

# CrossCurrents *A Catholic Reflects on Faith in Our Times*



# 277 Bernard F. Swain, Ph.D. [www.CrossCurrents.us](http://www.CrossCurrents.us)

## Obama's Catholic Case for Peace

**I am baffled: no one else seemed to notice** the very thing that struck me most about Barack Obama's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech.

While some wrongly compared Obama's discourse on war and peace to George Bush, and others rightly pointed out Obama's debt to Franklin Roosevelt and the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, no one I have read noticed this: Catholic Church teaching on war and peace is now shaping American policy at the presidential level for the first time.

It's true the phrase "just war" filled media coverage – hence the comparisons to George Bush. But while Bush ignorantly equated "just war" with "holy war" (where, because one's cause is just, anything goes to achieve victory), Obama categorically rejected the history of zealous crusaders killing in the name of God:

*No Holy War can ever be a just war. For if you truly believe that you are carrying out divine will, then there is no need for restraint.*

It is precisely "restraint" that distinguishes holy war from the just war tradition. True, Catholic tradition once embraced holy war, pacifism, and just war as moral options for Catholics. But no more. Now a Catholic may be a pacifist, or embrace the just war concept – but no Catholic can accept holy war, war without restraint.

Obama is clearly no pacifist. He clearly embraces "just war" theory, not only in name, but in its substance. As The New Republic's Michael Walzer noted, he is not the first President to invoke the theory:

*Other presidents have done that, but this one seemed to have a better grasp of the theory than any of his predecessors did.*

Secular and Protestant thinkers too, including Niebuhr, have also espoused the just war concept—but they were adopting (and sometimes adapting) an idea of Catholic origin. Obama here became the first US President to adopt Catholic teaching as his own. Without naming it, Obama was making the Catholic case for peace.

First, he said war first gained a moral critique in history when the concept of a “just war” emerged, though without noting Saint Augustine as its pioneer. He then listed conditions for just war, going beyond the simplistic notion of “just cause,” to include rules on the conduct of war developed by Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Spanish Jesuit Francisco de Vitoria: force must be proportional (the destruction cannot exceed the benefit); noncombatants cannot be targeted.

He admitted the just war concept “was rarely observed,” and lamented the modern phenomenon of *total war* “in which the distinction between combatant and noncombatant became blurred.” This was precisely the point on which Vatican Council II (1962-1965) updated just war theory, condemning nuclear weapons, and asking if any “total war” could meet just war conditions.

Obama noted that peace “haltingly advanced” thanks to the U.N. and Marshall Plan, but argued that “this old architecture is buckling under the weight of new threats”: not only terrorism, but ethnic, sectarian, and tribal conflicts that might require foreign humanitarian intervention.

Here, Obama said “I believe that force can be justified on humanitarian grounds” – something the just war tradition never foresaw, but which is the current focus of debate for updating the just war concept.

But Obama went deeper than “just war” mechanics, to cite its spirit, which (in its modern Catholic version) aims *not* to rationalize war but rather to elevate peace and create a moral presumption *against* war.

“No matter how justified,” he proclaimed, “war promises human tragedy...war itself is never glorious.” For Obama, as for the Catholic just war tradition, there is no such thing as a “glorious victory.” The moral outcome of war, even victory, calls for wiping our brows in sorrowful relief amid regret for war’s tragic toll.

The second half of Obama's talk shifted from justifying war to building peace, and here too he reflected the Catholic platform.

First he called to end the spread of nuclear weapons and to disarm the nuclear powers. This is the Church's position since Vatican II.

Second, he called for more clarity on what peace requires:

*Peace is not merely the absence of visible conflict. Only a just peace based upon the inherent rights and dignity of every individual can truly be lasting.*

These words echo nearly verbatim the U.S. Bishops' 1983 pastoral letter "The Challenge of Peace" – the same letter that put Chicago's Cardinal Joseph Bernardin on the cover of *Time Magazine* not long before a young Barack Obama began his community organizing among churches on Chicago's south side.

Third, Obama calls for peace based on economic security and opportunity:

*A just peace includes not only civil and political rights — it must encompass economic security and opportunity. For true peace is not just freedom from fear, but freedom from want.*

The phrase is from FDR, but the idea is Catholic; here Obama echoes Pope Paul VI's 1967 proclamation that "the new name for peace is development."

In acknowledging the ambiguities of history and the burdens of statecraft, in juggling the commitment to non-violent principles which he admires in King and Gandhi with the burden of using force that comes with office, Obama's tone reflects the influence of Niebuhr, who saw American power as a moral dilemma which challenges us to balance realism with idealism:

*To say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism — it is a recognition of history, the imperfections of man and the limits of reason...We do not have to think that human nature is perfect for us to still believe that the human condition can be perfected. We do not have to live in an idealized world to still reach for those ideals that will make it a better place.*

But Niebuhr's "realist" version of just war also allowed for something the Catholic version never allowed: the necessary evil of killing innocents. As Niebuhr wrote:

*It is not possible to defeat a foe without causing innocent people to suffer with the guilty. It is not possible to engage in any act of collective opposition to collective evil without involving the innocent with the guilty. It is not possible to move in history without becoming tainted with guilt.*

Obama begs to differ:

*The United States of America must remain a standard bearer in the conduct of war...We lose ourselves when we compromise the very ideals that we fight to defend. And we honor those ideals by upholding them not just when it is easy, but when it is hard.*

So although Obama's tone is from Niebuhr, his principles are Catholic. Think what this means.

For years I've told parish groups that we American Catholics are in trouble: a President can claim "just war," and his Catholic listeners can't tell he is invoking a Catholic concept, let alone judge whether the claim is legitimate.

But now we hear a President who not only claims "just war," but explains what he means by it— with an explanation solidly rooted in Catholic thinking. Fifteen centuries after it first emerged, the just war concept is now US foreign policy.

There remain some grounds for disappointment. Obama failed to say that, while Afghanistan may meet just war conditions, Iraq never did. He failed to argue that success in Afghanistan is "morally certain" — a key just war condition. He never answered those who believe "total war" can never meet just war criteria. He never admitted that just war has never actually prevented a war. He failed to link defense of every person's dignity with the fate of the unborn.

Still, just war theory is a major contribution of Catholic tradition to public policy thinking, and Obama's speech marks the first time this contribution has been enshrined as the official peace platform of any US President.

Who knows? The day may come when America, invoking this very speech, avoids or ends a war. On that day, not only

will humanity take one giant step toward genuine peace, but the Catholic Church will have proven its worth as a global force for good.

As Advent approaches the arrival of the Prince of Peace, no Christmas gift could be greater than this: our Church sowing the seeds of a President's pathway to peace.

© Bernard F. Swain PhD 2009

**NEW BLOG!** Your Feedback, Comments and Questions are welcome at <http://swaincrosscurrents.blogspot.com/>

*Dr. Swain's opinions do not represent the views of this parish or any other official body.*

A lifelong layperson, Bernie Swain has devoted more than 35 years to adult spiritual formation in dioceses in the US, Canada, and France. Since 1991 he has had a private practice as trainer, teacher, and consultant to leaders in parishes and other religious organizations. He holds degrees in political science from Holy Cross & The University of Paris, and in theology from Harvard & The University of Chicago. His writings include *Liberating Leadership* (Harper & Row, 1986) and more than 200 articles in periodicals such as *The National Catholic Reporter*, *Commonweal*, *The Miami Herald*, *The Catholic Free Press*, *The Pilot*, *Harvard Theological Review*, and *Liturgy*.

Visit his website at: <http://www.CrossCurrents.us>

**CrossCurrents** Is a weekly subscription service for parish websites.

Individual Subscriptions are also available. For Information, contact [bfswain@juno.com](mailto:bfswain@juno.com)