

Dear Parishioners of Saint Paul and Saint Mark,

“Thou Shall not Kill” is not a suggestion; it is a commandment from God. Because the Catholic Church considers herself a guardian of the right interpretation of the word of God, and because war is connected to this commandment, I wish to share with you some of the Catholic Church’s teachings on war.

On the inherent dignity of military service

In Luke 3:14, a group of soldiers ask John the Baptist “what should we do?”, to which John the Baptist responds: “Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.” John the Baptist did not command these soldiers to abandon their profession, and his response illustrates how, throughout the history of the Church, service in the military has been upheld as a vocation and an activity that is fully compatible with the Christian life.

At the Second Vatican Council, the dignity of military service was described in the following terms: “Those who devote themselves to the military service of their country should regard themselves as the agents of security and freedom of peoples. As long as they fulfill this role properly, they are making a genuine contribution to the establishment of peace” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 79). Many Catholics have served as these agents of security and freedom, and the Church goes to great efforts to serve and protect them.

In our own country, we have an entire Archdiocese dedicated to serving all persons in the various branches of the military, called the Archdiocese of Military Services. A primary duty of this Archdiocese is to coordinate Catholic chaplains who, in cooperation with the US government, provide spiritual and pastoral care to all those in the military (as well as veterans in VA hospitals) who need the sacraments, counsel, and a spiritual father. In our own Archdiocese, we are especially proud of one native son, Fr. Thomas Scecina (the namesake of Scecina Memorial High School in Indianapolis) who was awarded a Purple Heart for his distinguished service as a chaplain during World War II. Fr. Scecina suffered greatly with his fellow soldiers as a prisoner of war for two years in Japan, but he tragically died in a prisoner ship that was struck by torpedoes fired from a US submarine, and Fr. Scecina spent his final moments giving sacramental absolution to many soldiers who were soon to be drowned in the chaos. The Catholic Church celebrates the sacrifices of priests like Fr. Scecina because the Church desires to support (and even to die for) members of the military who are acting as agents of security and freedom.

In Perry County, we are especially proud of our parishioners who have served and who currently serve in the military. St. Mark and St. Paul cemeteries are filled with tombstones covered with military accolades that are a badge of honor for the individual and for our parishes. Besides these parishioners, there are other famous Catholics who served in the military: Saint Joan of Arc was sent by God to lead a war against English invaders; Saint Sebastian was a member of the praetorian guard and is the patron saint of soldiers; J.R.R. Tolkien was an English Catholic and author of *The Lord of the Rings*, a mythology that he began while he was engaged in trench warfare during World War I; Father Emil Kapuan was a military chaplain from Kansas who was awarded the Medal of Freedom for his heroic service in prison camps; Pope John Paul II’s father was a

lieutenant in the Polish Army; Pope Benedict XVI was drafted and served in the German army during World War II and spent time as a military prisoner in a POW camp run by allied forces. These persons serve as reminders of the dignity of military service in essentially all circumstances, so long as a soldier maintains basic normative principles like those described by John the Baptist.

On the horrors of all war, both just and unjust

Despite the inherent dignity of military service, it is the common judgment of mankind that war is brutal, de-humanizing, and a horrific scourge to the human race. This fact was summarily described by General Sherman of the Union Army who stated the following: “I am tired and sick of war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, for vengeance, for desolation. War is hell.” A plethora of testimonies abound to this same idea: that war is hell, that war is evil, and that every effort should be made to avoid war. Every child whose mother or father is killed in combat, every mother who mourns the death of her drafted son, every town that is destroyed, every conscience that is forever stained: these are just some of the sad proofs of the intrinsic evil of war.

The Catholic Church agrees with this consensus of mankind. Thus the Fathers at the Second Vatican Council stated that “recent wars have wrought physical and moral havoc on our world” and that “the fierce character of [modern] warfare threatens to lead the combatants to a savagery far surpassing that of the past” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 79). It is this “savagery”, this “physical and moral havoc” of war, that motivates all people of good will, including those in the military, to work for the elimination of all war. Christ summarized this motivation in a beatitude: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” We need such peacemakers in our world, today and always.

On whether it is possible to uphold both the dignity of military service while simultaneously despising the horrors of war

It may seem contradictory to uphold the dignity of military service while simultaneously despising war. But this paradox is not created by popes; it is taught by many heroic soldiers.

For example, Stephen Ambrose writes in *Band of Brothers* about the men of Easy Company of the 101st Airborne Division who fought at the beaches of Normandy, who received a Presidential Unit Citation for their actions during the battle of the bulge, and who captured Hitler’s Eagles Nest at Berchtesgaden in 1945. Ambrose’s book concludes by describing what the men of Easy Company learned at the end of their three years of heroic military service:

They thought the Army was boring, unfeeling, and chicken, and hated it. They found combat to be ugliness, destruction, and death, and hated it. Anything was better than the blood and carnage, the grime and filth, the impossible demands made on the body – anything, that is, except letting down their buddies.

They also found in combat the closest brotherhood they ever knew. They found selflessness. They found they could love the other guy in their foxhole more than themselves. They found that, in war, men who loved life would give their lives for them.¹

So yes, it is certainly possible to uphold the dignity of military service while simultaneously rejecting, hating, and despising war. This is not a paradox of Catholic teaching; it is a paradox proclaimed by some of America’s most decorated soldiers.

In fact, the brutality of war is what makes service in the military almost synonymous with heroic service. Those who take up military service are involved in an activity which may demand much more than the loss of their life, for it may involve them in grave moral conflicts; it may cause them to witness the barbaric destruction of their best friends; it may induce physical strains that exceed torture; it may lead them to being captured and literally tortured; it may leave them without limbs and without the capacity to function in society upon their return home. There is an intrinsic dignity bestowed on all persons who accept the real possibility of experiencing such tragedies from war, but this dignity is not to be confused as respect for war itself.

On the distinction between aggressive and defensive action in war

According to universal moral principles, there are several elements which increase the moral repugnancy of a war, one of the most grave being the instigation of war. *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 79) references this principle, teaching that “it is one thing to undertake military action for the just defense of the people, and something else again to seek the subjugation of other nations.” Because war is a scourge to human life and communities, those who instigate war for the subjugation of other nations are especially guilty of grave moral violations. Every culture has criteria to justify lethal action (think of our self-*defense* laws), and although these criteria vary by culture, such criteria almost always favor the defender and condemn the aggressor.

This principle of being critical of lethal aggressors is behind Pope Leo’s statement that Jesus “does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war, but rejects them.”² Pope Leo is appealing to the universal moral principle which is especially critical of unjust aggressors who ‘wage’ war and use military services in ways that exceed the proportional threat of evil. Pope Leo is teaching us with great clarity that such wars are despised in the eyes of Christ, and there is plenty within Scripture, Tradition, and common moral principles to support this claim.

On the specific judgement of particular wars

The Catholic Church traditionally does not give extensive commentary about any particular war, refusing to place too much blame on one side or another. However, the Church is very clear about moral principles, and the Church invites all Catholics to apply these principles to each particular case to help render a judgment that is in harmony with the mind of God and not divorced from God.

That being said, popes do pray for the end to particular wars. Pope Francis often prayed for the end of the war in Ukraine, of the war in Sudan, of war in Myanmar, and many others. This past Sunday (12 April 2026), Pope Leo prayed for the end of war in Ukraine, in Lebanon, and in Sudan, stating that “the principle of humanity, inscribed in the conscience of every person and recognized in international law, entails a moral obligation to protect the civilian population from the horrific effects of war.”³

Our own country has recently entered a war with Iran. Some well-informed authorities believe that this war in Iran is justified and necessary for the defense of some essential good, while other well-informed authorities believe that this is a war instigated by the United States for unjustifiable ends. I invite each of you to learn about the particulars and form your conscience according to what you learn.

What is certain is this: that like the evils of euthanasia, abortion, arbitrary imprisonment and deportation (see *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 27), the evil of *all* war is lamented by the Catholic Church. Without placing extensive blame on one party or another, the Church has engaged in persistent prayers for respectful dialogue instead of war in Iran.

On the response of a Catholic to the evils of war

War is just one of many evils afflicting our current culture, so our duties do not look much different during a time of war. Here are some of the essential duties:

1. Pay your taxes
2. Go to Church every Sunday
3. Love the poor and vulnerable, especially your children
4. Vote, and encourage others to vote
5. Pray for all political leaders
6. Despise every form of violent resistance to legitimate authority, whether civil authority or ecclesiastical authority
7. Register for the draft when required, and show up if you get drafted
8. Pray for your enemies, and do good to those who hate you
9. Follow your conscience as you would follow Christ himself

I especially hope we will remember the example of Pope Pius XII, the pontiff during the horrors of World War II who invoked Saint Michael as a special intercessor to help bring an end to all war. Thus he prayed, “may the Angel of peace, Saint Michael, be sent from heaven into our homes, and may this messenger of peace banish into hell *all* wars, the cause of so many tears.”⁴ Pope Pius XII is one of many modern popes who believed that the best way to honor those who serve in the military is not by propogating wars, but by banishing wars. This objective cannot be achieved without our prayers.

St. Michael the Archangel, pray for us!

Fr. Tony Hollowell

¹ Stephen Ambrose, *Band of Brothers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 289.

² Pope Leo XIV, *Palm Sunday Homily*, 29 March 2026. Here is the quote in context: “Brothers and sisters, this is our God: *Jesus, the King of Peace*, who rejects war, whom no one can use to justify war. He does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war, but rejects them, saying: ‘Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen: your hands are full of blood’ (*Is* 1:15).”

³ Pope Leo XIV, *Sunday Angelus*, 12 April 2026.

⁴ Pope Pius XII, *Discorsi e Radiomessagi di Sua Santità Pio XII* (Milan: Editrice Vita e Pensiero, 1961), 112.