

First Sunday of Lent
Dominica I in Quadragesima (Latin Mass)
March 6, 2022
Year of Saint Joseph
Catholic “Just War” Part One

“There are several typical ways in which people think about war: First, all warfare is wrong. This position finds simply no justification, at any time or in any circumstance, for opposing another human being to the extent of taking that human beings’ life, even in order to defend one’s own. A second approach sees warfare as a dirty business which is sometimes inevitable. It concludes that the best war is the quickest war, no matter what it may entail.”

(Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk, Twelve Tough Issues, p. 49)

As I mentioned last weekend, I felt it necessary, for our understanding, to examine the teaching of the Catholic Church concerning this most serious issue – War. In the quote provided above, Archbishop Pilarczyk introduces two commonly held positions concerning war. Due to the serious nature of this subject, our Catholic Church sought to find a third position. The Archbishop summarizes this theological quest in these lines:

“Church tradition teaches that because warfare is a matter of human freedom (human decisions and human choices), it is a moral question; there are circumstances in which war can be justified, just as there are circumstances in which war cannot be justified. The decision about the justification of warfare is based on criteria ultimately concerned with the basic principles of human dignity and of respect for human life. These two principles, taken together, offer the basis for what is known as the just war teaching.” (Pp. 49-50)

Before we examine the defined guidelines necessary to declare a war either just or unjust, I must first make this declaration: The defense of an innocent (s) against an unjust aggression can be both moral and legitimate. In stating this, I acknowledge the words of Jesus found in Saint Luke’s Gospel: *“But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either.”* (Luke 6:27-29). For you and I, a question must now be asked: Did Jesus intend for His followers to be obliged to accept every injustice, every injury, every insult? We can see two almost contradictory answers to this question found in Sacred Scripture. *“If a man takes the life of any human being,*

he shall surely be put to death. The one who takes the life of an animal shall make it good, life for life. If a man injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so it shall be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; just as he has injured a man, so it shall be inflicted on him. Thus, the one who kills an animal shall make it good, but the one who kills a man shall be put to death. There shall be one standard for you; it shall be for the stranger as well as the native, for I am the LORD your God.” (Leviticus 24:17-22). *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.”* (Matthew 5:38). The presumption is to assume Jesus did not want His followers to respond to unjust aggression. The point of the message of Jesus may be more applicable when one considers our emotions as an unjust aggression affects someone we love. As a parent, another adult could slap you hard enough to dislodge a tooth and not suffer any repercussion from you. However, if that same adult slapped your child dislodging a tooth or multiple teeth, would they still suffer no repercussion from you, the parent? Jesus very much understood His creation. He knew that a person, when guided by the intense emotion of anger, may respond to an unjust aggression in such manner that the response exceeds the idea of equal justice (tooth for tooth) thereby leading the victim to morph into an unjust aggressor. For this reason, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the great minds of our Catholic Church, undertook to devise a list of guidelines to determine when and if our defense of an innocent through the means of war would be both properly understood as being both just and moral in its application.

Next week, I will list these guidelines, providing a brief explanation of each leading up to a most important and rather long moral question of: In a world in which communities (countries) have become increasingly interdependent upon other communities (countries), whereby the behavior of one country can effect multiple countries (not solely one’s intended target), realizing the number of alternatives needing to be exhausted and the destructive force of modern weaponry; all of these being weighed, then can a war still be considered just and moral or have these guidelines become outdated; we are no longer able to justify their validity in today’s modern global society?