



CORPUS CHRISTI SUNDAY

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St. James Catholic Church
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Reflection from Fr. Garry Richmeier

I've always been baffled by the term "rules of war." In every military conflict I've ever seen or heard of, historians and commentators describe who is, and especially, who isn't following the rules of warfare. So I Googled it to see if I could come to any more clarity about it. I found the commonly held principles of the rules of war, which include military necessity, distinction, proportionality, humanity, and honor. I won't go into each of those, but suffice it to say, they are all pretty general and open to interpretation. I also found some specific actions that most countries believe are forbidden by these principles. These include torture, targeting civilians, and mistreating prisoners of war.

This all sounds good and sensible, but I have yet to hear about or see an armed conflict where the rules of war are followed, including the present well-publicized conflicts in Gaza and the Ukraine. Civilians, including women and children, usually take the brunt of the violence in any war. We've coined the term "collateral damage" to describe this, implying it's not that important and it's unavoidable, so it isn't really our fault and isn't immoral when civilians get killed. Over the years our country has repeatedly criticized other militaries for torturing prisoners of war. Yet we did the same thing at Guantanamo Bay with our "enhanced interrogation techniques" (another euphemism used to make it sound acceptable). And that's only one that got publicized. I suspect other similar incidents are kept from the public eye.

I've concluded that there really aren't any "rules of war" that anybody follows. The first principle, "military necessity," pretty much gives militaries freedom to do whatever they want. No matter how horrendous the result of the military action, they can always defend it by saying it was "necessary" in order to win the war. That is how Israel is defending the killing of 36,000 people (at last count), mostly women and children. And apparently most of the rest of the world agrees that this is a "military necessity." The rules of war are really just window dressing we use to try to make the killing of other people look respectable, civilized, restrained, and even patriotic. The rules of war help us deny the real horrors of war and our direct moral responsibility for the death of thousands of human beings. It helps us believe that as long as we follow the rules, we're OK.

Jesus often criticized the civil and religious leaders of his day for professing to follow the law and the rules, while in reality, using their positions of authority to abuse others. He said the only rule that mattered was the law of love, and that all other rules had to be evaluated in that light. I'm pretty sure he would say that how we practice our modern rules of war has very little to do with the law of love he lived and preached.