



SILENT HOMILIES

The Cloak Cut in Two

*How the Church thinks about soldiers,
war, and the peace that is still a duty*





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LITTLE TREASURES

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Before You Begin

When people hear that the Catholic Church has something to say about war, they often expect one of two speeches. Either they expect the Church to bless every flag. Or they expect her to say that no Christian may ever wear a uniform. Neither speech is the one she actually gives.

This book tries to give the speech she does give, in language that does not need a seminar. The Church loves peace because she loves people. She also knows that a people can be attacked, and that a government has a duty to protect the innocent. For many centuries she has asked a hard question: when, if ever, may force be used without betraying Christ?

Some of the facts in these pages still surprise people. The words chapel and chaplain come from a soldier's cloak. A medieval council once tried to ban the crossbow against Christians. The same saint remembered on 11 November as a friend of soldiers is also a patron of people who refuse to fight. The Catechism calls honourable soldiers servants of peace. In the next paragraph it asks governments to make room for those who cannot bear arms.

I write as a parish priest, not as a staff officer. These pages are meant for families who have someone in service, for veterans, for young people who do not know whether a uniform can sit beside a baptismal candle, and for anyone who has watched the news and wondered what a Catholic is supposed to think.

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Printing this book

Chapter 1

Why the Church talks about war

The Catholic Church does not love war. That sentence has to come first. If it does not, everything else she says will be misunderstood.

In the Catechism she writes that we must do everything reasonably possible to avoid war, because of the evils and injustices that war always brings. Peace is the point. It is not a decoration hung on the wall after the fighting.

At the same time she does not pretend that evil will sit down if we ask it to. A village can be burned. A people can be hunted. Those who have lawful responsibility for a country have a duty to protect the innocent. They cannot treat that duty as optional.

So the Church has spent a long time asking: when, if ever, may a Christian take up arms without betraying Christ? The answer is not a cheer. It is a set of strict questions. The tradition is often called just war. The name sounds colder than it is. It does not mean the Church likes war. It means she will not let anyone pick up a weapon without first asking whether defence is even allowed, and then asking what remains forbidden even if it is.

Feelings about war are a poor guide. Feelings will bless our side and curse the other. A list of conditions at least forces us to look at the facts.

A Small Reflection

Peace is always the goal, even when innocent people must be defended.

The Church is not choosing between loving peace and loving people. She loves people, and that is why she hates war. The same love is why she will not tell a government that it may abandon those who cannot defend themselves.

If I only hear one half of that teaching, I will either bless every campaign or leave the innocent without protection. Both mistakes are easy. Both are unfaithful.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, Prince of Peace, teach us to hate war without abandoning those who need defence. Amen.

Chapter 2

Christians who served, and Christians who would not

In the first generations after the apostles, Christians lived inside a pagan empire. Soldiers were often asked to swear by gods they did not believe in. The same empire sometimes used soldiers for executions and for public games. Some Christians served anyway. Some refused. The evidence is mixed, and that fact already helps us. The early Church was not a single poster.

We have soldiers who became saints. We also have soldiers who left the army because they could no longer do what was asked. The problem was not only killing. It was idolatry, cruelty, and the demand to treat the emperor as a god.

The Church did not begin with a finished theory of war. She began with people trying to remain Christian inside a violent world. Later she would have to speak as a people with public responsibility. The first centuries remind us not to use the early Church as a slogan. Some served. Some would not. Both groups were trying to follow Christ.

A Small Reflection

Catholics should resist easy slogans about either soldiers or pacifists.

If I say that every early Christian refused the army, I am not telling the truth. If I say that the Church has always blessed every soldier, I am not telling the truth either.

The first centuries leave us with a harder task. We have to look at the real situation, the real conscience, and the real teaching, not at the poster we prefer.

A short prayer

Lord, keep us from using the past as a slogan, and help us to seek the truth about what you ask. Amen.

Chapter 3

What Saint Augustine taught

Saint Augustine lived in North Africa in the fourth and fifth centuries. His city, Hippo, was under threat as the old Roman world came apart. He was a bishop, not a general. He had to think about force because people around him were being attacked.

Augustine did not write the later textbook list of just war conditions. Later teachers organised his ideas more neatly than he did. What he did insist on still matters.

He said that private revenge is not the same as public defence. Those who have public authority may, in some cases, use force to protect the common good. There must be a genuinely just reason, not a hunger for land or a wish to settle scores. The aim must be peace, not the pleasure of winning. War is a tragedy and a moral danger even when it can be defended.

Augustine also knew how easily a just cause becomes an excuse. He wrote as a man who had seen what violence does to souls. He did not treat war as a Christian sport.

A Small Reflection

Even justified defence must never become revenge.

Augustine's warning is simple. A cause can begin as protection and end as hatred. The moment we start to enjoy the harm done to the other side, we have already left the path the Church is trying to keep open.

Peace is not only what we hope for after the fighting. It has to shape the intention before anyone lifts a weapon.

A short prayer

Lord, give those who must defend the innocent a heart that still wants peace. Amen.

Chapter 4

The three questions Saint Thomas asked

In the thirteenth century Saint Thomas Aquinas gathered the older teaching and asked three basic questions. He did not write the modern Catechism. He gave the Church a clearer way to think.

First: who has the authority to use force? Private people cannot start wars for their own purposes. The decision belongs to those who have lawful responsibility for the common good.

Second: is there a genuinely just cause? Force cannot be used simply for land, wealth, revenge, prestige or national pride.

Third: what is the intention? The aim must be justice and peace, not hatred or cruelty.

Later Catholic thinkers added more questions as weapons and politics changed. In the sixteenth century Francisco de Vitoria used this tradition to challenge claims that a Christian empire could do as it liked with other peoples. The point of the questions was never to make war look respectable. The point was to limit it.

A Small Reflection

Before supporting a war, ask who is acting, why, and for what purpose.

Those three questions still work in ordinary speech. Who decided this? What wrong are they answering? Do they actually want peace, or do they want to win at any cost?

If I cannot answer those questions, I am not thinking as a Catholic. I am only choosing a side.

A short prayer

Lord, keep our judgments slow, and do not let us bless what we have not first examined. Amen.

Chapter 5

What the Catechism actually says

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, in paragraph 2309, gives four strict conditions for legitimate defence by military force. All four must be present at the same time.

First, the damage done by the attacker must be lasting, grave and certain. Second, all other ways of stopping it must have proved impractical or useless. Third, there must be a serious chance of success. Fourth, the use of arms must not cause evils worse than the evil being resisted. The Catechism adds that modern weapons weigh very heavily on that last condition.

The judgment belongs to those responsible for the common good. That does not mean ordinary people have nothing to think about. It means a slogan on the street is not enough.

The Catechism does not call this a permission for war. It begins earlier. All citizens and all governments must work to avoid war. Legitimate defence is an exception under hard conditions. If those conditions are missing, the exception is not there.

A Small Reflection

The conditions are deliberately difficult because human life matters.

If the list were easy, it would not be Catholic. The Church is trying to protect the innocent on both sides: those who would be destroyed if no one defended them, and those who would be destroyed if force were used carelessly.

A Catholic who finds the conditions inconvenient has understood them. They are meant to be inconvenient.

A short prayer

Lord of life, make us slow to bless the use of force, and brave when the innocent have no other help. Amen.

Chapter 6

Soldiers and the commandments

Catechism 2310 says that people who serve their country honourably in the armed forces are servants of the security and freedom of nations. If they do their duty well, they truly help the common good and the keeping of peace.

A uniform does not make a person holy. It also does not make a person sinful. Military service is a form of public work. Like other public work, it can be done well or badly.

War does not cancel the commandments. Soldiers remain responsible for the moral choices they make. A soldier may never deliberately attack innocent people. A soldier may not torture prisoners. A soldier may not take part in genocide or other grave crimes. An immoral order does not become moral because a superior gave it.

There are two different sets of questions. Before force is used we ask whether it is justified at all. During a conflict we ask what remains forbidden even if defence is justified. Mixing those questions causes confusion. The deliberate killing of civilians is not merely a problem of balance. It is morally forbidden.

A Small Reflection

A uniform does not remove a Christian's conscience.

Honour in service includes the face of the enemy. The Church can thank a soldier for protecting people without pretending that every order is righteous.

If I treat every soldier as a saint, I have stopped taking conscience seriously. If I treat every soldier as guilty, I have stopped taking the duty of defence seriously.

A short prayer

Christ the King, guard the honour of those who serve, and remind them that honour includes the face of the enemy. Amen.

Chapter 7

When conscience refuses the weapon

Conscience is where we judge what we should do before God. It is not the same as a strong feeling. Conscience has to be formed. We must seek the truth, pray, learn the Church's teaching, and avoid simply calling our preferences "conscience".

The Church does not say that a sincere feeling automatically makes a decision right. She does say that a person who, after honest search, cannot bear arms must be treated justly. Catechism 2311 asks public authorities to make fair provision for those who refuse to bear arms for reasons of conscience. Such people remain obliged to serve the human community in some other way.

Saint Martin of Tours is remembered both as a soldier and as a man who later refused to fight. According to his ancient biographer, Sulpicius Severus, Martin said he was a soldier of Christ and offered to stand unarmed before the enemy. The Church has honoured that witness without saying that every Christian must copy it in the same way.

Serving peace can mean carrying a weapon under strict conditions. It can also mean refusing one. The Church leaves room for both, because she takes conscience seriously and because she takes the innocent seriously as well.

A Small Reflection

Serving peace can sometimes mean carrying a weapon and sometimes refusing one.

The Church does not romanticise either path. She asks for a formed conscience, not a slogan. She asks objectors still to serve the human community. She asks soldiers still to keep the commandments.

If I only admire the person who fights, or only admire the person who refuses, I have made a poster. The Church is trying to make disciples.

A short prayer

Lord, form our consciences in the truth, and give courage both to those who serve in arms and to those who cannot. Amen.

Chapter 8

The cloak that named the chapel

The cloak is the reason this book has its title. It is also the reason many languages have the word chaplain.

According to Sulpicius Severus, who wrote Martin's life while some who knew him were still alive, Martin was still a soldier and not yet baptised. He was a catechumen, a person preparing for baptism. One winter, at the gate of Amiens, he met a poor man with almost nothing on. Martin had already given away what he could. What he still had was his military cloak. He drew his sword, cut the cloak in two, and gave half to the beggar. That night he saw Christ dressed in the half he had given. He heard the Lord say that Martin, still only a catechumen, had clothed him.

After Martin died, the cloak was kept as a relic. The small place that housed it came to be called a cappella, a chapel, from the word for the cloak. The priest who looked after the relic was the cappellanus, the chaplain. That is the unexpected root of two ordinary Catholic words.

Martin later became a monk and a bishop. He is remembered on 11 November. He is a friend of soldiers and also a patron of people who refuse to fight. The same life holds both facts. That is why the Church keeps telling it.

A Small Reflection

Before Martin became famous as a bishop, he saw Christ in a cold stranger.

The interesting fact about chapel and chaplain is not a word game. It means that a piece of mercy on a winter road became the name for a small house of prayer, and then the name for the priest who goes with people in danger.

If I remember only the sword, I have forgotten the beggar. If I remember only the beggar, I have forgotten that Martin was still wearing a uniform when he cut the cloak.

A short prayer

Saint Martin, who cut your cloak for a stranger and later refused to fight, pray for soldiers, for the poor, and for those who must choose. Amen.

Chapter 9

What is never allowed in war

Even if defence is justified, many acts remain forbidden. The Church and human reason both say that the moral law does not take a holiday during armed conflict.

The wounded, prisoners and people who are not fighting must be treated humanely. Torture is forbidden. Genocide is forbidden. The deliberate killing of civilians is forbidden. An order to do these things does not become moral because it comes from above.

In 1139 the Second Lateran Council forbade, under pain of anathema, “that murderous art of crossbowmen and archers” to be used against Christians and Catholics. The ban was limited. It did not speak about every enemy. Armies did not generally obey it. It is not the medieval version of the modern teaching on nuclear weapons. It remains an interesting fact: even in the age of knights the Church tried, clumsily, to limit certain ways of killing.

The modern teaching is clearer. The Second Vatican Council condemned acts of war aimed indiscriminately at whole cities or large areas with their inhabitants. That is not a problem of balance. It is a crime against God and man.

A Small Reflection

The enemy never stops being human.

War tempts us to divide the world into people who count and people who do not. The Church refuses that division. A prisoner still has a face. A child in the other city still has a soul.

If I only ask whether our side is allowed to fight, I have not yet asked the question that matters during the fighting: what may never be done, even to win.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, who told Peter to put away his sword, keep us from calling cruelty necessary. Amen.

Chapter 10

When the weapon is too large

Modern weapons have made the Church more cautious about claims that war can meet the old conditions.

The Church absolutely condemns deliberate attacks that do not distinguish between soldiers and civilians. Vatican II said so about the destruction of whole cities. That teaching comes first.

Saint John XXIII, in *Pacem in Terris*, said that nuclear weapons must be banned. The Catechism speaks with grave reserve about deterrence and condemns the arms race. Recent popes have become even more critical. In *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis warned that the destructive power of modern weapons makes it very hard today to apply older ideas of a just war. He said that war is not a solution.

Saint John Paul II said that war is always a defeat for humanity. That phrase names the tragedy. It does not mean the Church denies every right of legitimate defence. It means that even when defence can be justified, something human has already failed.

The Church does not bless the destruction of cities. She does not treat the arms race as a form of wisdom. She asks the nations to find a peace that does not rest on the threat of ending the world.

A Small Reflection

Some weapons threaten innocent life on a scale that changes the moral question.

The fourth condition in the Catechism already said that modern means of destruction weigh very heavily. Later popes have spoken even more plainly. A Catholic who still talks about war as if the weapons had not changed is not keeping up with the Church.

Peace that depends on being able to destroy cities is a peace the Church will not praise.

A short prayer

Queen of Peace, obtain for the nations a courage that does not need to end the world in order to feel safe. Amen.

Chapter 11

The priest who goes with soldiers

In Catholic law a chaplain is a priest given pastoral care of a particular group. A Catholic military chaplain is therefore a priest. Armed forces also have chaplains from other Christian communities and from other religions. Those ministries are not the same as Catholic priesthood, but they too try to stay with people in danger.

The word chaplain, as we have seen, grew from the priest who kept Saint Martin's cloak. The work is older than the word. A priest goes with soldiers because Christ does not abandon people in danger. He hears confessions. He says Mass. He anoints the dying. He writes to families. He tells the truth about what the commandments still require.

He is not a mascot for the campaign. He is not there to bless every order. He is there because baptised people in uniform still need the sacraments, and because the dying still need a priest.

A Small Reflection

A priest goes with soldiers because Christ does not abandon people in danger.

Chaplaincy is not a decoration on a parade. It is the Church refusing to leave her children when the work is ugly. The same Church who asks hard questions about war also kneels beside the wounded.

If the stole is only used to bless the flag, it has forgotten Martin's cloak.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, go with those who serve, and keep their priests faithful to you rather than to any campaign. Amen.

Chapter 12

Coming home after war

Many people return from war carrying memories and wounds that are hard to live with. Not everyone does. People's experiences differ. It is not true that war damages everyone in the same way. It is true that coming home in the body is not always the end of coming home.

Painful memories, grief and post-traumatic stress are not automatically sins. Moral injury and personal guilt are not the same as medical trauma. The Sacrament of Reconciliation forgives sins. It is not a medical treatment for trauma. A veteran may need prayer, the sacraments, friendship, family, a parish that does not use him as a symbol — and sometimes professional psychological or medical help.

A Catholic who is conscious of serious sin can seek God's forgiveness in Confession. Painful memories are not, by themselves, that kind of sin. Do not ask God only to take memories away. Ask him for healing, peace, forgiveness and rest.

An ordinary Catholic can do simple things. Write to someone who serves. Help a family while a parent is away. Sit with a veteran without demanding a story. Pray for the dead of every side. Work for peace where you actually live. None of that replaces the teaching in the earlier chapters. It is how the teaching comes home.

A Small Reflection

Coming home physically is not always the end of coming home.

A parish is not a clinic. It is also not a parade ground. It can be a place where a soldier sits without being used as a symbol, and where a person who refused to fight is not treated as a coward.

Mercy after war means telling the truth about what was done, asking for the forgiveness that is needed, and getting the help that trauma requires. Those are different kinds of help. Mixing them helps nobody.

A short prayer

Jesus, bring healing to those who have come home, rest to those who cannot forget, and peace to the living and the dead. Amen.

A last word

The Church loves peace because she loves people. She also knows that the innocent can be attacked. She will not give either truth away.

If you remember only a few things, remember these. Peace comes first. Defence, if it is ever allowed, sits under strict conditions. A uniform does not cancel the commandments. Conscience must be formed, and those who cannot bear arms must still be able to serve. Martin cut his cloak for a stranger and later refused to fight. The words chapel and chaplain grew from that cloak. Some acts are never allowed, even to win. Some weapons have made the old questions harder. A priest goes with soldiers because Christ does. Coming home may take longer than the journey on the map.

The cloak was cut in two. One half covered a poor man. The other half stayed on a soldier's shoulders. The Church is still trying to keep both halves in view.

A prayer

Saint Martin of Tours, pray for us. Saint Joan of Arc, pray for us. All you holy men and women who served, or who refused to serve, for the love of Christ, pray for us. Lord Jesus Christ, give peace in our days. Amen.

A word of thanks

These pages are free to read.

If they have helped you, a gift through Silent Homilies is welcome. Please give only if you wish, and only if you can. It is never a charge for a blessing.

Printing this book

This booklet is designed in A5 format.

For best results print double-sided on A5 paper, flipped on the short edge. Recommended paper: 80–100 gsm.

Written to be read in one or two sittings.