Catholic Social Teaching on Peace Since *Gaudium et Spes*

The Roles of Justice and Social Development

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Speaking from his widely respected expertise in the field of social justice, the author illustrates several ways in which the word “peace” has been understood in modern Catholic theology since Vatican II. From within this varied background, he singles out two elements indispensable for peace in today’s global society and then relates peace in this sense to the issue of the use of armed force in the contemporary international world.

A cartoon in *The New Yorker* showed an executive sitting behind a desk talking to a younger colleague. On the door of the office are the words “Department of Public Relations.” The executive is saying, “Around here we’re interested in words not deeds.” When it comes to peace-making, however, I suspect the opposite is true. Most of us are tired of words, especially if they are just empty promises about seeking peace by leaders who are bent on waging war. Words of peace tumble out of the mouths of preachers, teachers, diplomats, and politicians and yet so little peace seems to exist. There is a lot of talk about peace, but today many in our world might say, “Around here, we’re interested in deeds not words.” Certainly, such a sentiment is understandable.

Deeds of peace are desperately needed in our world today. Individuals and communities with practical skills in peacemaking, people trained in various

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aspects of conflict resolution and peace building, are to be valued and praised. And yet, there is still a great need for words as well as deeds of peace. First, we must articulate a vision of peace that is sufficiently inspiring as to motivate people to seek it. Second, we require a vision of peace, adequately clear, that it provides direction for our efforts. Finally, if peace is truly a cooperative effort and attainment then we need a suitable description in order to unify our efforts and direct our deeds to achieve a common aim (Macquarrie, 10–11). Wise words can inspire and shape great deeds.

A difficulty that arises, however, is that a vision of peace can be so idealized, placed at such a distant future in a transformed world, that it does not connect with the earthly realities of life in our time. Words of peace need to inspire deeds but must also be adequate to guide them. Too often religious communities can present a vision of peace that is wondrous to behold but impractical to seek, or, at least, lacks the specificity to provide political and moral guidance. Recent Catholic teaching provides a helpful way of understanding the meaning of peace. The teaching of the church during the four decades of this post-conciliar era is helpful because it offers both inspiration and guidance to good-willed people interested in building a more peaceful world.

This essay will clarify the meaning of peace in Catholic social teaching by, first, distinguishing the different kinds of peace in Catholic thought; second, analyzing the nature of one form of peace, what I call political peace; and, finally, relate this peace to the issue of armed force.

The Meanings of Peace

One way to distinguish between different meanings of peace is to consider the various terms used in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Shalom implies a sense of well being, fulfillment, even prosperity for the Israelite. To experience shalom is to know fullness of life. The Greek eirenè was derived from a root that meant “linkage” or “order.” Peace had connections with order, coherence, a joining together. Pax, the Latin term, came from the same root as the English word, pact. Peace was an agreement, a treaty, not to fight. Already in the ancient world, then, there was the basic distinction between peace as a negative term, the absence of war, and peace as a positive state, the existence of a harmonious order or way of being that led to a full life (Bainton, 18).

When clarifying the idea of peace, one of the clearest lessons from the Jewish and Christian traditions is that peace is not merely the absence of war. Yet this way of thinking about peace is most common. Whenever a war ends—the shooting stops and a treaty between warring parties is signed—we say that peace has been restored. The end of hostilities is widely thought of as the onset of peace. Such an approach to peace has been called a “residual concept.” It is “what
remains once a distressful event ceases to occur.” This is peace as non-war (McMorrow, 44).

Alternatively, peace can be understood as a positive concept, as a “place-holder,” that is, “when it stands for a particular value, good or state of affairs designated as the equivalent of peace.” The candidates for such equivalence are multiple and include harmony, personal and/or communal well being, forgiveness and reconciliation, happiness, acceptance, security. Although the place-holder understanding of peace is closer to the Catholic tradition’s understanding, it still has its drawback. If peace “is the equivalent of any and all good things, it is difficult to know what it means to create peace or when we succeed in doing so” (McMorrow, 45).

As already noted, the Catholic tradition, building on the biblical witness, sees peace as more than the absence of war. Rather it is a positive ideal, but one that requires greater clarity because peace may refer to different, even if related, realms. And in each of these realms, peace has been given a particular nuance. It is possible to find at least three important realms in which the ideal of peace is central to Catholic teaching.

When the biblical authors speak of peace, *shalom* in the Hebrew or *eirené* in the Greek, they are speaking of something quite positive and an idea that includes but encompasses far more than the political realm. In one sense peace has to do with being in covenant with God; knowing and dwelling within God’s merciful and faithful love. To be at peace with God is to dwell as one with God and all of creation in a harmonious, just, and loving community. This is the peaceful community of Isaiah, where the lion and lamb lie down together. It is the peace of the new creation when the heavenly Jerusalem will descend as depicted in the book of Revelation and there will be no more tears and pain, no more suffering and death. This vision of peace can inspire and comfort us as we deal with life’s troubles. It reminds us that God’s power is greater than human evil and that one day God shall truly reign over the earth.

A second very common way of speaking about peace is especially found in the writings of Paul and John. This is the interior peace that an individual experiences when living in the presence of Jesus. Peace in this sense stems from the realization that Christ has redeemed us, our sins are truly forgiven by God, that we are cherished and loved far beyond what we deserve. Interior peace flows
from the gift of faith, that God in Jesus has turned his smile upon us and that we are blessed to be in union with Christ. This peace is a result of the grace that, as Paul preaches, has come to all who are baptized in the Lord; it is the union of vine and branches that John describes. In sum, it is the peace that comes in communion with, and by being part of, the body of Christ.

It is hard to imagine Catholicism losing sight of these dimensions of peace and not being committed to preaching and teaching such a vision of peace. These are certainly more positive conceptions of peace than the negative or residual idea of peace as the absence of war. But the eschatological and interior meanings of peace described above do not exhaust the tradition. There is at least one other dimension to peace and it is the one that is the focus of the remainder of this essay, the political meaning of peace.

Political Peace

Throughout the Catholic tradition there is another way of speaking about peace that can be distinguished from both peace as interior serenity and peace as the fulfillment of creation beyond history. Besides these two meanings there is also the peace of a rightly ordered political community. This is the kind of peace that Augustine described by the expression “tranquillitas ordinis” (Augustine, XIX, 13). An order of tranquility is the result of a political community that is rightly ordered, meaning that people live in truth, charity, freedom, and justice directed toward the common good. It is a peace that is within the grasp of human possibility, not just a distant goal for the end-time, nor is it the interior peace that is achieved by knowing in faith the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Rather, it is the construction of an exterior space through institutions and practices that permit men and women to live together, if not as a Christian faith community, then at least as a properly human community.

Peace in the political realm is a genuine kind of peace and is not to be disparaged because it is not the interior peace of Christian spirituality, nor the perfection of creation that is eschatological peace. Peace that is a rightly ordered political community is a noble thing to achieve and deserves our commitment to attain and preserve it. This sort of political peace has its counterfeit and inadequate expressions as well.

That peace can be counterfeit is seen in the prophet Ezechiel where he reveals YHWH’s judgment upon those false prophets who misled the people “saying, ‘Peace,’ where there is no peace” (Ezek 13:10). Recall, too, the ancient historian Tacitus’s description of how the Britons bitterly described their Roman conquerors, “solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant” (they make a desert and call it peace) (Tacitus, 80). There is, in short, a false “peace” that results from oppression and fear. No violence or bloodshed may be seen, but this is hardly a genuine
peace, for it is based on intimidation and control, not on right order. Another illustration might be a painful domestic setting where a superficial “peace” may seem to be present, but a violent spouse or parent strikes fear into others who move warily and speak guardedly in the home. Both history and our contemporary age provide illustrations of a “peace” unworthy of the name.

In the Pastoral Constitution the bishops described the “peace of a sort” that marked the situation of nuclear deterrence at the time of the mid-sixties. (Vatican II, n. 81). This “peace of a sort” echoed the viewpoint of John XXIII. In his encyclical Pacem in Terris, John acknowledged that deterrence had seemingly contributed to a measure of international order, even while it also maintained the threat of nuclear war. Without dismissing the argument of those who saw deterrence as a partial good, the Pope wrote, “the fundamental principle on which our present peace depends must be replaced by another, which declares that the true and solid peace of nations consists not in equality of arms but in mutual trust alone” (John XXIII, n. 113). On the one hand deterrence provided a “peace of a sort” but on the other hand it was not a satisfactory system of international order.

It is the eschatological “tug” or “pull” of Christian faith that calls humankind to move beyond the “peace of a sort” to a more genuine peace in the political realm. Here we see the impact of a particular reading of Christian eschatology. The reign of God is not something that happens simply in the end-time but must be incarnated here and now, even if not in its full realization. An anticipatory or proleptic eschatology refuses to relegate the power of God’s reign only to a distant future. Rather it calls upon Christian disciples to transform the present in ways that demonstrate the “here and now” aspect of God’s reign. So a true political peace is one that is subject to the lure of the shalom that marks the complete and total transformation of God’s creation.

We can see, then, that when discussing peace within the political realm, there are three options: the risk of a counterfeit peace, the partial good of a weak
peace or “peace of a sort” and, finally, genuine peace that establishes a rightly
ordered political community, whether domestic or international. This last idea of
peace is not equated with spiritual peace nor is it the fullness of peace that
awaits the end-time, yet it is open to the transformative power of eschatological
peace as that affects history. Such a political peace is a genuine good worthy of
Christian support and commitment.

Political Peace and Other Goods

Since the Second Vatican Council there have been developments in Catholic
social teaching that have further added to our understanding of peace. To
use the terminology of Marilyn McMorrow, we find that recent teaching has
stipulated two “placeholder” terms for peace, when understood politically:
justice and development.

Justice and Peace

At Vatican II, the bishops observed that peace is “rightly and appropriately
called ‘an enterprise of justice’” (Vatican II, n. 78; quoting Isa 32:7). A few years
later, in his 1972 message for the World Day of Peace, Paul VI coined the expres-
sion, “If you want Peace, work for Justice” (Paul VI, 1972, 45). This catchy for-
mulation of Isaiah’s vision became a slogan for many Catholic activists working
in the field of social ministry. But it was a popular phrase with a rich heritage.
Emphasizing a central place for justice in Catholic teaching on peace was con-
sistent with the biblical tradition of peace as shalom.

The bishops at the council also wrote, “peace is actualized by people as they
thirst after ever greater justice” (Vatican II, n. 78). Two years later, Paul VI put it
this way, “peace is something that is built up day after day, in the pursuit of an
order intended by God, which implies a more perfect form of justice” among per-
sons (Paul VI, 1967, n. 76). In other words, peace in the political realm was not
simply a blessing from God but a task that was to be undertaken by human
beings. It could be “actualized” as people of good will worked to create a more
just world order.

Seen this way, the full title of the U.S. bishops’ pastoral letter was aptly phrased:
“The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response” (1983). There was a
range of activities that constituted peace building and the element of human
efforts on behalf of justice was placed at the top of the list.

Development and Peace

Another significant element of the teaching on peace was suggested by a
second aphorism of Paul VI. The papal encyclical Populorum progressio had as
the subtitle of Part II, section 4: “Development is the New Name for Peace” (Paul VI, 1967). That sub-title highlighted the particular aspect of justice that required attention.

During the decade of the sixties, there were competing theories of development as well as a growing disenchantment with the word itself, as the residents of poor nations found that many initial hopes for development were dashed. Catholic social teaching began to place modifiers in front of development to distinguish the church’s viewpoint from other perspectives deemed less adequate. Paul VI often used the expression “integral development” to express the conviction that development cannot be reduced simply to economic advancement; other aspects of human existence—cultural, political, psychological, religious—had to be included in any satisfactory understanding of genuine development (Paul VI, 1967, n. 21).

What was especially important for Catholic social teaching was that any theory of development worthy of the name had to address the stubborn resistance of social structures that hindered the genuine advancement of people toward a better life. In Catholic social teaching, justice was seen as the key virtue when discussing this need for social transformation.

Linking development and justice revealed the moral dimension of development. Economies can expand but distribution of the benefits of growth may be heavily skewed toward an elite. True development must lead to a widely shared participation in the benefits of any economic progress. Justice entails the creation of a social system that promotes the common good and secures each person’s right and ability both to contribute to, and benefit from, the common good.

This way of thinking in modern Catholic social teaching led to the idea that both justice and development were “placeholder” terms for political peace. There can be no tranquillitas ordinis without justice, and the particular shape of justice needed in our time is just development. Only by promoting the well-being of the millions trapped in crushing poverty throughout the world can there be a realistic hope for peace. Peace built on military or economic power may be a “peace of a sort,” but it is not the Catholic understanding of political peace. For Catholic social teaching the surer path to peace in our world is just development. More recently, as the dimensions of the challenge of just development on a global scale come into clearer focus, the significance of solidarity has also come to the forefront of Catholic social teaching.
**Solidarity and Peace**

Twenty years after Paul issued *Populorum progressio*, John Paul II wrote that solidarity is “the path to peace and at the same time to development.” For him, solidarity is the virtue that allows us “to see the ‘other’—whether a person, people, or nation—. . . as our ‘neighbor,’ a ‘helper,’ to be made a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life. . . .” (John Paul II, 1987, n. 39). It is this perspective on the other that encourages us to transform the fact of interdependence into the moral commitment to work with and for others, especially the less fortunate.

Solidarity serves as the motivating energy that fosters a desire to work for truly just development by establishing proper national and international practices, policies and institutions. From this work of solidarity in the pursuit of just development will emerge a true peace. “The goal of peace, so desired by everyone, 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 . . .” (John Paul II, 1987, no. 39).

To sum up the papal vision, peace is the outcome of a committed engagement (solidarity) to the project of social progress for individuals and societies (just development). Paul VI promoted this understanding by his linkage of development and justice as new terms for peace. John Paul II, while echoing Paul's viewpoint, has added solidarity as the crucial step in working for justice. Solidarity is the path to development, and peace is the end result of working for development that is just.

**Peace and Armed Force**

Because there can be no true peace without a political order that is just, there must be measures to correct injustices as a way to building peace. So, for example, a society can institute mechanisms for adjudicating rival claims that settle disputes without recourse to violence. Thus, we have systems of public safety and law that protect each person's basic rights, punish those who violate the rights of others, and that develop measures to compensate victims. Domestically, therefore, we expect rival parties to resolve their differences without using violence.

Internationally, however, the situation is different. While Catholic social teaching has often promoted and praised the work of those who strive to create a true international order, there is the acknowledgement that there is a structural flaw in the system. No institution of international order yet plays the role that the state plays in domestic society. There are movements of human rights, international law, regional accords, and other building blocks of international order, but the analogy between the domestic and international orders still limps.
In large part, due to the inability of any agent of international order to guarantee the rights of a nation-state, the structural flaw of international politics means that Catholic social teaching does not deny a state's right or duty to employ armed force in certain circumstances. Because peace without justice is no true peace, and no international authority is adequate to the task of securing international justice, there is a reluctant willingness to permit recourse to armed force.

For those who define peace as merely the absence of war, the claim that a war is fought for the sake of peace is self-contradictory. In Catholic social teaching, however, precisely because peace is not the absence of war but the establishment of a just political order, it can be the case that a war is fought for the sake of peace.

Given the positive understanding of peace, however, one ought not expect that war can establish peace; rather all that armed force can do is remove obstacles to peace, e.g., depose tyrants, stop genocide, repel aggression. There is a real sense in which it is true that one can win a war (remove an obstacle to true peace) and fail to win the peace (not proceed to build a just political order that promotes the common good and protects the human rights of individuals).

In addition, Catholic social teaching places limits on what can be done in the name of justice and peace. To allow for some war does not mean all war is legitimate nor are all actions in war permissible. This is the backdrop to the ongoing debates and developments within the just-war tradition. Because in modern times even a just war causes great harm, the church increasingly has looked to other, less harmful, means of building peace. As a result, strategies of non-violent social transformation have been accorded a more prominent place in recent teaching (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, nos. 221–30).

**Conclusion**

In the forty years since *Gaudium et Spes* was written, there have been notable developments in Catholic social teaching regarding peace. First, there is an increased appreciation for the meaning of peace in different realms. Second, there is a deeper understanding of the meaning of political peace as more than the absence of war. Third, due to the influence of a more biblically grounded approach, there is a specification of political peace as strongly linked to the goal of just development in our world. Finally, while the use of armed force to remove obstacles to peace is not denied, there is much greater interest in exploring non-violent methods as better suited to building political peace.

Today, Catholic social teaching has articulated a positive theology of peace, recognizing the different dimensions of peace. The *shalom* that will characterize the state of existence in the end-time and the inner serenity that arises from spir-
ritual union with God in Christ are both to be prized as central to Christian faith. But these do not exhaust the meaning of peace for in its social teaching the church has also developed an understanding of peace that is appropriate for political life. This political peace is both possible to achieve and a real blessing once established. It has as a constitutive element the just development of nations both rich and poor.

Feeding a hungry nation is a notable goal, yet it still is less than the heavenly banquet. Building a peaceful world order is a moral achievement even if the peace that is achieved is less than the fullness of peace that only God can give. We do not keep faith with God's call to renew the earth if we cynically dismiss goods that are achievable because they are not perfect. Political peace is not all that believers should seek, but it is a worthy goal for disciples who follow the rabbi who pronounced: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matt 5:9).

**Bibliography**


