

# IS PACIFISM MORAL?

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Let's cut to the quick. No, pacifism is not moral. Pacifism means that self-defense, and the defense of one's nation, is immoral. However pure the intent, pacifism holds that it is better to permit innocents to die than it is to use force to stop the aggressors. Now that is immoral.

This issue is back in the news largely because of the war in Iran. But it is also relevant again because of the recent death of Colman McCarthy, America's premier pacifist, and some remarks by Pope Leo XIV.

McCarthy wrote for *The Washington Post* for decades. He studied to be a monk and was popular in left-Catholic circles for his opposition to violence in any form and for any cause. He was 89.

He was such a purist that he even refused to stand for "The Star-Spangled Banner," objecting to the refrain "the bombs bursting in air." No doubt he hated fireworks. Any pacifist who views grades and exams as "forms of academic violence" surely must find Fourth of July celebrations to be verboten.

Though McCarthy was loved by his left-wing Catholic fans, he spoke with derision about Catholicism. "As the secretly elected leader of a male-run, land-rich, undemocratic, hierarchic, dogmatically unyielding organization headquartered in a second-rate European country, Pope John Paul II had few, if any, worries about accountability. He ruled, accordingly, as an autocrat."

Why the invective? Among other things, he hated the pope's defense of the "just war" doctrine. In his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, His Holiness wrote that "the intrinsic value of life and the duty to love oneself no less than others are

the basis of *a true right to self-defense*" (his italics).

McCarthy would have none of it. He believed that we have no right to kill an aggressor even in circumstances where that it is the only viable option. Moreover, he believed that even when someone was able to kill an aggressor from killing scores of non-combatant women and children, it would be better to let him slaughter the innocent. This is what pacifism yields—immoral outcomes.

Catholicism ascribes to the "just war" doctrine as broached by St. Augustine. He wanted peace as much as anyone but he also knew there were times when we had to fight in order to achieve it. He laid down several criteria for war, among them that the cause must be just; that there must be a probability of success; that the means used must be proportionate to the desired outcome; and that force should be invoked only as a last resort.

Many years ago when I was teaching at a Catholic college, I listened to a visiting professor lecture the mostly Catholic faculty on the merits of pacifism. He cited the tradition of the Quakers as exemplary and had the audacity to chide the audience for its affiliation with a religion that justifies war in some instances. He was not too happy with me when I stopped him in his tracks, arguing that the only reason any of us are alive today is because enough Americans rejected pacifism as a just option in World War II.

Pacifists may say they believe in peace, but in my book they confuse peace with surrender.

Pope Leo XIV has not openly rejected the "just war" doctrine, but recent comments he made about the conflict in Iran come close.

On Easter Sunday, Pope Leo XIV called for all nations to lay down their arms and choose negotiation. On March 1, he went further, saying about the Middle East, "Stability and peace

are not achieved through mutual threats, nor through the use of weapons, which sow destruction, suffering, and death, but only through reasonable, sincere, and responsible dialogue.” That comment drew the ire of *Wall Street Journal* columnist Bill McGurn.

McGurn took strong issue with the word “only.” He is, of course, right. Countless wars have resulted in peace. In fairness, the pope was not speaking from a traditional mantle of authority—it was a tweet. No matter, he left himself open for rebuke. It also needs to be said that there are those who wage war on innocents and explicitly reject dialogue. What then? There are times when we can’t talk our way out of a confrontation.

St. Augustine won the debate in 418 A.D. when he wrote that “Peace should be the object of your desire; war should be waged *only* as a necessity...in order that peace may be obtained” (my emphasis).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* agrees with Augustine. “Legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty for one who is responsible for the lives of others. The defense of the common good requires that an unjust aggressor be rendered unable to cause harm. For this reason, those who legitimately hold authority also have the right to use arms to repel aggression against the civil community entrusted to their responsibility.”

The great American political philosopher, Sidney Hook (whom I greatly admired and studied under), once wrote that “Those who will never risk their lives for freedom will surely lose their freedom without surely saving their lives...” A better rejoinder to Colman McCarthy would be hard to find.