

Military action against the Islamic State group?/ Protestant church once a year

Q: How does a Christian react to a terrorist group like the Islamic State group (IS)? Praying for their salvation is important, but it may not be sufficient.

Negotiating with them seems impossible, since IS is evidently determined to kill anyone who opposes their ideology. (We have seen this done by beheadings, bombings and other barbaric acts of violence.)

President Donald Trump has vowed to defeat IS through military means. Can a Christian support such a policy? (Edison, New Jersey)

A: Up until very recently, the traditional answer from the perspective of Christian morality would have applied the church's long-held "just war doctrine."

That teaching, first enunciated by the fourth-century theologian St. Augustine, is detailed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (No. 2309). The four conditions that would allow a military response to an unjust aggressor are these:

"The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave and certain; all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective; there must be serious prospects of success; and the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition."

But a Vatican conference in April 2016 has called into question the present validity of this just war teaching. That three-day symposium was jointly sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the Catholic peace organization Pax Christi International, and, at its conclusion, the 80 participants voiced their opinion that today "there is no 'just war.'"

That opinion seems largely based on the power of nuclear weaponry, which does not discriminate between combatants and noncombatants, and on the final provision of the just war doctrine, which holds that any use of weapons of war must never result in even greater evils.

All of this seems to argue for making military response an absolutely last possible resort. It also brings into play what Pope Francis told journalists in 2014 on a flight back to Rome from South Korea. Asked about Islamic State militants in Iraq, the pope seemed to endorse the United Nations as the competent authority to determine the legitimacy of military action, saying, “A single nation cannot judge how to stop this, how to stop an unjust aggressor.”

Q: My daughter is married and has four children. Her husband is not a Catholic, but he often attends Mass at the local Catholic parish with his wife and children. But at Christmas time, when they are visiting his parents, they all go together to the Lutheran church.

My daughter says God understands that family is important and that, especially at Christmas, they should all worship together. I worry, though, about the message this sends to the children — that it's OK to go to the church of a different denomination and not receive the Eucharist. What is the right answer? (Rockwell City, Iowa)

A: Here is what the Catechism of the Catholic Church has to say: “The faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness, the care of infants) or dispensed by their own pastor. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin” (No. 2181).

Other situations commonly presented by church moralists include the necessity to work to support one's family, personal sickness or the care of the sick, necessary travel — all of which might excuse a person on a particular occasion.

So your daughter's pastor might well recommend that, on the occasion of an annual visit to her husband's parents, the value of family harmony could allow for attendance at a Lutheran service rather than a Catholic Mass on that one particular day.

If the pastor agrees, and depending on the age of the children, your daughter might explain to them that, as Catholics, they believe in (and are grateful for) the importance of regular Sunday Mass but that, on this one occasion, it seems important for all of them to worship God together as a family.

Questions may be sent to Father Kenneth Doyle at askfatherdoyle@gmail.com and 30 Columbia Circle Dr., Albany, New York 12203.

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