

Why Killing in Self-Defense is Still a Sin

[David J Dunn](#)



I recently wrote that a Christian should not carry a concealed weapon because it violated the spirit of martyrdom and self-sacrifice the church tries to teach us. One common objection to this point was that to choose not to kill in the defense of another human being would be unloving. I agree. It would be unloving to the potential victim, and it would be unloving to the potential victimizer. In the Orthodox Church, killing in defense of self and country is still a sin.

I see a difference between private citizens who choose to carry a weapon and civil servants and soldiers who are trained to do the same. As I said before, I am not a pacifist. I probably would kill in order to defend the life of somebody else; just as I would kill to defend myself for the sake of those who depend on me. But I would also weep over it. In consultation with my spiritual father, I would want to remove myself from Communion for a while, because taking the life of another human being is always a tragedy.

When it comes to soldiers, Canon 13 of St. Basil prescribes that soldiers who take life on the battlefield should remove themselves from Communion for three years. In Canon 55 he extends the same penance to those who kill in self-defense. Canon 57 prescribes *ten* years of penance for involuntary manslaughter.

I do not read the canons in the same way as some traditionalists. The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor. 3:6). Thus in Canon 84 St. Basil says that he does not advocate a legalistic interpretation of the years of penance he meted out for various offenses. What matters is the sorrow of the sinner and the degree of repentance the canons facilitate. The point of Basil's canons is to state, unequivocally, that killing is always sinful, even when it is unavoidable.

Fr. John McGuckin discusses Canon 13 in his recent book [*The Ascent of Christian Law*](#), but what he says applies equally to the other canons I just mentioned.

Canon 13 concerns Christian men who return from wars after having spilled blood. In it Basil admits that in defending the Christians from barbarian raids...these men had done their duty; even so the spilling of blood, under whatever species of just cause, is a serious matter and those guilty of it should remove themselves from communion for three years. This adjudication, so modest in the few lines in which it appears, and seen by many, perhaps, as an example of tentative thinking, was a milestone in Eastern Orthodox reflection, refusing to allow the Orthodox to elaborate any theory of Just War, such as the Latin Church erected, via Augustine, on the basis of Cicero's philosophy. The Byzantines regularly absolved Christian soldiers from the actual stricture (not going to communion for three years after a war had concluded) but, along with Apostolic Canon 66, they were careful to preserve the sense that the Church ought to guard, in all strictness, the principle of the sacredness of life, the enormity of shedding blood, and the unjustifiable nature of glorying in slaughter even on the pretext of national right.

– John McGuckin, *Ascent of Christian Law* (84-85)

I do not think it is sinful to carry a weapon; I just think that it is spiritually unhealthy. At issue is not whether or not it is okay to kill in defense. I think the teaching of the Orthodox Church is pretty clear that it is never okay to kill in defense. I have a problem with carrying a weapon because of the attitude it seems to promote. I do not think a Christian who is a private citizen should walk out the door prepared to do battle with the bad guys. Every Christian is a martyr in training. "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against...spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). We must daily prepare ourselves to fight against the demons, which means that most of our battles are not fought in the streets but within ourselves, and if we daily gird ourselves to slay women and men whom Christ loves and has died for, it is a battle we have lost already.



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