

In interview, Cardinal McElroy says U.S. entry into war with Iran ‘not morally legitimate,’ citing Catholic just war teaching

Cardinal Robert W. McElroy, the archbishop of Washington, responded in an email interview to questions from the *Catholic Standard* newspaper of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington about the U.S. attacks on Iran. His responses were posted on the *Catholic Standard*’s website on 9 March 2026 and appeared in the newspaper’s 12 March 2026 edition.

Question: *Cardinal McElroy, it’s been a week since the United States and Israel launched attacks on Iran, and Israel has also attacked Lebanon. This week, you have been celebrating Mass in parishes across the Archdiocese of Washington. When you have spoken with parishioners, what are they saying about this situation?*

Cardinal McElroy: “I have encountered a very significant level of anxiety about the war in Iran, and many parishioners have spoken to me about their worries. Almost everyone rightly believes that the Khamenei regime has been for decades a brutal and repressive government that has spread terrorism throughout the world and should be replaced. But there is immense concern that this war will spiral out of control and embroil the United States in ever greater depth. Several parishioners have mentioned to me that they have sons or daughters in the military, and they are worried they might be placed at risk. Many speak of the two prior wars in Iraq, and the lack of peace or unity that they produced despite major American casualties and immense costs. Others believe that in spite of these realities, now is the time for the United States to end the theocracy in Iran and install a more friendly and more peaceful government.”

Question: *What insights do Catholic teaching on war offer regarding the attacks on Iran, and Iran’s counter attacks throughout the Gulf region?*

Cardinal McElroy: “The Church has a long and substantial teaching on the issues of war and peace. At the center of that teaching is an abiding resistance to war. Pope John Paul II vigorously opposed the 2003 Iraq War and stated categorically that war ‘is always a defeat for humanity.’ Pope Francis called for the total abolition of war, stating that ‘every war leaves the world worse than it was before.’ Pope Leo has noted with alarm that there is a raging zeal for war across nations at this current moment, which is utterly incompatible with Catholic faith. At their heart, each of these papal teachings testifies to the fact that we are followers of Jesus Christ, who placed peace-making at the heart of his call to discipleship and fidelity. Non-violence must be the first stance of Catholics in the world.

“At the same time, in some emergency situations, the Church has historically allowed resort to war if six conditions are clearly and simultaneously met:

1. Just Cause: The war must be undertaken in defense against an attack that is grave and certain on a nation, its allies or a defenseless human community.
2. The legitimate authority in the country contemplating war must declare war.
3. The country goes to war with right intention, namely to redress the specific just cause and restore peace.
4. War is the last resort to repel the aggression.
5. The expected destruction from the war must not outweigh the expected good.
6. There is a reasonable hope of success.

“At this present moment, the U.S. decision to go to war against Iran fails to meet the just war threshold for a morally legitimate war in at least three requirements:

“The criterion of just cause is not met because our country was not responding to an existing or imminent and objectively verifiable attack by Iran. As Pope Benedict declared categorically, Catholic teaching does not support

preventative war, i.e., a war justified by speculation about events in the future. If preventative war were to be accepted morally, then all limits to the cause for going to war would be put in extreme jeopardy.

“The criterion of right intention is not met in our country’s decision to attack Iran. One of the most worrying elements of these first days of the war in Iran is that our goals and intentions are absolutely unclear, ranging from the destruction of Iran’s conventional and nuclear weapons potential to the overthrow of its regime to the establishment of a democratic government to unconditional surrender. You cannot satisfy the just war tradition’s criterion of right intention if you do not have a clear intention.

“Finally, our current war effort does not meet Catholic just war teaching because it is far from clear that the benefits of this war will outweigh the harm which will be done. The Middle East is the most unstable region in the world, and the most unpredictable. Already the war has had unintended consequences. Iran’s morally despicable decision to target its neighbors in the region has spread the expanse of destruction. Lebanon may fall into civil war. The world’s oil supply is under great strain. The potential disintegration of Iran could well produce new and dangerous realities. And the possibility of immense casualties on all sides is immense.

“For all of these reasons, Catholic teaching leads to the conclusion that our entry into this war was not morally legitimate.”

Question: *What is your advice for Catholics in the Archdiocese of Washington, what actions can they take in response to what is happening in the Middle East?*

Cardinal McElroy: “I think it is essential for Catholics in our Archdiocese to pray for peace and an immediate end to this conflict. We should pray for our military men and women. We should pray for the Christian communities in the Middle East that are the last bastions of Catholic faith there, particularly in Lebanon where the large and spiritually beautiful Catholic community continues to witness to Christianity in the region.

“As citizens and believers, we should inform our political representatives of our positions on this unfolding war, giving our own guidance to this land we love so deeply. In addition, we should comfort those in our families, our parishes and our communities who are anxious, that the consolation of the Holy Spirit will be with them.

“Finally, and most importantly we must insure that this war does not turn into a prolonged conflict, lurching from goal to goal and from strategy to strategy. One of the most important Catholic teachings on war and peace is that nations have the strict obligation to end a war as soon as possible. This is particularly true when the decision to go to war was not morally legitimate. There is a logic to war that presses onward, escalating in its dimensions and timeline. Our country has fallen victim to this logic of war in the recent past, especially in the Middle East. We must all work together to forbid this expansionism to lead us into an ongoing morass in Iran.”

Question: *What are your concerns about the future of our country and our world as this war continues?*

Cardinal McElroy: “My deepest concerns on these issues lie most deeply in the general deterioration of moral norms in our own country and throughout the world. For the moral questions that confront us today in Iran are part of a larger issue of moral renewal and dialogue that is deeply needed in our country that we reverence so profoundly. The Founders of our nation believed that America would succeed only if its moral foundation was sound and strong. We can so easily forget that when our nation began as a democratic republic, there was no existing nation that was a democracy. Nor had there been one for over a thousand years. Theirs was truly an experiment in democracy. This same need for moral renewal that was present at our Founding exists piercingly at this moment. I pray that in our 250th year we may move to meet that challenge with zeal, unity and grace.”