

Against the Current
A Column for Teens and Young Adults
November 2012

On Veteran's Day

Throughout the land, on November 11th we celebrate Veteran's Day, a day during which we honor the military personnel, both living and dead, who served in the armed forces. We gather at cenotaphs, listen to speeches, and show our gratitude to all those who have given of themselves, even unto death, that we might enjoy peace and freedom.

Young people sometimes ask if it's OK to serve in the military. "How can it be", they reason, "that if Jesus teaches us that the most important commandment is love for God and neighbor, it's OK to make war, to shoot, bomb, maim and kill fellow human beings?" A good question. War has always existed, but is it OK for Christians to participate in war? How should we respond, on the basis of the Gospel, to the reality of international conflict and hostilities?

We must begin by recognizing that there are various types of war. There are "official" wars, usually resulting from a public declaration of war by one or another country, with clearly defined combatants. There is "undeclared" war, where countries fight, though no official declaration of war has been made by one or another government. We have civil wars, where the conflict is between citizens of the same country. Nowadays we even have war with terrorist organizations, where the identity of the enemy is not very clear at all.

On top of this there are wars of aggression, when one country attacks another, and wars of defense, when a country tries to defend itself, or its allies, from aggression.

Regarding violence and war Jesus gives two seemingly contradictory teachings. On the one hand he says "*Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends*" (Jn. 15:13). So sacrificing our life for those we love seems to be OK. Then again, he also says "*To him who strikes you on the one cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask*

them back" (Lk. 6:29-30), in other words, He teaches us not to return violence for violence.

So can Christians serve in the military? It would seem, on the basis of Jesus' teaching, that the clear answer is "yes and no"!

In the history of Christianity many great thinkers tried to make sense of this conundrum. Eventually what coalesced is what we call the "just war theory". In a nutshell, it goes like this:

In order for a war to be regarded as "just", or permissible, it must fulfill the following seven criteria: That the cause and the intent are just; that war is waged as a last resort; war is declared and conducted on the basis of legitimate authority; that there is discrimination regarding targets; the principle of "proportionality" is honored; and that there is a reasonable hope for success. Let's look at each of these conditions individually.

Just cause means that there is a good reason for going to war. This might mean protecting people from injustice, violence, or oppression, protecting the integrity of my country against the aggression of a neighboring state, etc. Making war in order to capture natural resources, or performing terrorist acts in order to destabilize a country whose socio-political system you don't agree with aren't acceptable reasons to fight.

Just intent means that the ultimate goal is peace. We don't fight simply to fight, we do battle in order to achieve a good which apparently can't be achieved by any other means. The intent of the war must be to achieve peace and reconciliation, not the surrender, humiliation, exploitation or degradation of the enemy.

War is only permitted as a last resort, when all other means of dealing with the conflict have been exhausted. Under normal circumstances we shouldn't go to war unless we have tried everything possible to avert war.

For a war to be "just" it must be conducted by the legitimate state authority. St. Paul writes: ". . . rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil." (Romans 13:3-4). This is precisely the problem with terrorism, as

terrorists generally do not conduct their activities based upon legitimate authority of any kind.

Discrimination of targets means that as much as possible only military targets will be attacked. This includes both military personnel and military facilities. This may mean facilities which support the enemy war effort, like munitions factories, mines, or oil fields. Non-military targets, including civilians, their homes, schools, etc., should never be targeted.

Proportionality means that we should use the minimum force necessary to achieve our objective. Using a hydrogen bomb to put down a small local uprising, or using machine guns on a mob armed with clubs and sticks are not “proportional” responses.

Lastly, there must be a reasonable hope for success. Even if all the other criteria have been met, if there is no reasonable hope of success the war, according to this theory, should not be waged. This is the point where we might have to turn the other cheek, rather than defend ourselves.

The consensus of Christian thinking has been that within the conditions of the just war theory it is permissible for Christians to take part in military or police actions. We have many saints, like Saints Demetrius, George, Theodore the Recruit, Theodore the General, and others who served as soldiers.

But we also have to emphasize that for Christians war has always been regarded a regrettable necessity. It's not something we engage in with pride, but with sorrow. And we always hold the two fundamental teachings of our Lord about laying down our life for those we love and turning the other cheek together, without trying to reconcile them. I do have a right to defend my family or my country from unjust aggression, even to the point of killing, if need be. But I also have the right not to defend myself, to surrender my freedom, or even my life, as well. The example here would be the Holy Passionbearers Boris and Hlib, who died rather than make war against their brother.

Is killing in war-time murder? Within the framework of the just war theory, the Church does not regard the killing of combatants under the conditions given above as murder. Why? Because those who are doing the killing are acting in obedience to legitimate state authority. If the state authority isn't legitimate, as, for example, in Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, then the police or military

personnel must make a difficult choice. Many of our military saints from Roman times were forced to make such a choice, and are recognized as saints because of the choice they made. But though killing in war isn't regarded as premeditated murder, it is still regarded as sinful, and military personnel are always encouraged to confess whenever as a part of their responsibilities they may have killed or injured anyone.

Should Christians be pacifists? While pacifism isn't forbidden, it's problematic. If we imagine a country of pacifists, having no military forces and avoiding any type of violence, we can understand how it could easily be overrun by an aggressive neighbor. Sadly, we see how pacifism can quickly lead to the end of pacifism. If I want to turn the other cheek and not defend myself it's OK. But it might not be OK to permit a violent, totalitarian, intolerant regime to enslave or terrorize my family, friends, and fellow citizens.

War is not something to be glorified. It is the sinful result of human sinfulness. But when there is no other option war can be a means of manifesting our Christian love for our neighbor as well as our courage in fighting against evil. The "just war" theory is one way in which Christians have tried to reconcile the reality of war with the Gospel of Christ.