

Just war?

Justice and Peace Commission of the Holy Land (30.6.2024)

The words we use matter, especially in a time of war. That is why, as the war in Gaza drags on and the death toll rises, those held hostage languish in captivity and those held without trial increase in number, we feel the need to speak out against the misuse of a term used in Catholic doctrine. That term is “just war”, a concept developed in pre-Christian antiquity, that, to our alarm as Christians, is increasingly being weaponized to justify the ongoing violence in Gaza.

Though nonviolence lies at the heart of our Christian faith, over centuries, Catholic thinkers have tried to formulate the conditions under which war is not only inevitable but also just. As a result, going as far back as Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Church has adopted the concept of “just war”. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (n. 2309), outlines the criteria for a just war, noting that “*the damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain; all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective; there must be serious prospects of success; and the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated.*”

Since the horrific attacks on October 7 on military installations, residential areas and a music festival in southern Israel by Hamas and other militants and the catastrophic war waged in response by Israel, Catholic leaders, beginning with Pope Francis, have continuously called for an immediate ceasefire and a release of hostages. Catholic moral theologians around the world have also outlined how neither the attacks by Hamas on October 7 nor Israel’s devastating war in response satisfy the criteria for “just war” according to Catholic doctrine. It is not our place here to repeat arguments that have already been made—among others, that negotiations have repeatedly not been exhausted before the use of force, and that Israel’s lack of stated objectives makes “serious prospects of success” impossible to measure. Most importantly, just wars must clearly differentiate between civilians and combatants, a principle that has been ignored in this war by both sides with tragic results. Just wars must also employ a proportionate use of force, which cannot easily be said of a war in which the Palestinian death toll is tens of thousands of people higher than that of Israel, and one in which a clear majority of the Palestinian casualties have been women and children.

The dubious application of “just war” theory to modern conflicts, especially to those that have dragged on for decades, has provoked thinking that suggests that “just” wars might only exist in very rare cases. This is especially true within a context in which the development of the contemporary arms industry, capable of causing death and destruction on an unknown scale, tips the scale in favor of war. We must express vigilance with regard to those who manipulate the concept of just war to suit their needs. At the general audience, on October 11, 2023, four days after the Palestinian attacks on southern Israel Pope Francis evoked the Israeli right to self-defense in the wake of the Hamas attack. He said, “*It is the right of those who are attacked to defend themselves.*” However, he immediately added, “*but I am very concerned about the total siege under which the Palestinians are living in Gaza, where there have also been many innocent victims.*” Later, rather than using just war theory to condone the violence in Gaza, the Holy See has employed it to call Israel to account. For example, Archbishop Gabriele Gaccia, the Holy See’s Permanent Observer to the United Nations underlined to the UN Security

Council on January 24, 2024, “Any action taken in self-defense must be guided by the principles of distinction and proportionality and comply with international humanitarian law.”¹

Another criticism of just war theory is that it can divert the conversation to whether or not a war is being fought ethically and thus avoid confronting the question of whether it should be fought at all. In this vein, Pope Francis has regularly repeated his insistence that war is ultimately a defeat for everybody.² Pope John Paul II had already begun to cry out, “No to war! War is not always inevitable. It is always a defeat for humanity”.³ Pope Francis has furthered this critique, calling war a “deception”, calling us to redirect our efforts towards building human fraternity. On January 29, 2024, in an interview in the Italian newspaper, La Stampa, the Pope explained: “It is right and legitimate to defend oneself, yes. But please let's talk about self-defense, so as to avoid justifying wars, which are always wrong.”⁴

As Catholics in the Holy Land, who share Pope Francis’ vision for a peaceful world, we are outraged that political actors in Israel and abroad are mobilizing the theory of “just war” in order to perpetuate and legitimate the ongoing war in Gaza. This theory is being used in a way in which it was never intended: to justify the death of tens of thousands, our friends and our neighbors. There are those pretending that the war follows the rules of “proportionality” by arguing that a war that continues until the bitter end might save the lives of Israelis in the future, therefore balancing the scales of the thousands of Palestinian lives being lost in the present. In doing so, they privilege the security of hypothetical people in the future over the lives of living and breathing human beings who are being killed every day. In short, the manipulation of the language of just war theory is not only about words: it is having tangible, fatal results.

Though we are a small community in the Holy Land, as Catholics we are an integral part of this land’s identity. We wish to make it clear that we, and our theological tradition, must not be used in order to justify this violence. The witness that we bring is not one of war, but one of transformational love, one of freedom and equality, one of justice and peace, one of dialogue and reconciliation. It is in a spirit of hope that we cannot allow words like “just” to be mobilized to justify what is unjust, cruel and devastating. We must argue for the integrity of language, because we remain convinced that true justice is still possible if we can hold fast to its promise. When words are perverted, language itself becomes incapable of plotting out a future that is free from the scourges of the present. A supposed “just war” that perpetuates injustice and deepens destruction, risks making the word “justice” a mockery as well. But justice is not a mockery, and its promise has not yet been extinguished. All of us must protect its integrity so long as we believe in a better future. The time has come to end this conflict, to prevent its spread, threatening a world war, and to mobilize a language that opens new horizons.

Hoping against hope that war will end and that Israelis and Palestinians together, living in freedom and equality, will seek true justice, promoting true peace. we repeat with the Psalmist: “O LORD, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more.” (Psalm 10:17-18).

¹ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2024-01/holy-see-united-nations-palestine-israel-gaza-ceasefire.html>

² See Angelus on 15.10.2023, 22.10.2023, 12.11.2023, 28.1.2024 and General audience on 18.10.2023, 29.11.2023, 6.12.2023, 24.1.2024.

³ Address to the diplomatic corps, 13.1.2003.

⁴ https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/it/2024/01/29/news/papa_francesco_guerra_israele_palestina_gaza_coppie_gay_intervista-14028375/