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# THE AMERICAN BISHOPS ON WAR AND PEACE

by

JOHN W. COFFEY

**A**t a meeting in Chicago on the second and third of May 1983, the American bishops approved a pastoral letter on war and peace, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response." Owing to pressure from the Vatican and European bishops, this final draft substantially improved on earlier versions and does not contain the meaning imputed to it by elements of the press and the peace movement. In order to understand the pastoral letter, one must therefore note certain changes required after a previous meeting at the Vatican.

Representatives of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops were summoned to Rome in January to discuss their second draft letter with representatives of European bishops' conferences and Vatican officials. Attending that meeting from America were Archbishop John Roach of St. Paul and Minneapolis, president of the NCCB; Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Archbishop of Chicago and chairman of the ad hoc committee on war and peace; Monsignor Daniel Hoye, secretary of the NCCB; and Reverend Bryan Hehir, the principal author of the pastoral letter. The meeting on 18-19 January was closed, but a summary was made public by Reverend Jan Schotte, a secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace.

One important result of the Vatican meeting was a sharper distinction between the different levels of moral authority involved in a discussion of this issue, a differentiation which the second draft had obscured. As Roach and Bernardin later explained to their American colleagues,

Perhaps the crucial point of the exchanges we have described has been to focus attention on the need to distinguish clearly between moral principles and their application to concrete realities—that is, between principles on the one hand and, on the other, specific applications of these principles via the assessment of factual circumstances. This is necessary to avoid attaching or seeming to attach an unwarranted level of authority to prudential, contingent judgments where the complexity of the facts makes possible a number of legitimate opinions.<sup>1</sup>

For one matter, a bishops' conference as such has no teaching authority. Only the Pope or the whole College of Bishops with the Pope can proclaim morally binding principles for Catholics. Thus, the pastoral letter carries moral authority only when it reiterates the formal teaching of the universal Church or when it reaffirms natural law principles of the just-war theory. Second, as the American bishops were compelled to admit in their final draft, "The applications of principles in this pastoral letter do not carry the same moral authority as our statements of universal moral principles and formal church teaching."<sup>2</sup> For example, natural law principles such as noncombatant immunity (noncombatant life must not be directly and intentionally taken) and proportionality (the good to be obtained must be proportional to the damage done) are binding, while the bishops' prudential judgments about specific policies, such as "no first use" of nuclear weapons or their proposals on how to secure

peace, do not possess a scintilla of authority. As we shall see, however, the practical application of even universally valid principles admits different conclusions. To the extent, then, that the American bishops uphold traditional Catholic just-war teaching, they have nothing new to say; their own views about political policy, on the other hand, bear no moral weight.

A second significant result of the Vatican meeting was to force the US bishops to employ Scripture more carefully in their treatment of war and peace. Those who read the bishops' second draft letter may recall Lincoln's response when importuned by a group of prophetic Christians about emancipation:

I hope it will not be irreverent for me to say that if it is probable that God would reveal his will to others, on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed he would reveal it directly to me; for, unless I am more deceived in myself than I often am, it is my earnest desire to know the will of Providence in this matter. *And if I can learn what it is I will do it!* These are not, however, the days of miracles, and I suppose it will be granted that I am not to expect a direct revelation. I must study the plain physical facts of the case, ascertain what is possible and learn what appears to be wise and right. The subject is difficult, and good men do not agree.<sup>3</sup>

Warned at the Vatican meeting not to confuse this imperfect, earthly life with God's kingdom in eternal life, the bishops recognized finally that Revelation offers no political treatise and that God's kingdom of peace and justice will never exist in this sinful world, which must settle for a rough justice that sometimes disrupts peace. An examination of the Scriptures, the bishops acknowledge, "makes it clear that they do not provide us with detailed answers to the specifics of the questions which we face today."<sup>4</sup> The final pastoral letter conforms to the sober realism of Pope John Paul II that "in this world a totally and permanently peaceful human society is unfortunately a

utopia" and that any illusions otherwise "lead straight to the false peace of totalitarian regimes."<sup>5</sup>

At the Vatican meeting, furthermore, "it was clearly affirmed that only one Catholic tradition exists: the just-war theory."<sup>6</sup> The American bishops abandoned their earlier pretense that pacifist nonviolence holds equal standing in Church teaching and allowed pacifism as an option only for individuals, not states. The final pastoral letter reaffirms Pius XII's injunction that states have a moral duty to defend their people against aggression and that nations are obliged to assist one another in self-defense.

In the final pastoral letter the bishops ground their discussion of nuclear policy in the 15-century-old just-war tradition and by doing so adhere to established Church teaching. Just-war theory stipulates seven conditions for the *jus ad bellum* (when resort to war is permissible) and two conditions for the *jus in bello* (permissible conduct in war). In the nuclear age, the critical conditions are proportionality and discrimination. Proportionality applies to the *jus ad bellum* (the harm inflicted and suffered must be commensurate with the good to be obtained) and to the *jus in bello* (the response to aggression cannot exceed the nature of the aggression; hence, unlimited nuclear war would lack reasonable proportion). Discrimination applied to the *jus in bello* requires that innocent, noncombatant life may not be directly and intentionally taken.

Now, these prudential dictates of natural reason do not allow precise, definite ap-

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plication. Long ago Aristotle counseled that ethics is not geometry and that an educated man will look for the degree of certainty and exactness appropriate to a subject. Recognizing the inexact nature of discrimination in practice, the bishops admit that "concise and definitive answers still appear to be wanting."<sup>7</sup> Very great, although unintentional and indirect, loss of civilian life may occur without violating the standard of discrimination, and it is often not possible neatly to distinguish between military and nonmilitary targets. What are we to say, for instance, of a munitions factory located in a city? Moreover, in many forms of conflict, particularly in unconventional warfare, it may be exceedingly difficult to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants. This was the situation in Vietnam and, more recently, in the war in Lebanon. All that is morally required in such cases is a reasonable, good-faith effort.

Nor can the principle of proportionality be reduced to some crude, material calculus. Were the preservation of the Union and the end of slavery worth one million dead and wounded Americans? Was the defeat of Nazism commensurate with the loss of 55 million lives? The principle of proportionality cannot be quantified, and traditional Catholic teaching has never been marred by the vulgar hedonism of many contemporary peace activists who suggest that the greatest evil is physical pain and death. As the distinguished Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray once explained,

The comparison here must be between realities of the moral order, and not sheerly between two sets of material damage and loss. The standard is not a "eudaemonism and utilitarianism of materialist origin," which would avoid war merely because it is uncomfortable, or connive at injustice simply because its repression would be costly. The question of proportion must be evaluated in more tough-minded fashion, from the viewpoint of the hierarchy of strictly moral values. It is not enough simply to consider the "sorrows and evils that flow from war." There are greater evils than the

physical death and destruction wrought in war. And there are human goods of so high an order that immense sacrifices may have to be borne in their defense.<sup>8</sup>

Earlier versions of the pastoral letter smacked of the kind of Hobbesian materialism against which Murray warned, but apparently the Vatican meeting helped clarify the hierarchy of moral values for the American bishops.

## II

At the January meeting in Rome, Cardinal Casaroli, Vatican secretary of state, offered an informal commentary on John Paul II's 1982 message to the Second Special Session of the UN General Assembly on disarmament. Casaroli cautioned the US bishops to stick to the level of moral principle that falls within their competence: "One must deal with true principles of the *moral order* without getting into questions of a technical, political or any other nature that ultimately escape the competence of the ecclesiastical magisterium."<sup>9</sup> This the bishops do in their moral judgment of the general policy of deterrence.

On the fundamental strategy of nuclear deterrence, the bishops side with Pope John Paul II: Deterrence is still morally acceptable, not as an end in itself but as a step toward disarmament; the danger of nuclear war must be balanced against the protection of justice and freedom. Their concurrence with the Pope on deterrence leads the bishops nominally to support the maintenance of a balance of strategic forces: "Thus a balance of forces, preventing either side from achieving superiority, can be seen as a means of safeguarding both dimensions,"<sup>10</sup> that is, averting war and defending freedom. Contrarily, the bishops' specific policy recommendations preclude the maintenance of this balance.

The bishops condemn the particular policy of deliberate, direct counterpopulation warfare under any circumstances. "Under no circumstances," the pastoral letter emphatically states, "may nuclear weapons or other instruments of mass slaughter be used

for the purpose of destroying population centers or other predominantly civilian targets."<sup>11</sup> At the January meeting in Rome participants agreed with this general prohibition, but the concrete application of even this principle is open to varied judgments: "Questions were raised though about the application of the principle to actual nuclear strategies or to the use of particular nuclear weapons. Such application entails a contingent judgment."<sup>12</sup> The summary of the Vatican meeting does not elaborate upon the contingent considerations participants may have contemplated, but we may perhaps assume that, for example, unintentional collateral damage arising from strikes against military targets proximate to urban areas would not violate the prudential standard of discrimination.

Dealing with the particular policy of flexible response entailing the possible first use of nuclear weapons by NATO, the final pastoral letter is much more qualified and cautious than earlier versions. First of all, the American bishops were required to clarify the morally nonbinding nature of their prudential judgment about the first use of nuclear weapons. Proximity to the Soviet threat has obviously concentrated the minds of the European prelates more powerfully than those of their American brethren. Consequently, according to the summary of the Rome meeting, participants believed that "clearer distinctions are called for in the text with regard to the question of first use in order to avoid any misunderstanding and ambiguity."<sup>13</sup> The final letter acknowledges the prudential character of the bishops' endorsement of no first use.

Because of the uncertainty in controlling escalation, the bishops profess that they do not see how "initiation of nuclear warfare on however restricted a scale can be morally justified."<sup>14</sup> Therefore, they urge NATO to renounce the option of first nuclear use against a conventional attack, relying instead on a conventional defense. Gone, however, is the bishops' earlier, bald endorsement of no first use. The final pastoral letter grants that development of an adequate conventional defense will take time, and although they do not explicitly approve the current strategy of

flexible response, the bishops do lend it tacit assent:

In the interim, deterrence against a conventional attack relies upon two factors: the not inconsiderable conventional forces at the disposal of NATO and the recognition by a potential attacker that the outbreak of large-scale conventional war could escalate to the nuclear level through accident or miscalculation by either side.<sup>15</sup>

The bishops cautiously hedge support of no first nuclear use by making it contingent upon concurrent creation of an adequate conventional defense: "We urge NATO to move rapidly toward the adoption of a 'no first use' policy, but doing so in tandem with development of an adequate alternative defense posture."<sup>16</sup>

For the bishops, "the first imperative is to prevent any use of nuclear weapons."<sup>17</sup> Over the question of whether it might be possible to conduct a limited nuclear war, the bishops register their doubt yet concede that the policy debate remains inconclusive. Contrary to the impression in some quarters, then, the final pastoral letter does not rule out the limited use of nuclear weapons. It is difficult to miss the influence on the final pastoral letter particularly of West German Catholic leaders, who have vigorously supported NATO's "two-track" decision of 1979 and who harbor no illusions about the threat they confront. As the Central Committee of German Catholics stated in 1981,

Whenever a nation fails to visualize the extent to which life under a totalitarian system is devoid of human dignity, it becomes a breeding ground for active minorities that use the word peace and the longing for peace as a vehicle for asserting their own totalitarian or anarchistic goals—goals that are opposed to freedom. Where the fatal tendency to disregard history is combined with political ignorance, an insufficiently developed ability to make ethical distinctions, and the reluctance to fight for our common order, such minorities can gain an influence that far transcends their real importance.<sup>18</sup>

The bishops' general principles conform to established Church teaching, and their major pronouncements on the strategy of deterrence are largely unexceptionable. When they enter the area of concrete policy recommendations, however, where they lack authority and competence, they become hopelessly muddled and in the process reduce deterrence to an empty, dangerous bluff. Thereby the bishops also, against the Vatican's admonishment, diminish the teaching authority and influence of the Church in society.

The bishops' condemnation of direct, deliberate counterpopulation warfare under any circumstances accords with American strategy. US nuclear strategy does not rest on the incredible threat of mutual extermination of civilians, but on the limited, flexible targeting of military forces. The Nixon Administration formulated the doctrine, reaffirmed by each subsequent administration, of limited nuclear options, whereby the United States would exercise a selective, measured retaliation according to the scale and targets of a Soviet attack. President Carter lamentably delayed or canceled every new weapon system designed to give the United States that flexible, counterforce capability, but the Reagan Administration's strategic modernization program intends precisely to bring that capability into being in accordance with the nation's declared policy.

Although the bishops acknowledge US deterrence strategy to be one of counterforce, not countervalue, targeting, they become entangled in a logical dilemma that renders deterrence a hollow threat. Unlike some nuclear freeze advocates who support the catastrophic doctrine of mutual assured destruction, realizing that in a crisis this doctrine would result only in US self-deterrence, the bishops rightly reject the immoral, suicidal policy of attacks on Soviet cities. Conversely, they disapprove development of hard-target weapons that would give us the discriminate capability of hitting Soviet military targets. Since the bishops understand deterrence as preventing any use of nuclear weapons, they regard "sufficiency" to deter as an adequate strategy and

oppose development of new counterforce weapons that might inspire fear of a first strike in the Soviets. But the bishops cannot logically have it both ways. Either they must embrace the suicidal doctrine of MAD, or they must favor the alternative of limited nuclear options; they cannot repudiate both and still purport to offer an intelligible strategic policy.

The bishops oppose the creation of a nuclear war-fighting capability along with the building of any new weapon system that would lower the nuclear threshold or blur the distinction between conventional and nuclear war. Though they do not say so, presumably the bishops have in mind a weapon such as the neutron bomb. Adoption of the strategy delineated by the bishops would present American decision-makers with an all-or-nothing response to Soviet aggression. Despite their rhetorical condemnation of the cataclysmic response to Soviet aggression, the bishops' position does not practically differ from the cynical endorsement of MAD by freeze advocates who know that in a confrontation this strategy would eventuate in American capitulation. Deterrence thus becomes for the bishops an incredible, dangerous bluff which we may not morally execute. Effective deterrence must be based on the ability to respond appropriately across the entire spectrum of conflict and on the credible intent to use nuclear weapons. By their rejection of a war-fighting capability and support of a nuclear freeze, the bishops undermine the flexible response that makes deterrence credible.

#### IV

In their handling of arms control, the bishops exhibit the confusion that grips most members of the professional arms control community and most elected officials. The bishops at least are candid about their confusion. For them, as for most of its promoters, arms control has become an end in itself rather than one means by which we strengthen our national security. Security policy is geared toward the achievement of arms control for its own sake; arms control is

no longer one instrument among others to bolster the nation's security. The bishops urge deep cuts in the nuclear arsenals of both superpowers and only grudgingly concede that the START and INF negotiations launched by President Reagan "are said to be designed to achieve deep cuts."<sup>19</sup> Why these proposals are merely "said to be designed to achieve" what they demonstrably call for, the bishops do not explain. But the bishops illustrate why we habitually wind up negotiating with ourselves in arms control talks. The United States, they admit, has already taken significant steps toward arms control, yet "additional initiatives are encouraged."<sup>20</sup> They have nothing to say about what the Soviets should do.

The bishops are candid about the source of their confusion, however, for their goal is not simply arms control or even reduction, but disarmament: "Nuclear deterrence should be used as a step on the way toward progressive disarmament. Each proposed addition to our strategic system or change in strategic doctrine must be assessed precisely in light of whether it will render steps toward 'progressive disarmament' more or less likely."<sup>21</sup> In this spirit the pastoral letter supports "immediate, bilateral, verifiable agreements to halt the testing, production, and deployment of new nuclear weapons systems."<sup>22</sup> A footnote in the pastoral letter disclaims support for any particular political initiative, but this statement effectively supplies aid and comfort to the nuclear freeze movement. Some of their newly found friends in the press and peace movement will, one suspects, be less enthusiastic about the bishops' call for opposition to direct war on innocent life in the womb as the first step toward a peaceful world. Nevertheless, the bishops show themselves captives of the hoary myth that weapons, not nations with conflicting vital interests in a fallen world, cause wars. And they can reconcile their support for maintenance of a strategic balance with their call for a nuclear freeze only by believing that deterrence is a static relation and that technology can be made to stand still. The bishops seem oblivious of the fact that the development of American

nuclear weapons has made them less numerous and destructive and more discriminate in effect. Had we frozen our nuclear systems 20 years ago, we would have a third more warheads—with four times the megatonnage—than we have today.

With respect to substituting an adequate NATO conventional defense for the option of first nuclear use, the bishops seem unaware of some unpleasant realities, or perhaps they are simply less than forthcoming about the harsh alternatives. They are far from the first or sole proponents of enhancing NATO's conventional capability. From the alliance's beginning American leaders have exhorted European allies to do just so, and from the start the Europeans have resisted this course for economic and political reasons. European governments, encumbered with burgeoning welfare states, have never been willing to sacrifice butter for guns and to shoulder the much greater economic burden a robust conventional defense would impose. They have been unwilling to risk the political unpopularity with their electorates of a larger defense establishment, and they have always feared that a stronger conventional defense would decouple the link to the American nuclear umbrella. Yet even if our NATO partners substantially upgraded their conventional capability, a flat disavowal at any time of the possible first use of tactical nuclear weapons to repulse a Soviet attack would make a conventional war far more feasible. The uncertain scale of NATO's retaliation has in fact deterred the Soviets and sustained peace in Europe for 35 years. Moreover, the community of risk created by extended deterrence has buoyed European confidence in America and prevented the Finlandization of the continent. This was the message conveyed by a bipartisan group of German political leaders in reply to the argument for no first use made last year by George Kennan and others.<sup>23</sup>

Just as they reveal by their eschewal of both assured destruction and a war-fighting capability, the bishops want to have their cake and eat it too. Conventional forces, unfortunately, cost more than nuclear weapons, and estimates for a sufficient

NATO conventional defense range up to ten percent beyond current expenditures. When we remember that our NATO allies have not even honored their agreement to a three-percent increase made to President Carter, prospects for a reliable conventional defense look dim. Yet the bishops are disingenuous about the sacrifices conventional defense would demand. Sensing that a nuclear deemphasis would boost defense expenditures, the bishops shirk approving increased defense spending (to say nothing of conscription for America and Britain) by professing incompetence to judge the case: "We cannot judge the strength of these arguments in particular cases . . . . It is not for us to settle the technical debate about policy and budgets."<sup>24</sup> If the bishops plead incompetence to decide budgetary questions, whence do they derive competence to judge far more complex matters?

Further, the bishops are loathe to endorse higher defense spending because they do not want to shortchange "other urgent, unmet human needs,"<sup>25</sup> and they beg off the entire problem by disavowing any "notion of 'making the world safe for conventional war,' which introduces its own horrors."<sup>26</sup> Additionally, if they were realistic about the problems of military defense, they might change their minds about "outlawing the production and use of chemical and biological weapons."<sup>27</sup> Not unexpectedly, they are silent about Soviet chemical warfare in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia, and they fail to see that a NATO chemical capability could help raise the nuclear threshold, while its absence in the face of Soviet combined-arms doctrine perilously lowers that threshold. But the bishops are not realistic. They do earnestly want to avoid war of any kind, but they would be more persuasive if they faced the harsh choices; by ignoring these they forfeit an opportunity to contribute to policy discussion.

## V

I will not offer here a lengthy consideration of the bishops' proposals to promote peace. These range from a feckless

endorsement of the United Nations as a step toward world government to a perverse recommendation to create a global political body that would maintain surveillance over the earth and have the power to prevent any nation from bellicose preparations. What a monstrous totalitarianism this would entail escapes the bishops, who blithely suggest that this might be accomplished without infringing on any nation's sovereignty.<sup>28</sup> Since the bishops pay homage to the UN as a vehicle of world political order, though, brief reflection on this proposition is worthwhile.

Although the United States contributes 25 percent of the UN's operating expenses, which total more than \$1 billion annually, the bishops encourage the United States to "adopt a stronger supportive role with respect to the United Nations."<sup>29</sup> The bishops might be excused for understating America's unparalleled support of the UN since its inception, but their persistent illusion that the UN represents the hope for international political order and the advance of human rights, despite a generation's experience, exemplifies their lack of realism.

No clear-eyed observer of the UN's nearly 40-year track record can believe any longer in the early utopian expectation that it would peacefully resolve international conflicts. Rather, Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick notes, the UN actually serves to exacerbate conflicts. "I am," writes Kirkpatrick, "more bothered by far by the tendency of the United Nations to make conflict resolution *more difficult* than it would otherwise be, at least in a good many cases."<sup>30</sup> This happens, Kirkpatrick points out, because when a problem such as the Golan Heights issue becomes a UN issue, the number of parties involved greatly expands to include many who would never otherwise have been concerned. Also, the UN politicizes and publicizes issues such as Namibian independence, breeding polarization by forcing states to choose sides. Finally, the UN pattern of bloc politics fosters a spurious solidarity where the interests of nations are subordinated to the interests of a group hostile to the real welfare of those nations, for example, support for the PLO by con-



servative Arab states. Given these realities and considering that the European nations sharing a common heritage have been unable to achieve political unity, how the bishops imagine that Western liberal democracies could fashion a global political order with Marxist totalitarian states and the anti-Western, tin-pot dictatorships of the Third World surpasses comprehension.

Taken together with their solicitude for human rights, the bishops' fantasy about the United Nations strikes one as extraordinary. This is the body, Ambassador Kirkpatrick reminds us, that bullies South Africa, Israel, and noncommunist Latin American nations while blinking the slaughter of three million Cambodians by Pol Pot, the murder of a quarter of a million Ugandans by Idi Amin, and the daily, systematic repression of millions of Soviet citizens. And it is the body that has equated Zionism with Nazism. The moral hypocrisy and cynicism of the UN concerning human rights are matched only by its trivialization of this noble ideal, as when the Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights proclaimed a paid vacation to be a human right. Walter Berns, who recently served as alternate US Representative to the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva, describes his experience in this manner: "The UN is the only organization with which I have been associated where it is taken for granted that members do not necessarily speak the truth."<sup>31</sup> Berns recounts the placid reception given the explanation by the chief Soviet delegate to the commission that the Berlin Wall exists not to keep East Germans in but to keep West Germans out.

## VI

In the end, the bishops' failure is one of prudence. The prime virtue in political and moral affairs, prudence is the steady habit of choosing the appropriate means to a good end. The bishops' intention is laudable. They fervently hope for peace and wish to say no to war. But wishing will not make it so. The bishops can no more wish peace into existence than they can make the earth flat or the sun revolve around the earth by declaring it to be

so. One cannot decry the horrors of unlimited nuclear war or deplore the misfortune of war altogether and then disregard every prudent means of averting those ends. The trouble with the bishops is that they want to have clean hands in politics, but as Peguy once said, to have clean hands in life means to have no hands at all. It is no small historical irony that the bishops' jejune observations about world politics come from representatives of a Church once so adroit at the manipulation of political power.

The pastoral letter contains a sober understanding of Soviet totalitarianism, which is inimical to the very freedom the bishops themselves enjoy. Yet it will probably take more than prayers to preserve the peace and freedom of the world. The bishops should emulate Lincoln's prudent expression of gratitude for the victorious Union Army: Thanks to God and credit to Grant!

No more than the bishops do other men want war, but sometimes men choose a course that may lead to war because they reject the alternatives as worse. Perhaps, finally, the bishops reflect that loss of civil courage in the West discerned by Solzhenitsyn, manifesting itself in a refusal to risk what is precious in the defense of common values.

## NOTES

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23. Karl Kaiser et al., "Nuclear Weapons and the Preservation of Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, 60 (Summer 1982), 1157-70; see also McGeorge Bundy et al., "Nuclear Weapons and the Atlantic Alliance," *Foreign Affairs*, 60 (Spring 1982), 753-68.
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