peace, properly understood, against aggression. This is an inalienable obligation. In God's reign the poor are given the Kingdom, ...the meek inherit the earth, ...and peacemakers are called the children of God (*Matthew 5:3-10*).