

Peace and the Roman Catholic Church

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church constitutes a good introduction to the subject of war and peace. This article takes a look at the development of its doctrine on this subject in recent history.

On Holy Thursday of 1963, Pope John XXIII published a letter to the world called *Peace on Earth*. It marked the first official declaration of the Roman Catholic Church supporting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the peace building efforts of the United Nations. The Secretary General organized a major international conference on John XXIII's document. Shortly afterwards, his successor, Paul VI visited the United Nations. This was one of the first international visits of a Pope in over a century. In his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations he concluded with a cry that echoed around the world: *War, never again!*



John XXIII had been interested in the question of peace and war since the time he held the post of Nuncio in France following the Second World War. He was one of the first promoters of the efforts for reconciliation between the people of France and Germany. That led to the establishment of *Pax Christi*, the international Catholic lay movement for peace – present now in over 40 countries around the world.

Three years later the bishops of the world, gathered in the Second Vatican Council, published a major document called *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)*, whose fifth chapter is devoted to peace. While the chapter retains the right of States to defend their populations from aggression, it argues that war has become an obsolete means for achieving justice and peace, given the establishment of the United Nations and an international diplomatic corps capable of resolving conflicts. It argues for a new international order between States, based on international law. Shortly afterward, Paul VI issued another letter to the world, entitled *On the Development of Peoples (Populorum Progression)*, in which he argues that working to end economic inequities is a major path to peace. (This inspired the Canadian Bishops' Conference to found the Catholic Organization *Development and Peace* forty years ago.)

One of the members of the commission that produced this reflection on peace was Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, later John-Paul II. In large measure, his participation in the work of this commission can be said to account for his outspoken and repeated condemnations of the wars in the Middle East, as well as his untiring efforts to promote peace around the world.

The publication of these two documents occurred at a time when a major transformation was taking place in the production of the arms that fuel wars. Up until then, States turned to their national industries to produce the arms required in times of conflict. However, after the Second World War, international arms industries began a permanent production of arms which they then attempted to sell to interested governments anywhere in the world. Rather than having States indicate the arms they needed, this international arms industry did its own research development and began lobbying governments to purchase their latest innovations. All the documents mentioned above make a point of denouncing this international arms industry as a major force fuelling wars around the world. Finally, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2315-2316) takes a very strong position in this regard:

⇒ *The arms race does not ensure peace. Far from eliminating the causes of war, it risks aggravating them. Spending enormous sums to produce ever new types of weapons impedes efforts to aid needy populations; it thwarts the development of peoples. Over-armament multiplies reasons for conflict and increases the danger of escalation.*

⇒ *The production and the sale of arms affect the common good of nations and of the international community. Hence public authorities have the right and duty to regulate them. The short-term pursuit of private or collective interests cannot legitimate undertakings that promote violence and conflict among nations and compromise the international juridical order.*

Richard Renshaw

How can these principles help us to better understand the complexities of contemporary armed conflicts? Share your thoughts with us at capsules@diocesemontreal.org.