

Catholic Social Teaching on War and Peace from *Gaudium et spes* to *Fratelli tutti* and Today

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I. Introduction

In June of 2024, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Holy See's Secretary of State, said, "[W]e know that there is a great deal of discussion today on the issue of just war[,],... that many doubt that we can speak of a just war, and the discussion will go on."¹ The following month, when asked by some journalists about the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, Cardinal Parolin similarly replied, "We know that there is a lot discussion today on the concept of just war as a war of defense. However, with the weapons that [are] available today this concept has become very difficult, and I believe that there is not a definitive position, but that this concept is under review."² The cardinal's remarks echo similar ones by Pope Francis – in informal statements and interviews as well as in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli tutti* – and, more recently, by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, in its April 2024 Declaration on Human Dignity, *Dignitas Infinita*. Indeed, as on Catholic ethicist observes, there is a growing "Catholic skepticism about the moral

¹ Catholic World News, "Cardinal Parolin: 'Many doubt that we can speak of a just war,'" *Catholic Culture*, 10 June 2024, <https://www.catholicculture.org/news/headlines/index.cfm?storyid=62545>.

² Antonella Palermo, "Cardinal Parolin: 'The concept of just war needs to be reviewed,'" *Vatican News*, 2 July 2024, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2024-07/cardinal-parolin-the-concept-of-just-war-needs-to-be-reviewed.html>.

justification of war at all”³ at the Vatican, as well as among an increasing number of theologians and other intellectuals and activists.

At the same time, there has been an increasing confidence in nonviolence. In his 2017 World Day of Peace Message, Pope Francis advocates a politics of nonviolence and the practice of active nonviolent peacebuilding. He writes, “In the most local and ordinary situations and in the international order, may nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms.”⁴ To counter “violence with violence,” in his view, displaces people, causes suffering, and “*can* lead to the death, physical and spiritual, of many people, if not of all.”⁵ Pope Francis holds that Jesus’s example and teachings, such as love for enemies (Matt 5:44), “marked out the path of nonviolence,” so that to “be true followers of Jesus today also includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence.”⁶ Pope Francis highlights the “power” of love and asserts that nonviolence is “more powerful than violence.”

Likewise, a year before the pope’s peace message, a number of Catholic theologians, ethicists, and other thinkers and practitioners urged the Church to “move just war thinking out of the way” and to focus instead on nonviolence and “just peace.”⁷ At a conference sponsored by the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace and Pax Christi International held at the Vatican, these Catholics, who identify as “called to take a clear

³ David DeCosse, “Justice, Self-Respect, and the Ukrainian Decision to Go to War,” *Political Theology Network*, 9 June 2022, <https://politicaltheology.com/%ef%bf%bcjustice-self-respect-and-the-ukrainian-decision-to-go-to-war/>.

⁴ Pope Francis, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,” #1, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html.

⁵ Ibid., #2, emphasis added.

⁶ Ibid., #3.

⁷ Marie Dennis and Eli McCarthy, “Jesus and ‘Just War’? Time to Focus on Just Peace and Gospel Nonviolence,” *Huffpost*, 1 October 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jesus-and-just-war-time-t_b_12389472.

stand for creative and active nonviolence and against all forms of violence,” issued an “Appeal to the Catholic Church to Re-Commit to the Centrality of Gospel Nonviolence.”⁸ These Catholics express their belief that “there is no ‘just war,’” they exhort the Church to “no longer use or teach ‘just war theory,’” and they call on the Church to shift to a “just peace” approach with “nonviolent practices and strategies (e.g., nonviolent resistance, restorative justice, trauma healing, unarmed civilian protection, conflict transformation, and peacebuilding strategies).” This latter approach, according to the statement, is “consistent with gospel nonviolence” as taught and practiced by Jesus Christ who was “the power of love in action.” The statement also asked Pope Francis to issue an encyclical devoted to nonviolence and just peace, and although this request was not fulfilled, the pope did release his World Day of Peace Message on nonviolence the following year. As one observer notes, “the Vatican has also increasingly endorsed grassroots nonviolent resistance by average citizens as a direct alternative to armed force, considering it both more moral and more effective in protecting peace and security.”⁹

This shift did not happen overnight. Indeed, a trajectory from just war to nonviolence and just peace has been unfolding for several decades, beginning with Vatican II’s *Gaudium et spes*, which called on Catholics to “undertake an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude.”¹⁰ As Drew Christiansen SJ observed, the Catholic ethics of war and peace subsequently became “more stringent in its application of just

⁸ The Appeal is available at <https://nonviolencejustpeace.net/appeal-to-the-catholic-church/>.

⁹ David Carroll Cochran, *The Catholic Case Against War: A Brief Guide* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2024), 30.

¹⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, #80, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

war thinking and more accepting of nonviolent alternatives even by the state.”¹¹ Thus, by the first decade of the 21st century, Catholic theologians, ethicists, clergy, religious, and practitioners – including both pacifists and just war thinkers – have shifted their focus toward seeking and sustaining a *just peace* through practices of *peacemaking* and *peacebuilding*.¹² But Cardinal Parolin, Pope Francis, and the Appeal apparently go further, calling into question the possibility of even a more stringent application of just war, and advocating instead only nonviolence and just peace.

This is how some Catholics interpret current Catholic social teaching on the ethics of war and peace. Indeed, Isabelle de Gaulmyn, a senior editor at *La Croix International* and a former Vatican correspondent, believes the Church no longer accepts just war at all and instead now adheres only to pacifism, or nonviolence. She claims that there has been a definite shift “from a definition of ‘just war,’ i.e., morally acceptable, to a refutation of all war, including armed resistance.”¹³ In her view, the current Catholic stance on the ethics of war and peace is an “absolute ‘pacifism’ [that she says] is consistent with the doctrine of the popes,”¹⁴ from Benedict XV to Francis.

In contrast to de Gaulmyn, however, Lisa Sowle Cahill notes that while the nonviolent, or pacifist, approach has gained traction and “considerable” sway in recent years, even though it is “a clear minority,”¹⁵ there continues to be “a margin of

¹¹ Drew Christiansen, SJ, “After Sept. 11: Catholic Teaching on Peace and War,” *Origins* 32, no. 3 (May 30, 2002): 36.

¹² Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Just War, Pacifism, Just Peace, and Peacebuilding,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 1 (March 2019): 169-185; and Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Pacifism, Just War, and Peacebuilding* (Fortress Press, 2019), 1-36.

¹³ Isabelle de Gaulmyn, “Global shift in Catholicism,” *La Croix International*, 9 May 2024, <https://international.la-croix.com/opinions/global-shift-in-catholicism>.

¹⁴ de Gaulmyn, “Global shift in Catholicism.”

¹⁵ Cahill, “Just War, Pacifism, Just Peace, and Peacebuilding,” 171.

ambiguity”¹⁶ concerning the status of just war in relation to nonviolence in the Church’s ethics of war and peace. Other Catholic scholars recognize this inexactness, too. For example, Thomas Massaro SJ asks, “Does this seeming papal endorsement of nonviolence transform the Roman Catholic Church into a ‘peace church’?... Has Francis definitively renounced the just war approach?”¹⁷ For Massaro, “the answers to these questions, while far from simple, are in the negative – at least for the time being.” Similarly, David Carroll Cochran writes that these “developments are ongoing” in this “area of teaching that is still relatively fluid, and therefore one necessarily marked by a number of ambiguities and unanswered questions, especially around if and when armed force is ever morally permitted.”¹⁸ For his part, Cardinal Parolin observes – contrary to de Gaulmyn – that it remains “clear what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, which admits of the liceity of a just war under determinate conditions.”¹⁹ Likewise, in a line *not* often noticed in his World Day of Peace Message, Pope Francis suggests, “Peacebuilding through active nonviolence is *the natural and necessary complement to* the Church’s continuing efforts to limit the use of force by the application of moral norms.”²⁰

To be sure, the *Catechism* addresses “the traditional elements enumerated in what is called the ‘just war’ doctrine” in connection with “lawful self-defense” or “legitimate defense.”²¹ Although the cardinal’s “determinate conditions” and the pope’s “application of moral norms” refer, respectively, to just war and the use of force, I propose that we

¹⁶ Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, 318.

¹⁷ Thomas Massaro, SJ, “Pope Francis: Renewing Roman Catholic Approaches to Peace,” *MST Review* 24, no. 2 (2022): 118.

¹⁸ Cochran, *Catholic Case Against War*, 3.

¹⁹ Catholic World News, “Cardinal Parolin: ‘Many doubt that we can speak of a just war.’”

²⁰ Pope Francis, #6, emphasis added.

focus on Francis's claim that active nonviolence and limited use of force ought to be regarded as complementary approaches to peacebuilding and protecting and sustaining a just peace. In contrast to the either/or binary – *either* nonviolence and pacifism *or* just war and limited armed force – I suggest that *legitimate defense* should refer not only to armed force but instead to *both* armed and unarmed force for safeguarding a just peace. To underscore this point, I call this both/and approach *integral defense*, which echoes Pope Francis's "integral ecology" by "bringing together the different fields of knowledge...in the service of a more integral and integrating vision,"²² and reflects how, as Christiansen once observed, Catholic teaching has "evolved as a composite of nonviolent and just-war elements."²³

II. *Gaudium et Spes* on War and Peace: A Trajectory Begins

For most of the Church's history, there have been two approaches to the ethics of war and peace: pacifism and just war. The earliest Christians, for the most part, were nonviolent. For several reasons, including concerns about idolatry of the emperor and about shedding blood, they refused to bear arms and to serve in the military. By the end of the second century, there is evidence of Christian soldiers, and in the fourth century, under Emperor Constantine, theologians such as Ambrose and Augustine began to write about the possibility of, and conditions for, just war. Over the centuries, other theologians, philosophers, and ethicists continued to develop criteria that justify

²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2308-2309, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P81.HTM. Subsequent references will be parenthetically cited.

²² Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, #141, 197, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. complementarity of just war and nonviolence was one of my PhD comprehensive examination questions three decades ago and the topic of one of my earliest conference papers, published as Tobias Winright, "The Complementarity of Just War Theory and Pacifism," in *Religion, War and Peace: Proceedings of the Conference at Ripon College, Wisconsin, November 1-2, 1996*, ed. Deborah Buffton (Wisconsin Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, 1997), 216-220.

embarking upon war (*jus ad bellum*) and that limit conduct during war (*jus in bello*), and just war thinking influenced the development of international law. The *jus ad bellum* principles include right intent, legitimate authority, just cause, proportionality, and last resort. The *jus in bello* criteria include discrimination (i.e., noncombatant immunity) and proportionate force. By the 20th century, pacifism was reserved to clergy and members of religious orders, while laymen were expected to adhere to just war. Indeed, as late as 1956, Pope Pius XII stated that “a Catholic citizen cannot invoke his own conscience in order to refuse to serve and fulfil those duties the law impose” when their nation legitimately defends itself with arms.²⁴

Of course, this is not to say that the just war criteria have been adhered to in most, if not all, wars over the centuries. As the 2016 Appeal remarks, “Too often the ‘just war theory’ has been used to endorse rather than prevent or limit war.” Nor is Francis the first pope to question the applicability of just war theory to modern war. In 2003, in response to a question about whether the US-led war against Iraq fit “within the canons of the ‘just war,’” Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who would become Pope Benedict XVI, replied that “we must begin asking ourselves whether as things stand, with new weapons that cause destruction that goes well beyond the groups involved in the fight, it is still licit to allow that a ‘just war’ might exist.”²⁵ Similarly, nearly a century earlier, with the advent of modern, total war, especially as seen during World War I, Pope Benedict XV lamented, “There is no limit to the measure of ruin and of slaughter; day by day the earth is drenched with newly-shed blood, and is covered with the bodies of the wounded and the

²³ Drew Christiansen, SJ, “Whither the ‘Just War’?” *America* 188, no. 10 (March 24, 2003): 8.

²⁴ Pius XII, Broadcast to the World (December 23, 1956), in *The Pope Speaks: The Teachings of Pope Pius XII*, ed. Michael Chinigo (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), 325, 327.

slain.” Likewise, in 1932, during the period between the two world wars, Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber observed:

We live in a period of transition; and just as in other questions, so, too, in the question of war and peace, a change of heart will be effected.... Even the teaching of moral theology in regard to war will speak a new language. It will remain true to its old principles, but in regard to the question of the permissibility of war, it will take account of the new facts!²⁶

These words from the Archbishop of Munich were quoted several years later by Virgil Michel OSB as a springboard for his own treatment of the ethics of war in his 1939 book, *The Christian in the World*, at the outset of World War II.

Reflecting back on World War I, Michel wrote, “Never before was there such destruction by war of lives and families, cities and towns, whole countrysides with all that was in them.”²⁷ Michel emphatically condemned the deliberate attacks against non-combatants by “airbombs, poisonous gases and death-dealing germs.”²⁸ Such atrocities led Michel to ask “a most important question: that of the justice of war today.”²⁹ Because of “the powerful weapons of destruction that modern science and technic” have produced, Michel acknowledged it has become too difficult to avoid killing non-combatants.³⁰ Moreover, determining whether or not an act of aggression is unjust no longer was “so clearcut” since most conflicts actually have “roots and causes going back into history.”³¹ Indeed, Michel wrote that “even a legitimate war of self-defense must be considered a great evil (even if not a moral evil, or a sin), for it, too, will be fraught with

²⁵ Gianni Cardinale, “The Catechism in a post-Christian world,” *30 Days International Magazine*, no. 4 (2003): https://www.30giorni.it/articoli_id_775_13.htm?id=775.

²⁶ Quoted in Virgil Michel, OSB, *The Christian in the World* (Liturgical Press, 1939), 184.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 181. See Tobias Winright, “Virgil Michel on Worship and War,” *Worship* 71, no. 5 (September 1997): 451-462.

²⁸ Michel, *Christian in the World*, 181.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 183.

³¹ *Ibid.*

all the horrible consequences that modern warfare entails.”³² For him, unjust war is a moral evil, whereas just war, even though it is not morally evil, entails many evils.

Although it is morally right, a just war is not good.

Accordingly, although he questioned the justice of modern war, Michel neither attacked nor jettisoned just war. Rather, he used just war reasoning and principles to make these critical judgments about modern, total war. Even though its consequences are an evil, Michel held onto the concept of “a legitimate war of self-defense.” Moreover, Michel was ahead of his time (and Pope Pius XII) when he called upon nations to respect and legally recognize absolute pacifists who, although not clergy or religious, adhere to Christ’s “counsels of perfection” and thereby oppose all wars.³³ In these ways, three decades before *Gaudium et spes*, Michel anticipated Vatican II’s call to “undertake an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude.”³⁴

With *Gaudium et spes*, the Council broke new ground by emphasizing that *all* Christians work toward the establishment of peace, which “is not merely the absence of war” (#78). In an unexpected departure from what Pius XII taught, the Council recognized conscientious objection, praising those who renounce the use of violence and who instead employ nonviolent methods in seeking justice and peace – with the added qualifier, “provided this can be done without injury to the rights and duties of others or of the community itself” (#78). While the Council made official what Michel recognized decades earlier about nonviolent conscientious objection, like Michel also the Council did not set aside just war reasoning and principles, as evident in its recognition of legitimate defense: “As long as the danger of war remains and there is no competent and sufficiently

³² Ibid. The parenthetical clarification is his.

³³ Ibid., 185.

powerful authority at the international level, governments cannot be denied the right to legitimate defense once every means of peaceful settlement has been exhausted” (#79). Even though the Council did not explicitly mention *just war* here, it is using the traditional *jus ad bellum* criteria of legitimate authority (i.e., governments), just cause (i.e., legitimate defense), and last resort (i.e., exhausting other means of peaceful settlement). In addition, the Council expressed strong concerns about the development of “scientific weapons” during the Cold War arms race that “can inflict massive and indiscriminate destruction far exceeding the bounds of legitimate defense” (#80). The targeting of population centers was condemned unequivocally by the bishops as a crime against God and humanity. The Council also warned about terrorism against civilians, and it prohibited soldiers’ blind obedience to unlawful commands. Again, although the Council did not explicitly mention just war, it was still employing the traditional *jus in bello* criteria of discrimination and proportionality. In *both* its stricter application of the criteria for legitimate defense *and* its commendation of nonviolence, *Gaudium et spes* proved to be a benchmark document for subsequent Catholic teaching.

In their 1983 pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response*, the US Catholic bishops wrote, “Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith. We are called to be peacemakers, not by some movement of the moment, but by our Lord Jesus.”³⁵ Like *Gaudium et spes*, the bishops understand peace “in positive terms,” as a just “kind of peace which protects human dignity and human rights” (#69-70). According to the bishops, “The Christian has no choice but to defend peace, properly understood, against aggression. This is an inalienable obligation”

³⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, # 80; subsequent references will be parenthetically cited.

(#73). On this, they add that it is “the *how* of defending peace which offers moral options” (#73). Referring to *Gaudium et spes*, the bishops recognize both armed and nonviolent approaches for legitimate self-defense and resistance against unjust aggression (#75). The bishops take a step beyond *Gaudium et spes*, though, when they suggest a “complementary relationship” between just war and nonviolence: “Catholic teaching sees these two distinct moral responses as having a complementary relationship, in the sense that both seek to serve the common good. They differ in their perception of how the common good is to be defended most effectively, but both responses testify to the Christian conviction that peace must be pursued and rights defended within moral restraints and in the context of defining other basic human values” (#74). This is the composite approach identified by Christiansen, and such complementarity, according to Todd David Whitmore, represents “a continuation of the trajectory of the tradition” of the ethics of war and peace in Church teaching and thinking.³⁶ It also is the backdrop behind Pope Francis’s line in his World Day of Peace Message: “Peacebuilding through active nonviolence is *the natural and necessary complement* to the Church’s continuing efforts to limit the use of force by the application of moral norms.”³⁷

III. Pope Francis and Legitimate Defense

In interviews with the press, audiences with delegations and groups visiting the Vatican, and official statements, Pope Francis has condemned war, commended nonviolence, and questioned just war. In his 2020 encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, the pope

³⁵ National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response* (United States Catholic Conference, 1983), #333; subsequent references will be parenthetically cited.

³⁶ Todd David Whitmore, “The Reception of Catholic Approaches to Peace and War in the United States,” in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes, OFM (Georgetown University Press, 2005), 513.

³⁷ Pope Francis, “Nonviolence,” #6, emphasis added.

devotes a section to “the injustice of war,” where he writes, “Every war leaves our world worse than it was before. War is a failure of politics and of humanity, a shameful capitulation, a stinging defeat before the forces of evil.”³⁸ He adds, “War can easily be chosen by invoking all sorts of allegedly humanitarian, defensive or precautionary excuses, and even resorting to the manipulation of information. In recent decades, every single war has been ostensibly ‘justified’” (#258). Given the great harms that happen to people and planet, especially with modern weapons and technologies, Francis concludes, “We can no longer think of war as a solution, because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits” (#258). “In view of this,” Francis concludes, “it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a ‘just war’” (#258). Yet, nestled among these criticisms of war and of just war, the pope acknowledges in *Fratelli tutti* that “The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of the possibility of legitimate *defense* by means of military force, which involves demonstrating that certain ‘rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy’ have been met” (#258, emphasis in original). Even if, as he adds, “it is easy to fall into an overly broad interpretation of this potential right” (#258), he does not completely deny it.

Indeed, after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, while initially condemning war altogether, Pope Francis gradually recognized Ukraine’s right to self-defense against Russia’s aggression. In September of that year, during an in-flight press conference, Francis said:

³⁸ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, #261, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html. Subsequent references will be parenthetically cited.

This is a political decision, which can be moral – morally acceptable – if it is done according to the conditions of morality, which are manifold, and then we can talk about it. But it can be immoral if it is done with the intention of provoking more war... The motivation is what largely qualifies this act. To defend oneself is not only lawful but also an expression of love of country. Those who do not defend themselves, those who do not defend something, do not live it; instead, those who defend, love.³⁹

While Pope Francis, much like *Gaudium et spes*, does not explicitly mention just war in this response, he nevertheless is using a moral framework of criteria justifying armed defense. It is noteworthy that he anchors this in intention, or motivation, which he identifies as love. Many just war thinkers, from Augustine to Paul Ramsey, associate love with the *jus ad bellum* criterion right intention, which aims at establishing a just peace for all, including not only those who have been unjustly attacked, but the aggressors, as well.

Similarly, in his call for prayer in April 2022, while urging the world to “develop a culture of peace,” Pope Francis notes that, “even in cases of self-defense, peace is the ultimate goal.”⁴⁰ In other words, a just peace for all is the right intent, or goal, of justified armed defense. In another interview in July 2022, he stated, “I believe it is time to rethink the concept of a ‘just war.’ A war may be just, there is the right to defend oneself. But we need to rethink the way that concept is used nowadays.”⁴¹ Although Pope Francis stops short of calling Ukraine’s armed defense a “just war” against Russian aggression, he seems to be, as Christian Nikolaus Braun describes him, “a reluctant just war thinker.”⁴² In Braun’s view, “The break with just war is thus mostly a semantic one that marks the

³⁹ “The patience of dialogue,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, 23 September 2022,

<https://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/2022-09/ing-038/the-patience-of-dialogue.html>.

⁴⁰ Catholic World News, “‘Let us make nonviolence a guide for our actions,’ Pope says in video,” *Catholic Culture*, April 4, 2023, <https://www.catholicculture.org/news/headlines/index.cfm?storyid=58258>.

⁴¹ Courtney Mares, “Pope Francis: ‘I believe it is time to rethink the concept of a just war,’” *Catholic News Agency*, July 1, 2022, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/251691/pope-francis-i-believe-it-is-time-to-rethink-the-concept-of-a-just-war>.

⁴² Christian Nikolaus Braun, “*Quo Vadis?* On the role of just peace within just war,” *International Theory* 15, no. 1 (2023): 122.

climax of a development that started with the advent of modern war.”⁴³ But I think there may be more to this shift than semantics. After all, words matter.

One possibility is that Pope Francis is worried that the word “just” conveys the sense that a just war is “good.” This concern was evident, as noted, in Virgil Michel’s distinction between moral and nonmoral evils in just war. This concern could also be related to Paul Ramsey’s recommendation that we call it “justified war” rather than “just war.”⁴⁴ Another possibility is that Pope Francis is allergic to the word “war” itself. If all wars are a defeat, and if we pray for the abolition of, and an end to, war, then referring to a just war seems contradictory. But it may be less so were we to refer to legitimate defense instead of just war when a nation uses armed force against an aggressor who has started a war. Another problem with the word “war” is that this word is often used as a metaphor for total, all-out “war” in other spheres: war against cancer, war against crime, war against drugs, etc. As James Childress warns, metaphors “shape how we think, what we experience, and what we do by what they highlight and hide,” and the war metaphor “often fails to recognize the moral constraints on waging war.”⁴⁵ Childress adds that these “negative or ambiguous implications of the war metaphor . . . can be avoided if . . . the metaphor is interpreted in accord with the limits set by the just-war tradition.”⁴⁶ As Pope Francis has noted, however, these moral constraints and limits are frequently ignored or misused. So, for these reasons, perhaps, the pope reluctantly acknowledges the

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience: How Shall Modern War Be Conducted Justly?* (Duke University Press, 1961), 15.

⁴⁵ James F. Childress, *Practical Reasoning in Bioethics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 5, 7.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 9.

moral legitimacy of armed defense even as he seems less inclined to call it just war. Such a view may actually be evident in the *Catechism*'s treatment of legitimate defense.

IV. Legitimate Defense and the *Catechism*

Like *Gaudium et spes*, the *Catechism* holds together nonviolence and conscientious objection (#2306, 2311) with “the right of lawful self-defense” (#2308) by governing authorities. It then stipulates, “The strict conditions for legitimate defense by military force require rigorous consideration... [and] the gravity of such a decision makes it subject to rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy” (#2309). While legitimate authority has already been mentioned, the *Catechism* lists four other “conditions of moral legitimacy”: just cause, last resort, probability of success, and proportionality. According to the *Catechism*, “These are the traditional elements enumerated in what is called the ‘just war’ doctrine.” In other words, the *Catechism* supports my earlier observation that legitimate defense – and the moral criteria justifying and limiting it – is the preferred name for just war.

Catholic theologian William L. Portier agrees

...that its ‘strict conditions’ are not explained with reference to ‘just war’, as one might expect. In fact, the *Catechism* never uses the word *war* for the armed defense whose legitimacy it recognizes. The word *war* is reserved for that from which the *Catechism* teaches us to pray for deliverance. The phrase *just war* does appear once in the text at the end of n. 2309. But it is set off ... in small print and seems to be part of a supplementary observation. Recent papal statements suggest that this usage of the word *war* may be significant.⁴⁷

In Portier's view, the Church's moral discourse about war and peace has been reoriented, and these statements reflect that while the traditional right to self-defense has not been abandoned, “what we have called ‘war’ or ‘just war’ is pushed to the edges of the moral

conversation where it can survive only in the form of what the *Catechism* calls ‘legitimate defense by military force’ (n. 2309).”⁴⁸ I would add that it may also be significant that the word “rigorous” appears twice in connection with legitimate defense, for it too perhaps guards against the temptation to “fall into an overly broad interpretation of this potential right” that Pope Francis worries has happened with just war.

Relatedly, moral theologian E. Christian Brugger notes that “legitimate defense” (*defensio legitima*) is “uncommon in Catholic theology.”⁴⁹ He adds that Thomas Aquinas used the words *inculcate tutela* (“blameless defense”) for individual self-defense, not for collective defense against an external aggressor. Thus, the extension of “legitimate defense” from the individual self-defense to the collective defense during the 20th century, according to Brugger, “is revealing.”⁵⁰ Indeed, in addition to its treatment of legitimate defense against external aggressors, the *Catechism* addresses, in #2263-2265 and under the heading of “legitimate defense,” individual self-defense and defense of the common good by governing authorities from unjust aggressors. That is, whereas Aquinas distinguished between just war and legitimate defense, the *Catechism* considers *any* use of armed force – by an individual, by the police, and by the military – under the rubric of legitimate defense, with its strict conditions that are expected to be more rigorously applied than when they are called just war theory.

V. A Proposal: From Legitimate Defense to Integral Defense

⁴⁷ William L. Portier, “Are We Really Serious When We Ask God to Deliver Us from War? The Catechism and the Challenge of Pope John Paul II,” *Communio* 23 (Spring 1996): 49.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁹ E. Christian Brugger, *Capital Punishment and Roman Catholic Moral Tradition*, 2nd ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 14.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Earlier I suggested extending the scope of legitimate defense to include both armed force and active nonviolence, and I proposed integrating these two approaches to defending and sustaining a just peace – the right intent or goal they mutually share – under the label “integral defense.” But why incorporate active nonviolence into this framework?

Well, for one thing, active nonviolence still involves *power*. It is a use of *force*, even if it is nonviolent. Indeed, both Pope Francis and the 2016 Appeal refer to the power of love and the power of nonviolence. Some have even called nonviolence “a force more powerful.”⁵¹ If nonviolence is a form of force, then it too needs criteria for ethical justification and application. After all, as Lisa Sowle Cahill admits, decisions and actions involving active nonviolence, like those having to do with armed force, “can still have morally evil dimensions, not just unfortunate and regrettable ones.”⁵² Sometimes nonviolent actions, such as marches or demonstrations, causes harm to others, including innocent persons. What if a patient dies because their ambulance is blocked, for example, by protesters on a bridge, preventing access to a nearby hospital? According to Cahill, not only are there moral costs that result from the use of armed force, so too “the renunciation of violence is not without its own human and moral price.”⁵³ Perhaps such concerns were implicit in *Gaudium et spes*’s proviso that nonviolence is to be lauded as long as it “can be done without injury to the rights and duties of others or of the community itself” (#78).

⁵¹ Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (St Martin’s Press, 2000).

⁵² Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, 126.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 323.

I am not the first to suggest that active nonviolence, like armed force, requires criteria for its justification and its application. Indeed, a few ethicists have studied active nonviolence and resistance (e.g., boycotts, protests, demonstrations, sit-ins) and how just war reasoning and criteria are implicitly exhibited in the thought and actions, for example, of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., who spoke of the power of love, like Pope Francis and the Appeal, but acknowledged that active nonviolent was a use of force, perhaps even coercive force, requiring justification as well as measured application.⁵⁴

For example, writing in 1971, James Childress wrote regarding civil disobedience:

The ‘just war doctrine’ offers a set of considerations for determining when war is justified, and analogous criteria must be employed in determining when civil disobedience is justified, although perhaps it is more accurate to suggest that civil disobedience is subject to the same general demands of morality as any other action rather than that it is illuminated by just war criteria. However that may be, certainly the appropriate criteria for evaluating civil disobedience coincide to a great extent with traditional just war criteria such as just cause, good motives and intentions, exhaustion of normal procedures for resolving disputes, reasonable prospect for success, due proportion between probable good and bad consequences, and right means.⁵⁵

Some recent critics of just war, who have called for its replacement by “just peace,” come close to recognizing this point about active nonviolence as a use of force that requires ethical criteria.

Maryann Cusimano Love, for example, has suggested “just peace principles” that are implied in just war thinking and resemble just war criteria.⁵⁶ Her just peace principles

⁵⁴ Lloyd Steffen, *Ethics and Experience: Moral Theory from Just War to Abortion* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 51-72.

⁵⁵ James F. Childress, *Civil Disobedience and Political Obligation: A Study in Christian Social Ethics* (Yale University Press, 1971), 204. Paul Ramsey similarly wrote about the ethics of sit-ins a decade earlier in his *Christian Ethics and the Sit-In* (Association Press, 1961).

⁵⁶ Maryann Cusimano Love, “What Kind of Peace Do We Seek? Emerging Norms of Peacebuilding in Key Political Institutions,” in *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis*, eds. Robert J. Schreiter, R. Scott Appleby, and Gerard F. Powers (Orbis Books, 2010), 56-57.

include: just cause, right intention, participatory process, right relationship, reconciliation, restoration, and sustainability. According to Lloyd Steffen, the use of force, armed or unarmed, requires “action guides,” which are “not intended to rationalize war” or other harms, but instead to “impose restraint, insisting that force be used only in a way that is proportionate to the end of addressing injustice and restoring peace.”⁵⁷ I am proposing that the strict conditions, or action guides, of legitimate defense and their rigorous application should be reframed as integral defense and widened to encompass both armed and nonviolent uses of force for establishing, protecting, and sustaining a just peace.

Roger Bergman thinks the US bishops “got it right” and that “we should simultaneously develop strategies of nonviolence *and* hold to a strict understanding of when war can be justified, *and when it cannot* – but we should not jettison the tradition until it is genuinely obsolete.”⁵⁸ Theodora Hawksley writes that “Church teaching on peace needs to continue to grow and develop.”⁵⁹ In her view, Catholic teaching and thinking on nonviolence and just war “need not be seen as competing, although they may exist in tension with one another: they can be understood as corresponding to different approaches, phases, or roles within the broader shared task of peacebuilding.”⁶⁰ This essay with its proposal for integral defense has been an attempt to contribute to the continued growth and development of Church teaching on the ethics of war and peace.

⁵⁷ Steffen, *Ethics and Experience*, 40.

⁵⁸ Roger Bergman, *Preventing Unjust War: A Catholic Argument for Selective Conscientious Objection* (Cascade Books, 2020), 4.

⁵⁹ Theodora Hawksley, *Peacebuilding and Catholic Social Teaching* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 2-3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*