

# JUST WAR DOCTRINE

*Several pages in Catalyst address the controversy in the Middle East where a horrific genocide is being committed against Christians by a terrorist group known as ISIS. A handful of prominent Catholic officials have condemned what the terrorist group is doing, and advocated for military action. Some of their strongest statements are featured [here](#). There are instances when the Church believes that war is justified, and the Christian genocide that is currently underway exemplifies this. The Just War doctrine, which is rooted in Christian theology, illustrates when war is needed to end violence. The Catholic League demonstrated this in a recent New York Times ad which can be found [here](#).*

The Catholic Church always emphasizes peace over violence. Many examples are cited throughout Scripture. There is a presumption that binds all Christians that we should do no harm to our neighbors; how we treat our enemy is the greatest example of our love for our neighbor. However, the Church acknowledges special circumstances where evils and injustices exist that provoke a response which requires a legitimate defense.

As early as the fifth century, St. Augustine of Hippo was considering the moral consequences of war. He was one of the first people to articulate a philosophical statement on war and justice, known as the Just War doctrine. St. Augustine laid the groundwork for the just war theory but he also did so with caution. Writing in 418 A.D., St. Augustine said: "Peace should be the object of your desire; war should be waged only as a necessity...in order that peace may be obtained. Therefore, even in waging a war, cherish the spirit of a peacemaker, that, by conquering those whom you attack, you may lead them back to the advantages of peace...As violence is used toward him who rebels and resists, so mercy is due to the vanquished or captive." Since that time, the Church has used his teachings

as a basis for determining when just force is necessary to protect the innocent.

Over the centuries, the Church has developed this doctrine. More recently, in 1983, the United States Bishops issued a Pastoral Letter on War and Peace which elaborated on St. Augustine's theories; "Faced with the fact of attack on the innocent, the presumption that we do no harm, even to our enemy, yielded to the command of love understood as the need to restrain an enemy who would injure the innocent." It is on this basis that the Church evaluates the use of force as a last resort.

In order for war to be considered morally permissible, the *Catechism* outlines strict conditions for the legitimate use of military force. The guidelines are divided between when conditions exist which justify engagement, *jus ad bellum*, and the conditions for conducting a war in a just manner, *jus in bello*.

According to the *Catechism*, all of the following criteria must be met at the same time in order for a war to be considered just:

- *the damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain;*
- *all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective;*
- *there must be serious prospects of success;*
- *the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition.*

These requirements are not to be taken lightly. For example, in their pastoral letter, the United States Bishops expanded

on these requisites by enumerating the following criteria to which war is a permissible recourse:

- *Just Cause*: to confront “a real and certain danger” to protect innocent life
- *Competent Authority*: declared by those with responsibility for public order
- *Comparative Justice*: Are the values at stake critical enough to override the presumption against war?
- *Right Intention*: War can only be conducted to satisfy the just cause
- *Last Resort*: All peaceful alternatives have already been exhausted
- *Probability of Success*: The outcome cannot be disproportionate or futile
- *Proportionality*: inflicted damage must be proportionate to the good expectant

Harking back to the fifth century, St. Augustine tells us violence must be constrained within the limits of necessity. Under the Just War doctrine, a set of rules for military combat must be followed. This means treating non-combatants such as women, children, elderly, wounded, and prisoners of war humanely. The *Catechism* describes genocide as a “mortal sin” and forbids the extermination of religious and ethnic minorities, women, and other populations. The Christian genocide is a perfect example of this. Christians are being beheaded, raped or forced to marry jihadists; who contradict everything that the Just War doctrine stands for.

The Church’s teachings are clear when innocent lives are at stake. According to the *Catechism*, “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 aggressors against the civil community entrusted to their responsibility.”

War is a serious matter that results in grave consequences and should only be used as a last resort. The violence being committed against Christians meet all the criteria mentioned in the Just War doctrine. The Church is one of the greatest forces of peace in the world, which is why it is so careful when weighing these monumental decisions. Christians must be protected from the religious cleansing that they are continually suffering from.