

THEOLOGICAL ROUNDTABLE

Must Just Peace and Just War Be Mutually Exclusive?

In April 2016 Pax Christi International and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace cosponsored the Nonviolence and Just Peace Conference at the Vatican. The conference issued an Appeal calling on the Catholic Church to make nonviolence and just peace central to its purpose, while also urging it to cease teaching or using just war theory. This roundtable consists of four perspectives from Catholic moral theologians who offer just-war responses to this Appeal.

Keywords: just war, pacifism, nonviolence, just peace, responsibility to protect, just policing

Introduction

For much of its history within the Catholic tradition, just war theory (JWT), while accepted as the primary approach to the morality of military force, has fomented unease. Should the use of deadly force, under the criteria of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, be morally legitimate as a form of neighbor love as Augustine and others have argued, or does Christian faith require pacifism as the historic peace churches and others, such as Catholic Workers, have held? A truce, of sorts, was established with Vatican II's affirmation of pacifism and nonviolence in *Gaudium et Spes* as part of its call to the church to "undertake an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude," along with its continuation of just-war teaching that "governments cannot be denied the right to legitimate defense once every means of peaceful settlement has been exhausted."¹ The US Catholic bishops, in their 1983 pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace*, likewise agreed that peacemaking "is a requirement of our faith," even while "the *how* of defending peace . . . offers moral options," including absolute pacifism, active nonviolent methods, and just war.² However, the

A version of this roundtable was presented at the 2017 College Theology Convention, held at Salve Regina University, Newport, RI.

¹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, §§79–80, in Walter M. Abbot, SJ, *The Documents of Vatican II* (Piscataway, NJ: New Century Publishers, 1966).

² National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1983), para. 78.

debate about pacifism, nonviolence, and just war was reignited in the wake of the Nonviolence and Just Peace Conference, cosponsored by Pax Christi International and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and held in Rome in April 2016. The conference released a statement entitled *An Appeal to the Catholic Church to Re-commit to the Centrality of Gospel Non-Violence* that called on Pope Francis to write an encyclical on “nonviolence and Just Peace.” It also called on the church to “no longer use or teach ‘just war theory.’”³

Such a rejection of JWT was momentous, given its 1,600-year significance in Catholic teaching and practice. In an early response to the *Appeal*, Mark Allman and Tobias Winright praised the principal aims of the conference, but challenged the *Appeal*'s criticism of JWT, claiming that it

- read papal statements on peacemaking selectively, while ignoring their use and defense of JWT;
- glossed over legitimate defense, humanitarian intervention, and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P);
- failed to distinguish between different versions of JWT, including those that are more hawkish and another represented by many Catholic just war theorists today that is sometimes viewed as “practically pacifistic” with its strong presumption in favor of peace and strict application of the *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* criteria;
- set up a false dichotomy between nonviolence and JWT, as well as conflating pacifism and nonviolence;
- read Scripture and tradition selectively;
- ignored the nascent *jus post bellum* and *jus ante bellum* categories in the development of JWT.⁴

In short, Allman and Winright pointed out that the *Appeal*'s brief allegations were a caricature of JWT. The debate continued with articles by Lisa Cahill; Marie Dennis and Eli McCarthy; Gerald Schlabach; Drew Christiansen, SJ; and Peter Steinfels.⁵ In addition, in his 2017 World Day of Peace message,

³ Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, *An Appeal to the Catholic Church to Re-commit to the Centrality of Gospel Non-Violence*, April 2016, <https://nonviolencejustpeace.net/final-statement-an-appeal-to-the-catholic-church-to-re-commit-to-the-centrality-of-gospel-nonviolence/>.

⁴ Mark J. Allman and Tobias Winright, “Protect Thy Neighbor: Why the Just-War Tradition Is Still Indispensable,” *Commonweal*, June 17, 2016, 7–9, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/protect-thy-neighbor>.

⁵ Lisa Sowle Cahill, “‘A Church for Peace’: Why Just-War Theory Isn’t Enough,” *Commonweal*, July 11, 2016, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/church-peace>; Marie Dennis and Eli McCarthy, “Jesus and ‘Just War’? Time to Focus on Just Peace and Gospel Nonviolence,” *Huffington Post*, October 1, 2016, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>.

Pope Francis called for a “politics for peace”⁶ and offered “the most extensive teaching on nonviolence by any pope.”⁷

Our roundtable continues this debate and offers responses from the perspective of contemporary JWT by four contributors. We begin by stressing that we agree with most of the *Appeal* and find much of it consistent with contemporary JWT, including the assertions that

- all Christians are called by Jesus to be peacemakers;
- creative and active nonviolence is an effective and underutilized method for alleviating conflict;
- the resurging commitment to peacemaking in the church is a good thing;
- JWT is often (mis)used to justify violence.

We especially support and embrace as consistent with JWT most of what the *Appeal* highlights as commitments the church ought to make to peacemaking. On the latter, the *Appeal* reads:

“We call upon the Church we love to:

- continue developing Catholic social teaching on nonviolence. In particular, we call on Pope Francis to share with the world an encyclical on nonviolence and Just Peace;
- integrate Gospel nonviolence explicitly into the life, including the sacramental life, and work of the Church through dioceses, parishes, agencies, schools, universities, seminaries, religious orders, voluntary associations, and others;
- promote nonviolent practices and strategies (e.g., nonviolent resistance, restorative justice, trauma healing, unarmed civilian protection, conflict transformation, and peacebuilding strategies);

[com/entry/jesus-and-just-war-time-to-focus-on-just-peace-and_us_57ec6282e4b0972364deab50](http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/entry/jesus-and-just-war-time-to-focus-on-just-peace-and_us_57ec6282e4b0972364deab50); Drew Christiansen, SJ, “Pope Francis Calls for a ‘Politics of Nonviolence’ in Annual World Day of Peace Message,” *America*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2016/12/12/pope-francis-calls-politics-nonviolence-annual-world-day-peace-message>; Gerald Schlabach, “Just War?,” *Commonweal*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/just-war-0>; and Peter Steinfelds, “The War against Just War,” *Commonweal*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/war-against-just-war>.

⁶ Pope Francis, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,” Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Celebration of the Fiftieth World Day of Peace, January 1, 2017, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html.

⁷ Christiansen, “Pope Francis Calls for a ‘Politics of Nonviolence’ in Annual World Day of Peace Message.”

- initiate a global conversation on nonviolence within the Church, with people of other faiths, and with the larger world to respond to the monumental crises of our time with the vision and strategies of nonviolence and Just Peace;
- no longer use or teach ‘just war theory’; continue advocating for the abolition of war and nuclear weapons;
- lift up the prophetic voice of the Church to challenge unjust world powers and to support and defend those nonviolent activists whose work for peace and justice put their lives at risk.”⁸

Again, we agree with and support *most* of the *Appeal*. We part company with it, however, primarily over two statements found elsewhere in the *Appeal* and the fifth bullet point above:

“We believe there is no ‘just war.’”

“Suggesting that a ‘just war’ is possible also undermines the moral imperative to develop tools and capacities for nonviolent transformation of conflict.”

“We call upon the Church we love to ... no longer use or teach ‘just war theory.’”

The remainder of this roundtable presents each of our critiques of the sentiments expressed in the forty-five words of those three statements.

I.

The Nonviolence–Just War Nexus

Gerald Schlabach wrote that a key test of progress for Catholicism in its dialogue with the historic peace churches on nonviolence and the use of force would be that the church’s teaching on nonviolence would become “church

⁸ Catholic Nonviolence Initiative, *An Appeal to the Catholic Church to Re-Commit to the Centrality of Gospel Non-Violence*.

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