

For the past two weeks American armed forces have engaged in acts of war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The Catholic Church promotes peace. Two days after the September 11 attack, Pope John Paul II said in reference to the terrorism, "I pray that this inhuman act will awaken in the hearts of all the world's peoples a firm resolve to reject the ways of violence, to combat everything that sows hatred and division within the human family, and to work for the dawn of a new era of international cooperation inspired by the highest ideals of solidarity, justice, and peace."

Later, the pope's spokesperson, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, said this: "Sometimes it is more prudent to act rather than to be passive Sometimes self-defense implies an action which may lead to the death of a person Either people who have carried out a horrendous crime are put in a position where they can do no further harm, by being handed over and put into custody, or the principle of self-defense applies with all its consequences." The pope is making appeals for nations to seek justice and peace, while his official spokesperson has clarified that there are occasions when one legitimately takes up force.

In the tradition of the Catholic Church we have a thing called the just war theory. It puts into words when it is permissible for one nation to take up arms against another. The bishops of the United States reiterated these principles in 1993. They listed seven criteria for the just use of lethal force. Here's what they are and here's what they mean:

- 1) Just cause: A nation may use force only to correct a grave, public evil, for example, massive violation of the basic rights of whole populations;
- 2) Comparative justice: There may be rights and wrongs on all sides of a conflict, but to use force the injustice suffered by one side must significantly outweigh that suffered by the other;
- 3) Legitimate authority: only constituted public authorities may use deadly force or wage war; a nation may declare war, not a vigilante group, not guerillas;
- 4) Right intention: force may be used only in a truly just cause and only for that purpose;
- 5) Probability of success: arms may not be used in a hopeless cause or where excessive measures are required for success;
- 6) Proportionality: the good you achieve must outweigh the destruction from the use of force;
- 7) Last resort: force may be used only after all peaceful alternatives have been seriously tried and exhausted.

Those are the criteria for a just war as explained by the American bishops almost ten years ago.

These are stringent conditions, but it appears that our circumstances meet them. Still, an attack on civilians must be avoided. We may not inflict unfair damage to civilian life and property, and the aim of our conflict needs to promote peace with justice, not acts of vengeance and indiscriminate violence. It is important that the world be protected from terrorism in all its forms.

Today's first reading concerns a conflict in the mid-east between the people of Moses and the people of Amalek. As long as Moses prays, the people of God win. In today's gospel, Jesus praises prayers for justice. As a church, we promote peace. The business of war does not benefit us, even though, at this terrible time, it seems necessary. Let us keep our hands lifted in prayer that wars may cease, terror may end, and peace will reign.