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The Narrow Path: From Just War to Nonviolence

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*IN CONVERSATION WITH **ERIK OWENS**, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF THE BOISI CENTER, AND
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Owens: Today, you are talking to us about a movement from the “just war theory” tradition to an emphasis on nonviolence in the Church. I wonder if you might give us a brief account of the traditional bases for justified war within Catholic thought.

Christiansen: The first tradition of the Church was pacifist. The early Church did not believe in taking blood in any form. For the same reason that women didn’t abort, men didn’t take lives in warfare. In fact, early Christians’ resistance to entering the military grew out of this pacifism. With the barbarian invasions and the Christianization of the empire, bishops began to advise the army—which was more like a police force in those days—on how to behave themselves.

Augustine took ideas from Ambrose and Cicero when developing the early terms of Catholic just war teaching. The premise is that you’re going to do two things. One: you’re going to protect the innocent. And two: you’re going to restore the peace. Augustine says that a ruler needs to put down his arms as soon as the other side sues for peace. So there’s a strong element of old pacifism in Augustine’s teaching on just war. In the end, he rejects the opposition to war on consequentialist grounds. That is, he rejects being opposed to war because of the harm you do. He insists that it is what’s in your heart, or intention, that really counts. Therefore

having the heart of a peacemaker is also important for Augustine. The other norms are that there be a justified authority and a just cause. Generally, for Augustine, the just cause is protection of the innocent.

Some years ago, I was at a conference at the Ethics and Public Policy Center with George Weigel. At the conference, there was a debate going on about the bishops' understanding of Church teaching as having a presumption against war. Weigel argued that the Catholic position is very different now than it was in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, when state interests mattered. To him, it's not state interests, but what's happening to people that matters. I agree with Weigel, in that protection of the innocent is primary. So would John Paul II, who opposed virtually every war. John Paul II did, however, justify humanitarian intervention—what I would call the “responsibility to protect (R2P)” —on the grounds that large numbers of people were being slaughtered and needed rescue. This was the responsibility of governments. John XXIII had laid the foundations in “*Pacem in Terris*”: when governments fail to protect their people, all authorities have a responsibility to respond to protect those people. It was John Paul II who applied this principle. The doctrine of responsibility to protect, which was fully endorsed by Pope Benedict, took this on.

The Church's own position on just war evolved over a number of years, especially after the 12th century, when canon law became more important to the working of the West. Standards for going to war—“*ad bellum*”—and standards for combat in war—“*in bello*”—were developed. Within *in bello* standards, the protection of innocent noncombatants became primary, a focus of many 20th century debates about just war.

I disagree with Brian Hehir that Catholic bishops in 1983 said that just war was the official Catholic doctrine. It is true that just war is doctrine in the Anglican Church and the Lutheran Church because of the Westminster and Augsburg confessions. However, it wasn't until the catechism of the Catholic Church that official Catholic formulation of just war appeared. It was applied. It was utilized. But it was part of the ordinary magisterium of the church, understood as what the theologians practiced, not necessarily what the bishops taught.

Through the late Middle Ages, there were still large pacifist movements that received endorsement by popes. Monks frequently led nonviolent campaigns against the forced conversion of warring

tribes. As far as I can see, just war was not in control until the very late Middle Ages or the beginning of the Age of Absolutism.

Owens: There's a conversation happening now about the application of just war thinking with regard to Syria that emphasizes Thomistic thought on the justified tradition of punishment. Could you speak to the appropriateness of that claim in the Catholic tradition?

Christiansen: The tradition of punishment has fallen out of use over the latter centuries because people saw to what abuse it could lead. After the First World War, we paid a high price for exacting costly penalties from the Germans, which resuscitated German nationalism. Thinking of just war in terms of punishment is not given much credibility any longer because of a greater sense of the human rights and the right to self-determination. This has changed the environment so punishment is no longer seen as a goal.

The Church now endorses rescue in international law. During a speech to the UN, Pope Benedict strongly endorsed the responsibility to protect, which had been adopted by John Paul II in reaction to the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, and then applied in central Africa and East Timor.

Owens: Tell us about the shift toward a more concrete emphasis on nonviolent responses to war. If R2P exists, some claim that force may be justified in order to protect the innocent and provide humanitarian conditions of justice. Where is the space between justified force and nonviolent response?

Christiansen: In 1983, the U.S. bishops said that building up institutions makes it possible to respond nonviolently. Conflict resolution centers must be ~~disputed~~ established. There must be preventive diplomacy, use of tools like sanctions, and education about options. The people, in turn, have to hold their government accountable. Even Aquinas articulated last resort as one of the principles of just war. The idea is that you try other things first. Sometimes a declaration of war is considered the last step in this process. But, the expectation is that you do things nonviolently as far as possible. If resolution can't come about by peaceful means, then legitimate authorities—usually the United Nations—has permission to enforce peace. The church is keen on multilateral diplomacy with respect to the application of force. But it has, on occasion, said “no” in situations such as the breakup of the former Yugoslavia when the international community was divided. In this case, those states that have authority and capacity do have the responsibility to intervene.

Owens: What is the influence of non-Catholic sources on this shift? For example, Protestant theologies of nonviolence and separatist movements, Indian independence with Gandhi, or civil rights? There are many traditions of pacifism, some that hearken back to early Christian pacifism that you mentioned. But what non-Catholic influences do you see in this?

Christiansen: For starters, the nonviolent witness of non-Catholics during the Second World War was hugely influential. There were Catholics who resisted nonviolently as well, but active resistance against the Nazis by groups like the White Rose was particularly influential. For the first time, during the Second Vatican Council, the Church praised people who used nonviolent means to defend their rights. I think the experience of the Second World War—particularly efforts at German-French reconciliation—precipitated greater interest in nonviolence.

When teaching Mennonite theology at Notre Dame, John Howard Yoder had an enormous influence on Catholic thinking, beginning with the *Politics of Jesus*. John was one of the significant outside consultants to the 1993 statement “The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace.” I think there was also some unarticulated admiration on the part of John Paul II towards the Mennonites. When I was part of the International Catholic-Mennonite Dialogue, I was repeatedly told that the Pope really wanted Catholics and Mennonites to work together, as both Mennonites and Catholics have a commitment—a vocation—to peacemaking.

And of course, the Pope John Paul II was himself a leading force in this. Although he was a Cold Warrior at one point, he was constantly urging the Polish dissidents, and Solidarity in particular, to pursue nonviolent ways of resisting the communist government. He also intervened to prevent both Brezhnev and Gorbachev from stopping freedom movements in Eastern Europe. He praised nonviolent activists in Poland for their persistence in choosing nonviolent ways to resist oppression.

Owens: The concept of R2P came onto the scene after some meetings in the late 1990s and big conferences in early 2000. The Catholic Church embraced it pretty quickly. Do you see this embrace of R2P as a fundamental shift away from a just war model? Or is it a reordering of the criteria for intervention that the just war tradition teaches about?

Christiansen: I think it’s an integration of a lot of the Church’s concerns, such as the obstacles that principles of sovereignty and nonintervention put

to rescue. The Church had already begun to articulate positions of humanitarian intervention, but these positions were very unpopular among diplomats. However, as George Weigel points out, Catholic tradition is not interested in state interests. It's interested in the people, and what happens to people, is at the center of R2P. It is the just responsibility of governments to care for their people. If they don't, then there can be outside intervention.

Even the people who formulated R2P concede that, before going into enforcement, questions must be asked (and answered). Issues of proportionality, for instance, may stop intervention. In Syria, outside military intervention would seem to result in disproportionate harm. So, all you can do under R2P is rescue refugees and help through humanitarian corridors, because *ad bellum* conditions are not satisfied.

Owens: What does this mean for Catholic laypeople? We've been talking about doctrine and about national claims to the use of force. What does this mean with regard to violence and force for lay-believers?

Christiansen: The teaching on nonviolence has to be appropriated. As Gerald Schlabach from St. Thomas University in Minneapolis–St. Paul says, it has to become church-wide and parish-deep—the clergy are not prepared to teach it. They're not taught Catholic social teaching in the seminaries anymore. But it seems to me, especially on this 30th anniversary of “Challenge of Peace” and 20th anniversary of “Harvest of Justice,” that the appropriation and the propagation of the teaching on nonviolence is something that really needs to be done.

Popeo: While I was in Japan this summer, I learned that the Japanese bishops unanimously decided to issue a declaration calling for an end to the use of nuclear power. I know that the global Catholic Church supports nuclear disarmament and abolition. What do you think about the church's shift towards nonviolence in relation to broader views of nuclear disarmament, including areas beyond nuclear weapons?

Christiansen: After Fukushima, the Japanese have good reason to mistrust atomic energy. On the other hand, the American Academy of Sciences did a report arguing that nuclear power plants are the only way out of global warming. I'm in a quandary. I myself don't know what to think about that.

However, the Vatican is advancing its views on nuclear weapons abolition. This fall, Vatican Archbishop Mamberti gave two

speeches—one at the IAEA and the other at the General Assembly—advocating for abolition. Another was given by UN observer Archbishop Chullikatt, also arguing for abolition. The Church, I am told, plans to make a series of pronouncements and declarations with respect to abolition of nuclear weapons in the coming year.

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