News



Washington Cardinal Robert W. McElroy speaks during an Oct. 17, 2025, event at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. (OSV News/Michael Caterina, Courtesy of University of Notre Dame)



by Brian Fraga

Staff Reporter

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 9, 2026

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The United States' war with Iran is "not morally legitimate" because it fails several tenets of Catholic just war principles, Cardinal Robert McElroy of Washington said in a March 9 interview with his archdiocesan newspaper.

Responding to questions in The Catholic Standard, McElroy expressed pointed concerns over the military strikes that the U.S. and Israel have been waging on the Islamic Republic of Iran since Feb. 28.

"I have encountered a very significant level of anxiety about the war in Iran, and many parishioners have spoken to me about their worries," said McElroy, who added that opinions are mixed among those he has spoken with. He said some people are skeptical of another U.S.-led war in the Persian Gulf while others believe the time is right to overthrow Iran's theocracy.

"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," McElroy said.

While spelling out the Catholic Church's conditions for a just war, the cardinal went on to say that the U.S. decision to go to war against Iran fails to meet that threshold in at least three requirements.

First, McElroy said, the criterion of a just cause is not met because the United States was not responding to "an existing or imminent and objectively verifiable attack by Iran." The cardinal referenced Pope Benedict XVI, who rejected the concept of preventative war.

"If preventative war were to be accepted morally, then all limits to the cause for going to war would be put in extreme jeopardy," McElroy said.



Smoke rises following an explosion in Tehran, Iran, March 7, 2026, amid the U.S.-Israeli war with Iran. (OSV News/West Asia News Agency via Reuters/Naser Safarzadeh)

The cardinal added that the war on Iran also fails to satisfy the just war criterion of "right intention."

"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," McElroy said.

The cardinal added: "You cannot satisfy the just war tradition's criterion of right intention if you do not have a clear intention."

McElroy said the Iran war also fails to meet 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," McElroy said, adding that the war has already had several unintended consequences.

"Iran's morally despicable decision to target its neighbors in the region has spread the expanse of destruction," he said. "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."

Advertisement

The cardinal also described "the immense concern" some have expressed that the ongoing war in the Middle East will "spiral out of control" and embroil the United States in ever greater depth.

While saying that the Catholic Church has "an abiding resistance to war" at the heart of its teaching on war and peace, McElroy noted the church, in "some emergency situations," has historically allowed a resort to war if six conditions are "clearly and simultaneously met."

McElroy called on Catholics in his archdiocese to pray for peace and "an immediate end to this conflict."

"We should pray for our military men and women," he said. "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."

McElroy added, "Finally, and most importantly, we must [ensure] 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," he said. "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."

McElroy's interview was published two days after Chicago Cardinal Cupich issued a statement criticizing a social media video posted by the White House Friday featuring footage from the ongoing war in Iran spliced with scenes from action movies.

"A real war with real death and real suffering being treated like it's a video game — it's sickening," he wrote.

Cupich also noted that the "moral crisis we are facing is not just a matter of the war itself, but also how we, the observers, view violence, for war now has become a spectator sport or strategy game."

This story appears in the **War in Iran** feature series. View the full series.