

## **Pope Francis, Nonviolence, and Catholic Teaching on War**

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In his 2017 World Day of Peace message, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,” Pope Francis issues a call for Catholics to “make active nonviolence our way of life.”<sup>1</sup> Francis grounds this call to nonviolence directly in the person and teachings of Jesus: “Jesus marked out the path of nonviolence. To be true followers of Jesus today includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence.”<sup>2</sup> These statements of Pope Francis represent the latest stage in official Catholic social teaching of a lengthy process of rediscovering of the centrality of nonviolence in Christian life and have profound implications for the mission of the Catholic Church in our time.

In this paper I plan to explore some of the history of Catholic teaching on war, with particular attention to the nonviolent views of the early Church, the rise of just war thinking, and the critical rethinking of war that began with Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. I will also explore some reasons why official Catholic teaching on issues of war and nonviolence is often so little known at the parish level, put forth some suggestions for how these teachings could be better incarnated by the Catholic Church in its lived practice, and highlight a few issues in need of further development.

### **Early Church Nonviolence and the Development of Just War Theory**

Leaders of the early Christian community strongly emphasized the nonviolent nature of the teachings of Jesus. According to Church historians, there exists no evidence of Christian participation in the Roman military until approximately the year 170 CE.<sup>3</sup> After this time sporadic accounts of Christian soldiers appear in the historical record. Many of these earliest Christian soldiers seem to have been men who converted to Christianity while already serving in the military. According to the *Apostolic Tradition*, an early Church law code, any person who was already Christian or who was in training to be a Christian and who joined the military was to “be dismissed [from the Church], because they have despised God.”<sup>4</sup> Those who converted while already serving in the military, however, could remain (the penalty for refusing to serve could be

death), but they were to refuse to obey any orders to kill: “A soldier [...] shall not kill anyone. If ordered, he shall not carry out the order, nor shall he take the oath. If he does not accept this, let him be dismissed [from the Church].”<sup>5</sup>

Prior to the time of Constantine in the Fourth Century, we have no record of any Church leader explicitly approving of Christians joining the military, while there exist numerous accounts of Church leaders opposing military service.<sup>6</sup> The reasons for this opposition were multiple, including concerns about idolatrous worship of the emperor and the sexual immorality that often characterized military life, but the primary reason given was the conviction that killing constituted a direct and fundamental violation of the teachings of Jesus. “We [Christians],” the prominent early Church theologian Origen states, “no longer take up sword against nation, nor do we learn war any more, having become children of peace for the sake of Jesus, who is our leader.”<sup>7</sup> “The Christian Lawgiver,” Origen explains, “did not deem it in keeping with laws such as his, which were derived from a divine source, to allow the killing of any individual whatever.”<sup>8</sup> This nonviolent rationale for opposing military service is further explained in another early Christian text, Lactantius’ *Divine Institutions*:

When God prohibits killing, he not only forbids us to commit brigandage, which is not allowed even by the public laws, but he warns us not to do even those things which are regarded as legal among men. And so, it will not be lawful for a just man to serve as a soldier [...] nor to accuse anyone of a capital offense, because it makes no difference whether you kill with a sword or with a word, since killing itself is forbidden. And so, in this commandment of God, no exception at all ought to be made to the rule that it is always wrong to kill a man, whom God has wished to be a sacrosanct creature.<sup>9</sup>

In a movement away from the more principled nonviolence of the early Church, Christian just war theory began to be developed by Augustine of Hippo in the late Fourth/early Fifth Century, drawing upon the work of his teacher Ambrose and the Roman philosopher Cicero. These thinkers argued that war could be morally acceptable if certain conditions were met, such as just cause (e.g., defense of the innocent), proper intention, and declaration of war by a legitimate authority. It was at this time that Christian participation in warfare first became officially

accepted by Church leaders. As the just war theory took root, the nonviolent ethos of the early Christians largely receded from Church teaching. In the Middle Ages the Church's acceptance of violence would extend even to the Crusades. Following the Crusades the just war tradition reasserted its dominant role in Christian thought and the criteria for a just war were further refined.<sup>10</sup> The dominance of just war thinking and the marginalization of principled nonviolence became so strong in Catholic thought that as recently as 1956 Pope Pius XII could declare that it was morally unacceptable for a Catholic to be a conscientious objector to all war.<sup>11</sup>

### **Pope John XXIII: *Pacem in terris***

In the early 1960s, official Catholic teaching on war began to undergo a major transformation, recovering a more critical view of war. In his encyclical *Pacem in terris*, issued in 1963, Pope John XXIII asserted the inappropriateness of war in the modern world and highlighted the conditions needed for authentic and lasting peace. In light of the destructiveness of contemporary weaponry, Pope John declared, "it is contrary to reason to hold that war is now a suitable way to restore rights which have been violated."<sup>12</sup> Pope John continued to adhere to the just war tradition but expressed serious doubts as to whether any modern war could meet the just war criteria. Focusing attention instead on the conditions needed for peace, Pope John emphasized the importance of respect for a broad range of human rights, including both civil/political rights (such as freedom of speech and assembly) and social/economic rights (such as the right to employment, food, housing, education, and health care.) Pope John also highlighted the urgency of creating a "worldwide political authority" that would be democratically organized and that would have sufficient power to effectively prevent war, including the authority to enact the social and economic reforms needed for greater equity in the global system.<sup>13</sup> Pope John's thought thus helped to consolidate an important shift of focus away from debates concerning justification of war to an emphasis on the responsibility for building structures of peace.

### **The "New Attitude" of Vatican II**

The rethinking of Catholic approaches to war that Pope John XXIII initiated was taken up and further developed by the Second Vatican Council in the document *Gaudium et spes*. In this document the Council proclaimed the need to "undertake an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude."<sup>14</sup> Part of this new attitude included an affirmation of the legitimacy of principled

nonviolence as a Catholic option and a call for governments to provide legal protection for conscientious objectors.<sup>15</sup> Another part of the new approach was an affirmation of the need to more rigorously apply just war criteria. The Council issued, for example, a strong condemnation of attacks directed at civilian populations, such as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. “Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population,” the Council declared, “is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.”<sup>16</sup> The Council also critiqued the arms race between the superpowers, which it described in powerful terms as “an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which injures the poor to an intolerable degree.”<sup>17</sup> Like Pope John XXIII, the Council viewed the ultimate solution to the problem of war to lie in the creation of a democratically established “universal public authority.” This international authority, the Council argued, should be “endowed with effective power to safeguard, on the behalf of all, security, regard for justice, and respect for rights.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Pope Paul VI: “No More War, War Never Again!”**

The critical views expressed by the Second Vatican Council concerning war and the need for alternatives to war were strongly influenced by the witness of both Pope John XXIII and his successor Pope Paul VI. It was Pope Paul’s famous speech at the United Nations, in which he passionately declared “No more war, war never again!” that provided the context for the Council’s deliberations on war. Pope Paul’s U.N. speech took place on October 4, 1965. The Council began formal discussion of the war and peace section of *Gaudium et spes* on October 5, the very next day.<sup>19</sup>

One particularly important contribution that Paul VI made to Catholic reflection on war and peace was his proclamation of January 1 of each year as “World Day of Peace.” Pope Paul commemorated the event with an annual World Day of Peace message. It is essential, Pope Paul emphasized in his 1978 message, to proclaim “at the top of our voice the absurdity of modern war and the absolute necessity of peace.”<sup>20</sup> These papal messages, which were continued by subsequent popes, have become a rich resource for the Church’s moral reflection on war.

Along with discouraging war between states, Pope Paul also sought to discourage revolutionary violence. In his encyclical letter *Evangelii nuntiandi*, for example, he stated: “The Church cannot accept violence [...] as the path to liberation, because she knows that violence

always provokes violence and irresistibly engenders new forms of oppression and enslavement [...]. We must say and reaffirm that violence is not in accord with the Gospel, that it is not Christian.”<sup>21</sup> Such bold statements in opposition to violence in general (rather than focusing on distinctions between justified and unjustified violence) would become common in the teachings of subsequent popes.

### **Pope John Paul II: Deepening the Rejection of War**

The tradition of Catholic teaching on war and peace was further developed during the papacy of Pope John Paul II. Key developments included deepened attention to the negative consequences of all wars, a further move away from the use of just war language, and an increased emphasis on the power and effectiveness of nonviolent action.

Throughout his papacy, John Paul II was a prominent critic of war. His opposition to the Persian Gulf War of 1991 and to the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq that began in 2003 are perhaps the most well-known examples, though his rejection of war was expressed in many other contexts as well:

Today, the scale and horror of modern warfare—whether nuclear or not—makes it totally unacceptable as a means of settling differences between nations. War should belong to the tragic past, to history; it should find no place on humanity’s agenda for the future.<sup>22</sup>

Is it not necessary to give everything in order to avoid war, even the “limited war” thus euphemistically called by those who are not directly concerned in it, given the evil that every war represents, its price that has to be paid in human lives, in suffering, in the devastation of what would be necessary for human life and development, without counting the upset of necessary tranquility, the deterioration of the social fabric, the hardening of mistrust and hatred which wars maintain towards one’s neighbor?<sup>23</sup>

It is essential, therefore, that religious people and communities should in the clearest and most radical way repudiate violence, all violence.<sup>24</sup>

To attain the good of peace there must be a clear and conscious acknowledgement that violence is an unacceptable evil and that it never solves problems.<sup>25</sup>

Violence is a lie for it goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of our humanity [...]; do not believe in violence; do not support violence. It is not the Christian way. It is not the way of the Catholic Church. Believe in peace and forgiveness and love, for they are of Christ. Yes, the Gospel of Christ is a Gospel of peace: “Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called children of God.”<sup>26</sup>

In these passages Pope John Paul II clearly sounds like a pacifist, expressing moral opposition to all war and violence. Nonetheless, he did not consider himself a pacifist, but rather understood himself as adhering to a strict interpretation of just war criteria. John Paul acknowledges, for example, that “peoples have a right and even a duty to protect their existence and freedom by proportionate means against an unjust aggressor”<sup>27</sup> but he expresses grave doubt that any modern war could in fact meet this criterion of proportionality. One factor in this assessment, of course, is the high percentage of civilian deaths and injuries that have characterized modern wars. It is commonly estimated, for example, that civilians have constituted about 90% of the casualties of war in the past several decades.<sup>28</sup> In addition, John Paul highlights a range of other negative consequences of war, including the destruction of infrastructure, the waste of funds that could be used to meet the needs of the poor, the destruction of the environment, the psychological and spiritual impacts of killing on those who kill, and the cycles of animosity and desire for vengeance that wars fuel. Reflecting upon the Persian Gulf War of 1991, for example, John Paul contends that war “destroys the lives of innocent people, teaches how to kill, throws into upheaval even the lives of those who do the killing and leaves behind a trail of resentment and hatred.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in his 1993 World Day of Peace message, he declares:

Recourse to violence, in fact, aggravates existing tensions and creates new ones. *Nothing is resolved by war; on the contrary, everything is placed in jeopardy by war.* The results of this scourge are the suffering and death of innumerable individuals, the disintegration of human relations and the irreparable loss of an immense artistic and environmental patrimony. War worsens the sufferings of the

poor; indeed, it creates new poor by destroying means of subsistence, homes and property, and by eating away at the very fabric of the social environment [...]. After so many unnecessary massacres, it is in the final analysis of fundamental importance to recognize, once and for all, that *war never helps the human community*, that violence destroys and never builds up, that the wounds it causes remain long unhealed, and that as a result of conflicts the already grim condition of the poor deteriorates still further, and new forms of poverty appear.<sup>30</sup>

Pope John Paul II also highlights important issues related to the just war criterion of last resort. In particular, he argues that the efficacy of mass nonviolent action in defending violated rights shows that recourse to violence is likely never truly the only remaining option. This emphasis on nonviolence comes to the fore in John Paul's thought especially after the successful nonviolent overthrow of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, in which his own support for the Solidarity movement in Poland played an important role. The end of communism, the pope states, was brought about by

the nonviolent commitment of people who, while always refusing to yield to the force of power, succeeded time after time in finding effective ways of bearing witness to the truth. This disarmed the adversary, since violence always needs to justify itself through deceit, and to appear, however falsely, to be defending a right or responding to a threat posed by others [...]. I pray that this example will prevail in other places and other circumstances. May people learn to fight for justice without violence.<sup>31</sup>

"Those who have built their lives on the value of non-violence," John Paul states, "have given us a luminous and prophetic example."<sup>32</sup>

This emphasis on nonviolence also began to play an increasingly important role in the reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops in the 1980s and 1990s. "Nonviolent means of resistance to evil," the bishops assert in their 1983 pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace*, "deserve much more study and consideration than they have thus far received."<sup>33</sup> In *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, published in 1993 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of *The Challenge of*

*Peace*, the bishops return to this theme. They stress that nonviolence, properly understood, is a powerful way of actively challenging injustice:

The vision of Christian nonviolence is not passive about injustice [...]. For it consists of a commitment to resist manifest injustice and public evil with means other than force [...]. Dramatic political transitions in places as diverse as the Philippines and Eastern Europe demonstrate the power of nonviolent action, even against dictatorial and totalitarian regimes [...]. National leaders bear a moral obligation to see that nonviolent alternatives are seriously considered for dealing with conflicts.<sup>34</sup>

The assertion that governments, rather than only individuals, have a moral obligation to actively consider nonviolent action as a response to grave injustices represented a new insight in Catholic social thought. The U.S. bishops in fact recognized it as constituting development of doctrine and requested Vatican approval of this material prior to publication. Such approval was received.<sup>35</sup> With this increased recognition of the power of nonviolence, assert the U.S. bishops, the “presumption against the use of force” is strengthened and the “threshold for the use of force” is raised.<sup>36</sup> In other words, recognition of the effective power of mass nonviolent action, i.e., nonviolent force, makes it even more difficult to justify any war.

While frequently criticizing all war in very strong terms, it should be noted that Pope John Paul II appears to leave open at least the possibility of a legitimate limited use of violent force or threat of violent force to prevent massive human rights abuses such as genocide. Any such use of violent force, he stressed, would need to adhere to very strict guidelines, especially concerning noncombatant immunity, would need to be very limited in scope, and would need to be conducted “in full respect for international law, guaranteed by an authority that is internationally recognized.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, John Paul seems to envision some type of U.N.-authorized peacekeeping mission with authorization to intervene to prevent serious human rights abuses. Significantly, such a possible use of violent force is never described by John Paul as “war,” but appears rather to be viewed by him as constituting a separate category, perhaps better thought of in terms of international policing. There is therefore no contradiction, in John Paul’s mind, between his bold, broad critiques of war and the possibility of support for limited multilateral



police action in extreme circumstances. And even in this context, John Paul stresses that humanitarian intervention and the obligation to “disarm the aggressor” should not be understood as inevitably requiring the use of military force. “The Holy See does not cease to recall the principle of humanitarian intervention, that is not necessarily a military intervention, but every other kind of action aimed at ‘disarming’ the aggressor.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Popes Benedict XVI and Francis**

Like Pope John Paul II, both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have made many blanket comments condemning war. “The Church,” said Benedict, “emphatically rejects war.”<sup>39</sup> “War, with its aftermath of bereavement and destruction,” he asserts, is “a disaster in opposition to the plan of God.”<sup>40</sup> Prior to becoming pope, responding to a question about Pope John Paul II’s outspoken opposition to the Iraq War, Cardinal Ratzinger stated: “There were not sufficient reasons to unleash a war against Iraq. To say nothing of the fact that, given the new weapons that make possible destructions that go beyond the combatant groups, today we should be asking ourselves if it is still licit to admit the very existence of a ‘just war.’”<sup>41</sup> Thus Benedict, like John Paul, strongly suggests that no modern war can be legitimate. He highlights numerous reasons for this, such as the reality of effective nonviolent alternatives, the overwhelmingly negative humanitarian impacts of war, and, most fundamentally, the ways in which the use of violence undermines human dignity. “To put one’s trust in violent means in the hope of restoring more justice is to become the victim of a fatal illusion,” Benedict stated in his earlier role as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. “[V]iolence,” he asserts, “begets violence and degrades man. It mocks the dignity of man in the person of the victims and it debases that same dignity among those who practice it.”<sup>42</sup>

Pope Francis similarly issues blanket criticisms of war. “War,” Francis says, “is the suicide of humanity because it kills the heart and kills love [...]. Wars are always madness.”<sup>43</sup> Asserting that war is never necessary, Francis declares:

[W]ar is never a satisfactory means of redressing injustice and achieving balanced solutions to political and social discord. All war is ultimately, as Pope Benedict XV stated in 1917, a “senseless slaughter.” War drags peoples into a spiral of violence which then proves difficult to control; it tears down what generations

have labored to build up and it sets the scene for even greater injustices and conflicts [...]. War is never a necessity, nor is it inevitable.<sup>44</sup>

In his 2017 World Day of Peace message, highlighted at the start of this paper, Francis presents the most lengthy, sustained reflection on nonviolence that has ever appeared in official papal teaching documents. Calling upon Catholics to “make active nonviolence our way of life,” Francis prays that “nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms.”<sup>45</sup> “To be true followers of Jesus today,” Francis boldly declares, “includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence.”<sup>46</sup> In making this assertion, Francis quotes Pope Benedict XVI: “For Christians, nonviolence is not merely tactical behavior but a person’s way of being [...]. Love of one’s enemy constitutes the nucleus of the Christian revolution.”<sup>47</sup>

Francis stresses that nonviolence is a powerful and effective way of actively opposing injustice: “Nonviolence is sometimes taken to mean surrender, lack of involvement, and passivity, but this is not the case. [...] The decisive and consistent practice of nonviolence has produced impressive results.”<sup>48</sup> Francis here mentions the efforts of Gandhi; Martin Luther King, Jr.; the Muslim nonviolent leader Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, who formed the world’s first nonviolent army in opposition to British colonialism; the women of Liberia who led a successful nonviolent movement that helped to remove a dictator, end a civil war, and elect the first woman as president of an African nation; and those who ended the communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe through active nonviolence. Additional examples, such as the overthrow through mass nonviolent action of dictatorial regimes in the Philippines, Chile, Serbia, Bolivia, South Africa, Indonesia, and many other cases, could also be added. Indeed, never has the historical evidence for the power of nonviolent action been stronger.<sup>49</sup>

### **Towards the Future: Deepening Catholic Faithfulness to Church Teaching on War and Nonviolence**

The recent tradition of Catholic reflection on issues of war and nonviolence is a rich one, which has much to contribute to the discernment of a Christian moral response to the problems that our world currently faces. The challenge for Church leaders, educators, and all Catholics is to take these teachings seriously and to find ways to make them come alive. Currently, many Catholics

are sadly unaware of papal teachings on war, nonviolence, and the building of peace. With regard to the increasingly central role of nonviolence in papal thought, for example, Drew Christiansen has stated: “The Church’s gradual embrace of nonviolence is a well-kept secret in need of much catechizing among ordinary Christians and institutionalizing in the life of parishes and dioceses as well.”<sup>50</sup> Part of the responsibility for this lack of knowledge among Catholics of Church teaching on war and peace issues has been the failure of many Catholic bishops, priests, and other Church leaders to publicly proclaim the teachings due to their controversial nature. The war in Iraq, begun in 2003, provides a telling example. Despite the strong statements by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI asserting that the war was a “defeat for humanity” and was not justified, there were only a very small number of bishops or priests in the United States who expressed public encouragement to Catholic military personnel to conscientiously refuse to participate in the war, or who provided public support for those who did. Such support for refusal to participate, however, must be an integral part of any serious application of just war principles, which include the firm moral obligation not to serve in wars that do not meet strict just war criteria.<sup>51</sup> Given comments by recent popes very strongly suggesting that no modern war can be justified, this becomes even more critical. If Church leaders are not willing to publicly call for and support such refusal to participate, then what they are really espousing, despite any appeals to the just war tradition, is in reality a type of uncritical nationalism and a tacit acceptance of any war that their country chooses to engage in.

A major campaign of education concerning Church teaching on war, peace, and nonviolence is direly needed. This could take a variety of forms in parishes, in diocesan media, in elementary and high schools, and in Catholic universities. Education on the Christian call to peacemaking and nonviolent action, rather than being relegated to an occasional program sponsored by a peace and justice committee, must become an integral part of all Catholic catechesis and education. One important part of these efforts to deepen the formation of Catholic conscience on war and peace issues would be to acquaint Catholics with the reflections on war of the pre-Constantinian Church, thereby helping Catholics to see the deep roots of principled nonviolence in the Christian tradition, an approach grounded ultimately in the life and teachings of Jesus himself. Education on the history and theory of nonviolent action and its proven success in overcoming repressive regimes and bringing about needed social reforms throughout the world is also crucial.

In addition to the widespread effort that is needed to more fully inform Catholics about Church teaching and to put this teaching into practice, I would suggest that there are also several ways in which Catholic thought on war, peace, and nonviolence could be enhanced through further clarification and development.

First, there is need for deeper reflection on the question of humanitarian intervention. As we have seen, Pope John Paul II, while condemning all war, left open the possible legitimacy of a limited armed intervention in extreme circumstances to prevent genocide or other massive abuses of human rights, even while stressing that humanitarian intervention does not necessarily imply the need for armed force. Several of the criteria given by John Paul II for humanitarian interventions were highlighted above, i.e., any such action must be in response to grave violations of human rights, must respect noncombatant immunity, must be in accord with international law, and must be “guaranteed by an authority that is internationally recognized.” Pope Francis has also affirmed a moral obligation to act to prevent grave violations of human rights. He too has emphasized that this need not entail the use of armed force. “In these cases where there is an unjust aggression, I can only say this: It is licit to stop the unjust aggressor. I underline the verb: stop. I do not say bomb, make war, I say stop by some means. With what means can they be stopped? These have to be evaluated.”<sup>52</sup> If any openness to the use of armed force is to be maintained (and it is ambiguous whether Francis intends this or not), the criteria certainly require deeper discernment. What constitute the essential differences, for example, between a justified “humanitarian intervention” or “police action” and an unjustified “war”? Unless the criteria are sufficiently clear, there seems to be a grave danger that these criteria for “just intervention” can be deeply abused just as the criteria for “just war” so often have been.

Christian theologian Walter Wink has argued compellingly that when the Church allows for any use of violence, this limited acceptance of violence opens the door in practice to a widespread acceptance of violence that far exceeds what the Church intends. Therefore, asserts Wink, it is essential that the Church reject all violence. Says Wink:

I resisted committing myself without reserve to nonviolence for so many years. I have slowly come to see that what the Church needs most desperately is precisely such a clear-cut unambiguous position. Governments will still wrestle with the option of war, and ethicists can perhaps assist them with their decisions. But the

Church's own witness should be understandable by the smallest child: we oppose violence in all its forms. [...] That means, the child will recognize, no abuse or beatings. That means, women will hear, no rape or violation or battering. That means, men will come to understand, no more male supremacy or war. That means, everyone will realize, no more degradation of the environment. We can affirm nonviolence without reservation because nonviolence is the way God's domination-free order is coming.<sup>53</sup>

If the Catholic Church is to continue to accept the possible legitimacy of Catholic participation in some very limited forms of violence (e.g., as part of multilateral "humanitarian interventions"), then it is crucial to explain why and how the negative implications that Wink warns against (i.e., a much more widespread acceptance and practice of violence than Church leaders intend) can truly be avoided. I would suggest that these implications almost certainly cannot be avoided and that a fuller embrace of principled nonviolence would in fact be the most effective and faithful choice that the Church can make. I will respond to some common objections to this claim in the final section of this paper.

Other important issues needing attention concern the various ways that Catholics are currently implicated in war and preparations for war. If the Church takes seriously the broad, powerful condemnations of modern warfare and the increased emphasis on nonviolent action that have been articulated in Church teaching by Pope John Paul II, Pope Francis, and others, even apart from any fuller, definitive embrace of principled nonviolence, is there any way that traditional national military service (as opposed to service in some type of U.N.-organized peacekeeping force) can continue to be viewed as morally licit? Should followers of Jesus be forbidden again to join the military as they were in the early Church? Should ROTC training programs at Catholic colleges and universities be abolished? If a justified war is essentially impossible in our modern context, as recent popes have suggested, are not Catholic-supported military training programs creating contexts in which grave sin is extremely likely? Also, how should Catholics in nuclear-armed countries respond to their countries' possession of nuclear weapons, given that Pope Francis has firmly stated that "[t]he threat of their use as well as their very possession is to be firmly condemned."<sup>54</sup> What concrete actions need to follow for Catholics from this and similar judgments?

Increased emphasis on the centrality of nonviolence to Christian faith also raises questions about traditional Catholic conceptions of natural law. Natural law as understood by St. Thomas Aquinas includes the right to violent self-defense as one of its implications. If increased emphasis continues to be placed in Church teaching on a Christologically-grounded embrace of nonviolence, as it should, what implications would this have? Perhaps Catholic thought on natural law could be enhanced here through dialogue with the thought of Gandhi, who conceptualized nonviolence as being most in accord with human nature properly understood. “Nonviolence is the law of our species,” Gandhi states.<sup>55</sup> Particularly since Catholics understand Jesus to be the fullest embodiment of true human nature, it seems only fitting that Jesus’s example of nonviolence be incorporated more deeply into Catholic natural law perspectives.

Finally, it is crucial for the Catholic Church to continue to seek to foster a deep spirituality of nonviolence. Without a foundation in prayer and without moral formation deeply grounded in the life and teachings of Jesus, it seems unlikely that the Church’s increasingly strong rejection of war and embrace of nonviolence will ever truly take root.

### **Objections and Responses**

The call for a deeper and more unambiguous embrace of principled nonviolence faces a variety of common objections, many of which were articulated in the 2018 special issue of *Expositions* on just war theory and Catholic social teaching.<sup>56</sup> Three such objections are that a call for the Church as a whole to embrace principled nonviolence would undermine respect for the goodness of creation, would be naïve and dangerous, and would run the risk of sectarian withdrawal from worldly responsibility.

Bernard G. Prusak, for example, argues that the natural law ethic that undergirded just war theory “reflected a fundamental faith commitment to the goodness of creation,” suggesting that a principled commitment to nonviolence would leave the innocent unprotected and thus not adequately respect this goodness.<sup>57</sup> Robert H. Latiff argues that calls to abandon just war theory are “extraordinarily naïve” and would allow evil to triumph.<sup>58</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, in an otherwise very insightful essay, adds a comment at the end of her essay seemingly critical of the traditional peace churches, implying that their principled commitment to nonviolence may not reflect an adequate concern for justice. “The Catholic Church has a countercultural message about military force,” Cahill says, “but it is not a sectarian ‘peace church.’ The purpose of CST, including its

peacebuilding profile, is to contribute to more just societies and to increase justice in civil society and governance globally.”<sup>59</sup>

To criticize those who embrace nonviolence as not adequately affirming the goodness of the created world, as Prusak does, is an odd claim, since it is precisely respect for the goodness and value of life that leads most pacifists to commit not to kill. It is also respect for the goodness of life that has led many pacifists to study, teach, and engage in various methods of nonviolent action in defense of the innocent.

As to whether principled pacifism is naïve and dangerous, this claim would appear to rest in part on misunderstandings. Latiff, who makes this claim, suggests that pacifists believe that all conflicts can be resolved through diplomacy. Clearly, however, this is not the argument that is being made by those calling on the Catholic Church to embrace principled nonviolence. Proponents of nonviolence and of a just peace framework highlight the power of mass nonviolent action to challenge and overthrow even highly repressive regimes, as has been demonstrated in the many historical cases cited above. Such an approach does not rely solely on diplomacy or on faith in the good will of repressive leaders.

With regard to naivety, proponents of nonviolent action are generally quite realistic about the power and prevalence of sin and injustice. They recognize that this approach can result in martyrdom and acknowledge the possibility even of widespread death, just as those who affirm the justness of military responses acknowledge that many are likely to be killed in war. There is clearly a deeply tragic dimension to life, and there may be circumstances in which neither violence nor nonviolence can bring about needed change in the short-term. In general, though, studies have shown that mass nonviolent action has succeeded in ending repressive regimes more often, more quickly, and with less loss of life than attempts at ending such regimes through violence.<sup>60</sup>

It should also be noted that those who emphasize a more restrictive version of just war as being preferable to a principled embrace of nonviolence can themselves be criticized for naivety in thinking that such a restrictive version of just war will ever have widespread influence within Church or society and be able to fundamentally impact concrete action. The Iraq War, as highlighted above, provides powerful counter-evidence. Despite the vast majority of Christian ethicists and Church leaders in denominational statements arguing that the war was unjust, almost no Christian soldiers refused to participate and almost no Church leaders actively called

for or pledged concrete support for such non-participation. The opening to violence provided by the theoretical notion of a just war, along with an often uncritical nationalism, triumphed over any deeper critical analysis or prophetic action. Only a more principled affirmation of nonviolence, I would contend, has the potential to fundamentally break through such rationalizations. As long as any violence is deemed acceptable, people will always find ways to believe that their violence is or will be the acceptable kind, and Christians will continue to tolerate all the evils of war and preparations for war that the popes have so eloquently condemned. While there are risks in embracing principled nonviolence, I would argue that there are far greater risks in not doing so.

Finally, as to critiques of “peace churches” as demonstrating a sectarian form of withdrawal from responsibility for building a more just world, which Cahill implied, this certainly does not hold up as a generalized claim. The Quakers, for example, are one of the most prominent historical peace churches and have been in the forefront of nearly every social justice struggle of the past several centuries, from the abolition of slavery to women’s rights to civil rights to immigrant rights and the sanctuary movement, among many others. A principled embrace of nonviolence clearly need not result in social withdrawal or a lack of commitment to social justice.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored some of the history of Catholic teaching on war, including the nonviolent ethos of Jesus and the early Church, the subsequent development of just war teaching, and the critical rethinking concerning war that has taken place since Vatican II. This recent rethinking has included a renewed appreciation for principled nonviolence, greater awareness of the effectiveness of nonviolent action in challenging repressive regimes, deep skepticism that any modern war could meet traditional just war criteria, emphasis on the need to address the structural causes of war, and emphasis on the role of multilateral organizations such as the United Nations in preventing war and building peace. These powerful themes of recent Catholic teaching could profoundly transform the Catholic Church and the world if they come to be more effectively taught and acted upon. A clearer principled embrace of nonviolence on the part of the Church, I have suggested, has the potential to transform the world even more deeply. Most



importantly, it would demonstrate greater faithfulness to the teachings and example of the nonviolent Jesus.

## Notes

1. Pope Francis, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,” The Holy See, January 1, 2017, §1, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco\\_20161208\\_messaggio-1-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-1-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html).
2. Ibid §3.
3. C. John Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude Toward War* (New York: Seabury, 1982), 97; John Driver, *How Christians Made Peace with War* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), 14.
4. *Apostolic Tradition*, quoted in Driver, *How Christians* 49. Also see Paul Bradshaw, Maxwell Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 90.
5. Ibid.
6. In addition to the works cited above, see Jean Michel Hornus, *It Is Not Lawful for Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes Towards War, Violence, and the State*, rev. ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980).
7. Origen, *Contra Celsus*, quoted in Eileen Egan, *Peace Be With You: Justified Warfare or the Way of Nonviolence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 27.
8. Origen, *Contra Celsus*, quoted in Driver, *How Christians* 67.
9. Lactantius, *Divine Institutions*, quoted in John Ferguson, *The Politics of Love: The New Testament and Nonviolent Revolution* (Nyack, NY: Fellowship Publications, 1979), 59–60.
10. For a classic overview of the Christian tradition on war and peace, see Roland Bainton, *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960). Also see Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994).

11. Pope Pius XII declared in his 1956 Christmas Message that “a Catholic citizen cannot invoke his own conscience in order to refuse to serve and fulfill those duties the law imposes” (“Communism and Democracy,” in *The Major Addresses of Pope Pius XII, Volume 2: Christmas Messages* (St. Paul, MN: The North Central Publishing Company, 1961), 225).
12. Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, The Holy See, 1963, §127, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_11041963\\_pacem.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html).
13. Ibid. §§137–141.
14. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, The Holy See, 1965, §80, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).
15. Ibid. §§78–79.
16. Ibid. §80.
17. Ibid. §81.
18. Ibid. §82.
19. The Council’s deliberations were also influenced by the moral witness of a group of pacifist women, including Dorothy Day, who undertook ten days of fasting and prayer in Rome and who met with numerous bishops as the section of *Gaudium et spes* on war and peace was being drafted. See Egan, *Peace Be With You*, 166–180.
20. Pope Paul VI, “No to Violence, Yes to Peace,” The Holy See, January 1, 1978, [http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_mes\\_19771208\\_xi-world-day-for-peace.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_p-vi_mes_19771208_xi-world-day-for-peace.html).
21. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, The Holy See, December 8, 1975, §37, [http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_exh\\_19751208\\_evangelii-nuntiandi.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html).
22. Pope John Paul II, “Apostolic Journey to Great Britain: Homily in Coventry,” The Holy See, May 30, 1982, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1982/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19820530\\_coventry.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1982/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19820530_coventry.html).
23. Pope John Paul II, “Dialogue for Peace, A Challenge for Our Time,” The Holy See, January 1, 1983, §4,

- [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_19821208\\_xvi-world-day-for-peace.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19821208_xvi-world-day-for-peace.html).
24. Pope John Paul II, "Address of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Representatives of the World Religions," The Holy See, January 24, 2002, §4,  
[http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/january/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20020124\\_discorso-assisi.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020124_discorso-assisi.html).
25. Pope John Paul II, "Do not Be Overcome by Evil but Overcome Evil with Good," The Holy See, January 1, 2005, §4,  
[https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_20041216\\_xxxviii-world-day-for-peace.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20041216_xxxviii-world-day-for-peace.html).
26. Pope John Paul II, "Truth: The Power of Peace," The Holy See, January 1, 1980, §10,  
[https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_19791208\\_xiii-world-day-for-peace.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19791208_xiii-world-day-for-peace.html).
27. Pope John Paul II, "Peace: A Gift of God Entrusted to Us!" The Holy See, January 1, 1982, §12,  
[https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_19811208\\_xv-world-day-for-peace.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19811208_xv-world-day-for-peace.html).
28. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 137.
29. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, The Holy See, 1991, §52,  
[https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html).
30. Pope John Paul II, "If You Want Peace, Reach Out to the Poor," The Holy See, January 1, 1993, §4,  
[http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_08121992\\_xxvi-world-day-for-peace.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121992_xxvi-world-day-for-peace.html) (emphasis in original).
31. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* §23.
32. Pope John Paul II, "Peace on Earth to Those Whom God Loves!" The Holy See, January 1, 2000, §4,  
[https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_08121999\\_xxxiii-world-day-for-peace.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121999_xxxiii-world-day-for-peace.html).

33. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1983), §222.
34. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1993), §1.B1.
35. This information concerning “development of doctrine” is recounted by Drew Christiansen, S.J., in a lecture entitled “‘No, Never Again War’: The Evolution of Catholic Teaching on Peace and War,” Santa Clara University, April 28, 2004.
36. USCCB, *Harvest of Justice* §1.B1–2.
37. Pope John Paul II, “Peace on Earth to Those Whom God Loves!” §11.
38. Pope John Paul II, Address to Diplomats (January 13, 1994), quoted in “War, the U.N., and Humanitarian Intervention According to Pope John Paul II,” *La Stampa: Vatican Insider* August 26, 2014, <https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/en/2014/08/26/news/war-the-un-and-humanitarian-intervention-according-to-pope-john-paul-ii-1.35627007>.
39. Pope Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to H. E. Mr. Makram Obeid, Ambassador of the Syrian Arab Republic to the Holy See,” The Holy See, December 14, 2006, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/december/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_spe\\_20061214\\_ambassador-syria.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20061214_ambassador-syria.html).
40. Pope Benedict XVI, “Angelus,” The Holy See, July 22, 2007, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2007/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_ang\\_20070722.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20070722.html).
41. For a transcript of the interview in which Cardinal Ratzinger made these comments, see <http://www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=34882>.
42. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation,” The Holy See, August 6, 1984), §11.7, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19840806\\_theology-liberation\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html).
43. Pope Francis, “Where Is Your Brother?” The Holy See, June 2, 2013,

[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2013/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie\\_20130602\\_war-madness.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2013/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20130602_war-madness.html).

44. Pope Francis, "Peace Is the Future," The Holy See, August 26, 2014,

[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2014/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140826\\_messaggio-sant-egidio-pace-anversa.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140826_messaggio-sant-egidio-pace-anversa.html).

45. Pope Francis, "Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace" §1.

46. Ibid. §3.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid. §4.

49. For books exploring the theory and recent history of nonviolent action, see Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Gene Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (Boston: Porter-Sargent, 2005).

50. Christiansen, "No, Never Again War."

51. One prominent exception to this lack of outspokenness concerning the implications of Church teaching was John Michael Botean, bishop of Byzantine-rite Romanian Catholics in the United States. Bishop Botean issued a pastoral letter declaring that direct participation in the war in Iraq would constitute mortal sin. For Bishop Botean's powerful letter, see <https://www.scribd.com/document/4196399/Pastoral-Letter-Iraq-War>.

52. Pope Francis, quoted in Gerard O'Connell, "Full Text of Pope Francis's Press Conference on Plane Returning from Korea," *America* August 18, 2014,

<https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/full-text-pope-francis-press-conference-plane-returning-korea>.

53. Wink, *The Powers That Be* 144.

54. Pope Francis, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the International Symposium 'Prospects for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament,'" The Holy See, November 10, 2017,

[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20171110\\_convegno-disarmointegrale.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/november/documents/papa-francesco_20171110_convegno-disarmointegrale.html).

55. Mohandas Gandhi, "The Doctrine of the Sword," *Young India* August 11, 1920,

[https://www.mkgandhi.org/nonviolence/D\\_sword.htm](https://www.mkgandhi.org/nonviolence/D_sword.htm).

56. *Expositions: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities: Special Issue on the Future of Just War Theory in Catholic Social Thought* 12.1 (2018), <https://expositions.journals.villanova.edu/issue/view/159>.
57. Bernard G. Prusak, “Just War or Just Peace? The Future of Catholic Teaching on War and Peace,” *Expositions* 12.1 (2018): 2, <https://expositions.journals.villanova.edu/article/view/2315/2214>.
58. Robert H. Latiff, “Jumping into Combat without a Parachute—on Purpose?,” *Expositions* 12.1 (2018): 76, <https://expositions.journals.villanova.edu/article/view/2321/2225>.
59. Lisa Sowle Cahill, “The Future of (Catholic) Just War Theory: Marginal,” *Expositions* 12.1 (2018): 27, <https://expositions.journals.villanova.edu/article/view/2318/2222>.
60. For in-depth examination and comparison of Twentieth Century violent and nonviolent struggles against repressive regimes, see Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).