

The Catholic Church is often criticized as rigorist, unrealistic, and unbending, especially in regard to its teaching on sexuality. How could anyone, we hear over and over again, possibly live up to the Church's demands concerning masturbation, artificial contraception, or sex outside of marriage? Moreover, every poll that comes out suggests that increasing numbers of Catholics themselves don't subscribe to these moral demands. Few expect the Church to acquiesce to the moral laxity of the surrounding culture, but even many faithful Catholics think that the Church ought at least to soften its moral doctrine, adjusting a bit to the times to become a tad more realistic.

I wonder whether I might address these questions a bit obliquely, shifting the focus from the sexual arena into another area of moral concern. The Church's teaching on just war is just as rigorist as its teaching on sexuality. In order for a war to be considered justified, a number of criteria have to be simultaneously met. These include declaration by a competent authority, a legitimating cause, proportionality between the good to be attained and the cost of the war, that military intervention is a last resort, etc. Furthermore, in the actual waging of a war, the two great criteria of



proportionality and discrimination have to be met. The latter means, of course, that those engaged in the war must distinguish carefully between combatants and non-combatants, targeting only the former. If these criteria are strictly applied, it is difficult indeed to find any war that is morally justifiable. Many would hold that the Second World War met most if not all of the criteria for entering into a war, but even its most ardent moral defenders would have a difficult time justifying, in every detail, the waging of that war. For example, the carpet bombings of Dresden, Frankfurt, and Tokyo, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocents, certainly violated the principles of discrimination and proportionality. Even more egregious examples of this violation, of course, were the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Catholic moral

theology would characterize all of these actions as intrinsically evil, that is to say, incapable of being justified under any circumstances.

In the wake of the atomic bombings in 1945, the English moral philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe made the Catholic case vociferously in a number of public debates. She went so far as to protest President Harry Truman's reception of an honorary degree at Oxford, on the grounds that a great university should not honor a man responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocents. In answer to Anscombe's criticisms, many Americans—Catholics included—used



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frankly consequentialist forms of moral reasoning, arguing that the atomic bombings undoubtedly saved untold numbers of lives, both American and Japanese, and effectively brought a terrible war to an end. And I am sure that a poll of American Catholics conducted, say, in late 1945 would have revealed overwhelming support for the bombings. But does anyone really think that the Church ought to lower its standards in regard to just war? Does anyone really think that the difficulty of following the Church's norms in this arena should conduce toward a softening of those norms?

Here is the wonderful and unnerving truth: the Catholic Church's job is to call people to sanctity and to equip them for living saintly lives. Its mission is not to produce nice people, or people with hearts of gold or people with good intentions; its mission is to produce saints, people of heroic virtue. Are the moral demands regarding warfare extravagant, over the top, or unrealistic? Well, of course they are! They are the moral norms that ought to guide those striving for real holiness. To dial down the demands because they are hard and most people have a hard time realizing them is to compromise the very meaning and purpose of the Church.

Now let us move back to the Church's sexual morality. Is it exceptionally difficult to live up to all of the demands in this arena? Do the vast majority of people fall short of realizing the ideal? Do polls of Catholics consistently reveal that many if not most Catholics would welcome a softening of sexual norms? Well, of course. But none of these data prove much of anything, beyond the fact that living a heroically virtuous life is difficult. As in regard to just war, a compromising of the ideal here would represent an abdication of the Church's fundamental responsibility of equipping the saints.

However, here is the flip-side. The Catholic Church couples its extraordinary moral demand with an extraordinarily lenient penitential system. Suppose the pilot of the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima (I believe he was a Catholic) came into a confessional box and, in an attitude of sincere repentance, confessed the sin of contributing to the deaths of 100,000 innocent people. The priest would certainly give him counsel and perhaps assign a severe penance, but he would then say, "I absolve you of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." And that man's sins, before God, would be wiped away. Period.

The Church calls people to be not spiritual mediocrities, but great saints, and this is why its moral ideals are so stringent. Yet the Church also mediates the infinite mercy of God to those who fail to live up to that ideal (which means practically everyone). This is why its forgiveness is so generous and so absolute. To grasp both of these extremes is to understand the Catholic approach to morality."