

There is no mistaking the fact that in the fourth and fifth centuries the Lamb of God was being rapidly redesigned into the Lord of Hosts. The seed of holy war had been sown and was already taking root in welcoming soil. The imperial legions were now the agents of God, the enforcers of his will, the devouring flame of his wrath. Just how far this conceit could and would be taken was showcased in the year 388 when Ambrose the Bishop intervened to restrain the Emperor Theodosius from punishing a Christian community in Callinicum for burning down a Jewish synagogue. Ambrose assembled a number of arguments to make his case, concluding that “there is, then, no adequate cause for such a commotion, that the people should be so severely punished for the burning of a building, and much less since it is the burning of a synagogue, a home of unbelief, a house of impiety, a receptacle of folly, which God Himself has condemned.” For centuries the early Christian Church had prayed for and come to expect religious tolerance within a pagan empire, and for the most part they had been granted it. Now, when the empire was theirs, they forgot all that. They forgot as well the second greatest commandment given them by their Lord and Savior, to love their neighbor as they loved themselves. He must have meant their Christian neighbor.

By the close of the fourth century, if not earlier, Christians had only two valid options for weighing the morality of military service and the killing that it entailed: pacifism and the Just War Theory. The latter represented the official position of the Church and would continue to do so far into the future (down to the moment when I am writing this sentence). The former position, the total renunciation of all bloodshed, would remain the personal prerogative of the Church’s “first estate”—monks, nuns, and clergy—as well as the personal choice of a relative handful of men and women who

were more convinced by the gospels than they were by the theology of Ambrose, Augustine, Eusebius, and others....

As we leave the Church of Late Antiquity and proceed into the Middle Ages, there is one more voice to which we need to listen, and that is the muted voice of uneasiness and uncertainty perceptible in a Church that has for all practical purposes embraced the not very limiting policy and practice of just war—not very limiting because the wars that it supported were deemed just by definition. We listen here to a letter written by Saint Basil the Great of Caesarea to his friend Amphilochius of Iconium, a fourth-century bishop who before he took up his episcopal duties in Cappadocia had been first a lawyer and later a monk:

Homicide in war is not reckoned by our Fathers as homicide; I presume from their wish to make concession to men fighting on behalf of chastity and true religion. Perhaps, however, it is well to counsel that those whose hands are not clean only abstain from communion for three years.

The disconnect in these words that on the face of it declare that homicide in war is not homicide may be seen first in the use of the word “concession” to describe this declaration. The ability to kill without it’s being called homicide comes to the soldier as a special dispensation or waiver. But not without a catch. Those who kill in war are to be counseled to abstain from communion for three years. In a word, they are to be temporarily “excommunicated.” Presumably because they are stained, polluted, corrupted. They need to perform at least this penance: to remove themselves from the table of the Lord and the liturgical company of fellow Christians.