

“Living the Peace of Jesus in a Time of War”
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Christians have often been conflicted about war. During the first 300 hundred years of the church’s life, Christians were at best marginalized and often persecuted. And participation in the military – or giving the oath – was one way they could have shown their allegiance to Rome. But Christian theologians rejected it. Justin Martyr and Irenaeus each echoed Isaiah and called all Christians to pound swords into plowshares. Tatian, writing in about 160, explicitly refused military participation and compared it with a long list of evils. Instead, with Clement of Alexandria, he said the Christian’s weapon was to be prayer. He wrote, “For it is not in war, but in peace that we are trained. Peace and love, *those simple and quiet sisters*, require no arms.” Everything changed in the 4th century with the conversion of Constantine. The historian Eusebius showed his accommodation to war by telling a story about the 12th Roman Legion, the Thundering Legion [or *Fulminata*]. In about A.D. 173 in a war in Germany the prayers of Armenian Christian soldiers led to a divinely guided victory. It is in the 4th century that Christians for the first time had to make some accommodation to the state because it now might stand not as the church’s opponent, but as its protector and aid. And if this were true, full participation with the state – even in the military – was a possibility. But Eusebius went on to say even more. The military successes of the empire against barbarians was evidence of God’s hand on Constantine’s rule.

The dangers of this sort of thought were not missed by Augustine. And it is no doubt to him that we look for the notion of a “just war” that is so prevalent in conversations today. He wrote a series of rules to regulate violence and permit believers to fight for the empire. These rules are well known and it would serve us well to review them regularly. Legitimate war must have a just cause, stem from a legitimate authority, have a good intention, hold a reasonable chance of success, limit violence (the rule of proportionality), and be used as a last resort.

What Augustine failed to do was diagnose the political atmosphere in which Christians should be alarmed; where *patriotism and piety merge to form a dangerous national militancy*. This is precisely what happened during the crusades. A report from the 11th century described it nicely,

“We attacked the city of Jerusalem from all sides, day and night... But before we attacked the city, the bishops and priests, by preaching and exhortation, ordered everyone to hold a procession in honor of God all around the city and arranged for prayers, almsgiving and fasting. At dawn our men went up to the roof of the Temple and attacked the Muslim men and women, beheading them with naked swords...” *July 17, 1099. Guibert, Abbot of Nogent*

When I was a reserve chaplain during the Gulf War, I served in both Navy and Marine units. And one message came clearly from commanders: the role of the chaplain should be to endorse the mission and comfort the soldier. Thoughtful chaplains rejected such advice.

The church must always protect its prophetic voice and never confuse its mission with that of the state. And when called upon to fight, the Christian soldier must do so with caution and sorrow, always asking questions about a war’s just cause, holding conscience fast at all costs, and being ready to refuse the one order that will cost him his soul.

The church must be ready to sound the alarm when patriotism is labeled a Christian duty; when fear is used as a call to arms and a catalyst for military action. The church must claim its

prophetic voice when enemies are stereotyped and dishonored, when they are attacked without posing a threat, when even their dead are not counted. The wedding of patriotism and piety is perhaps the church's most dangerous temptation. And at no time is that temptation more real than in a time of war.