JUST WAR

KAI: All right. For $2,000, Libby, what completes the title of Leo Tolstoy's epic 1867 novel, “Blank and Peace?” Is it A: kiwifruit; B: indefatigability; C: Warren Beatty?

LIBBY: Oh, I like him.

KAI: Or D: war. Take your time.

LIBBY: Oh, this is easy. I read this in high school. The answer is D: war.

KAI: The card says you're correct, but is war ever the answer?

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LIBBY: Hi, I'm Libby.

KAI: And I'm Kai. Welcome to Catholic Central.

LIBBY: War. From the times of Cain and Abel, all the way up to today, humans have been fighting and killing each other.

KAI: And for just as long, people have been trying to figure out the morality of war.

LIBBY: We see conflict in the world, and it's natural to wonder whether war is the answer, or if it is ever the answer.

KAI: So how does the Catholic Church think about war and peace?

LIBBY: Let's start with an important distinction. Peace is more than just the absence of war. When the Church talks about peace, it means genuine harmony, where people and nations are in a state of right relationship.

KAI: Yeah. Isn't everyone just looking for the right relationship?

LIBBY: When Catholics talk about right relationship, we mean a state where people aren't exploiting, oppressing or manipulating each other.

KAI: To have real peace, you need justice, where people respect each other's rights and meet their own responsibilities. Jesus boiled this down to a simple principle. "Love your neighbor as yourself."

LIBBY: Catholics believe that, through God, even the hardest hearts can be turned away from violence. This is why the Church prays together for peace around the world.

KAI: Now, hang on a minute.

LIBBY: Yeah?

KAI: You do know that there are some terrible wars going on right now, right? Well, if I didn't know better, I'd say that God wasn't answering our prayers for world peace.

LIBBY: This is an important point. When we pray for peace, we're not praying that some giant hand comes down and swats missiles out of the sky. Although that would be pretty cool. Praying for peace is opening our own hearts to God's love and asking the same for our fellow human beings.

KAI: That's why the Church also works actively in the world to create peace. These pro-peace activities include standing up for human rights, supporting disarmament, and promoting social and economic development to target the root causes of violence and war.

LIBBY: Also, the Vatican has formal diplomatic relations with about 180 countries and has mediated many crises to prevent war, including playing an important role in urging a peaceful resolution to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

KAI: So if you're glad that you and your parents were even born, you could thank Pope Saint John XXIII.

LIBBY: Yet despite our best efforts to promote peace, people sometimes misuse their God-given free will and start wars anyway.

KAI: So let's talk about the Church's stance on war and what it means for each of us.

LIBBY: First, we need to be really clear that war, always and everywhere, causes innocent people to suffer.

KAI: If your only experience of war is movies, CNN, and “Call of Duty,” it's easy to think of war as something abstract that happens to other people far away.

LIBBY: But when you read about people killed in war, every single one of them had human dignity, hopes and dreams, just like you.

KAI: We should do everything reasonably possible to avoid war. Yet, the Church also recognizes that sometimes, people determined to harm the innocent can only be stopped with force. This idea led to what we call "Just War Theory."

LIBBY: This dates back to Saint Augustine, and was developed by other thinkers. like Saint Thomas Aquinas during the Middle Ages, and Pope Saint John Paul II in our own time.

KAI: When national leaders are deciding whether to fight a war, and individual citizens are deciding whether to support it, there are four criteria to determine whether it is a just war.

LIBBY: First, just cause.

KAI: Don't start a war, just ‘cause.

LIBBY: To be just, a war must be fought for the right reasons, preventing a harm that is lasting, grave and certain. A nation shouldn't go to war to expand its territories or avenge an insult, but it can defend itself or others against an enemy invasion.

KAI: Second, a just war must only be waged as a last resort. Once all other practical options have failed.

LIBBY: Third, there must be a real chance of success. Wasting human lives is not just.

KAI: And forth, proportionality. The harms that a war seeks to prevent must be greater than the harms that will be caused by the war itself.

LIBBY: So it sounds like I'm justified in waging war on my roommate's boyfriend, Brian. He's always at our apartment and won't even acknowledge me when I'm in the room. And his BO consistently makes me ...

KAI: Maybe? But it depends on the kind of war. Even just wars must not be fought with immoral tactics. No matter how evil an enemy leader is, or how bad their BO, civilians are still civilians and may not be deliberately targeted. And even so-called collateral damage must be proportional to the military benefit.

LIBBY: How do you determine the right proportion?

KAI: It's impossible to put an exact number on it, but if you know that an attack will kill or harm few enemy soldiers and many civilians, or in your case your roommate, that's wrong.

LIBBY: What about limits on weapons?

KAI: Weapons of mass destruction like nuclear bombs or deadly viruses kill soldiers and civilians indiscriminately. Land mines stay buried in the ground and can maim children many years later.

LIBBY: So no on weapons of mass destruction, but what about setting traps?

KAI: Libby, could you stop thinking about your roommate's boyfriend and tell everyone about informing your conscience?

LIBBY: Oh, right. A core principle of Catholic ethics is each person's responsibility to have a well-informed conscience. This means paying attention to current events and opposing unjust wars.

KAI: If you were ever in the military and received an unjust order, you have a responsibility to refuse. The horrors of World War II showed that just following orders is no excuse.

LIBBY: Although we have a duty to oppose unjust wars, the church recognizes that it is also a legitimate moral choice to oppose all war. This is known as pacifism.

KAI: You don't have to be a pacifist, but many saints and great Catholics throughout history, like Saint Francis, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton, were pacifists. Pacifists followed the radical example of Jesus, who was arrested and tortured unjustly, but did not resist.

LIBBY: If someone is a soldier or forced to join the military, but they refuse to participate in violence because of their fundamental moral convictions, they are known as conscientious objectors. The Catholic Church supports and affirms conscientious objectors and works to uphold their rights around the world.

KAI: And although Christians have sometimes wrongly used God as a justification for immoral violence, today's Church is very clear that extremism can never justify unjust war.

LIBBY: So anything else I need to consider before I dramatically proclaim, "This means war" the next time Brian leaves dirty dishes in the sink?

KAI: Work on informing your conscience. To make good judgments, stay informed about current events and read writings by thinkers who've struggled with these questions before.

LIBBY: Consider how new technologies like drones might affect Just War Theory, especially the consequences for victims … which, now that I am really thinking about it, I guess it's not her fault.

KAI: One of the best ways to build peace in the fullest sense of the word is by forming friendships with people from other countries and from marginalized groups.

LIBBY: Because when you're friends with someone, you don't usually want to kill them. Maybe I can be a better friend to Brian even though he makes me ...

KAI: If you want peace in your apartment, then yes. True peace is a state of justice and right relationship. God made us to live in peace, but some people abuse their free will to harm each other.

LIBBY: Don't worry. I'm not going to wage war. Yet. For Catholic Central, I'm Libby.

KAI: And I'm Kai. Check out our website for more resources, CatholicCentral.com. See you next time.

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