



## Catholic Social Thought and War

*Gaudium et Spes*<sup>1</sup> of Vatican II recognized two moral traditions in looking at war—the so-called “just war” or “justifiable war” and pacifism, both deeply embedded in Catholic thought. In the wake of two world wars the Council more fully embraced Christian nonviolence and conscientious objection. After the utter destruction of cities by conventional and atomic bombs, the Council participants felt compelled “to undertake an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude” [80]. *Gaudium et Spes* declared:

Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation [80].

It further denounced the arms race as “an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which injures the poor to an intolerable degree” [81].

**The arms race was “an act of aggression against the poor” [128]; and they urged reduced armaments, bans on chemical and biological weapons, and cuts in conventional forces.**

These teachings grounded the U.S. Bishops’ 1983 pastoral letter on peace,<sup>2</sup> with its special focus on nuclear weapons. Applying just-war criteria, the bishops declared the use of such weapons against civilian populations to be immoral [147], first-strike use to be morally unjustifiable [150], and “limited” use to be morally “highly skeptical” [159]. They taught “strictly conditioned moral acceptance” of nuclear deterrence policy, only justifiable as a step toward disarmament [173]. The arms race was “an act of aggression against the poor” [128]; and they urged reduced armaments, bans on chemical and biological weapons, and cuts in conventional forces.

In the decades following, with the People Power Revolution of 1983-86 in the Philippines and peaceful

revolutions ending communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, the Church seemed to be moving towards a stronger endorsement of pacifism. Contemporary war is so destructive that during the past thirty years it has seemed less and less defensible—as Catholic leaders argued in opposing the U.S./United Kingdom invasion of Iraq in 2003 and as Saint Pope John Paul II contended in opposing both the 1990 Gulf War and the Iraq War.

In addition, while nuclear war fears seem less acute now than during the “nuclear freeze movement” in the 1980s, concerns continue about the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Witness the current debate over Iran’s possible acquisition of such weapons, North Korea’s testing of ballistic missiles, the nuclear weapons of India and Pakistan,<sup>3</sup> and President Trump’s call for a nuclear build-up. For the Church, the arms race is devastating to the world’s poor by diverting human, scientific, and financial resources from development needs to war.

In addition, just war principles challenge contemporary war-making on two fronts: what the tradition called *jus ad bellam* (justice in going to war) and *jus in bellam* (justice in waging war). Concerns have included: “civil wars” as in Syria; the arms trade, both conventional and nuclear; resort to violent revolution by aggrieved minorities; terrorism and the responses to terrorists embedded with civilian populations; and use of “drones” and other more “automated” weapons that can seem to make war “easier.”

Following the Council’s lead, Saint Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI also called for strengthening the United Nations, improvements in international protection of refugees, and the ability of international entities to intervene in violent disputes even within a single country.

### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Second Vatican Council, *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, December 7, 1965.
- <sup>2</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response*, May 3, 1983.
- <sup>3</sup> “The World’s Most Dangerous Border” and “A Rivalry That Threatens the World” in *The Economist*, May 21-27, 2011.