

Moral theology is a living enterprise

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Catholic Courier columnist

Moral theology is a very lively enterprise because it must continually address new sets of questions in ways that remain faithful to traditional insights. This can be as delicate an undertaking as walking a tightrope — and can seem to be almost as dangerous at times! But since it attempts to address living issues as they occur, moral theology is always unfinished and always underway.

We can illustrate this by examining almost any moral issue of our day. In taking up the issue of warfare as an example, we can see the "ever living, always underway" character of moral theology.

For Christians, the starting point for thinking about all issues must be the Scriptures. As Catholics, we do not expect the Bible alone to determine our entire stance on any moral issue, but we always expect to gain a perspective from Scripture that will help guide our thinking. In the matter of warfare, we know that the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible, includes many tales of wars fought and violence enacted — even by God's chosen people.

In the New Testament, we see that Jesus seems to have deplored violence by telling us to love our enemies, by



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promoting an ethic based on love of God and love of neighbor, by advising us to forgive one another and to turn the other cheek, and by proclaiming that "those who live by the sword will die by the sword." But the Gospels never report Jesus declaring that waging war is immoral, or telling the soldiers around him to leave the military life.

Modern Americans value clarity and simple, plain rules to follow. We might have wanted Jesus to leave an exact blueprint stating whether waging war is right or wrong in every time and in all circumstances. But Scripture does not offer us this sort of record. As we try to heed Jesus' com-

mand to love and strive to avoid violence, we still know that Christians have struggled from the very beginning with the morality of warfare.

For the first four centuries of Christianity, the followers of Jesus did not bear arms or engage in war. Christianity adopted what we might call a "pacifist" position regarding the morality of warfare. This early practice shifted as the relationship between church and state shifted, however. Thus, from about the fifth century onward, the Catholic church, at least, accepted a position that permitted the use of war in some circumstances. We developed the "just war theory" to help us determine what circumstances would justify the use of warfare in defending a just cause.

One question we might bring to this knowledge is: "Well, which position was right and which one was wrong?" I find that question to be futile, since Christians of the first centuries were dealing with their own unique situation of trying to remain faithful to the vision of Jesus while responding to the circumstances of their own world. The judgment of later Christians — based on a new set of circumstances and a new relationship of Christianity to the world at large — produced a different conclusion about waging war. Both positions were thought by those who held them to offer the best

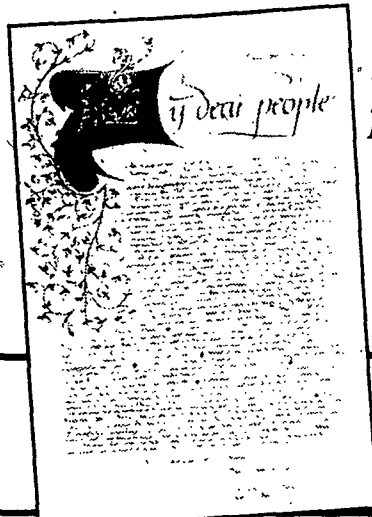
possible way to limit evil in the world.

Some may find this information unsettling. Sometimes we expect moral theology and moral teaching to behave like mathematics, delivering certain and sure answers to dilemmas, unaffected by the circumstances of time, place, and the particular situation at hand. But neither the nature of the Scriptures themselves nor the reality of the questions we deal with permits moral theology to step out of time or beyond the concrete reality of life.

Moral positions can and do develop and change. Today our church has actually moved to a third position regarding the morality of war. At this point, the church acknowledges both pacifism and just war theories for Catholics. Changing circumstances in our own time, including the advent of nuclear weapons, have contributed to a reemergence of pacifism among many Catholics.

A good American might say of all this: "Clean it up. It's messy and confusing. Give us one clear, certain answer for all time so we can be absolutely sure we are doing God's will here and now." But for moral theology to be true to its mission, it must be ready to adapt and change. Adaptation and change are characteristics of life, and moral theology is, above all, a living enterprise conducted in and for a living church.

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