

A few weeks ago the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops sent a letter to the President of the United States. Bishop Wilton Gregory asked President George Bush not to use any preemptive, unilateral military force to overthrow the government of Iraq. He wrote on behalf of the bishops' administrative committee.

American Catholic bishops are concerned that this situation does not meet the criteria for a just war. Last year, after the September 11th attacks, the bishops supported the use of force against Afghanistan hoping it would be part of a broader, nonmilitary effort to deal with terrorism.

Bishop Gregory's letter challenges the use of force against Iraq because of several criteria from Catholic just war theory. For example, to go to war, the cause must be just, as when an aggressor inflicts lasting damage. The bishops have not seen credible evidence linking Iraq to the September 11th attacks.

A just war is waged by legitimate authority. It needs broad consensus among the people of the nation going to war, as well as international support. Most nations agree that Saddam Hussein must end his evil activities - like repression, making threats to neighbors, supporting terrorism, and developing weapons of mass destruction - and he must comply with the resolutions of the United Nations. But we have no international support for how this is done.

A just war carries a probability of success. But the future is unpredictable in Iraq, according to Bishop Gregory's letter. War could make life more difficult for the Iraqi people and hinder peace and security throughout the Middle East. It could hurt our good efforts to rebuild Afghanistan and strengthen the coalition against terrorism.

Finally, a just war protects noncombatants. But war with Iraq could have terrible consequences for civilians who have already suffered too much.

The bishops promote other solutions through diplomacy, the resumption of inspections, a military embargo, economic sanctions that do not threaten innocent Iraqis, and promoting the work of Iraqis who want genuine democratic alternatives to government. It is hard work, but our bishops have urged our president to seek high moral ground.

In Jesus' parable, a landowner entrusts his vineyard to workers who steal the crops and rebel against the owner, killing his servants and his son. Jesus was targeting the chief priests and elders of the people with this parable: They are like the tenant farmers. They received God's vineyard, Israel, but they killed the prophets and they're about to kill God's son. If the accusations against Hussein are correct, he is also like the tenant, entrusted with a corner of God's vineyard, but abusing his rights and privileges while killing the innocent. There are situations in our lives where justice must be done, when crimes must be redressed. But we do not have the right at any level to commit injustice against those who harm us. To restore justice we act with justice.