

The Bishops on Nuclear Weapons

by Father Daniel Callam, CSB

ON 24 SEPTEMBER 2009 President Obama presented a resolution to the Security Council of the United Nations that was passed unanimously. It envisaged a world without nuclear weapons and also called for an end to the proliferation of such weapons. Nuclear disarmament has, of course, long been a crucially important topic, and not only for politicians. Theologians who have treated the matter have placed it within a broader discussion of the morality of modern warfare. Over the years, there have also been important statements by the hierarchy. Some twenty-five years ago, for instance, the episcopal conferences of five countries published pastoral letters on the topic: West Germany, the United States, France, Holland, and Ireland; and in England Basil Cardinal Hume wrote a widely publicized letter on the issue to *The London Times*.¹ Such extensive exercise of the episcopal magisterium should not be overlooked in the present crisis, all the more as we find these statements based on biblical teaching, developed from traditional Catholic doctrine, and consonant with the numerous papal statements about nuclear weapons. Furthermore, all of these weighty documents take as their starting point the teaching of the Second Vatican Council:

Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their populations is a crime against God and man itself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.²

Once this is granted, however, the bishops faced an all-important question: Is it right to threaten the enemy with nuclear retaliation but only so as to prevent the outbreak of war? This is the policy of nuclear deterrence, which seems to be based on the intention of employing weapons that it

¹ National Conference of [American] Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*. This document is no longer in print, but excerpts from it are available at the website of the American Catholic Conference: www.usccb.org/sdwp/peace/peace2.shtml. It may also be consulted in the library of Saint Michael's College, Toronto.

Out of Justice Peace: Joint Pastoral Letter of the West German Bishops; Winning the Peace: Joint Pastoral Letter of the French Bishops. These pastoral letters were published together, along with Cardinal Hume's "Letter to the Times." Now out of print, the book is available in the library of Emmanuel College at Victoria University, Toronto.

² *Gaudium et Spes*, 80.

would be wrong actually to use. The bishops of Germany and of the United States—whose letters are remarkably similar in structure and argument—approached this question after a long preamble in which they establish that true peace can be achieved only by a right relationship with God: “We have ‘peace through our Lord Jesus Christ.’”³ Not everyone, of course, recognizes the religious foundation of peace, but the bishops were able to address all men by a principle that is, or should be, universally acknowledged, the supreme dignity of the human person. Considerable space is devoted to summaries of the traditional Catholic teaching about just war. The result is to reaffirm the right to self-defence—there is, however, to be no first, “pre-emptive” strike—at the national as well as the individual levels. Consequently, while the bishops recognize the prophetic witness of pacifists, they admit the legitimacy of a Catholic’s doing military service as long as his duties are within morally acceptable boundaries.

The invention and accumulation of nuclear weapons has created a new situation. Could a limited use of nuclear weapons be justified? The American document is particularly trenchant in examining the real context of this question by considering the actual targets, the difficulty of controlling automated warfare, the psychology of fear, and so on. The bishops placed the onus of proof on anyone who would admit a limited use of nuclear weapons, but they are clearly sceptical of the possibility in practice. France is a smaller nation in possession of a limited number and variety of nuclear weapons. The French bishops point out that in “deterrence of the strong by the weak” the limited resources of the small nation would require it to direct its deterrent against large population centres, which shows the practical impossibility of a morally acceptable use of such armaments. Their comments have an almost prophetic power, given the situation in the Near East and the Orient.

Slightly before these letters were issued, John Paul II had spoken to the Special Session of the United Nations for Disarmament. He then enunciated a policy that was later adopted by the bishops:

In the current conditions “deterrence” based on balance—certainly not as an end itself but as a step on the way to ward a progressive disarmament—may still be judged morally acceptable. Nonetheless, in order to ensure peace, it is indispensable not to be satisfied with this minimum which is always susceptible to the real danger of explosion.

³ Rom. 5.1.

The bishops drew two implications from the Pope's remarks: there must be progress toward disarmament and the number of weapons stockpiled must be the minimum necessary to intimidate the enemy. The American bishops went further, pointing out that a free democracy should be willing to *reduce* the number of its weapons unilaterally. The stopgap character of the situation at that time was stressed. We have, they said, a God-given period in which to achieve peace. Nuclear deterrence is, therefore, merely a "temporary expedient."⁴ The irony of such statements cannot be lost on us, reading them after a quarter century in which the dangers that alarmed the bishops then have dramatically increased.

An important question was not broached by bishops: how long should this "temporary expedient" be allowed to continue? An answer would depend, not on the clock but on the developing situation. All talk about winning or even surviving a nuclear war must reflect a failure to appreciate an obvious fact that any nuclear war would inevitably cause death, disease and suffering of pandemic proportions and without the possibility of effective medical intervention. Even a massive epidemic of H1N1 flu would occasion suffering that would be insignificant compared to what would happen if a single nuclear device were to be deployed. With regard to H1N1, we have learned that prevention is the best means of control. Since, in a nuclear attack, the same effects—widespread death, debility, and suffering—would be present, the same principle should govern our attitude. Here, too, prevention is the best means of control.

The American bishops concluded, "As a people we must refuse to legitimate the idea of nuclear war"; some would go further and refuse to legitimize massive nuclear research. The bishops had described the psychological and sociological harm done to the population by the ever-increasing collection of nuclear weapons in the world, even aside from the primary consequences of disease and death. In the 1980s, these considerations should have been sufficient motive for Soviet and American leaders to negotiate in good faith for a mutually verifiable reduction in nuclear arms. How much more appropriate are the bishops' appeals today, when first-world countries are enabling North Korea, Iran, and other nations to acquire what really are weapons of mass destruction. The mere possession of these weapons, in whatever country they are housed, is destructive of the very people they are supposed to protect. We are at war against ourselves. ❧

⁴ The phrase comes from Cardinal Hume's letter.