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Just War Disputes—Then and Now

by Phil Berryman

A US administration disputing over just-war principles with bishops and the pope?

Actually, we've been here before. In the early 1980s, the US Catholic bishops spent two and a half years in public discussions and consultations, leading to a pastoral letter, "The Challenge of Peace" (1983). The context was that of rising USSR-US tensions and the election of Ronald Reagan, whose administration intended to develop new weapons systems that would enable the US to prevail over the USSR in a nuclear war. Peace activists, many of whom had opposed the Vietnam War, were protesting at test sites, military bases, and nuclear component factory sites, sometimes with civil disobedience and arrests (including Catholic priests and sisters). In 1982 a million people gathered in Central Park in support of a "nuclear freeze" (a negotiated agreement to halt testing and further development of nuclear weapons).

The central question the bishops confronted was the morality of the use and possession of nuclear weapons. Led by a group of five bishops headed by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago and aided by staff, the bishops engaged in a public consultation and study process, and gathered feedback from two drafts, before releasing the final document. The enterprise was questioned by Catholic conservatives like William F. Buckley and George Weigel, and Reagan administration officials sought to counter it.

The just-war tradition, with roots going back to antiquity, including St. Augustine, which had been developed in the Middle Ages, considered the conditions under which going to war might be justified, e.g., just cause, exhaustion of other means, possibility of success (*ius ad bellum*), and what means were permissible in war (*ius in bello*). One might wonder how relevant principles devised in an era of bows and arrows and hand-to-hand fighting were when a miscalculation could lead to nuclear holocaust.

After an opening section with themes from scripture and tradition related to war and peacemaking, the book-length document applied the just-war criteria. The bishops rejected any first use of nuclear weapons, or their use against civilian population centers. The possession of nuclear weapons for purposes of deterrence could be tolerated, but only on an interim basis while pursuing the reduction and elimination of nuclear weapons. They endorsed the proposal for a “nuclear freeze.”

Alongside the just-war tradition, the document recognized the existence of a Christian pacifist tradition dating to early Christianity, and to Jesus himself, understood primarily as the option of individuals rather than as an obligation on whole societies. Some bishops were members of the Catholic pacifist movement, Pax Christi, including Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit, one of the five on the steering committee.

Although the conclusions of “The Challenge of Peace” could be summarized briefly, the bishops were not using their authority to impose a position, but inviting Catholics and others to form their own conscience with regard to developments in nuclear war policy. During the same period, they were also engaged in a similar process that led to the pastoral letter on the US economy, “Economic Justice for All” (1986).

At the invitation of Pantheon Books, I researched and wrote a book on the two letters. By the time it appeared in 1989, the world was changing: Communism was about to collapse in Eastern Europe, and Reagan and Gorbachev had taken steps toward reducing the likelihood of nuclear confrontation.

The generation of bishops who issued the two pastoral letters had been affected by the renewal around Vatican II (1962-65), and they saw engagement with issues of peace and justice as part of their office. As they explained,

We speak as pastors, not politicians. . . . We cannot avoid our responsibility to lift up the moral dimensions of the choices before our world and our nation. . . . We are simply trying to live up to the call of Jesus to be peacemakers in our own time and situation. . . .

Although the letter inspired some Catholics to activism, its impact among the majority was modest and there was little follow up. Over the next three and a half decades, under the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the profile of the US hierarchy changed as the primary criterion for being made bishop became absolute doctrinal loyalty to Rome, which was reflected in a fixation on abortion and culture wars. That began to be reversed under Pope Francis, who urged attention to issues like migration.

Despite media portrayals of a mano-a-mano between Pope Leo and President Trump, the US bishops today are addressing primarily their own flock, inviting Catholics to examine current developments, in the light of their faith. Trump’s war of aggression does not meet the criteria for going to war (*ius ad bellum*): Iran had not attacked the US, and was not an immediate threat. Attacking civilian infrastructure, let alone threatening to wipe out an entire civilization, violates the traditional criteria for means in war (*ius in bello*).

“The Challenge of Peace” was a response to its time and was focused on the US-USSR nuclear arms race. Today’s context is different, particularly with the erosion of the post-World War II consensus against territorial war by one nation against another—albeit observed unevenly—and the assertion of a right of “great powers” to claim spheres of influence. Non-nuclear wars are being waged from the air, sometimes by “warriors” continents away. And nuclear weapons are ready to be used, while the Trump administration proposes a 50% increase in military spending.

“Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith,” said the bishops over a generation ago. Perhaps their successors are recovering that voice. If so, it would be a welcome development.

Presidents, Popes, and Peace

by Scott Fina

Scott's commentary was published by the Santa Maria Times and also carried by the Lompoc Record, Hanford Sentinel, and Santa Ynez Valley News. See the link to the published article here: https://santamariatimes.com/opinion/commentary/presidents-popes-and-peace-scott-fina/article_15c1ef8e-a125-482c-92ee-8b089e492637.html

“The war can be waged only as a last resort, with all nonviolent options exhausted.... But now, with our own national security not threatened and despite the overwhelming opposition of most people and governments in the world, the United States seems determined to carry out military and diplomatic action that is almost unprecedented in the history of civilized nations.”

Readers likely assume this statement was issued recently in the hurried leadup to the U.S. attack on Iran. Not so! The statement is part of a [commentary](#) written by former (and deceased) President Jimmy Carter. Carter published the commentary in the New York Times on March 9, 2003, eleven days before the U.S., led by President George W. Bush, attacked Iraq.

In this op-ed article, “Just War – or a Just War?”, Carter was referring to “[just war theory](#)” dating back to a 13th Century work written by a Catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas: the “Summa Theologica”. Carter used “just war theory” in attempting to prevent the Second Persian Gulf War.

A few months later, on May 3, 2003, another significant voice weighed in against the Iraq war: [Pope John Paul II](#), who had taken over the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church in October of 1978. According to an article published by the Associated Press on May 4, 2003, the pope [condemned the American war on Iraq](#), stating, “When war, as in these days in Iraq, threatens the fate of humanity, it is ever more urgent to proclaim, with a strong and decisive voice, that only peace is the road to follow to construct a more just and united society.” John Paul II attempted to dissuade President Bush from attacking Iraq, to no avail.

More recently, popes have become more critical in their response to wars initiated and/or supported by U.S. presidents. Here I refer to [Pope Francis](#), who took his office in March of 2013, and [Pope Leo](#), who followed Francis into the papacy in May of 2025. The warring presidents who fell under their papal scrutiny were Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

Pope Francis was arguably the most disparaging of war and military violence, at least by the measure of his powerful [Encyclical letter](#) (churchwide teaching), titled, “[Fratelli Tutti](#)”. Francis [published](#) the letter in October of 2020.

In [Fratelli Tutti](#), Francis claimed there is a societal and global, common good that crosses national borders. Our technological advancements have made the world much smaller.

Most poignant in [Fratelli Tutti](#), is how modern military apparatus employed in warring, inevitably brings death to humanity and destruction of our world. Certain statements in the Encyclical letter invalidate key parts of “Just War Theory”, where it reads:

“We can no longer think of war as a solution because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits.” (§ 258) and

“...with increased globalization, what might appear as an immediate or practical solution for one part of the world initiates a chain of violent and often latent effects that end up harming the entire planet and opening the way to new and worse wars in the future. In today’s world, there are no longer just isolated outbreaks of war in one country or another; instead, we are experiencing a ‘world war fought piecemeal,’ since the destinies of countries are so closely interconnected on the global scene.” (§ 259)

Until he [died](#) on April 21, 2025, Francis watched the brutality brought upon the Gazans by Israel, with military support (weaponry, munitions and bombs) of the U.S. From the Vatican, Francis followed the killing, wounding, and starving of thousands of innocent Palestinians, and wide destruction of the Gazan infrastructure.

President Biden had a better view of these calamities from the White House--if he had cared and opened his eyes.

The Lancet Global Health organization “estimated [there were] [75,200 violent deaths](#) ... between Oct 7, 2023, and Jan 5, 2025, representing approximately 3.4% of the Gaza Strip's pre-conflict population. Women, children ... and older people ... comprised 56.2% of violent deaths totaling 42,200 deaths.” All this was under Biden’s watch.

Pope Francis had no real effect on Biden’s arming of Israel. But with the election of [Pope Leo](#) (on May 8, 2025), and the commencement of the [U.S. and Israeli war](#) with Iran on February 28, 2026, papal influence on peacemaking may be on the rise.

The world currently has a pope who speaks out against military violence, and condemns the war on Iran.

And Leo has quickly become popular among Americans—far more than President Trump, according to a [Reuters/Ipsos poll](#) released on April 21, 2026.

Trump has lashed out at Pope Leo over the Iran War. Leo [responded](#), stating: “I’m not afraid of the Trump administration, or of speaking out loudly about the message of the Gospel”

Leo also used his recent Palm Sunday [homily](#) to call, compassionately, for world peace, with the Iran War in mind. Consider these compelling statements from the homily:

“Brothers and sisters, this is our God: *Jesus, King of Peace*, who rejects war, whom no one can use to justify war. He does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war, but rejects them, saying: ‘Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen: your hands are full of blood.’ (*Isaiah* 1:15).

As we set our gaze upon him who was crucified for us, we can see a crucified humanity. In his wounds, we see the hurts of so many women and men today. In his last cry to the Father, we hear the weeping of those who are crushed, who have no hope, who are sick and who are alone. Above all, we hear the painful groans of all those who are oppressed by violence and are victims of war.

Christ, King of Peace, cries out again from his cross: God is love! Have mercy! Lay down your weapons! Remember that you are brothers and sisters!”

May 24th Pentecost Sunday St. Malachy Hospitality

St. Malachy Antiracism Committee will co-sponsor with other parish groups and **CPF** the 2nd Pentecost Hospitality after the Sunday Mass and invite parishioners and guests to bring examples of foods from the diverse cultures of the parish community.

NEXT CPF MEETINGS: June 14 and July 12

We hope to have 2nd annual Peace Mass on August 9; No meeting that day or in May.

June 14, and July 12 Agenda: St. Malachy Annual Peace Mass on August 9.

Second Sunday CPF Phila meeting after the 10 am Mass at St. Malachy 1429 North 11th St., Philadelphia, PA 19122 Starts online about 11:45 pm; Please email CPFphila@gmail.com for Zoom Meeting Link.

Pax Christi Pennsylvania meets online every 3rd Monday at 4:30 pm

-next meetings

May 18, June 15 and

**Please hold the date and see the website for updates for
Statewide in-person / virtual meeting in planning to be near
Harrisburg, PA on June 27, 2026**

Please email the following if you wish to join us:

info@paxchristi-pa.org,

Pax Christi Pennsylvania

www.paxchristi-pa.org

pghpaxchristi@gmail.com,

Pittsburgh Area Pax Christi

paxchristihbg@gmail.com,

Pax Christi Harrisburg

paxchristiphila@yahoo.com,

Pax Christi Philadelphia / CPF: www.cpfphila.com

cpfnewsletter@gmail.com, catholicpeacefellowship.phila@gmail.com, cpfphila@gmail.com,

Also

West Chester PA Contact: Jeffrey Singleton jeffrey.singleton@comcast.net and for:

Blessed Are the Peacemakers Reading Group

Meets at Saint Joseph's Parish in Downingtown, PA; Contact for local meeting times:

<https://stjosephrc.org/blessed-are-the-peacemakers-reading-group>

Pax Christi USA:

info@paxchristiusa.org and sniamke@paxchristiusa.org

Walking Stations of the Cross - ICE offices to the Cathedral - images from this past Good Friday on next page:



Walking Stations of the Cross images from Good Friday





WALKING STATIONS OF THE CROSS

Good Friday, April 3 at 5pm
 Starting outside the ICE Field Office and ending outside the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul

Questions? Email justice@ssiphila.org

Faithful Philadelphia
 A COALITION OF CATHOLICS COMMITTED TO "UNLEASHING A TORRENT OF MORAL ENERGY" (POPE LEO XIV) FROM LENT THROUGH CORPUS CHRISTI

RSVP: 

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The Good Samaritan
 by Robert McGovern

catholic peace FELLOWSHIP

Philadelphia Chapter of Pax Christi USA – www.paxchristiusa.org

Dear Catholic Peace Fellowship Supporter,

1429 North 11th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122

www.cpfphila.com / cpfphila@gmail.com

catholicpeacefellowship.phila@gmail.com

cpfnewsletter@gmail.com

paxchristiphila@yahoo.com

www.paxchristi-pa.org / info@paxchristi-pa.org

In 2019 the Catholic Peace Fellowship celebrated its 50-year anniversary. CPF Phila is a member of Pax Christi USA and we have joined together to bring a gospel-based perspective to peace, justice, and environmental issues. We invite you to contribute to the program and the work of the CPF. Your donation can be a seed to allow this form of Catholic Peace Activism, be a gift to the next generation; please email cpfphila@gmail.com for an update to the donation process. Please visit our website cpfphila.com for links to past CPF newsletter articles, appeal letters and a donation link and our Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/catholicpeacefellowship.phila/>.

We hope the next generation will take the legacy of CPF into the future and maybe re-start the CPF newsletter to return to a formal format. We encourage subscribers to participate by posting thoughts, resource links and even articles to the CPF Facebook page. If you would like to submit an article for inclusion on the website and postings, please send to cpfnewsletter@gmail.com and cpfphila@gmail.com. Articles ideally should be limited to 1,000 words and please include a brief one-line bio. Photographs and graphics submissions can only be used with clear copyright compliant permission. We encourage passing on the CPF Newsletter and since that may include black and white printouts, for the online version, active links and color images please see www.cpfphila.com or request an emailed PDF at cpfphila@gmail.com and also at <https://www.facebook.com/catholicpeacefellowship.phila/>.

We thank you all again for your interest and generosity,

Catholic Peace Fellowship

Catholic Peace Fellowship Philadelphia meets most second Sundays of the month virtually as early as 11:30 am which is typically also in person after the 10 am mass at St. Malachy's; please see our Facebook for virtual / in-person events status. If you are interested in attending, please email us at cpfphila@gmail.com. Donations are now through the parish and tax deductible; see website for more information, for copyright notice, how to donate, and hopefully soon to make an online donation to support the website and media outreach. Thank you, CPF

return address:

Catholic Peace Fellowship
1429 North 11th Street,
Philadelphia, PA 19122



Door to the Path Taken
by Robert F. McGovern
tribute to
Blessed Franz Jagerstatter

deliver to:

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Franz Jagerstatter,
wood carving by Robert F. McGovern
at St. Malachy's RC Church