

Can a Christian fight in war? If a Catholic soldier killed someone in battle, would they have to go to Confession?

The answer is: it depends.

We have to understand that, as the late Pope John Paul II stated, “War is always a defeat for humanity”. Catholics are not called to be “hawks” or “warmongers”. In fact, there have been many faithful Catholics who have been pacifists. They are followers of Jesus who refuse to respond with violence for any reason. These men and women are often brave and honorable and saintly. Insofar as they choose pacifism for a noble purpose rather than a selfish one (e.g. to avoid danger or to preserve their own life), their decision is to be respected and praised. Pope Benedict even praised a certain kind of Christian pacificism a few years ago.

And yet, ever since the 4th century, the Catholic Church has understood that there are times when a nation is justified in going to war. Now, very strict conditions have been laid down in order for a war to be declared just, and they must be closely observed, but a good Catholic may also be a good soldier. These conditions can be found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 2309.

The Second Vatican Council stated, “Those who are pledged to the service of their country as members of its armed forces should regard themselves as agents of security and freedom on behalf of their people. As long as they fulfill this role properly, they are making a genuine contribution to the establishment of peace.” (Gaudium et Spes, No. 79). So no, a soldier does not necessarily need to confess his killing of other soldiers in combat. Provided that the war is just, this killing is not a sin as it is not the taking of an innocent human life; it is stopping an unjust aggressor for the sake of the common good.

And yet, this does not mean that all is fair in war. Killing can be done “improperly”.

In fact, the dropping of the atomic bomb was a condemnable act on the part of the United States during the Second World War. It involved the direct and indiscriminate killing of non-combatants.

As I write this column, it is the feast day of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. Among the many good things he did during his lifetime, one of them was preaching in favor of the Crusades. This does not disqualify him from sainthood. Rather, he was doing his duty. The Crusades were, in large part, a defensive war against the unjust aggression of Muslim invaders. Much of the Crusades could be considered to have been “just”. But during those Crusades, a number of Christian soldiers behaved badly...sinfully. They did not always act justly even as they were engaged in warfare and on one occasion, slaughtered all of the inhabitants of Jerusalem in re-taking that city.

The Crusaders at times stepped over the restrictions placed on them by the Church and killed civilians or tortured their enemies. For those sins, they had to repent and be forgiven, for those are indeed sins. But “merely” to kill one’s enemies in a just war is no sin, and there is no need for a soldier to repent or confess those actions.

Even so, I can imagine many a soldier who might want to talk about their experience and seek trusted spiritual guidance after returning from battle. The toll that warfare can take on the soul and psyche of a person ought not to be minimized. Some (not all) may even need a degree of healing in their interior life after.

Going to battle for the sake of a just cause is noble. It is noble in the same way that defending one’s family from an intruder is noble. But it is not pretty. It is not glorious. But it can be virtuous if done properly: according to the teachings of the Church, and with a formed and attuned conscience. But it is ugly. We ought to be extremely grateful for those soldiers who have, and continue to, risk their lives doing this very difficult service.