Catholic Just War Theory

The Catholic church holds a strong presumption against war and emphasizes the pursuit of peace, with Just War Theory acting as a narrow exception to that presumption rather than a justification for militarism.

Catholic Just War Theory, rooted in the teachings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, provides a strict moral framework for evaluating the use of force, emphasizing that war is a last resort to correct a grave, lasting, and certain evil. It demands strict adherence to principles of justice in entering war and conduct within war, including proportionality and distinguishing between combatants and civilians.

Key Principles of Catholic Just War Theory

The Catechism of the Catholic Church outlines several strict criteria that must be met simultaneously for a conflict to be considered morally permissible.

Just Cause: The war must confront a real lasting, grave, and certain danger.

Last Resort: All other peaceful alternatives must have been exhausted or proven ineffective.

Legitimate Authority: The war must be declared by a rightful authority responsible for the common good.

Right Intention: The objective must be to defend justice and restore peace, not for territorial gain or revenge.

Prospect of Success: There must be a reasonable chance of success, preventing useless destruction.

Proportionality: The damage and destruction caused by the war must not be greater than the evil being eliminated.

Distinction/Discrimination: Non-combatants and civilians must be protected; indiscriminate, massive destruction is forbidden.

Development and Modern Application

Historical Context: While St. Augustine focused on war in defense of justice, later developments by Aquinas and modern church teaching (e.g., Vatican II) emphasize limiting, rather than justifying, war.

Modern Challenges: The immense destructive power of modern weaponry often makes it difficult to satisfy the proportionality and discrimination criteria, leading some theologians to argue the theory is harder to apply today.

Duty to Defend: The church acknowledges that governments have a duty to defend their citizens, but this duty is bound by these ethical constraints.