

# War and Catholics: *What if an enemy attacks us?*

By Fr. Dave Heney

---

***I was asked this question by friends of mine. I had performed the marriage of their son who was now a fighter pilot newly assigned to the Middle East. Their question was serious one and so is the morality of war. Here is the chain of ideas that led to my answer. I know there are good people on both sides of this issue.***

All war is a failure. It is a failure to work out our differences peacefully. War is ultimate violence for it unleashes the full fury of military technology with the full force of national resources for destruction and death. Yet, each person who dies in war was made and loved by God. Who wants to answer to God for the death of any of His people? Step forward now. Yet what about aggression aimed at us ...or our loved ones? Can we just stand aside with our families in danger? What can we do in good conscience? *What would Jesus do?*

Because we are each created and loved by God we cannot allow anyone to physically harm us. We must both respect our self ...and resist evil. Because we believe evildoers are also created and loved by God we must treat them with human respect too. Everything we do must be motivated by love for our enemy (*Matt. 5:44*). We see their evil behavior as bad for them as well as us. Our desire to stop them, or defend ourselves from attack, even if it might sadly include deadly force, can be a moral act under certain guidelines that we will look at here.

No one wants to hurt North Koreans, but no one wants to be Neville Chamberlain either; the unfortunate British leader in 1938 that tragically

delayed confronting Hitler when he could have easily been stopped. Lesson learned. *We cannot ...do nothing in the face of evil.* But we cannot act rashly either. This is a time for clear thinking and carefully weighing the facts and issues. When lives are at stake *we cannot operate emotionally or on a whim.* This is where wisdom is so important. The famous Just War The-



ory was very slowly developed over many centuries by wise people in many cultures to *control* the rush to war or *contain* the violence of war if it happens. No war is ever really "*justified*" but some actions are more just than others, and to the extent they are

motivated by love for our enemy.

An "*American style*" of war has also slowly developed. In our own history it has often been very hard to get Americans to fight. Because we are a nation ruled by consent of the people and not the whim of emotional kings, we were always slow to wage war. However, we would fight if (a) attacked as innocent victims as we were at Pearl Harbor, or (b) to rescue other innocent victims, like South Korea, and even in Vietnam at the beginning of that conflict, but never for conquest, revenge, or power. We will fight wars to stop evildoers and spare innocent civilians as much as possible.

---

---

We also require strong citizen support, unlike in Vietnam at the end. We also reconnect with our enemies after war is over, as we did with Japan and Germany after WWII, and even the Soviet Union after its collapse. None of these countries had democratic traditions but changed quickly with our help.

Our own history is not without shame, but the general trend, from WWI, to WWII, to Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq, has been about fighting to stop aggression, spare the innocent, and stopping when aggression stops.

Certainly technology has made those goals more possible. In the early days of the Afghan war, when American planes flew over Afghan cities, civilians actually left their homes to assemble in the open near Taliban or Al Qaeda buildings to watch their destruction, so confident were they in our bombing accuracy and so confident in their understanding of our motives ...to target only terrorists. When has that careful fighting ever happened before?

This natural "American style" resembles the classic Just War Theory. Here are a summary of the principles as developed by *St. Augustine* and later refined by *St. Thomas Aquinas*, and the official *Catechism of the Catholic Church (sections 2258-2330)*

**JUST CAUSE:** War must confront "a real, certain, and immediate danger" i.e., to protect innocent life, preserve human dignity, or secure basic human rights. *War must have the purpose of restoring peace or stopping a deadly threat, and never conquest, punishment, or revenge.*

**COMPETENT AUTHORITY:** War must be declared carefully and slowly by those with responsibility for public order, not by private groups or individuals. *More governments working together are better than less. Consensus of the people is very important.*

**LAST RESORT:** All practical and peaceful alternatives must have been exhausted, e.g. diplomacy, negotiations, time. (this also depends on the immediacy of the threat). *The best battle is the one won without fighting.*



**PROBABILITY OF SUCCESS:** There must be a strong chance of success and where the end conditions are better than the start. *We can't make things worse.* We cannot leave destruction without our helping to rebuild.

**PROPORTIONALITY:** The damage inflicted and the costs incurred must be proportionate to the good expected. *We must limit aggression to stop or contain aggressors and spare innocent civilians. War stops when the aggressor stops.*

These timeless common sense principles help control a needless rush to war (*ad Bello*) and needless violence in war (*in Bello*).

## WHAT ABOUT NUCLEAR WAR?

Nuclear weapons are so destructive, unpredictable, and imprecise that they are virtually militarily useless. It is impossible to avoid civilian casualties and radiation makes the target area unusable for years by everyone. They can unleash irrational responses as well. Therefore, they are not military ...but *political* weapons.

---

---

Small nations such as Pakistan, Iran, and North Korea seek them as a way of projecting power. If one small nation acquires one, all the neighbors will seek them as well. However, small nations also often lack adequate security to prevent these incredibly dangerous weapons from falling into the hands of terrorists, who are more likely to actually use them. It is very important to make sure that nuclear weapons do not proliferate any more than they have already.

### WHAT ABOUT THE GLOBAL “WAR ON TERROR?”

Terrorists use bombs and car crashes to present *an image* of global power, and at times, to provoke an over-reaching police crackdown, which helps justify their actions among people. Middle Eastern terrorism promotes a global Islamic state under radical Islamic rule. (See my article, “*Why do Radical Islamic People Hate America*” at [daveheney.com](http://daveheney.com)).

This is not a formally declared war, but does involve the full cooperation of nations, police forces, and citizens to find and arrest terrorists. They also join all their military, economic, and political forces to defeat terror groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda and utterly *delegitimize* their image of power. The rule of law and genuine democracy will slowly defeat them.

### SPLIT DECISION ON WAGING WAR

My answer to parents always involves a split decision. “*We may or may not see a moral cause for war in a particular situation, but if America does fight ...it will likely be waged in a just manner.*”

The United States has always worked with other countries and especially the United Nations in conflict regions, such as the Middle East and now in North Korea. Recent conflicts, like the Afghan and both Iraq wars, have always involved rather large coalitions of nations. No one can ever say there was a “*rush*” to war.

However, it is often a judgment call, open to opposing viewpoints, about the *immediacy and size of the threat*.



For example, in 2003, after years of careful analysis by all western nations, the coalition of western and Arab nations sincerely believed Iraq did have weapons of mass destruction (WMD) coupled with Iraq’s numerous threats to use

them. That they were not found afterwards does not change the sincerity or morality of the decision of many governments beforehand to stop a perceived serious threat of aggression

However, if the United States *does* go to war, there is a very strong chance, based on our recent history in Afghanistan and Iraq that our use of armed force will be used carefully and as intelligently as possible, and for the purpose of bringing war to a swift end. Past history also indicates a very careful sparing of innocent civilians.

There is even a chance that just sending large forces may be enough to induce enemies to change their ways. The famous “*surge*” of sending thousands of extra US troops to Iraq (2008) and Afghanistan (2009) persuaded Iraqis and Afghans tribes to switch sides and kick Al Qaeda and Taliban forces out.

---

---

Sending soldiers may itself stop war. Past history indicates we will make the situation better afterwards, by helping to build police forces, local democratic institutions, and local civilian infrastructure. In 2009, Iraq was finally a peaceful country. Unfortunately, the swift withdrawal of troops soon afterwards enabled terrorists to return just as swiftly ...leading to further conflict and the rise of ISIS.

### **What about the Principle of Non-Violence?**

Did not Gandhi change the British Empire with his non-violent response to British violence? Well, we can *voluntarily* accept violence onto ourselves, as Gandhi encouraged, but *only* if we believe there is a good chance that our innocent suffering will inspire compassion in the other nation and so stop their aggression. Even Gandhi recognized his non-violence methods would not work against atheist Nazi-Germany, but would work against Christian Britain.

*However, we cannot force or volunteer someone else to accept violence!* Gandhi led by courageous example but governments have the force of law. Presidents, after all, are responsible for the defense of all of us. They cannot simply force citizens to peacefully accept violence against their loved ones.

### **What about turning the other cheek? (Matt. 5:39)**

Let's look at this passage closely. To hit someone on the right cheek, you must use the back of your right hand ...which is a tradition-

al insult to your dignity, *and not actually a physical attack*. Jesus is saying that since your dignity comes from God, *no person* can take your dignity away, so the slap is not actually felt as a wound at all. Therefore, no need to strike back. A physical attack is something entirely different, and can include forceful defense.



Compassion is the strongest force in human history. It is what compels people to rush into burning buildings or dive into rushing rivers to rescue innocent victims. It is what motivates parents to endure amazing hardships for their children. It is what compels us to restrain evil-doers intent on doing your loved ones harm.

Compassion for the world demands we do the right thing even when it is dangerous. *Can you think of a more dangerous place to come than planet earth?* Yet Our Lord arrives with courage ...and compassion for all ...and to reveal that *every person* is our brother and sister.

We must stop terrorists and these who use violence precisely because we love them, and know that their use of violence is also not good for them as well.

If we go to war, it cannot be for punishment, revenge, or conquest. It must be as an absolute last resort and precisely in order to stop people we love from causing even greater harm.

Let our prayers for peace continue.

Fr. Dave Heney  
daveheney@gmail.com  
Daveheney.com

---