

The Early Church Fathers on Military Service

The concept of a just war is not a new one. Christians of differing opinions have debated the issue for centuries. Opponents will point to verses of Scripture that command us to be peacemakers. And they are right to do so. But that doesn't tell the whole story. In Romans 12:18 we are told: "If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all." Note that it says: "If possible." There are times when an aggressor makes it impossible. That is why Ecclesiastes 3:8 says there is: "a time for war, and a time for peace." While making a point on the necessity of being totally committed to discipleship, Jesus uses the example of a king preparing for war (Luke 14:31). I think we can agree that Jesus wouldn't use an intrinsically immoral activity to illustrate how one should act. Certainly, military action can be justified to protect the innocent and prevent greater evils. The Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it this way: "Governments cannot be denied the right of lawful self-defense, once all peace efforts have failed" (CCC 2308). Make special note of the last part of that quote. Going to war must always be a last resort.

Irenaeus

When they further maintain that it is incumbent on them to have experience of every kind of work and conduct, so that, if it be possible, accomplishing all during one manifestation in this life, they may [at once] pass over to the state of perfection, they are, by no chance, found striving to do those things which wait upon virtue, and are laborious, glorious, and skillful, which also are approved universally as being good. For if it be necessary to go through every work and every kind of operation, they ought, in the first place, to learn all the arts: ... those, again, connected with a maritime life, gymnastic exercises, hunting, military and kingly pursuits, and as many others as may exist (*Against Heresies* 2:32:2 [A.D. 189]).

Tertullian

We pray for life prolonged; for security to the empire; for protection to the imperial house; for brave armies, a faithful senate, a virtuous people, the world at rest, whatever, as man or Cæsar, an emperor would wish. These things I cannot ask from any but the God from whom I know I shall obtain them (*Apology* 30 [A.D. 197]).

We sail with you and fight with you, and till the ground with you; and in like manner we unite with you in your trafficking (*Apology* 42 [A.D. 197]).

Clement of Alexandria

Sail the sea, you who are devoted to navigation, yet call the while on the heavenly Pilot. Has [saving] knowledge taken hold of you while engaged in military service? Listen to the commander, who orders what is right (*Exhortation to the Heathen* 10 [A.D. 195]).

... and the Hebrews afterwards going forth, departed carrying much spoil from the Egyptians, not for avarice, as the cavillers say, for God did not persuade them to covet what belonged to others. But, in the first place, they took wages for the services they had rendered the Egyptians all the time; ... Whether, then, as may be alleged is done in war, they thought it proper, in the exercise of the rights of conquerors, to take away the property of their enemies, as those who have gained the day do from those who are worsted (and there was just cause of hostilities. The Hebrews came as suppliants to the Egyptians on account of famine; and they, reducing their guests to slavery, compelled them to serve them after the manner of captives, giving them no recompense) ... , but rather had robbed them (*Stromata* 1:23 [A.D. 202]).

Tactics belong to military command, and the ability to command an army is among the attributes of kingly rule. Legislation, again, is also one of the functions of the kingly office, as also judicial authority. ... Now, generalship involves three ideas: caution, enterprise, and the union of the two. And each of these consists of three things, acting as they do either by word, or by deeds, or by both together. And all this can be accomplished either by persuasion, or by compulsion, or by inflicting harm in the way of taking vengeance on those who ought to be punished; and this either by doing what is right, or by telling what is untrue, or by telling what is true, or by adopting any of these means conjointly at the same time (*ibid* 1:24)

Julius Africanus

Among all the areas of knowledge, that of war is especially valuable. ... Thus one must not only attack adversaries with an open battle; it is also necessary to combat enemies with a crowd of ruses, even the most secret. ... [For example, one could] simulate a precipitous retreat and abandon...in the face of the [enemy], one's camp filled with [poisoned] food. (*The Seventh Cestus* 1-2 [A.D. 229]).

Origen

And to those enemies of our faith who require us to bear arms for the commonwealth, and to slay men, we can reply: "Do not those who are priests at certain shrines, and those who attend on certain gods, as you account them, keep their hands free from blood, that they may with hands unstained and free from human blood offer the appointed sacrifices to your gods; and even when war is upon you, you never enlist the priests in the army. If that, then, is a laudable custom, how much more so, that while others are engaged in battle, these too should engage as the priests and ministers of God, keeping their hands pure, and wrestling in prayers to God on behalf of those who are fighting in a righteous cause, and for the king who reigns righteously, that whatever is opposed to those who act righteously may be destroyed! (*Contra Celsus* 8:73 [A.D. 248]).

Adamantius

[The Old Testament] is not contrary [to the New Testament], but the circumstances are different: in the one instance, some were sent from Jerusalem by Christ, commissioned to preach peace; in [the Book of Exodus] certain people were driven out of Egypt by their own servants. [The Egyptians], since they had chosen war, had necessarily to be destroyed by war; even the Gospel recognizes the right of retaliation and the slaying of evil men. Thus it says, 'The lord of that evil servant will come on a day when he knows not, and in an hour when he is not expecting, and will cut him in two and will assign him a place among the unbelieving' [Luke 12:46]. Hence it is right to wage a just war against those who go to war unjustly. (*Dialogue on the True Faith* 1:10 [A.D. 300]).

Council of Arles

Those who throw down their arms in time of peace are to be separated from the [Church] (Canon 3 [A.D. 314]).

Eusebius

[The way of life] permits men to join in pure nuptials and to produce children, to undertake government, to give orders to soldiers fighting for right; it allows them to have minds for farming, for trade, and the other more secular interests as well as for religion...[for] all men, whether Greeks or barbarians, have their part in the coming of salvation, and profit by the teaching of the Gospel (*Proof of the Gospel* 1:8 [A.D. 319]).

Lactantius

[The passions] are not evil of themselves, since God has reasonably implanted them in us; but inasmuch as they are plainly good by nature—for they are given us for the protection of life—they become evil by their evil use. And as bravery, if you fight in defense of your country, is a good, if against your country, is an evil, so the passions, if you employ them to good purposes, will be virtues, if to evil uses, they will be called vices (*Epitome of the Divine Institutes* 61 [A.D. 320]).

Athanasius

For in other matters also which go to make up life, we shall find differences according to circumstances. For example, it is not right to kill, yet in war it is lawful and praiseworthy to destroy the enemy; accordingly not only are they who have distinguished themselves in the field held worthy of great honors, but monuments are put up proclaiming their achievements. So that the same act is at one time and under some circumstances unlawful, while under others, and at the right time, it is lawful and permissible (Letter 48 [circa A.D. 350]).