

Monastic Scribe 102 - March 27, 2026

CAN WAR BE JUST?

War can never be good or holy. There is too much evil in the killing, the destruction, the terror unleashed in a war. Some religious traditions say war is never just. There are degrees of pacifism as seen in the lives of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day and many men and women who refused to take part in wars. But wars have been certainly waged by religious groups, including Christians, and some way of limiting them has been attempted by such teachers as Saint Augustine (354 – 430) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 -1274). The Just War Theory is still taught today though some like Pope John Paul II believed that in today's world no war can really be just. For any unfamiliar with Just War Theory, I offer here a short survey.

The Just War theory deals with justification for going into war (**Jus ad bellum**). It also deals with legitimate ways of warfare once a war has begun (**Jus in bello**). The requisites for entering into wars are, first, it must be declared by a legitimate authority. In the United States this is the Congress, though a few Presidents have begun wars without congressional approval. The second requirement is that there must be good grounds for achieving the aim of the war. This necessitates that the aims and goals of a war must be clear and stated. This principle shies from mass violence in favor of proportionality. The third principle is that war must be a last resort after all non-violent options have been exhausted. The fourth principle is that the reason for going to war needs to be just and cannot be simply to recapture things taken or punishing people who have done wrong.

Once a war has begun there are also just requirements in Just War Theory (**Jus in bello**). Most importantly, a distinction must be made between combatants and non-combatants. This forbids bombing residential areas that include no military targets. Secondly the principle of proportionality demands that any harm done to civilians or civilian property is not excessive. The third principle is about military necessity. An attack or action must be intended to help in the defeat of the enemy; it must be a legitimate military objective. This is meant to limit excessive and unnecessary death and destruction. The fourth principle is the just treatment of prisoners of war.

Pope Benedict XVI condemned the possibility of a preventive war. Pope Francis also questioned that war with modern weapons could ever be just. In 2016 he addressed a group of peace activists and urged them to revitalize the tools of

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non-violence. The possibility of just war is becoming more complicated with the use of drones and other forms of technology. In 2020 Pope Francis, in his encyclical, "Fratelli tutti", wrote that it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of just war. The words "very difficult" are a step away from impossible.

What is the ordinary citizen to think? I was born at the end of the great depression and grew up in the years of the Second World War. Patriotism was imbued in us as we practiced living with shortages of food, automobiles, and other materials that would soon become the staples of American life. There was no question in my life that our soldiers in Europe and Japan were really fighting evil and were more than just. Much of that mindset was soon to change. Exposure, by television, to Vietnam and later to Iraq and Afghanistan disturbed the simple understanding of us being the good guys. The Civil Rights movement of the sixties, the women's movement of the seventies raised our awareness and our conscious.

There is still much that is good and noble about America and its people. But there is also much that is askew. The unjust distribution of wealth; the disappearance of the Middle Class. The forces of consumerism, greed, force, power and might are now our inner battles. As individuals and communities we have to take a stand.

Religion and the place of God help each of us to stand up for what is right. I don't mean the religion of Christian Nationalism which buys into the politics and forces of society. For us Christians the teachings of Pope Leo offer us guidance on our way. We do not despair. We live in hope. We live by the standards of justice, love, peace, forgiveness as followers of Jesus Christ. This includes our evaluation and acceptance of war and violence. What do you think? Drop me a line at: joycet@glastonburyabbey.org.

"Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me."

Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.