

Theological Reflections on War and Peace

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1. The teaching of the Magisterium of the Church and the theological reflections on war and peace date back to the early centuries of Christianity. A body of doctrine has progressively been established, the evolution of which reflects its attention to the “signs of the times”. This does not exclude the constants.

2. In the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas, the approach to the problem of war and its morality is significant.

This issue is studied in his treatise on charity, the form of all virtues (II-II, q. 23 sv.).

After considering charity in itself and in its effects, which include peace, Thomas analyzes the vices that are the opposite of charity (q. 34 sv.). Among the vices opposed to its effects (q. 37-42), he lists war (q. 40)

The fact that he places war here already has a doctrinal value. It indicates that war is evil in itself. Indeed Thomas poses one central question, namely whether and how war can be morally licit. It is, in other words, the problem of *just war*.

In this matter, Thomas refers largely to Augustine. This signifies the constancy of the doctrine through very different socio-political contexts.

The theme of just war has been the focus of reflection through the centuries. Recently a substantial shift can be observed, which does not deny the previous acquisitions. The main problem becomes the construction of peace, as an imperative of moral conscience.

The Magisterium of the Church was responsible for this turning point. I am referring to the Pastoral Constitution of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*. The last chapter of the second part (*some problems of special urgency*) addresses the *fostering of peace and the promotion of a*

community of nations. The problem originated from the perception of a major historical fact: the *community of nations* had become aware that together they formed one family. As a result, a series of exigencies arose, among which the need for international bodies equipped with real power. The idea of a community of nations, a family of nations, thus becomes a principle.

3. The document provides a definition of peace, *opus iustitiae* (... 32, 17), preceded by a triple negation: peace is not the mere absence of war, peace is not limited to ensuring a balance with the opponent's forces, peace is not based on a despotic rule.

The division of the chapter into two sections is significant: 1. The need to avoid war. 2. The constitution of the international community. The first section is subordinated to the second. The text sets out a realistic task, conscious that it will take time and effort. The subtitles indicate this: the duty of mitigating the inhumanity of war, total war, the arms race, the absolute condemnation of war and the international action to avoid it. The Council was aware that the required efforts would run into opposite tendencies and resistance.

The Church's involvement in international institutions finds in this document the expression of its motives, which are commented on each year in the letter that, from Paul VI onwards, the Pope sends to the Heads of State. Thus, a body of doctrine of significant importance has gradually taken shape.

II.

In the abovementioned question of the *Summa Theologica* (II-II, q. 40), St. Thomas lists the requirements of a *just war*.

a. Declaring (*movere*) war and mustering an army is not the competence of a private person. It is the competence of princes, who must protect the interests and rights of the *res publica*, punishing the perpetrators of internal unrest and defending them against external enemies.

b. The cause of war must be a just cause. Theological reflection has commented on this. The offense, the damage caused by the opponent must be serious. The punishment inflicted by war must be proportionate to the harm suffered. Moreover, war must be the last resort after all other avenues for resolving the conflict have proved fruitless.

c. The moral rectitude of those who wage war: the promotion of good and the reduction of evil. In Augustine's words, war must be waged *non crudelitate nec cupiditate, sed pacis studio*.

This condition is crucial to such an extent that, supposing legitimate authority and just cause, if it fails, war becomes illegal (*propter pravam intentionem bellum [redditur] illicitum*).

d. These criteria are stringent. How many wars follow them? Moreover, Thomas illustrates the case of a war that starts out as just but becomes unjust because of the abuse of power of an unruly army (cf. ad. 4).

The goal guiding those who make war must always be the establishment of peace. Therefore, the belligerent must act with a "peaceful soul".

e. Thomas examines a series of problems. Some are of specific interest to us. An essential problem is the morality of the means of war. It is not permissible to use any and all means to win.

Thomas raises this question about treacherous behaviour. Lying or breaking promises, even when dealing with an opponent, is illegal. He does not lose his rights. These are treaties that remain valid.

However, if being treacherous means not revealing one's plans and preparations to one's opponent, it is permitted, because we are not obliged to disclose them.

The topic is of great importance. In war, certain rights must always be respected: the care of the wounded and prisoners, the protection of civilians, the prohibition of using certain types of weapons.

6. Two contradictory trends seem to dominate the current situation. The first is the realization that war is unworthy of man. This awareness inspired the movements in favour of an international order and the sense of solidarity. All the abovementioned initiatives that tend to humanize the war are in the same vein.

The other tendency is the continuous improvement of weapons and their stockpiling, with the inherent risk of total war and irreparable consequences for humanity itself. This huge growth is opposed to humanization, which means control and sense of measure.

This is what we should reflect on, particularly when dealing with nuclear weapons.