

**Peace Cannot Wait Until War Ends:
Recovering a Christian Moral Imagination of Peace**

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Introduction

Beginning with the public dialogue between Pope Leo XIV and President Donald Trump, this essay argues that contemporary warfare invites Christians to recover a richer theological vision of peace. Drawing upon Scripture, the Christian moral tradition, and voices from the global Church, it contends that Christian reflection on war and peace has gradually expanded beyond asking primarily when force may be justified toward a broader moral imagination shaped by reconciliation, just peace, conflict transformation, civil society peacebuilding, and Gospel nonviolence. The discussion unfolds in three movements: first, it reframes the contemporary debate through a theological understanding of peace; second, it considers how the Christian moral tradition continues to develop in response to modern warfare; finally, it turns to Asian and African theologians whose reflections deepen the Church's public witness to reconciliation.

I. Seeing Peace Differently

On July 4, Americans celebrated the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Across the country, communities gathered for parades, concerts, picnics, and fireworks to commemorate the nation's founding ideals of liberty, representative government, and democratic self-government. Like many Americans, I found myself reflecting on the meaning of freedom, gratitude, and national memory. Such occasions rightly invite us to remember the sacrifices of previous generations while giving thanks for political freedoms that many people throughout the world continue to seek.¹

During that same week, another image stayed with me. Rather than participating in events surrounding America's semiquincentennial, Pope Leo XIV traveled to Lampedusa, the small Mediterranean island that has become an enduring symbol of migration, displacement, and the lingering consequences of war.² Refugees fleeing armed conflict, political persecution, environmental disasters, and economic collapse have crossed its shores for decades, many never completing the journey. Lampedusa reminds us that even after wars disappear from newspaper headlines, their human consequences endure. The battlefield may fall silent, but violence continues to shape lives, communities, and nations long afterward.

Holding these two images together invites a different way of thinking about peace. One celebrates the blessings of political freedom secured through constitutional government. The

¹ The White House, "A Proclamation on the 250th Anniversary of American Independence," July 4, 2026; see also America250, United States Semiquincentennial Commission, <https://america250.org/>

² Pope Leo XIV, "Address during the Pastoral Visit to Lampedusa," Lampedusa, Italy, July 4, 2026, *The Holy See*, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/travels/2026/documents/lampedusa-4luglio2026.html>; see also *Vatican News*, "UNHCR: Pope Leo's Lampedusa Visit a Call for Shared Responsibility," July 2026, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2026-07/unhcr-interview-ungaro-pope-leo-visit-lampedusa-migration.html>

other remembers those who still long for the security and dignity that such freedom makes possible. These images need not compete. Nations rightly honor their history, protect their citizens, and pursue the common good. The Church likewise reminds the world that no political achievement is complete if it forgets those whose lives remain marked by violence, displacement, or poverty. Gratitude for one's own political community and compassion for those who remain vulnerable deepen rather than diminish one another.

Much of the recent public conversation surrounding Pope Leo XIV and President Donald Trump has centered on immigration, the conflict involving Iran, and the moral limits of military force. News coverage often portrays these exchanges as a contest between compassion and security, religion and politics, or idealism and realism. Those descriptions capture part of the story, but they do not reach its theological depth. Beneath the policy disagreements lies a more fundamental question concerning the distinct vocations of the Church and political authority and the different ways each bears witness to peace.³

Christian theology has long recognized that both the Church and the state serve the common good, though through different callings. Political authority bears responsibility for preserving public order, protecting citizens, and restraining injustice. The Church proclaims the Gospel, forms moral conscience, and witnesses to the reign of God—a reign that judges every political order without being identified with any of them. Their responsibilities therefore differ, not because they inhabit separate moral worlds, but because they participate in the common good according to distinct vocations. Christian social ethics has long sought to hold these callings together without confusing one with the other.

President Trump has consistently emphasized the responsibility of governments to protect their citizens, defend national borders, and preserve public order. Those concerns deserve serious consideration. Christian tradition has long affirmed that governments exist to pursue justice, defend the innocent, and safeguard the common good. Pope Leo XIV begins from another vocation. As Bishop of Rome, his attention naturally turns toward those whose voices are least likely to shape political decisions: civilians living under bombardment, refugees crossing dangerous seas, migrants separated from their families, and communities struggling to rebuild after violence. His visit to Lampedusa reminds the Church that the true cost of war cannot be measured only by military objectives or diplomatic outcomes but also by the lives that continue bearing its wounds long after the world's attention has shifted elsewhere.⁴

Their disagreement therefore concerns more than immigration or foreign policy. It reflects two distinct forms of public responsibility rooted in different vocations. A president asks how best to protect a political community entrusted to his care. A pope asks how the Church bears faithful witness to the Gospel within a wounded world. These responsibilities sometimes generate genuine moral tension, but they need not be understood as competing visions of the common good. Reducing their dialogue to familiar political categories misses the more profound theological question:

What kind of peace are Christians called to practice while the world remains at war?

³ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), nos. 74–76, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996), 903–5; Kenneth R. Himes, *Sacred and Social* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2025), 1–3.

⁴ Pope Leo XIV, “Address during the Pastoral Visit to Lampedusa”; Hannah Roberts, “Pope Moves to Clarify When Wars Are Justified. Trump Probably Won’t Like the Answer,” *Politico*, June 26, 2026.

That question feels especially urgent today. From Ukraine and the Middle East to Sudan and Myanmar, contemporary conflicts remind us that wars rarely conclude with a decisive moment that clearly separates conflict from peace. Even after ceasefires are declared, societies continue living with broken trust, displaced populations, damaged institutions, and generations shaped by trauma. Peace therefore cannot be understood simply as the moment when weapons fall silent.

Scripture speaks of peace in a richer sense. The biblical vision of *shalom* signifies wholeness, right relationship, and the flourishing of life under God's covenant.⁵ The prophets unite justice and peace because both arise from God's ordering of creation (Isa. 2:2–4; Mic. 4:1–4). Jesus blesses peacemakers because they participate in God's reconciling work (Matt. 5:9). After the resurrection, his greeting—"Peace be with you"—comes not to disciples who have escaped history's violence but to disciples still living with fear and uncertainty (John 20:19). Peace is therefore more than the cessation of conflict. It is the restoration of communion with God, with one another, and ultimately with creation itself.

This biblical vision rests upon a theological understanding of the human person. Created in the image of God, humanity is called into communion rather than isolation. Violence fractures those relationships; redemption restores them. Peace is therefore not simply one ethical value among many but participation in God's reconciling work through Christ. Christian ethics begins from this theological reality before turning to questions of diplomacy, military force, or political responsibility.

The argument developed here grows from one simple but demanding conviction:

Peace cannot wait until war ends.

If reconciliation matters after war, Christians must begin practicing reconciliation before and during war. If rebuilding communities matters after conflict, the habits that sustain reconciliation cannot be postponed until reconstruction begins. Peace is not merely the final goal of Christian ethics. It is the theological horizon within which Christian moral reflection unfolds from the beginning.

II. Practicing Peace

If peace is the horizon of Christian life, an important question follows: Why has so much of Christian reflection on war focused on the conditions under which force may be justified rather than on the practices by which peace is cultivated? The question is not intended to dismiss the long history of Christian moral reasoning about war. Rather, it invites us to consider how the Christian tradition has sought to remain faithful to the Gospel while responding to changing historical realities. Christian ethics has never developed in isolation from history. It has continually discerned how enduring theological convictions illuminate new forms of political responsibility, violence, and human suffering. Alongside reflection on the moral limits of force, Christians have also cultivated traditions of Gospel nonviolence, reconciliation, and

⁵ See Walter Brueggemann, *Peace* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 14–19; Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1987), 10–16; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 69.

peacebuilding that witness to peace as a way of life rather than merely an outcome of political order.

One influential trajectory within this broader tradition emerged through the classical just war tradition.⁶ Confronted with the responsibilities of political authority in a fallen world, Augustine and later Thomas Aquinas refused both the glorification of war and the abandonment of moral judgment. Political power, they argued, remained accountable to justice because it remained accountable to God. Their achievement was not to make war morally acceptable but to insist that even the tragic use of force remained subject to the demands of charity, justice, the common good, and respect for human dignity. The just war tradition therefore represented a significant moral achievement—not because it justified violence, but because it sought to discipline and restrain political power. At the same time, other Christian communities continued to emphasize Gospel nonviolence, while many contemporary Catholic ethicists have sought to bring these traditions into constructive dialogue through the framework of just peace, reconciliation, and peacebuilding.⁷

The same moral commitments that shaped these diverse traditions continue leading the Church to confront questions that earlier generations could not fully anticipate. Contemporary warfare rarely concludes with decisive victories that restore political stability. Long after military operations cease, societies continue living with displacement, fractured institutions, ecological devastation, economic instability, and memories shaped by trauma. The deepest wounds of war are often borne not only by soldiers but by civilians, families, and communities struggling to rebuild a shared life. These realities expose dimensions of violence that cannot be addressed simply by asking whether the initial resort to force was justified. They invite Christians to ask another question: What does faithfulness require once violence has entered history?⁸

This broader moral horizon became especially visible in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, which reaffirmed the Church's commitment to justice while urging Christians to "strain every muscle" in the pursuit of peace.⁹ A similar trajectory has emerged within ecumenical Protestantism, where the World Council of Churches has increasingly articulated Christian public witness through the framework of just peace rather than the moral justification of war.¹⁰ In this way, the Church's moral imagination has continued to broaden. Reflection on war increasingly extends beyond the moral evaluation of military action toward the longer work of restoring relationships, rebuilding institutions, renewing political participation, and cultivating the conditions in which reconciliation becomes possible. It is within this wider horizon that *jus post bellum*, traditionally understood as reflection on justice after war, has emerged as a broader

⁶ Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), XIX.7; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II–II, q. 40, art. 1.

⁷ See Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Pacifism, Just War, and Peacebuilding* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 111; Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), "Toward a Theology of Resistance"; Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 79–82; Eli S. McCarthy, "A Virtue-Based Just Peace Ethic," *Journal of Moral Theology* 7, no. 2 (2018): 92–101; and John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3–38.

⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), nos. 79–82, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996), 907–10; Himes, *Sacred and Social*, 14–15.

⁹ *Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 78–82, especially no. 82.

¹⁰ World Council of Churches, *An Ecumenical Call to Just Peace* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2011); see also McCarthy, "A Virtue-Based Just Peace Ethic," discussing the World Council of Churches' just peace framework within the development of a Catholic just peace ethic.

theological and interdisciplinary conversation about reconciliation, political renewal, and the cultivation of just peace before, during, and after conflict. Although the language first developed largely within just war discourse, it now brings theologians into sustained conversation with peace studies, restorative justice, conflict transformation, international law, civil society peacebuilding, and, increasingly, traditions of Gospel nonviolence and just peace.¹¹

Seen in this way, *jus post bellum* gradually becomes something more than another category within just war reasoning. It opens a wider conversation about reconciliation, political participation, restorative justice, conflict transformation, and the practices of peace that sustain communities before, during, and after conflict. This broader horizon has shaped my own understanding of *jus post bellum*. Rather than locating it primarily within just war theory, I have argued that its greatest theological promise lies in bringing these diverse conversations into dialogue. The central question therefore shifts from determining only when force may be justified to discerning how churches, political communities, and civil society can cultivate reconciliation throughout the entire life of conflict. Peacebuilding is no longer simply what follows war; it becomes part of the Church's faithful participation in God's reconciling work.¹²

This shift also reshapes how we understand the Church's public vocation. The Church is not called to function as another political institution, nor does it possess technical solutions to military or diplomatic crises. Its distinctive witness lies elsewhere. Christian communities are called to become places where forgiveness, truthful memory, hospitality, solidarity with the vulnerable, and the restoration of trust are practiced long before societies emerge from conflict. These habits do not eliminate political responsibility, but they remind us that durable peace cannot be sustained solely through treaties, military deterrence, or institutional reform. Reconciliation must also be learned, embodied, and nurtured within the ordinary life of communities.¹³

Such a vision requires more than the careful application of inherited principles. It also demands the capacity to perceive how enduring theological convictions illuminate new historical realities. Kenneth Himes describes this capacity as moral imagination—a form of discernment through which the Christian tradition remains rooted in the Gospel while discovering fresh possibilities for justice and peace. The point is not to replace earlier traditions but to place them in dialogue with complementary traditions of just peace, reconciliation, and Gospel nonviolence as the Church continues discerning its vocation in changing historical realities. In an age marked by technological warfare, mass displacement, ecological destruction, and deep political polarization, the Church's vocation is not exhausted by refining older moral categories. It must also cultivate the imagination necessary to recognize where God's reconciling work is already taking root and where Christians are called to participate in it.¹⁴

¹¹ See Brian Orend, "Roots and Branches: The Past and Future of *Jus Post Bellum*," 29–46; James Gallen, "Reconciliation and a Just Peace," 97–113; and Carsten Stahn and Jens Iverson, "Preface," vii–xii, in *Just Peace After Conflict: Jus Post Bellum and the Justice of Peace*, ed. Carsten Stahn and Jens Iverson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹² David Kwon, "Jus Post Bellum and Catholic Social Thought: Just Political Participation as Civil Society Peacebuilding," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 20, no. 2 (2023): 409–17; and David Kwon, *Justice after War: Jus Post Bellum in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 1–9.

¹³ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 3–31; Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 225–245; and Himes, *Sacred and Social*, 1–2, 14–15.

¹⁴ Himes, *Sacred and Social*, 3–7.

The Gospel itself offers the clearest image of this vocation. When the risen Christ appears to the disciples, the doors remain locked, fear still governs their lives, and the political order that crucified Jesus remains firmly in place (John 20:19–23). Nothing in history has yet changed. Nevertheless, Christ's first gift is peace. It is not peace offered after the world has become secure, nor after justice has been fully established. It is peace spoken into a community still marked by fear, uncertainty, and woundedness. The disciples receive that peace not as a private consolation but as the beginning of their mission. Christian peace is therefore not merely the destination of moral reflection. It is the form of life through which the Church participates in God's reconciling work while history remains unfinished.

Understanding peace in this way prepares us to listen more carefully to voices beyond the traditional centers of Western theology. Communities shaped by colonialism, civil conflict, migration, and religious plurality often illuminate dimensions of reconciliation that become especially visible where Christians have learned to practice hope amid prolonged violence. Listening to those voices is not simply an exercise in expanding perspectives. It is one way the Church continues learning how the Gospel speaks within a wounded world. It is to those voices that we now turn.

III. Learning Peace from the Global Church

The Christian moral tradition has never developed through abstract reflection alone. It has also grown through the lived witness of communities seeking to embody the Gospel under changing historical circumstances. Learning, therefore, belongs to the Church's life no less than teaching. As new realities emerge, the Church continues discerning how the Gospel speaks within them. Listening to the global Church is not simply an exercise in broadening perspectives or acknowledging cultural diversity. It is part of the Church's ongoing reception of the Gospel. No single history, culture, or political experience exhausts its meaning. Communities formed amid colonialism, migration, religious plurality, and prolonged violence often perceive dimensions of peace that remain less visible elsewhere. Their witness enlarges the Church's moral imagination because it reveals how God's reconciling work is encountered in different places and among different peoples.¹⁵

For readers of this journal, Asian theology provides a particularly fruitful place to begin. Much of Asian Christian theology has emerged from societies shaped by colonialism, political conflict, interreligious encounter, and the experience of Christian minorities. Peace therefore appears not primarily as an abstract ethical principle but as a concrete practice of faithful living within complex historical realities. Few contemporary theologians have articulated this vision more clearly than Peter C. Phan. Reflecting on migration and world Christianity, Phan argues that the Gospel is always received within particular histories and cultures. This claim is more than a methodological observation. It carries an important ecclesiological insight. If no single historical or cultural perspective can exhaust the meaning of the Gospel, then the Church's understanding of peace is deepened whenever it listens to communities whose experiences have been shaped by migration, displacement, and religious plurality. Christian reflection on peace

¹⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), nos. 13 and 17, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996), 357–58, 362–63.

becomes richer when it allows those lived realities to reshape the questions it asks about reconciliation and public life.¹⁶

The Church also learns that peace cannot be hurried. Kosuke Koyama captured this insight through his memorable image of the "three-mile-an-hour God." God's love moves at the speed of ordinary human life—the pace at which people walk together, accompany one another, forgive, and heal. The image offers more than a spiritual metaphor. It challenges modern assumptions that peace can be secured primarily through military superiority, technological efficiency, or political control. Reconciliation unfolds differently. Trust is rebuilt gradually. Communities recover through patient accompaniment rather than coercion. Hope is sustained through faithful presence long before diplomatic negotiations or reconstruction programs bear visible fruit. Koyama reminds the Church that peace is not only something to be negotiated after conflict. It is a way of inhabiting history while conflict continues.¹⁷

Another lesson emerges when the Church listens to communities that continue living with the wounds of war. C. S. Song begins not with abstract concepts but with the suffering of ordinary people whose lives have been shaped by colonialism, political oppression, and violence. The crucified Christ is encountered not beyond wounded history but within it. God's reconciling work becomes visible wherever broken lives are restored, forgotten voices are heard, and wounded communities begin to hope again. Song's theology continues to resonate far beyond the Asian contexts from which it emerged. It speaks to the suffering remembered on Lampedusa no less than to the continuing conflicts across the Middle East, Myanmar, Sudan, Ukraine, and many other regions where war leaves communities struggling long after the fighting has ceased. In these places, peace cannot be measured simply by ceasefires, military victories, or diplomatic agreements. It must also be measured by whether memories can be healed, trust rebuilt, and neighbors learn once again to share a common life. Song reminds the Church that reconciliation is not merely the final stage of conflict. It is the form through which God's redemptive work becomes visible within history itself.¹⁸

Asian theology opens this conversation, but it does not end there. The Church continues learning as it listens to Christians whose experiences of violence, reconciliation, and communal life have emerged in other parts of the world. African theology likewise reminds the Church that peace is inseparable from restored relationships. Writing from societies rebuilding communal life after colonialism and civil conflict, Bénédet Bujo understands personhood as fundamentally relational. Human beings become fully themselves only within communities of mutual responsibility and shared life. Violence therefore wounds more than individuals; it fractures the relationships upon which human flourishing depends. Reconciliation cannot be reduced to legal settlements or political compromise. It also requires the patient restoration of trust, memory, and communal life. Bujo enriches the Church's understanding of peace by reminding us that justice ultimately serves communion. His work broadens the Christian moral tradition by drawing renewed attention to the social and ecclesial dimensions of reconciliation.¹⁹

¹⁶ Peter C. Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 183, 238.

¹⁷ Kosuke Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 42.

¹⁸ C. S. Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), xiii; idem, *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 166; idem, *Christian Mission in Reconstruction: An Asian Analysis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 53.

¹⁹ Bénédet Bujo, "Reasoning and Methodology in African Ethics." James F. Keenan, ed., *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future: The Trento Conference*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 148–151, 154–157.

Learning from the global Church is not an invitation to choose between Augustine and Phan, Aquinas and Koyama, or the classical Christian moral tradition and Asian or African theology. It is an invitation to receive the diverse gifts through which the one Gospel continues to illuminate the Church's understanding of peace. The Christian tradition has always grown by welcoming fresh insights while remaining rooted in Scripture and the Gospel. The voices considered here enrich that tradition by illuminating dimensions of peace that become especially visible where Christians have learned to practice hope amid migration, colonialism, religious plurality, and prolonged violence. Their witness expands the Church's moral imagination and strengthens its public witness because it reminds Christians that peace is first learned in communities before it is proclaimed to nations.²⁰

Having listened to Scripture, the Christian moral tradition, and the witness of the global Church, we can now return to the dialogue between Pope Leo XIV and President Donald Trump with fresh eyes. Their public exchange ultimately concerns more than immigration, military intervention, or national security. It reveals the continuing vocation of the Church to ask questions that politics alone cannot answer. Governments must weigh security, diplomacy, and public order. The Church asks whether those decisions preserve the dignity of every person, especially those whose suffering remains least visible. These responsibilities are distinct, but they need not be opposed. Political prudence and Christian discipleship serve the common good most faithfully when each remains faithful to its own vocation while remaining open to the moral insights of the other. The global Church reminds us that such discernment becomes richer whenever Christians listen not only to political debate but also to the lived experiences of communities that continue bearing the wounds of violence.²¹

The Gospel finally returns us to the upper room. The doors remain locked. Fear has not disappeared. The political order that crucified Jesus still governs. Even the wounds of crucifixion remain visible on the risen Christ's body. Christ's first words are remarkably simple: "Peace be with you." (John 20:19)

Christ does not wait until history becomes peaceful before speaking peace. He speaks peace into fear, uncertainty, and woundedness. That gift becomes the Church's vocation. Every generation must learn anew how to receive it, embody it, and bear witness to it within the realities of its own history.

Conclusion

The public dialogue between Pope Leo XIV and President Donald Trump that prompted this essay ultimately points beyond itself. It invites Christians to recover a richer understanding of peace—not simply as the absence of war but as participation in God's reconciling work within history. The Christian moral tradition continues to develop not by abandoning its inheritance but by allowing Scripture, its own theological wisdom, and the lived witness of the global Church to illuminate new historical realities. Listening to Asian and African theological voices does not replace that tradition; it enables the Church to receive it more deeply by seeing dimensions of peace that become especially visible in communities living with the enduring wounds of violence, migration, and social fragmentation. In a world still marked by war, forced migration, ecological destruction, and deep political polarization, peace cannot remain only a future hope or a postwar aspiration. It must become a present practice. The risen Christ's greeting, "Peace be

²⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 13.

²¹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 217–245.

with you," is therefore both promise and calling, inviting the Church to embody God's reconciling love in the midst of a wounded world and to bear faithful public witness to the peace that cannot wait until war ends.