

Can War be Just in a Nuclear Age?¹

by Thomas Corbishley, S.J.

Perhaps it is worth while beginning by taking a look at the traditional Catholic teaching on the just war, to see how and why it developed. It is significant that, in approaching the question of war, Aquinas asks whether it is always sinful to wage war. His discussion of this topic concludes with the formulation of three conditions for a war to be just. His doctrine has been elaborated by later theologians and perhaps the most comprehensive brief statement is to be found in the following passage from Father Henry Davis, S.J.:

'That war may be just the following conditions must be fulfilled: It must be declared by the State itself; it must be necessary in the last resort after diplomacy has failed; there must be a grave and just reason for it; the method of it must be just and in accordance with international law; an upright purpose must be intended; it may not be protracted after due satisfaction has been given or offered; the conditions of peace must be just, and may not be crushing, unless such severity is necessary for present self-defence.

When the reasons for undertaking war are not certainly just, it is more generally taught that war may not be undertaken, for another State may not be deprived of rights in possession, one of these being immunity from attack. But when a State is on the defensive, it is sufficient justification for defence that its own injustice is not obvious.'² It seems to me fair to suggest that the Just War doctrine arose precisely because Christians felt almost instinctively that war needed to be 'justified'. In other words, Christians believed that the Christian ideal demands that men should live at peace with one another, since only so will Christ's own teaching about brotherly love be fully realized. To this extent, the primitive Christian attitude was a reaction both against the Jewish tradition of a militant religion and, of course, against the Roman tradition of wars of conquest. In this, as in other matters, the Constantinian settlement was something of a mixed blessing. *In hoc signo vinces* can hardly be taken as an authentic interpretation of Christ's attitude to warfare. It seems necessary to maintain that the pure theory of the Christian ideal can be maintained in its perfection only by keeping alive the teaching of the complete pacifist.

¹This is the text of a paper read at the Conference on Christian Approaches to Defence and Disarmament at Compton Hall, Oxford, July 2, 1965.

²*Moral and Pastoral Theology*, 1935: Volume II, pp. 120–1.

On the other hand, the insistent question poses itself: what is to be done in practice? The Christian living in this only partially Christian world is faced with the sort of dilemma which faced the Jews at the time of the Maccabean revolt. Their law taught them that fighting on the Sabbath was wrong. Yet, this put them at such a disadvantage in face of their unbelieving enemies, that they found it necessary to depart from the requirements of their law in order that they might survive. And indeed, Christ himself whilst teaching the ideal of non-violence, turning the other cheek and so on, nevertheless implicitly, and indeed explicitly, recognized the practical necessity of the use of power. 'The strong man armed', the soldier and the centurion were not held up to reprobation.

In a sense then, the doctrine of the just war represents a compromise, a compromise, if you like, with something which is of its nature un-Christian. It should be seen as representing a genuine attempt to *limit* the degree of evil to be found in *any* human situation. Clearly the purpose of the Christian is to bring about in this world a state of good will, justice and peace. The end is clear. The debate is about the means to that end. The pacifist believes that any form of violence is, of its nature, evil and, therefore, intolerable. In fact, presumably, he would say that it is the greatest of all evils and, therefore, any other evil must be tolerated rather than that. On the other hand, it seems necessary to admit that Christianity as a visible and effective force in the world, would not have survived but for the achievements of Christian men who went to war in the conviction that this was God's Will.

Whilst the Church sought to maintain the Christian pacifist ideal in its integrity by regarding warfare as incompatible with the practice of the religious, and even the clerical life, she never condemned the use of force as such. What she has always condemned has been the excessive use of force, the use of a degree of force going beyond the minimum required to meet a given situation – whether by the private individual in self-defence or by public authority fighting for its legitimate rights. The use of force of any kind must be regarded as a *pis-aller*, but something which in practice in certain circumstances will be inevitable.

Now it is true that in the discussion of the doctrine of the just war, theologians, as is their habit, have resorted to every kind of casuistical device, and it may well be that the development of modern weapons of destruction demands that we must take a fresh look at the whole subject without allowing ourselves to indulge in the sort of hair-splitting which has been all too common in the past. When John XXIII said in *Pacem in Terris*: 'In a nuclear age warfare no longer makes sense', it would look as if he was saying in effect that there could be no longer such a thing as a just war, or at least, that a war waged with nuclear weapons was so insane as to be a complete contradiction of all human values.

It is here, as it seems to me, that the Christian and the man-of-affairs

must join hands. If a thing is insane, then, presumably, it will be rejected by all reasonable men, whether they call themselves Christian or not. In a sense not intended by those who devised it, the description of war as 'the last argument of kings' (*ultima ratio regum*) has become only too true. Nuclear warfare is the end of reason, precisely because it involves the use of force out of all proportion to any possible good which may be brought about. Indeed, it seems necessary to hold that to contemplate the mere possibility of launching a nuclear attack on an enemy implies such colossal failure to recognize the value of human life, as to reduce the whole operation to something sub-human. It may well prove to be the case that the Christian in the twentieth century can preserve the Christian ideal only by returning to the attitude of mind of the early Christians, who saw their vocation as permanent protest against the whole pagan society in which they were immersed.

The question naturally arises, is this a practical possibility? All I can do, at this stage, is to pose the question and leave it to you to work out the answer.

But perhaps I may suggest the lines of discussion.

(a) The solution adopted by the pacifist. This is clearly an important, indeed an essential part of our Christian witness. But it does seem to me that it is a specialized vocation, analogous to that of the religious. Roman Catholic theologians have always asserted that the ideal of virginity/celibacy is superior to the married state. I must frankly confess here that this has always puzzled me. It would be intolerable to suggest that those who are married are, somehow, as Christians, an inferior race. Nor can it mean that Christians, as a body, are required to practise this way of life. If this were so, it would logically follow that Christians could only fulfil themselves, as Christians, by committing suicide. Similarly, if Christians as a body were required to opt out of a society which possessed nuclear weapons, this might well make things worse rather than better.

(b) On the other hand, we are all agreed that the *use* of such weapons, at least in their larger forms and against densely populated areas, is incompatible with the Christian conscience. What then is to be our attitude to the *possession* of such weapons? Here I think we need to give more time to the discussion of the ethics of bluffing. It *sounds* logical to say – 'To *threaten* to do something which is immoral is itself immoral'. Yet is this quite so certain? Here again perhaps life as we experience it cannot be fitted into the tidy categories of the logician.

There is in the Bible a celebrated story of a successful piece of bluff – the story of Solomon and the two harlots. Surely we can all subscribe to the view that Solomon was acting wisely and ethically. Today, doubtless we should have done it all by taking a blood-test, and should not need to resort to the crude methods of the old polygamist. But, in the cir-

cumstances, we have to confess that he did a good job. Doubtless, in a more sophisticated world, nations will eventually come to abandon the tactics of the poker-player in a Western film. But we have to work with the situation as it is, and I personally see nothing un-Christian in *principle* in the *possession* of immense reserves of power any more than in the possession of great wealth – *dangerous* as we know such possessions to be.

And here we might return to the question of the 'purpose of thermo-nuclear weapons. Whilst it is true that *per se* the explosion of a nuclear device might seem to be solely for the purpose of destroying human lives or human productive capacity, *per accidens* it might well have another purpose and another effect. Suppose, for example, the allies instead of bombing the two Japanese cities in 1945 had informed their enemies that they proposed to demonstrate the destructive force of the atom bomb by dropping it in open country, they might well have accelerated the Japanese surrender just as effectively and much more humanely. It would surely be fair to claim that in this case the purpose of such an explosion would have been entirely compatible with quite high moral standards.

(c) Again, we should, I think, all agree that the very existence of such powerful destructive forces (along with bacteriological and other horrors) constitutes a real scandal, in the strict sense of that term. Not only does it constitute a standing temptation to those who find themselves at war with another country, but even in times of so-called peace it adds to the sense of fear and insecurity which almost certainly accounts for much of the increasing psychological and mental instability of our age. For all these reasons it is manifest that no Christian can acquiesce in such a situation.

What, then, finally can we do?

As individuals, we have the duty to keep ourselves honest and clear-minded about this whole subject. One of the failures of the men of our generation is that they seem to regard the whole business of nuclear power as something rather like the weather. They hope there won't be a thunderstorm but they feel they can't do anything about it. But we can and must, through all the channels open to us.

As members of an organized Church, we must again do all we can to ensure that, as a body, we bear common witness to the Christian ideal. It seems to me, to say the least, odd that the most ambitious and wide-ranging follow-up to Pope John's *Pacem in Terris* encyclical has so far come, not from any specifically Roman Catholic or even Christian organization, but from the American Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions.

It is to be hoped that the forthcoming discussion in the Vatican Council on this question of nuclear warfare will be followed up throughout the

whole Christian world by a concerted effort :

- (a) to try to stop the further proliferation of these weapons ;
 - (b) to support the efforts of statesmen of different countries to establish some system of control over existing stock-piles ;
 - (c) to support the effort now being made to achieve some form of progressive disarmament ;
 - (d) to encourage Christians and others to recognize that the final answer to our problem is to be found only in a genuine world security system which will, amongst other things, seek to eliminate the causes of wars.
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