Cardinal Cupich: What the Gospel Demands in Times of War

(This essay was adapted from remarks by Cardinal Blase Cupich upon receiving the "Blessed are the Peacemakers Award" from the American Catholic Theological Union on April 29, and published in 'America')

Pope Leo XIV releases a dove with community representatives at the conclusion of a peace meeting at St. Joseph Cathedral in Bamenda, Cameroon, April 16, 2026.

Scripture scholars point out that the Greek word translated "peacemakers" (*eirēnopoioi*) appears only once in the Bible, in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:9). It is exceptional both in its linguistic rarity and its provocative political context. In calling peacemakers "children of God," Jesus subverts the Roman propaganda of the Pax Romana that calls Caesar the "peacemaker" and "son of God." For Jesus, the true children of God are not the generals who pacify through conquest and military force, but those who enter a conflict for the sole purpose of restoring *shalom*, a Hebrew concept of wholeness and justice.

In a similar way Pope Leo XIV, since his homily on Palm Sunday, has been subverting the narrative that attempts to justify war to bring about peace by domination. On that occasion, he spoke with disarming clarity: "Jesus, King of Peace, who rejects war, whom no one can use to justify war…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)."

The reaction, especially in the United States, has been revealing. Sadly, much of the response has not been to ask what the Gospel demands of us in a time of war, but to revisit, defend and refine the just war theory. Posts and debates have multiplied, carefully weighing conditions, thresholds and proportionalities.

There is, of course, a place for that tradition. The church has long sought to discipline political power with moral reasoning. But to spend this moment primarily trying to determine whether war can still be justified risks missing something more urgent. It begins to sound less like moral discernment and more like an anxious effort to prove that what is happening might still be just.

And that is the wrong starting point.

The first question is not: Can this war be justified? The first question is the one Jesus addresses in the Beatitudes: What does the Gospel demand of us now? What does it mean, concretely, to be peacemakers?

The Catholic tradition gives an exacting answer. As the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" ("Gaudium et Spes") teaches, "peace is not merely the absence of war…it is rightly and appropriately called an enterprise of justice," something that "must be built up ceaselessly" (No. 78). Peace, in other words, is a task.

This is why Pope Francis, in "Gaudete et Exsultate," calls peace-building a "craft," something that demands "serenity, creativity, sensitivity and skill" (No. 89). When read through the lens of the Gospel, those four demands describe not an ideal but a discipline.

Serenity

Serenity comes first. Not because peace ignores conflict, but because it refuses to be ruled by it. The Gospel command in Luke, "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also" (Lk 6:29), is often misunderstood as passive submission. It is nothing of the sort. This gesture does not legitimize violence; it unmasks it. To offer the other cheek is to refuse the role assigned by the aggressor; it denies violence the power to define the relationship. Instead of responding within the logic of domination and humiliation, the disciple steps outside that logic altogether.

In this way, the act becomes a form of freedom: it exposes injustice without reproducing it, and it interrupts the chain of retaliation at its source. It is, therefore, a radically active stance, not a passive one. "To act in this way presumes a heart set at peace by Christ, freed from the aggressiveness born of overweening egotism" ("Gaudete et Exsultate," No. 121). Without that interior stability, every call for peace collapses into anger, fear or revenge.

Creativity

But serenity alone is not enough. Peace also demands creativity. Conflict cannot simply be absorbed; it must be transformed. The normal logic of conflict—insult answered with insult, force with force, grievance with grievance—reproduces itself endlessly. The Gospel interrupts that cycle. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Lk 6:27). The command to love the enemy is not a feeling but a practice that disarms hostility by refusing to mirror it. It creates an unexpected space where the other is no longer treated as an enemy to defeat but as a person to be encountered anew.

In this sense, Jesus' teaching is profoundly creative; it breaks the closed circuit of violence by introducing a gratuitous act—good given where harm is expected—that cannot be predicted or controlled. Such acts expose the poverty of violence and open the possibility of a different future. They are, therefore, not naïve ideals but concrete strategies of transformation, instructions for breaking patterns that otherwise cannot be broken.

Creativity is the practical courage to attempt something other than domination or defeat. It takes shape in the hard, patient work of dialogue and negotiation—not as tactics of compromise at any cost, but as moral processes ordered toward justice, where the vulnerable are protected and the innocent safeguarded. Such creativity refuses both the illusion that peace can be imposed by force and the temptation to abandon those most at risk. Instead, it seeks solutions that preserve human dignity, restrain violence and open space for reconciliation. In this way, dialogue itself becomes an act of moral imagination: a deliberate effort to build a future in which the weak are not sacrificed and the innocent are not forgotten.

Sensitivity

That, in turn, requires sensitivity, a word that risks sounding weak until one understands its depth. Sensitivity means attention to the person, especially the difficult person. It is easy to speak of human dignity in the abstract. It is much harder to recognize it in those who provoke, oppose or wound us. Yet this is precisely where the Gospel calls us to turn our attention: "Love your enemies…pray for those who mistreat you" (Lk 6:27-28). This demand stands in direct opposition to what Pope Francis called the "globalization of

indifference": a cultural condition in which the suffering of others becomes distant, normalized and ultimately invisible.

Sensitivity is not optional; it is an act of resistance. And today that resistance is made even more difficult by the growing "gamification" of war: conflicts mediated through screens, reduced to images, metrics and strategic abstractions, where human lives risk being perceived as data points rather than persons. The danger is not only that we tolerate violence, but that we cease to feel it, to the point that some—even in our own government—have no hesitation about shamelessly turning the sufferings of others into entertainment. Against this, the Gospel insists on a different vision, one that restores the face of the other, even the enemy, and calls us back to a form of attention that refuses to let suffering become anonymous.

This is not sentimentality. It is a moral discipline grounded in the conviction that every person bears a dignity that cannot be erased, even by injustice. Peace that excludes, dismisses or dehumanizes is not peace at all. It is simply a quieter form of conflict.

Skill

Finally, peace demands skill. This may be the most neglected demand of the four. Peacemaking must be learned, practiced and refined. It requires habits: the discipline to restrain one's speech, the courage to tell the truth without hatred, the patience to build trust, the willingness to sacrifice one's own advantage for the sake of justice. It also requires the concrete skill of dialogue and negotiation: the ability to listen without defensiveness, to name grievances without inflaming them, to seek common ground without betraying the truth, and to persevere in conversation even when agreement seems distant.

The late Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., once observed that dialogue is about giving those across the table from you permission to tell you why they think you are wrong. Such skills and attitudes do not come naturally; they are formed over time, day after day, through effort and discipline.

Taken together, these four demands reveal why the Gospel can feel so impractical in a time of war. It does not begin where we often want to begin. It does not start by asking whether violence can be justified. It starts by asking who we are becoming in the face of it.

This does not mean abandoning moral reasoning about war. It means placing it in its proper place. The just war tradition was never meant to be a comfort, and surely not, as some are proposing, a merely relativistic measure that exists only for those most inclined to go to war. It was meant to restrain, to warn, to limit. That is its place. But when it becomes the primary lens through which we view conflict, it risks narrowing our imagination to what can be permitted, rather than expanding it toward what is required.

And what is required is more demanding.

But peace has always been like this: not an idea to defend, but a craft—learned and practiced until it truly bears fruit in the concrete realities of history.

At the end of his visit to the African continent, speaking to journalists on his return to Rome, Pope Leo did not enter abstract debates about justified force. He called instead for a "culture of peace," urging leaders to return to dialogue rather than escalation and grounding his appeal not in theory but in human suffering, recalling the story of a child he had met who was later killed in war. Once again, like Jesus in proclaiming the Beatitudes, the Holy Father refused to argue at the level many expected. Leo, speaking as a pastor rather than a strategist, asked not only whether the war could be justified, but instead how peace could be sought. And so must we.