

## **What are key concerns about the Catholic Church continuing to legitimate the “just war” ethic as part of its official teaching?**

Sr. Matty Nazik from Iraq: “War is the mother of ignorance, isolation, and poverty. I say this as a daughter of war. We can’t respond to violence with worse violence. In order to kill five violent men, we have to create 10 violent men to kill them. This encourages the exhausting spiral of violence up and up. It’s like a dragon with seven heads. You cut one and two others come up.”

### **1. The “just war” ethic mostly is used to justify rather than prevent or limit war**

In spite of some good intentions, according to Bishop Robert McElroy (San Diego, CA) and others like Cardinal Peter Turkson, the just war ethic itself has “become only a little bit less than a green light” for war and “increasingly ineffective at restraining war.”<sup>1</sup> This is the case even if Catholic leadership may at times use a more restrictive version.<sup>2</sup> The issue here is more about the concept of war as morally justifiable and all that flows from that, and less about versions of a just war ethic.<sup>3</sup> Whether political leaders value or devalue it, the just war approach is not adequately fulfilling the intended effect to primarily prevent and limit war. It is true that all moral frameworks may be susceptible to abuse; however, with the just war ethic we not only have strong evidence of consistent abuse over time, but also enormous and horrendous consequences from such abuse.<sup>4</sup>

The just war criteria to limit ongoing war may have restrained some actors in militaries. However, these moments are still overtaken by the rampant abuse of these criteria in wars and how they legitimate the horror of war.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1900s, about 10 percent of deaths in war were civilians but steadily climbing to about 87 percent in wars since 2000.<sup>6</sup> These numbers don’t even include the enormous numbers of indirect deaths of civilians, at a rate of about 3-15 times more than direct deaths; due to the lack of clean water, sewage, electricity, and medical supplies.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, the criteria of proportionality as used in a just war framework is too ambiguous and vague, and thus, too often easily abused.<sup>8</sup> It is also arguably inconsistent with the orientation of Christian scripture.<sup>9</sup> Attempts to extend or refine the just war categories, still signal the possibility of justifying war and all the disadvantages that comes with this as we will see more below.

### **2. The “just war” ethic consistently gets us stuck in cycles of violence even when war appears just**

For example, we have seen this with World War II leading to the Cold War and numerous proxy wars, such as Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan in the 1980s. The war in Afghanistan yielded in part the resentment and conditions which gave birth to Al-Qaeda, 9/11 in the U.S., the ongoing war of 18 years in Afghanistan, the spread of Al-Qaeda and with the 2003 Iraq war, the eventual morphing of parts of Al-Qaeda into ISIS.<sup>10</sup> Such cycles of military violence also create massive flows of refugees, generational trauma, and increased violent social habits, such as domestic violence and rape.

Other examples of cycles of violence include before and especially after Libya in 2011, where thousands more have been killed in the aftermath of the “responsibility to protect” military intervention. There has also been significant corruption, torture, refugees, paramilitary action, and another civil war in 2014, as well as the spreading of violence to nearby Mali. South Sudan was created in 2011 after what many in the country presumed was a just war. Yet, the habits of violence soon re-ignited into a civil war which is still ongoing.<sup>11</sup> Research supports these examples as illustrative of a consistent pattern with violent interventions.<sup>12</sup>

### **3. The “just war” ethic too often enables structural and cultural violence**

A moral framework focused on whether violence is morally legitimate, even in a restricted form, has led to and will continue to lead to significant spiritual and material energy on war preparation and violence rather than adequately investing in nonviolent resources or other basic human needs. This structural violence includes the arms trade and a war system increasingly embedded in our economy and politics. For instance, in 2017 the world spent about \$1.7 trillion on militaries and about \$3.4 billion on peacebuilding.<sup>13</sup>

This ethic also enables cultural violence in the form of de-humanizing social habits generated by training for war, media propaganda to support war, and generational trauma from the experience of war. Cultural violence includes those aspects of culture that *can be* used to justify or legitimate, both structural and direct violence. Examples include language, conflict habits, symbols, ideology, moral frameworks, media, racism, sexism, etc.<sup>14</sup> The very language of “just war” too often functions in society, even if unintentionally, as a form of such cultural violence that further legitimates direct and structural violence.

### **4. The “just war” ethic fails to address root causes of violence and to build sustainable peace**

The just war ethic does not provide adequate moral guidance to transform conflicts by addressing the root causes. Transformation of conflict requires attending to the personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions of a conflict. In turn, it fails to address the epicenter (or root causes) of the conflict, and thus, build sustainable peace. For example, this is one of the main reasons all war normally gets us stuck in cycles and habits of violence. In fact, the broader structural and cultural violence normally associated with being prepared for a possible “just” war, often exacerbates the root causes of violence and inhibits sustainable peace. For example, the structural violence of the arms trade often generates more distrust and potential for profiting from war, particularly ongoing war. Also, the associated cultural violence of de-humanization exacerbates the root causes of violence and inhibits sustainable peace.

### **5. The “just war” ethic fails to form us as courageous nonviolent peacemakers**

The just war ethic too often functions to distract or limit our attention, imagination, virtues, skills, and commitment to develop possible nonviolent practices as well as to resist war. It appears inconsistent with the central virtues of empathy, compassion, mercy, humility, and nonviolence. For example, Cardinal Turkson said, “It [just war theory] can undermine efforts to develop alternative capacities and tools for conflict to be overcome and transformed.”<sup>15</sup>

For example, too many spend little if any time trying to imagine how to humanize or illuminate the dignity of our enemies, which is not only a Gospel mandate but is an essential step in overcoming mass violence. Second, we rarely hear religious and political leaders speak about or promote nonviolent resistance, especially boycotts, strikes, and civil disobedience, etc., to injustice and violence. Third, we offer little or inadequate resistance to enormous military spending or actions, especially in countries with large militaries.<sup>16</sup> Fourth, the depth and range of education on nonviolent theory and practice normally is much better in Quaker or Mennonite schools compared to most Catholic institutions.

Some might argue that the just war's last resort criterion should in theory minimize or enable no such distraction or obstruction. However, in practice evidence suggests otherwise as the examples of distraction, the formation issues, the structural and cultural violence, the primary use to justify war, and the frequent abuse of the criteria illustrate.

#### **6. The “just war” ethic is inconsistent with human dignity and ecological care**

It does not help us adequately illuminate the sacred gift of each person, even our adversaries. Instead, it too often enables us to act in discord with our dignity, i.e. being a gift, such as by destroying some lives and illustrated by the trauma caused by killing. Hence, Pope John Paul II said violence “violates our dignity.”

For example, soldiers are normally trained to de-humanize their adversary in order to improve the willingness to kill them.<sup>17</sup> Such training as well as killing itself de-humanizes the soldiers as it results in significant rates of moral injury,<sup>18</sup> mental illness and trauma. In addition, soldiers are 2-3 times more likely than the civilian population to suffer suicide and homelessness, as well as commit sexual assault, domestic violence, and child abuse.

In terms of ecological care, Pope Francis said, “war always does grave harm to the environment.” Preparation for war and all actual wars even if they appear “just” do extensive harm to our common home. This includes damage to air and water quality, destruction of forests, contamination of land, plundering of natural resources, exorbitant use of fossil fuels, harm to biodiversity, killing of animals, and damage to human infrastructure that supports the environment.<sup>19</sup> Of course, much of this harm to the environment includes significant impacts on human health, such as cancer, respiratory disease, food illness, etc.

#### **7. The “just war” ethic obstructs the goal to outlaw and end war**

Because the just war ethic signals that war may be justified, it tends to function in society to obstruct the goal identified at Vatican II to “strain every muscle” to “outlaw war.”<sup>20</sup> For example, the just war ethic continues the mentality, structures, and culture which make the possibility for a just war an ongoing characteristic of society. Even when a few Catholic leaders or others argue that modern war does not meet the just war criteria, there is an inherent logic or momentum to the ethic that enables other leaders to continuously argue: “why can’t we use new technology to humanize war to meet the criteria, (i.e. smart bombs, drones, etc.)?” or “why can’t we refine the criteria to meet the present circumstances of war?” Thus, even if not

intended, the just war ethic often functions to work against a robust, adequate, “straining of every muscle” to outlaw and end war.

### **8. The “just war” ethic distracts us from Jesus**

This ethic at best distracts us from Jesus’ way of nonviolent love of friends and enemies. It makes it harder to “put on the mind of Christ” and live in the fullness of missionary discipleship. The mission of the Church calls us to be a sacrament of our ultimate unity as children of God and with all creation. Hence, Cardinal Turkson said “all killing is fratricide”<sup>21</sup> or the killing of a close family member;<sup>22</sup> while Pope Francis stated, “justice never comes from killing.”<sup>23</sup> Jesus calls us to love of friends and enemies in concrete, visible, and comprehensible ways, not merely by good intentions or emotions. Thus, we are drawn to creative nonviolent responses rather than killing enemies, because they too remain our neighbors and have sacred dignity.

The just war ethic is of little resemblance and is incompatible, if not simply contradictory to the redemptive way of Christ. Jesus overcomes physical death and the ultimate death of being disconnected from God; and thus, models for us how to manifest ultimate, authentic, and sustainable protection. Therefore, in extreme situations of violence the role of the Church including Christians is to directly accompany and take on some of the risk to defuse the violence; without necessarily condemning those who sincerely see no other way but violent defense, but also without the Church justifying, legitimating, or calling such violence “necessary.”

### *Conclusion*

We are in need of a new path, a bold next step that moves away from the logic of just war. Instead, we need an ethic which draws people to Jesus *and* is more likely to actually fill the space many hoped the just war ethic would fill, i.e. to prevent and limit war, and thus, to better *protect* people and creation.

Fr. Francisco De Roux, SJ from Colombia said, “In my Catholic country, it [just war] has been scandalous. The priests and nuns would join the guerillas because of the just war paradigm, and it has been hell for Colombia. The Catholic paramilitaries pray to the Virgin before slaughtering people because of the just war paradigm. The Catholic military is based on the just war paradigm ...thus one of my goals is to have the Catholic Church abandon the just war perspective and build up a new paradigm.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua McElwee, “Pope Condemns Possession of Nuclear Weapons,” National Catholic Reporter, Nov. 10, 2017. Christopher Lamb, “Pope urged to abolish creed of ‘just war,’ Sunday Times, April 24, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Examples have been given of the restrictive use by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops for legitimizing the 2001 war in Afghanistan but this has resulted in the ongoing war that continues 18 years later; as well as the restrictive use to question the 2003 Iraq War, but they did not clearly resist it even when Pope John Paul was against it, and the ongoing abuse in Iraq including the rise of ISIS.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, some versions are better than others, but the issue of immense, consistent abuse is still highly relevant.

<sup>4</sup> This shows that consistent abuse can be traced from Cicero and the Roman Empire (7-10), the Medieval times with the Popes and Crusades (12-13), the years of conquest in the “New World” (14-15), and the modern period with the “sovereign state” logic of war (16-17). Even Hugo Grotius, key influencer of international law, acknowledged that “just war theory contributes to the likelihood and ferocity of war,” 19. For a historical analysis of the misuse of just war thinking during the 20th century (such as WWI) see Johan Verstraeten, “The Just War Tradition and Peace Thinking 1914-1964,” in *From Just War to Just Peace: Catholics between Militarism and Pacifism in Historical-Theological Perspective* (Kadok studies, 15), ed. Roger Burggraeve et al. (Leuven: Universitaire Pers, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Example of *in bello* abuse: U.S. soldier Ethan McCord testified that in Iraq “the rules of engagement are a joke,” in the video “Collateral Murder,” Aug. 10, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kelmEZe8whl>.

<sup>6</sup> Center for Systemic Peace, “Global Conflicts Trends,” 2017, especially figure 8.

<sup>7</sup> Todd Whitmore, “Peacebuilding and Its Challenging Partners,” in *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis*, ed. R. Schreiter, S. Appleby, G. Powers, p. 163-167. See Geneva Declaration, “Global Burden of Armed Violence,” 2008, p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Examples of claimed proportionality include the atomic bombs in WWII, the “shock and awe” bombing of Iraq in 2003, and the Israeli bombing of Gaza in 2014 that decimated the area. Johan Verstraeten, “From ‘Just war’ to ‘Ethics of Conflict Resolution:’ A Critique of Just War Thinking in Light of the War in Iraq,” in *Ethical Perspectives*, 11 (2004) 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> Examples: “no one return evil for evil” (1 Thes. 5:12-18), “you have heard an eye for eye but I say to you” (MT 5:38-42), and “not return insult for insult, but give a blessing” (1 Peter 3:9) or “feed your enemy” (Rom. 12:17-21).

<sup>10</sup> Consider that about 3,000 people were killed on 9/11, meanwhile over 160,000 have been killed in the so-called “just war” or “legitimate defense” in Afghanistan.

<sup>11</sup> Other examples include the war in Bosnia and military intervention in 1994, which maintained the hostilities despite an apparent political agreement, and enabled the escalating violence by the Serbs in Kosovo. The political regime in Serbia was only ended when Otpor, a nonviolent resistance movement led the way. Rwanda in 1994 was part of a cycle of violence enabled by previous French military actions and armed support for the Hutus. The Tutsi military response has continued the cycle by escalating violence and war in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

<sup>12</sup> Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, *Why Civilian Resistance Works*, (Columbia University Press: New York, NY, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Kevin Clarke, “Infographic: Peacebuilding Dollars at Risk,” in *America Magazine*, Feb. 8, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Johan Galtung, “Cultural Violence,” in *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 27, no.3, 1990, pp. 291-305.

<sup>15</sup> Cardinal Turkson quoted in Christopher Lamb, “Pope urged to abolish creed of ‘just war’,” in *Sunday Times*, 24 April 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Another example to consider is when Pope Francis said not to “bomb or make war” on ISIS, most Catholic press and many political and religious leaders, particularly in the U.S., left out this phrase. Henceforth, they supposed an openness to some military action, and focused their discussion on how much. Instead, the Catholic community may have better faced the call to not “bomb or make war” by working together to identify creative nonviolent responses.

<sup>17</sup> Lt. David Grossman, *On Killing*, (New York: NY, Back Bay Books, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Robert Meagher, *Killing from the Inside Out: Moral Injury and Just War*, (Cascade Books, 2014). Also see <http://moralinjuryproject.syr.edu/about-moral-injury/>

<sup>19</sup> Karl Mathiesen, “What’s the Environmental Impact of Modern War?” in *The Guardian*, Nov. 6, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Pope Paul VI, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” 1965, par. 81.

<sup>21</sup> Cardinal Turkson, Welcome Address at Conference on Nonviolence and Just Peace in Rome, Italy, April 11, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Cardinal Turkson, “The Catholic Church Moves Towards Nonviolence? Just Peace/Just War in Dialogue” at the University of San Diego Conference, Oct. 7, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Pope Francis, Letter to Federico Mayor, in *Catholic News Agency*, Mar. 20, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> <https://nonviolencejustpeacedotnet.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/nonviolence-justpeace-session-3-transcript.pdf>