

Just War Tradition

[from the U. S. Catholic bishops' statement,
The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace,
www.usccb.org/sdwp/harvest.htm]

The just war tradition consists of a body of ethical reflection on the justifiable use of force. In the interest of overcoming injustice, reducing violence and preventing its expansion, the tradition aims at:

- clarifying when force may be used;
- limiting the resort to force; and
- restraining damage done by military forces during war. The just war tradition begins with a strong presumption against the use of force and then establishes the conditions when this presumption may be overridden for the sake of preserving the kind of peace which protects human dignity and human rights.

In a disordered world, where peaceful resolution of conflicts sometimes fails, the just war tradition provides an important moral framework for restraining and regulating the limited use of force by governments and international organizations. Since the just war tradition is often misunderstood or selectively applied, we summarize its major components, which are drawn from traditional Catholic teaching.

First, whether lethal force may be used is governed by the following criteria:

- **Just Cause:** force may be used only to correct a grave, public evil, i.e., aggression or massive violation of the basic rights of whole populations;
- **Comparative Justice:** while there may be rights and wrongs on all sides of a conflict, to override the presumption against the use of force the injustice suffered by one party must significantly outweigh that suffered by the other;
- **Legitimate Authority:** only duly constituted public authorities may use deadly force or wage war;

- **Right Intention:** force may be used only in a truly just cause and solely for that purpose;
- **Probability of Success:** arms may not be used in a futile cause or in a case where disproportionate measures are required to achieve success;
- **Proportionality:** the overall destruction expected from the use of force must be outweighed by the good to be achieved;
- **Last Resort:** force may be used only after all peaceful alternatives have been seriously tried and exhausted.

These criteria (*jus ad bellum*), taken as a whole, must be satisfied in order to override the strong presumption against the use of force.

Second, the just war tradition seeks also to curb the violence of war through restraint on armed combat between the contending parties by imposing the following moral standards (*jus in bello*) for the conduct of armed conflict:

- **Noncombatant Immunity:** civilians may not be the object of direct attack, and military personnel must take due care to avoid and minimize indirect harm to civilians;
- **Proportionality:** in the conduct of hostilities, efforts must be made to attain military objectives with no more force than is militarily necessary and to avoid disproportionate collateral damage to civilian life and property;
- **Right Intention:** even in the midst of conflict, the aim of political and military leaders must be peace with justice, so that acts of vengeance and indiscriminate violence, whether by individuals, military units or governments, are forbidden.