

Blessed are the Peacemakers:  
A Catholic Look at War  
By Sean Lansing

Purpose

In this session, participants will be introduced to the Catholic just war theory, particularly the criteria for using lethal force (jus ad bellum) and the criteria for the conduct of lethal force (jus in bello). The closing prayer will focus on our call to be peacemakers. This session is ideal for 24 to 50 high school youth.

Session at a Glance

7:00 p.m.	Gather and Welcome
7:05 p.m.	Opening Prayer
7:10 p.m.	What Do I Think about War? A Personal Inventory
7:15 p.m.	Just War Theory: A Catholic Look at War
7:25 p.m.	Just War Symbolism
	Extend the Session: A Just War Applied (add 30 minutes)
7:45 p.m.	When is War Just? A Personal Inventory Redux
7:52 p.m.	The View
8:10 p.m.	Prayer for Conversion
8:20 p.m.	Announcements and Refreshments
8:30 p.m.	Good Night!

Extend the Session: A Just War Applied (30 minutes)

A simple, yet compelling way to extend this session is to create five small groups and give each group a different war to critique in light of just war theory, particularly jus in bello. Put together information from newspaper, magazine, and website articles of current wars (e.g., war in Afghanistan, Iraq War, Darfur conflict, Fatah-Hamas conflict, and the Kenyan crisis) to give to each group. Allow time for the groups to discuss their issue and then present decision in the following format:

The following war is [just or unjust] because it [does/does not] fit the following jus in bello criteria (see Resource 1, Excerpt from The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace, for a detailed description):

Noncombatant Immunity  
Proportionality  
Right Intention

Materials Needed

Nametags  
Newsprint  
Markers  
Handout 1, What Do I Think about War? one for each participant (cut the pages in half)  
Three Bibles  
Multicolored table cloth, crucifix or cross, candle, and a table

Pens

CD player and some instrumental music for reflection

An assortment of household items like a ball of string, a box of tissue, eraser, alarm clock, coffee mug, calculator, memo pad, picture frame, etc. Be creative! Display these items in a common area so that everyone can see them.

Prepare in Advance

1. Read The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace to prepare for the session. You can read the document at <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/harvest.shtml>.

2. Create a prayer table using the multicolored tablecloth, Bible (opened to Matthew 5:45-48), crucifix or cross, and candle.

3. Invite five young people to proclaim Scripture passages for the opening and closing prayer:

Opening Prayer: Mathew 5:45-48

Closing Prayer: (in this order)

John 15:12-13

Isaiah 32:17-18

Matthew 5:9

Resource 3, A Reading from The Harvest of Justice in Sown in Peace

Practice with the readers in advance of the session so they are familiar and comfortable with the readings.

4. Cut Resource 2, Just War Criteria, along the dashed lines and create strips.

5. Make a sign with newsprint and markers with the following instructions on it. Hang it in a location so that participants can read it while in their small group.

Instructions: As a small group, come up with an answer to the question below. Be ready to present your answer to the large group.

What do you see as the difference between the Church's view of war and the world's view?

6. Copy Resource 4, Peaceable Virtues, on cardstock and make cards out of the virtues so that there is at least one card for each participant. Consider making a few extra of each virtue so that everyone has an opportunity to pick the virtue that they want. Place these cards on the prayer table.

7. Make a sign with newsprint and markers with the following prayer on it. Hang it in a location so that participants can read it during the closing prayer.

God, you created all that is good. You created us for peace. Jesus became one of us and preached peace. Grant that we may have more of the virtues that are required to be peacemakers in this world. We ask this through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

7. Set up tables for refreshments (if you are serving any) and sign-in. Have one or two people at the sign-in table with a check-in sheet and nametags. (Skip the nametags if participants know each other and you know them. However, if they wear nametags, you wear one, too.) Hospitality is important: As the facilitator, do not use the gathering time before the session begins to take care of last minute preparations. Spend the time moving among the participants, greeting and speaking with them.

### Session Outline

#### Welcome and Introductions (5 minutes)

Greet the participants warmly as they arrive and give everyone a nametag. If there are folks that are new, allow them to introduce themselves and receive a warm welcome to the evening. Introduce tonight's session by saying something like:

As we gather here tonight we are aware that our country is engaged in armed conflict. The ethics of war have been and continue to be a very hotly debated topic by politicians, theologians, and everyday people throughout the past and probably well into the future. It is a topic that evokes a lot of emotion, so I want to set two ground rules:

1. We are allowed to share our opinion, but we must do it respectfully.
2. We will conduct ourselves in a way that reflects the Christian community that we are called to be.

Tonight we are going to look at what is called the Catholic just war tradition. Just war tradition provides a moral framework for thinking about going to war.

Before we do that, let us pray.

#### Opening Prayer (5 minutes)

Turn everyone's attention to the prayer table and light the candle. Begin the prayer with the Sign of the Cross. Invite the volunteer to proclaim Matthew 5:45-48.

Allow for a few moments of silence and then lead the group in the following opening prayer:

God of love and forgiveness,  
Your Word challenges us to be perfect as you are perfect. You have given us your Son as an example. Open our hearts and minds tonight so that we may seek the conversion necessary to be people of peace. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

#### What Do I Think about War? A Personal Inventory (5 minutes)

Distribute Handout 1, What Do I Think about War? and a pencil to every participant. Invite them to take some quiet time to check the boxes in the column marked "L." If they

finish quickly invite them to find a partner and share which box(es) they checked and why.

#### Just War Theory: A Catholic Look at War (10 minutes)

When participants have finished filling out their inventories have them gather for a large group discussion, introducing the just war tradition. Use Resource 1, Excerpt from Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace.

Be sure to include the following points:

The just war tradition starts with a strong disposition against war and has created conditions that must be met to use force. The primary condition is that force can only be used as a last resort and to bring peace.

The seven criteria which must be met in order to use lethal force: just cause, comparative justice, legitimate authority, right intention, probability of success, proportionality, last resort.

Use the definitions provided in Resources 1 and 2.

The moral standards for which armed force must be conducted: noncombatant immunity, proportionality, right intention.

Use the definitions provided in Resources 1 and 2.

#### Just War Symbolism (20 minutes)

Step 1: (2 minutes) Divide the group into seven small groups and distribute one Just War Criteria to each group. Introduce this activity, by saying something like:

In your small group, I invite you to pick someone to read your just war strip. On your just war strip will be one of the criteria that must be met in order to use lethal force. After your just war strip has been read, I want you to pick an object from the table that you think best symbolizes your criteria. Your group must agree on the symbol. Be prepared to explain your criteria and your symbol to the large group.

Step 2: (10 minutes) Give the group 10 minutes to work on their criteria and their symbol.

Step 3: (8 minutes) Invite each group to come up and share their criteria and symbol.

#### When is War Just? A Personal Inventory Redux (7 minutes)

Step 1: (2 minutes) Invite the participants to find their Handout 1, What Do I Think about War? and take a look at it for a second time. Say something like:

In light of the criteria that we have learned tonight, is there anything that you would check differently? I invite you to fill out your personal inventory again, this time check the box in column R.

Step 2: (5 minutes) Invite the participants back into their small groups, and give them an opportunity to discuss their inventories with each other. Ask them to share any of the changes they made and why they made them.

The View (18 minutes)

Step 1: (10 minutes) Explain the small group task as follows:

Your task as a small group is to examine what you have learned tonight about the Church's view of war and compare it to what you think the world says about war. Is there a difference? Be prepared to make a short presentation as a group.

Point them to the newsprint sign with the instructions for their task. Allow the groups 10 minutes to finish their group work.

Step 2: (5 minutes) Give each group an opportunity to share their report to the large group.

Step 3: (3 minutes) Conclude this activity by offering anyone in the large group an opportunity to share their view of war by answering the question "Do you think there is such a thing as a just war? Why or why not?"

Transition to prayer by saying something like:

Our prayer tonight is a prayer for conversion. One of the most important things to understand about our just war tradition is that we always start as a people of peace. We call Jesus the Prince of Peace. Peace in our world starts with becoming a peaceful person. Let us get ready for prayer.

Prayer for Conversion (10 minutes)

Gather

Invite everyone to gather together around the prayer space.

Prayer Leader: (begin with the Sign of the Cross)

God of peace and mercy,

We turn to you for guidance in living peace-filled and just lives. Our just war tradition not only calls us to think about the criteria for using armed force, but to think about how we can be people of peace. As we conclude our time in prayer this evening, help us be mindful that we are called to be peacemakers. We make this prayer in your Son's name. Amen.

Sing "Prayer of St. Francis" by Sebastian Temple (Spirit & Song, OCP).

Listen

Invite the readers to proclaim their readings from a Bible in the following order:

Reader 1: John 15:12-13

pause for a five count

Reader 2: Isaiah 32:17-18

pause for a five count

Reader 3: Matthew 5:9

pause for a five count

Reader 4: Resource 3, A Reading from "The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace"

pause for a five count

Respond

Invite everyone to come to the prayer table when they are ready and to select a card with the virtue for which they would like to pray for an increase in their goal to be a peacemaker. Play instrumental music in the background while participants come up and get a virtue card.

Then pray together the prayer from the newsprint (see #7 in Prepare in Advance).

Send Forth

Prayer Leader:

Peace be with you.

Wait for their response ("And also with you"), then say:

Let us close our prayer by offering each other a sign of Christ's peace.

Announcements and Refreshments (15 minutes)

Thank everyone for their participation in tonight's program. Serve light refreshments, and make any announcements that are needed.

Websites mentioned in this session were successfully accessed on February 29, 2008.

This session was written by Sean [Lansing](#), Coordinator of Youth Ministry Services, Center for Ministry Development, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Handout 1

What Do I Think about War?

When is it okay to go to war?

(Check the box in the column marked L (for left) of all the reasons you think are okay. You may choose more than one reason.)

L R

☐ ☐ To prevent an attack on the United States.

☐ ☐ To respond to an attack on the United States.

- ☐ ☐ To stop an oppressive regime from violating the human rights of their citizens.
- ☐ ☐ To secure the natural resources which are necessary to maintain our way of life.
- ☐ ☐ To spread democracy.
- ☐ ☐ To convert people to my religion.
- ☐ ☐ To stop genocide.
- ☐ ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

War is okay if...

(Check the box in the column marked L (for left) of all the reasons you think are okay. You may choose more than one reason.)

L    R

- ☐ ☐ We have clear objectives and use only the force necessary to achieve those objectives.
- ☐ ☐ There are no civilian casualties.
- ☐ ☐ There are as few civilian casualties as possible.
- ☐ ☐ We use nuclear weapons.
- ☐ ☐ The infrastructure of a country is destroyed (streets, highways, bridges, etc.).
- ☐ ☐ We win.
- ☐ ☐ Never.

Resource 1

Excerpt from The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace

Just War: New Questions. The just-war tradition consists of a body of ethical reflection on the justifiable use of force. In the interest of overcoming injustice, reducing violence and preventing its expansion, the tradition aims at:

clarifying when force may be used,  
limiting the resort to force and  
restraining damage done by military forces during war.

The just-war tradition begins with a strong presumption against the use of force and then establishes the conditions when this presumption may be overridden for the sake of preserving the kind of peace which protects human dignity and human rights.

In a disordered world, where peaceful resolution of conflicts sometimes fails, the just-war tradition provides an important moral framework for restraining and regulating the

limited use of force by governments and international organizations. Since the just-war tradition is often misunderstood or selectively applied, we summarize its major components, which are drawn from traditional Catholic teaching.

First, whether lethal force may be used is governed by the following criteria:

Just Cause: force may be used only to correct a grave, public evil, i.e., aggression or massive violation of the basic rights of whole populations;

Comparative Justice: while there may be rights and wrongs on all sides of a conflict, to override the presumption against the use of force the injustice suffered by one party must significantly outweigh that suffered by the other;

Legitimate Authority: only duly constituted public authorities may use deadly force or wage war;

Right Intention: force may be used only in a truly just cause and solely for that purpose;

Probability of Success: arms may not be used in a futile cause or in a case where disproportionate measures are required to achieve success;

Proportionality: the overall destruction expected from the use of force must be outweighed by the good to be achieved;

Last Resort: force may be used only after all peaceful alternatives have been seriously tried and exhausted.

These criteria (*jus ad bellum*), taken as a whole, must be satisfied in order to override the strong presumption against the use of force.

Second, the just-war tradition seeks also to curb the violence of war through restraint on armed combat between the contending parties by imposing the following moral standards (*jus in bello*) for the conduct of armed conflict:

Noncombatant Immunity: civilians may not be the object of direct attack, and military personnel must take due care to avoid and minimize indirect harm to civilians;

Proportionality: in the conduct of hostilities, efforts must be made to attain military objectives with no more force than is militarily necessary and to avoid disproportionate collateral damage to civilian life and property;

Right Intention: even in the midst of conflict, the aim of political and military leaders must be peace with justice, so that acts of vengeance and indiscriminate violence, whether by individuals, military units or governments, are forbidden.

During the last decade, there has been increasing focus on the moral questions raised by the just-war tradition and its application to specific uses of force. We welcome this renewed attention and hope our own efforts have contributed to this dialogue. We also recognize that the application of these principles requires the exercise of the virtue of prudence; people of good will may differ on specific conclusions. The just-war tradition is not a weapon to be used to justify a political conclusion or a set of mechanical criteria that automatically yields a simple answer, but a way of moral reasoning to discern the ethical limits of action. Policy-makers, advocates and opponents of the use of force need to be careful not to apply the tradition selectively, simply to justify their own positions. Likewise, any application of just-war principles depends on the availability of accurate information not easily obtained in the pressured political context in which such choices must be made.



From: "Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace," pp. 12-14 (<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/harvest.shtml>).

## Resource 2

### Just War Criteria

**Just Cause:** War is permissible only to confront "a real and certain danger," i.e., to protect innocent life, to preserve conditions necessary for decent human existence, and to basic human rights. As both Pope Pius XII and Pope John XXIII made clear, if war of retribution was ever justifiable, the risks of modern war negate such a claim today.

**Comparative Justice:** The category of comparative justice is destined to emphasize the presumption against war which stands at the beginning of just-war teaching. In a world of sovereign states recognizing neither a common moral authority nor a central political authority, comparative justice stresses that no state should act on the basis that it has "absolute justice" on its side. Every party to a conflict should acknowledge the limits of its "just cause" and the consequent requirement to use only limited means in pursuit of its objectives. Far from legitimizing a crusade mentality, comparative justice is designed to relativize absolute claims and to restrain the use of force even in a "justified" conflict.

**Competent Authority:** In the Catholic tradition the right to use force has always been joined to the common good; war must be declared by those with responsibility for public order, not by private groups or individuals.

**Right Intention:** Right intention is related to just cause—war can be legitimately intended only for the reasons set forth above as a just cause. During the conflict, right intention means pursuit of peace and reconciliation, including avoiding unnecessarily destructive acts or imposing unreasonable conditions (e.g., unconditional surrender).

**Last Resort:** For resort to war to be justified, all peaceful alternatives must have been exhausted. There are formidable problems in this requirement. No international organization currently in existence has exercised sufficient internationally recognized authority to be able either to mediate effectively in most cases or to prevent conflict by the intervention of United Nations or other peacekeeping forces. Furthermore, there is a tendency for nations or peoples which perceive conflict between or among other nations as advantageous to themselves to attempt to prevent a peaceful settlement rather than advance it.

Probability of Success: This is a difficult criterion to apply, but its purpose is to prevent irrational resort to force or hopeless resistance when the outcome of either will clearly be disproportionate or futile. The determination includes recognition that at times defense of key values, even against great odds, may be a “proportionate” witness.

Proportionality: In terms of the jus ad bellum criteria, proportionality means that the damage to be inflicted and the costs incurred by war must be proportionate to the good expected by taking up arms. Nor should judgments concerning proportionality be limited to the temporal order without regard to a spiritual dimension in terms of “damage,” “cost,” and “the good expected.” In today's interdependent world even a local conflict can affect people everywhere; this is particularly the case when the nuclear powers are involved. Hence a nation cannot justly go to war today without considering the effect of its action on others and on the international community.

Excerpts from “The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response,” paragraphs 85-100 ([www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/TheChallengeofPeace.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/TheChallengeofPeace.pdf)).  
Resource 3

A Reading from “The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace”

True peacemaking can be a matter of policy only if it is first a matter of the heart. In the absence of repentance and forgiveness, no peace can endure; without a spirit of courageous charity, justice cannot be won. We can take inspiration from the early Christian communities. Paul called on the Corinthians, even in the most trying circumstances, to pursue peace and bless their persecutors, never repaying evil for evil, but overcoming evil with good.

Amid the violence of contemporary culture and in response to the growing contempt for human life, the Church must seek to foster communities where peaceable virtues can take root and be nourished. We need to nurture among ourselves faith and hope to

strengthen our spirits by placing our trust in God, rather than in ourselves; courage and compassion that move us to action; humility and kindness so that we can put the needs and interests of others ahead of our own; patience and perseverance to endure the long struggle for justice; and civility and charity so that we can treat others with respect and love.

"The goal of peace, so desired by everyone," as Pope John Paul has written, "will certainly be achieved through the putting into effect of social and international justice, but also through the practice of the virtues which favor togetherness and which teach us to live in unity."

This is the Teaching of our Church.

From "Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace" pp. 6-7 (<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/harvest.shtml>).

Resource 4

Peaceable Virtues

Repentance

Repentance

Repentance

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