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The hunt for bin Laden and the legacy of US wars

by Mike Sweitzer-Beckman

This past Sunday evening, while watching a Phillies-Mets game from Citizens Bank Ballpark on ESPN, the news arrived that U.S. military forces had captured and killed Osama bin Laden after nearly 10 years of hunting him down. The Philadelphia crowd erupted into cheers of "USA, USA" as if the Americans had just beaten the Russians for a gold medal in hockey. For many at the game, it was a moment of pure joy after years of frustration.

For others, it was a very somber moment. Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, released the following written statement reacting to the news:

Osama bin Laden, as we all know, bore the most serious responsibility for spreading divisions and hatred among populations, causing the deaths of innumerable people, and manipulating religions to this end.

In the face of a man's death, a Christian never rejoices, but reflects on the serious responsibilities of each person before God and before men, and hopes and works so that every event may be the occasion for the further growth of peace and not of hatred.

OK, so what would just war theorists say about the hunt and death of bin Laden from a Catholic Social Teaching perspective?

The premise of the war in Afghanistan (initiated in November 2001) was to find those responsible for the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States -- namely Osama bin Laden.

Using the *Jus in bello* criteria on how combatants should act, this hunt, capture and assassination of bin Laden has been an epic failure. Distinction must be used to ensure that only enemy combatants are killed

during a just war, and the deaths of non-combatants should be minimized.

A rough estimate of 2,800 people were killed in the attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001. The war in Iraq was justified in part by those attacks. Estimates are that around 100,000 innocent people have died in that war, according to the Iraq Body Count Project.

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan estimates that 2,118 civilians were killed during our war there in 2008 alone, and another 1,523 in 2007. Anywhere from 40 percent to 75 percent of these civilian deaths are estimated to have come at the hands of the Taliban. However, in war, both sides need to claim culpability because of the boost in violence that comes from the antagonism.

Just war theory also calls for proportionality in order to fight a just war.

It took the United States nearly 10 years to track down, capture and kill Osama bin Laden. Countless lives have been lost. Billions of dollars have been spent on these two wars. The most serious terrorist threats on U.S. soil in recent years have come from al-Qaida forces in Yemen, but not from Afghanistan (where bin Laden grew up) or Pakistan (where he sought refuge in a compound where the U.S. military captured him).

For every bin Laden, there must be dozens of others who want to attack American people. Unfortunately, the legacy of bin Laden's death may be the spark that causes more terrorist attacks from unsuspected factions of terrorist groups.

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[Mike Sweitzer-Beckman helped launch the blog <http://www.youngadultholics-blog.com/> in 2008. He also blogs at <http://sweitzer-solutions.com/> about technology.]

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