

Peace, War, and the Christian Conscience

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Though much of what I have to say will reflect a perspective based on my own experiences and, to that extent, will take its colouration and emphasis from Catholicism in the U.S. setting and situation, I think the underlying essentials will apply as well to the British and European situations. After all, Catholic opponents of war, wherever they are, must come to terms with the tragic truth that the 'universality' of our Church has usually found expression in too ready a willingness to endorse and support participation in wars and (for the last 1500 years at least) a reluctance to challenge its faithful to give active witness instead to its Founder's teachings of peace and nonviolence.

Something of a re-awakening began in the interval between the two World Wars. In great part due to the writings of the Dominican, Fr. Franziskus Stratmann, there developed what might be described as a 'Thomist' or 'neo-Scholastic' pacifism. While not yet accepting the 'absolutism' of the so-called 'peace churches' with their total rejection of all violence and war, this new theological interpretation recognized the impossibility of fitting the weapons and strategies of modern warfare into the traditional concept of the 'just war' and its conditions. In Germany Stratmann joined with the later martyred Max Josef Metzger to found The Peace League of German Catholics, which soon claimed over a thousand local units and many thousands of members and was deemed enough of a problem to merit the honour of being one of the first, if not the very first, organizations to be driven out of existence by

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the Gestapo once Hitler came to power.

This modernized Thomism, as I understood it, was the position of PAX as well. In a letter dated September 9, 1943, and published in the January 1944 issue of our very occasional *Catholic C.O.* paper, Stormont Murray enclosed a copy of the statement identifying PAX as an organization which rejected 'the idea of a justifiable war here and now' because 'war today' failed to meet the 'rigid conditions' which were required for the use of force to be 'morally justifiable.' Other items 'borrowed' by us (without the slightest concern for soliciting permission, I might add) were Eric Gill's 1938 speech stressing the economic sources of war, Fr. Orchard's elaboration of PAX policy from the July 1943 issue of the *Bulletin*, and E.I. Watkin's *Catholic Peacemaker* article explaining that the introduction of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki finally eliminated all possibility of a 'just war'.

Though *The Catholic Worker* accepted and used such arguments, its position was much closer to the 'peace church' absolutism. Its basic ideology stressed a striving for perfection 'as our heavenly Father is perfect' and the commitment to sacrificial love and the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Even in a 'just war', it would argue, the Christian was called to go beyond justice to love the enemy. As one of my fellow conscientious objectors liked to put it, the 'just war' principles in their Aristotelian/Stoic origins represented the ethic required of 'the good pagan'. Christians, he insisted, are called to a higher ethic.

Life in the camp for Catholic conscientious objectors, run by the Catholic Worker movement, where I spent much of World War II, was exciting enough in its way. No more than half of the members of this nominally Catholic camp were Catholic, and no more than half of these were 'practicing' Catholics. Those who were not 'of the Faith' were understandably resentful of what they considered the imposition of the Catholic Worker philosophy and practice of voluntary poverty, and they were joined in their protests by the Catholics, like myself, identified as of a more religiously 'liberal' persuasion. The mundane arguments over such things as adequate food and other creature comforts went on all the time, of course; but they were no match for the more heated controversies which were theological in nature and conducted almost exclusively among the *really* Catholic campers.

Catholic Workers were dominant in administrative positions, as might be expected with the CW Movement as the camp's patron, and they promoted their 'perfectionist' point of view and made it at least semi-official. Others again, including me, who were less experienced in the niceties of theological disputation, tended to be more absolutist in rejecting even the possibility of a 'just war'. A third faction claimed to represent the only 'orthodox' position, basing their rejection of the war upon what they regarded as violation of one or more of the conditions set

forth by St. Thomas Aquinas. To add a bit of spice to the ever-bubbling pot, we also had a few Catholics who attributed their presence in the camp to personal 'revelations' of one kind or another. Finally, and perhaps most surprising of all, ten or so were ardent followers of the right-wing radio priest, Fr. Charles Coughlin and they insisted they were conscientious objectors only because the United States was fighting on the wrong side!

All in all, a very strange band of 'prophets'. In truth, of course, that is not what we were. Perhaps the most that can be said for the 'Catholic peace movement' of that time—and this probably held true in Britain as much as it did in the United States—is that those of us who opposed World War II may have *accidentally* laid the foundation without which the theologically sophisticated and effective Catholic peace movement of today could not have gained the influence *and the respect* it enjoys in both our countries.

World War II ended in a storm of theological confusion. The two atomic bombings merely capped the demonic escalation of 'conventional' terror and obliteration bombings, and the victors were united only in their suspicion of each other's motives and intentions—some of the military and political leaders on the 'democratic' side even being prepared, if necessary, to move on to Moscow to complete the job. A few, as we know, were ready to make common cause with the defeated enemy in doing so.

In his final years Pius XII gave cause to hope in his apparent condemnation of the new 'advances' (if one may use the term) in atomic, bacteriological, and chemical warfare and, by inference if not by official declaration, narrowing the conditions for 'justifiable' war to only one: defence against unjust aggression. Unfortunately, from our vantage point at least, he also all but excluded conscientious objection as a legitimate option for the Catholic. To complicate Rome's record still further, it is now quite clear that a rather dubious 'underground railroad' was in operation in the immediate postwar years—whether the Pope was aware of it or not—facilitating the escape of prominent Nazis and others suspected of war crimes. This, coupled with Pius's failure or refusal to speak out in condemnation of Hitler's infamous 'Final Solution', left the Church suspect of indifference or even complicity—unjust though the suspicion may have been.

This was the time and the setting in which the Catholic peace movement was reborn. PAX, *The Catholic Worker*, and the few other groups which had persevered through the bad days of the war now found a more receptive hearing and support and continued what they had been trying to do all along. They were joined by new groups, some with more sharply focussed or limited interests and goals. In the United States, a few of us who had been in alternative service camps joined with

Dorothy Day and several of the Workers who wanted to concentrate more heavily on peace concerns to form an American PAX modelled after the organization whose anniversary we are commemorating here. In Germany the remnants of the former *Friedensbund* were divided between the newly created Pax Christi and the more leftist-oriented Pax Vobis, with the former winning out in the competition for Catholic support.

Founded in 1945, principally as a movement for reconciliation between French and German veterans, Pax Christi has since broadened its scope both in terms of international representation and, more important perhaps, in its definition of purpose. Caution and the reverence for protocol are still much in evidence at Pax Christi's international proceedings, but—and this is in great part due to the contributions of the English-speaking sections, I make bold to suggest—early reluctance to tackle 'touchy' subjects has largely disappeared. If the movement does not yet merit the title of 'Crusade' used by Pius XII when he gave it his blessing and commendation, it is still engaged in the works he praised: 'spreading everywhere the Christian concept of peace and creating, by the prayers of its members and circulation of its literature, an atmosphere of universal understanding which will be the basis for a true and lasting reconciliation between men and nations.'

It is probably stretching a point to suggest that the Pope's praise conferred 'official' ecclesiastical status upon the movement. Even so, its international character makes Pax Christi the most significant Catholic peace movement of our time. Through it the spirit of PAX and its American 'clone'—both of which have since become national sections of the international movement—continue. There has been a highly significant change, however. The emphasis on the 'just war' tradition, even as modified by Stratmann and his followers, is now overshadowed by the more thorough-going rejection of all violence and war that characterized the earliest centuries of Church history. A companion change is the extent to which the Christian witness against war has shifted from intellectual disputation to a concern for means of translating that witness into more effective action.

These changes, of course, have taken place in the broader context of that 'new approach' to war called for by the Second Vatican Council and anticipated in John XXIII's great peace encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*. Since that watershed document was first issued, there has been a steady stream of papal statements—some calling for the abolition of nuclear war and denouncing the arms race; others affirming the legitimacy of conscientious objection and encouraging the search for alternatives to war in the pursuit of international justice. These statements in their turn have been echoed (sometimes improved upon) by similar appeals voiced by individual bishops and formalized in pastoral directives issued by

national hierarchies like our own. None of which, needless to say, was anticipated, even in my wildest fantasies, when I was performing my 'service' during World War II. Though the institutional Church may not have come as far or as fast as most of us might wish, such statements provide an invaluable foundation ('launching pad' to use a military term) upon which Pax Christi and other organizations can base their future efforts.

We may take some gratification, too, in recognizing the fact of a two-way relationship here: those statements and policies of the institutional Church might not be available as reinforcement for today's Catholic peace movement had it not been for its predecessor's stubborn perseverance in the days when it was unnoticed, unwanted and ignored. It would be unwise, though, to make too much of that. The *real* cause of the welcome change that has taken place in the Church's attitudes and teachings concerning modern war is the change in the nature of war itself, its weapons, and the inhuman strategies those weapons make possible. It is these things, not simply the persuasive cogency of our arguments, which should demonstrate once and for all the irrelevance of the 'just war' tradition. Our task has been—and must continue to be—to make that point as insistently as possible so that, however much 'prudence' and 'practicality' may seem to recommend silence in some future situation, the official leaders of a Church which claims to be The Mystical Body of Christ may never be permitted to ignore or escape their responsibility to speak out.

The minor 'victories' we may have won to this point should not give us too much comfort. Whatever satisfaction we take from the progress Pax Christi and other elements of the peace movement have made since the end of World War II must be tempered by the awareness that the challenge still before us is greater now than it ever has been. The technology of modern warfare and the plans and preparations already under way to put it to use have developed a dynamic all their own. The depersonalization process which, psychologists tell us, must take place before one human being is made ready and willing to destroy another on command has been perfected and now extends to entire populations. Indeed, to the planet itself!

It is right to take hope from the growing worldwide demand for significant steps toward disarmament and the ultimate elimination of war. The rediscovery by the Christian religious communities of their mission to advance the cause of peace and nonviolence may be late and still incomplete; but this, too, is a source of hope. Nevertheless, that hope will disappear if we fail to translate these goals and values into the awareness and acceptance by ordinary men and women of their personal responsibility to do what they can to reverse the trend toward war while there is still time. But this, I fear, will not be possible unless present

assumptions of helplessness are replaced by a renewed commitment to the potential and power of the individual conscience.

Shakespeare thought he had the word for it. 'Conscience,' he has Hamlet lament, 'makes cowards of us all'. All too often the behaviour of Christians—and this has been especially true of *Catholic* Christians—seems to prove his point.

Consider, if you will, the parents who 'disown' sons who choose to become conscientious objectors or, if they do not go quite that far, voice strong parental disapproval and concern about the shame such a decision could bring upon the family. Not that this is too widespread a problem, probably. It is the case in the States, and I assume it would be true here too, that few of our young Catholics who might be called up in some future military conscription are aware that conscientious objection is a possible option or, if they are, would be at all inclined to exercise it. That their bishops, following the lead of Vatican II, have affirmed the legitimacy of that stand on numerous occasions matters little. Nor are most young Catholics likely to be aware of, or particularly impressed by, the fact that Pope John Paul II has praised conscientious objection as 'a sign of maturity.'

According to the Fathers of Vatican II, conscience is 'a law written by God (that) man has in his heart', the 'most secret core and sanctuary of man (where) he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths'. Somehow, (sexist language notwithstanding) this must be made meaningful and relevant to each and every person who professes to claim the name of Christian. There is no denying that being true to one's conscience will seldom be easy, that it is often costly and even dangerous. That merely increases the vital importance of getting the message across. The U.S. bishops in their 1983 peace pastoral spelled it out in its fullest implications: 'To be a Christian, according to the New Testament,' they wrote, 'is not simply to believe with one's mind, but also to become a doer of the word, a wayfarer with and a witness to Jesus. This means, of course, that we never expect complete success within history and that we must regard as normal even the path of persecution and the possibility of martyrdom.'

Franz Jaegerstaetter knew that. This 'ordinary' peasant, beheaded in 1943 for refusing to serve in Hitler's army, went to his death certain that no one outside his village would ever know about him or his sacrifice. This did not bother him too much because, in his mind, it was simply a matter between him and his God. Nothing more. We now know he was wrong about the impact his sacrifice would have, as things turned out, but had he known it it would have made no difference to him. Although at the time everyone who knew of his intention—family, friends, neighbours, priests, and even his bishop—pleaded with him to 'do his duty', to consider the needs of his wife and family, and not to

throw his life away in pointless sacrifice, he persisted. And they, also, were wrong. Today he is honoured as a national hero and prospective saint for his refusal to violate his conscience.

Shakespeare was wrong too. Dead wrong!

It is the role of conscience to make *heroes* of us all by helping us become the Christians we can be and are called to be. Cowards are those who surrender their moral judgment to experts and to those in power, who 'go along' when dissent or refusal seem pointless and foolhardy. Christians living in what our bishops have called 'this new moment' would do well to take Jaegerstaetter as the example of what conscience may demand of us all in the event of the war that is forbidden becoming a reality.

The demands of conscience are not limited to the young people who may be called upon to reject military service in a war they consider immoral or unjust. Modern society is so tightly integrated that no member can escape being involved in whatever is done in the name of the whole. In societies like ours which at least profess a commitment to democratic ideals and representational procedures this involvement imposes a measure of personal responsibility for the policies and actions of those we choose to conduct our affairs. No matter how much we may prefer to ignore the fact and its implications, how each of us exercises this responsibility should find its definition and guidelines in that law written in our hearts.

This applies, of course, to every relationship we have with one another, but it is easier to state the principle linking private conscience with social responsibility than to apply it in particular circumstances. There are always competing values and obligations to be considered. It then becomes the role of conscience to help us determine the order of priority among them. For the Christian faced with the need to define and resolve his or her responsibilities relating to war and peace, the problem becomes most acute. It is not too much to say that, given what is now at stake—the very real prospect of that 'global suicide' Thomas Merton warned against—it could determine our chances for eternal salvation.

Merton's answer in the face of that danger, written more than twenty years ago, is still as valid today as it was then. 'It is no longer possible or right,' he wrote, 'to leave all decisions to a largely anonymous power elite that is driving us all, in our passivity, towards ruin. We *have* to make ourselves heard.' The important thing to remember is that as citizens and as Christians we bear the inescapable obligation to do something. And once our decision is made, there is the further and continuing obligation to periodically re-assess whether we are doing all we could.

It is not only opponents of current policies or conscientious objectors who face that continuing obligation. Those who support those

policies and endorse the current state of preparations for war have even more difficult choices to make. Since their responsibility is more direct, it is more crucial that they be sensitive to restraints or any doubts they may entertain in that 'secret core and sanctuary' of their souls. This is especially true, of course, for individuals who accept or volunteer for service in the armed forces. Their moral responsibility does not end when they put on the uniform; if anything that is only the beginning. Participation in war and preparations for war must always be *conscientious* participation, never unquestioning obedience to those in command. This principle, too, finds explicit statement in the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter, 'The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response.' There the men and women in uniform are praised as 'custodians of the security and freedom of their fellow countrymen' and assured that 'where they carry out their duty properly they are contributing to the maintenance of peace.'

That all-important qualifying phrase is now difficult, if not impossible, to fulfil. At times it may impose a definite *obligation* to disobey. This is recognized by the bishops in their statement, 'No Christian can rightfully carry out orders or policies deliberately aimed at killing non-combatants.' Nor can we stop at that, though I'm sad to say the Bishops' Pastoral did. Given the nature of modern war and its weaponry, the full logic of that instruction should imply that the Christian serviceperson ought to avoid or reject military assignments where such orders or policies are most likely to be encountered. On Polaris or Trident submarines. In long-range bomber forces. In chemical or bacteriological warfare units. And there should no longer be the slightest doubt that anyone presented with orders to turn the key or press the button that will 'take out' a number of population centres must face an inescapable crisis of conscience.

In the Second World War a German general, morally offended by Hitler's decision to invade Norway, gave advance notice of the plans to the Allied forces. Surely, in the military scale of values, this was high treason. To General Oster, though, it was an obligation in conscience. How many British or American officers of equal rank, it is fair to ask, would be equally responsive to the demands of conscience if they learned of secret plans to launch a 'decapitating' first strike against Moscow? Would they go public? A trickier question still: how many Roman Catholic chaplains, bearing the responsibility for guiding and strengthening the consciences of the men in their spiritual care, would be prepared to counsel them to do so?

This is no idle question. *The day may not be far off when the last remaining hope for the survival of the human race, the last safeguard against Merton's 'moral evil second only to the Crucifixion', may be the conscience of some disobedient soldier.* That is why we must insist that

our Church, along with all the other religious communions, should undertake to provide the kind of spiritual guidance and assistance that is needed *now* to form and strengthen the consciences of those who might be called upon to make that fateful decision. With rare exceptions this is *not* being done. And the Church's obligation does not stop with those who are being prepared right now to unleash the final holocaust. All citizens—Catholic or Protestant or whatever—need to be reminded that they, too, share responsibility for their nation's policies and actions and, should the dreadful test come, must face its consequences no matter how direct or remote their individual contributions may be.

And what about us? Everyone who would be a peacemaker or even just a seeker after peace must assume part of the burden of reminding others, by word or by example, of the responsibility we all share for the future existence of the world and all its inhabitants. Where necessary, and to the extent necessary, we must be prepared to prod the religious leadership to action when it seems too willing to leave essential moral decisions to military or political authority.

That, of course, is what the revered founders of PAX set out to do fifty years ago. The task remaining for us, then, is to take them as a model and do more of the same, but more effectively and with the greater sense of urgency that today's peril imposes.

Forty years and more have passed since I, as but one of that handful of conscientious objectors to the Second World War, represented what passed for the 'active Catholic peace movement' in the United States. We may not have been prophets. I don't think we were. But in a very real sense I think we were pioneers, as were the founders of PAX. It is fitting, then, to conclude by quoting the legend featured on the masthead of that 'occasional' publication I referred to earlier. In a sense it tells us what PAX and all of us should be about.

We hope that war will be overcome through the Church, and even if, after two thousand years, this hope is still unfulfilled, we still hope and go on knocking at the door like the importunate man in the Gospel.

That hope persists. We are still knocking and must and will go on knocking until that door, now slightly ajar, is finally opened all the way.