

# Catholic doctors in wartime and peacetime serving the Gospel

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## Abstract

The wartime testimonies of Catholic doctors help us to understand the logic of the Gospel, the concept of fraternity, and the preciousness of care as a prerequisite for peacemaking. Christian peoples entered into conflict in both World Wars I and II of the last century, but continue to do so, as is the case today on the Russian-Ukrainian front. Therefore, calling oneself Christian is not enough. There is a need to adopt an evangelical posture, as Luke tells us in the parable of the Samaritan. Pope Francis constantly exhorts us to change our hearts and become builders of peace. We need to fill the grieving, the suffering, the violence, we need to build Isaiah's prophecy with courage and determination. The role of Catholic doctors in Europe, therefore, is fundamental in order to witness to humanity alternative conducts to divisions and oppression and harbingers of a new time of peace for all.

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The testimonies of doctors during the conflicts of the last century and these first 24 years of the third millennium constantly remind us of the essence of being a doctor: to treat every human being, without distinction, with competence and compassion.

Hippocrates already recommended that "In *all the houses I visit, I shall enter for the good of the sick, abstaining from all offenses and from all voluntary harm... If I fulfill this oath and do not betray it, may I enjoy the fruits of life and art, esteemed in perpetuity by all men; if I transgress it and perjure myself, may all the contrary touch me.*" <sup>1</sup>.

Indeed, the idea of a physician in the ancient Greek way was of a servant of all for the care of all, without exclusion of any and without being on one side. The physician answered only to his conscience and was "partisan" only for the care of life, of all.

Wars since antiquity have seen doctors treat the wounded of both their own and the opposing side. But also, not a few times, they become "caregivers of one side" and sometimes "users of the bodies of enemies for experiments, torture, suppression" (as did, in the last century, quite a few German doctors who were collaborators with the Nazi regime in the eugenic euthanasia campaign of suppression of the mentally and physically disabled and then in the concentration camps) <sup>2</sup>. Thus, it is the wars and totalitarian ideologies (from the wars of expansion of the ancient Persian, Babylonian and Roman empires to colonialism and then to recent Nazism, fascism, communism, Maoism, etc.) that can cause physicians to betray their identity as servants of humanity and not of one side.

But for us believers, for us doctors, does war make sense? A faithful interpretation of the biblical commandment *Thou shalt not kill* (despite the fact that the Old Testament is also a succession of battles) and especially of the Gospel with its call to *turn the other cheek* and *love one's enemies* (*Matt. 5:38-48*), has led Christian thinkers in various eras to hold that a disciple of Jesus cannot make an attempt on a person's life, even an enemy's, under any circumstances, even if it were only in defense. Reflexively, the Christian physician cannot fail to assist the wounded enemy as well.

This position was majority in the Church until the 3rd century (think of the many Christian martyrs, including Peter and Paul, examples of "*passive nonviolent resistance*" in the Roman persecutions <sup>3</sup>) and then became a minority until the 20th century. The theory of *just war*, already shared by Aristotle <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://portale.fnomceo.it/giuramento-di-ippocrate>

<sup>2</sup> Forks. History of Aktion T4: Euthanasia in Nazi Germany 1939-1945 - Gotz Aly - Einaudi - 2017

<sup>3</sup> AA.VV., *The Cambridge History of Christianity - Vol. 1: Origins to Constantine*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006, [ISBN 0-521-81239-9](https://doi.org/10.1017/9780521812399).

<sup>4</sup> In ancient Greece, Aristotle had tried to justify war from a moral point of view, calling it legally and morally just in

and Cicero <sup>5</sup> and developed by Christian authors such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Francisco de Vitoria, consists of a set of criteria for judging when it is morally permissible to resort to arms (*jus ad bellum*) and what limits should be respected in their use (*jus in bello*). The reflection that would mark Christian thought the most would be that of Augustine (*Contra Faustum*, XXII, 74-78; *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, IV; *De Civitate Dei*, XV, 4; XIX, 7. 12-13), which would find its juridical accommodation in the *Decretum Gratiani* (pars II, causa XXIII) and a theological one in Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 40). Augustine elaborates the doctrine of just war with the aim not to legitimize war but to place limits on the possibility of declaring it (*jus ad bellum*), setting three conditions: just cause, right intention, and legitimate authority. Thomas Aquinas takes up Augustine's positions, adding two more criteria: *ultima ratio* (only after all attempts to find solutions by diplomatic means have been exhausted) and *debitus modus*, which concerns *jus in bello* (use of legitimate means and protection of civilians).

In the modern era there is the full formulation of the doctrine of *just war*, fostered by the emergence of absolute states claiming a monopoly of force, the revival of the distinction between the right to wage war and the conduct to be maintained on the occasion of war, and the recovery of the right of self-defense, broadening it from the individual sphere to the community or social sphere: *licet vim vi repellere*. The innovations are significant: the concept of just war is no longer elaborated to set limits to war, but to fully legitimize it. The fundamental criterion for legitimizing war is no longer the objective criterion of just cause, but the subjective criterion of legitimate authority (absolutism). It is clear that thus all wars, even wars of aggression, find legitimacy.

Barring a few exceptions-such as Bartholomew De Las Casas <sup>6</sup> and Erasmus of Rotterdam <sup>7</sup> - Christian reflection on peace will be dominated and monopolized until the last century by a repetition of just war principles.

It is only with the reflections on the tragic events of World War II and the wars of liberation everywhere in the world (think of the wars of independence of colonial states in the second half of the 20th century), starting from a faithful reading of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-48.) and the testimonies of Gandhi <sup>8</sup> and Martin Luther King <sup>9</sup>, that the concept of just war is sought to be overcome and the theses of *non - violence* are developed, overcoming even the concept of simple pacifism. New reflections matured within the Catholic Church especially with John XXIII's Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), which rejected all war as "*contrary to reason*." The Pope addresses all men of good will, considering the presence in our time of deadly weapons, such as the atomic bomb, which have the power to destroy all humanity.

In the 1965 the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council-under the impetus of Pope Paul VI-recognized this change and encouraged "*those who, renouncing violence in the vindication of their rights, have recourse to those means of defense which are, moreover, within the reach even of the weakest, provided that this can be done without prejudice to the rights and duties of others or of the community*" (GS, no. 78). At the same time, the theory of *legitimate defense* was structured: "*once all possibilities of peaceful accommodation have been exhausted, governments cannot be denied the*

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three cases: in defense of one's borders, to exert hegemony over conquered peoples, and to enslave barbarians, who were considered slaves by nature

<sup>5</sup> De re publica III; De legibus 3.3.9;

<sup>6</sup> In *De unico vocationis modo* and *Apologia* he condemns all wars and all arguments in their favor and states that the only just war is that of the natives against the Spaniards.

<sup>7</sup> E. da Rotterdam, *The Education of the Christian Prince* (1516), Edizioni di Pagina, Bari 2009

<sup>8</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *A War Without Violence. The birth of modern nonviolence*, Florence, Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, 2005. [ISBN 88-89264-54-3](https://www.isbn.it/ISBN/88-89264-54-3).

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther King Jr, edited by Coretta Scott King, *The Dream of Nonviolence*, p. 12, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2008, [ISBN 978-88-07-81881-3](https://www.isbn.it/ISBN/978-88-07-81881-3).

*right of legitimate defense*" (GS, no. 79). The Church also recognizes that a people can legitimately resort to arms to free themselves from the power of a tyrant who oppresses them, as Paul VI reported in the 1967 Encyclical *Popolorum Progressio* (PP, no. 31).

The Synod of Bishops in 1971 in the synod document *Justice in the World* states, "*It is absolutely necessary that conflicts between nations should not be resolved through war, but other solutions should be found for them that are in conformity with human nature. The strategy of nonviolence must, moreover, be favored.*" <sup>10</sup> .

Pope John Paul II in this regard pointed out, "*Some may tell you that the choice of nonviolence is ultimately nothing more than a passive acceptance of situations of injustice. He may argue that it is cowardly not to use violence against what is unjust, or to refuse to violently defend the oppressed. But nothing could be further from the truth. There is nothing passive about nonviolence when it is a choice dictated by love. It has nothing to do with indifference.*" <sup>11</sup> .

The abandonment of the doctrine of just war and deterrence does not mean total rejection of the use of force if this is necessary to prevent genocide or mass persecution, as the Balkan conflict has shown us. Thus was born the doctrine of interference (renamed the *responsibility to protect* by the UN <sup>12</sup> ), the purpose of which is to provide relief to victims of aggression through the involvement of the international community. "*This is not a matter of reintroducing the doctrine of just war; in fact, the purpose is to halt a process of serious violence with circumscribed action designed only to disarm the aggressor. The legitimacy of such forms of intervention is linked to the occurrence of certain conditions, such as impartiality, a willingness to promote genuine de-escalation of violence and war, and prudence in the use of weapons.*" <sup>13</sup> .

Finally, Pope Francis states in the Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* that "*it is very difficult to sustain the rational criteria matured in other centuries to speak of a possible just war*" (258). In his message for the 2017 *World Day of Peace*, he stated that "*responding to violence with violence leads, at best, to forced migration and immense suffering, as vast amounts of resources are allocated for military purposes and diverted from the daily needs of the young, families in need, the elderly, the sick, and the vast majority of the world's inhabitants. At worst, it can lead to the death, physical and spiritual, of many, if not all.*"

This "*according to the Gospel*" evolution of the Catholic Church is countered by the anti-evangelical and pro-war stance of the Moscow Orthodox Church, which recently with its Patriarch Kirill argues that the war in Ukraine is a holy war because Moscow is defending "*Holy Russia*" and the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West "*fallen into Satanism.*" <sup>14</sup> . Obviously these different views on the meaning of war among peoples, moreover, both Christian, undermines not only ecumenical dialogue, but also the Christian doctor's conception of meaning in the face of the victims, whereby the Catholic doctor will see men to be cared for, without flags, and the Russian Orthodox doctor compatriots to be cared for and enemies not to be cared for and left to die.

What interpretation then to give of the well-known and didactic parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) in this historical context for us Catholic physicians? Just a good intention, a concept of ideal love/solidarity, disembodied from human history? No, because Jesus tells us of a concrete fact: a man without identity, apparently lifeless, wounded, lying on the ground, in need of care not to bleed to

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<sup>10</sup> Synod of Bishops 1971, no. 1296).

<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, *Address to Young People*, Maseru (Lesotho), September 15, 1988

<sup>12</sup> Christiansen D. (2022), "Responsibility to protect: a response that is not just military," in *Updates Social*, 4, 230-232.

<sup>13</sup> Don Vittorio Rocca, 2023, <https://www.retesicomoro.it/oggi-si-puo-ancora-parlare-guerra-giusta/>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/europa/2024/03/31/il-patriarca-kirill-in-ucraina-e-una-querra-santa\\_93ab4b17-b849-4c4b-9dca-afcb8336eb3d.html](https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/europa/2024/03/31/il-patriarca-kirill-in-ucraina-e-una-querra-santa_93ab4b17-b849-4c4b-9dca-afcb8336eb3d.html)

death, represents for the Samaritan an opportunity to share, an opportunity to love. A question arises here, one that cannot fall on deaf ears: either way, one way or the other, we are compelled to respond, and that response will not only have consequences for the other, but also redefines who I am, who I am as a Catholic doctor. Maurice Merleau-Ponty speaks of the hand that *touches the other* as "touchee-touching" <sup>15</sup> , I touch and am touched. In that gesture of getting close and caring, not only does the fate of the unfortunate person change, it is the Samaritan's own life that is touched and, in that touch, redefined. "What you spend extra, I will pay you when I return," for the man is now part of me. Love is something that happens, a concrete face that knocks on my life and to which I can only respond: that response also says who I am.

Bernard Haring <sup>16</sup> also said that by healing we are healed, by saving we are saved, in giving we receive, and this "mirror" action/relationship defines who I am. Behold, the physician, the Catholic physician, assumes the identity of a witness of Christ if he or she heals, welcomes, makes one's own the fate of every sick person, without distinction of any kind, not even between friend and foe, between attacked and aggressor, recognizing in the other the face of Christ himself in need of care (Matt. 25:35-44). This is the premise for fulfilling for present and future humanity the dream of Isaiah: "They will forge their swords into plowshares, their spears into sickles; one people will no longer raise a sword against another people, they will no longer practice the art of war. " <sup>17</sup> .

We Catholic doctors, we men and women who see, live, suffer the drama or consequences of war, can by our example, by our Samaritan style of life, together, heal the bereaved, restore hope, express concrete closeness and solidarity, seek and activate dialogues, go "beyond" the logic of war, become *artisans of true peace*.

I end this talk with the words of Pope Francis: *"ideologies do not have feet to walk, they do not have hands to heal wounds, they do not have eyes to see the suffering of the other. Peace is made with the feet, hands and eyes of the peoples involved, together all. Peace will never be the fruit of distrust, the fruit of walls, of weapons pointed at each other. St. Paul says, "Each one will reap what he has sown" (Gal 6:7). Brothers and sisters, our civilizations right now are sowing destruction, fear. Let us, brothers and sisters, sow hope! Let us be sowers of hope! Everyone look for ways to do it, but sowers of hope, always. That is what you are also doing: sowing hope. Do not stop. Do not become discouraged. Do not become spectators of the so-called "inevitable" war. No, spectators of a so-called inevitable war, no. As bishop Tonino Bello said<sup>18</sup>: "All stand up, builders of peace!" All together <sup>19</sup> "*

Here, then is our dream, the meaning of our being here today in the land of Croatia: Catholic doctors builders of healthy and healing relationships and witnesses of peace, everywhere, with anyone, always!

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<sup>15</sup> Raoul Frauenfelder, *Between the hands the flesh* - Maurice Merleau-Ponty, macula, 2017, ISBN: 9788857541723

<sup>16</sup> Bernhard Haring, *The therapeutic power of nonviolence: for a practical theology of peace*, Pauline Ed., 1987

<sup>17</sup> [Isaiah 2:3-4](#)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.fondazioneantonino.it/la-biografia-di-don-tonino-bello/>

<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis, *Arena of peace - justice and peace will baptize*, Verona, May 18, 2024