

# Comment

Church leaders are not normally reluctant to speak unequivocally and clearly about certain moral issues. The bishops of England and Wales are able to point out time and time again that there can be no moral justification for 'any action which deliberately aims at destroying the life of an innocent individual.' Quite right, too.

They have regularly pointed out that we may not do evil that good may come. So we may not discuss the right to life of the 'innocent individual' in terms of what may or may not happen if we violate that right in abortion or euthanasia. For this clear rejection of consequentialism we should be grateful.

But we also need to look at just who is being addressed in such unequivocal terms. Because, generally speaking, such strong language is used by the English bishops when the people with whom they are concerned are pregnant women who might be tempted to have an abortion. And they are easy meat. They are often alone, afraid and vulnerable, and it is easy to make them feel more guilty than they already do. It is the easy condemnation questioned by Brecht:

You who bear pleasantly between clean sheets,  
and give the name 'blessed' to your womb's weight,  
must not damn the weakness of the outcast.

This is not an argument for watering down the moral teaching. But these same moral principles, so strictly and clearly applied to weaker brothers and sisters, may usefully be applied elsewhere. The same principles are fundamental to the Just War tradition of non-combatant immunity.

Yet when it comes to the threat to innocent human lives from Polaris submarine controllers and USAF pilots in nuclear-armed F111 jets based in England, suddenly the moral language seems to have lost its power and clarity. The just war tradition has been soft-pedalled by many Catholic moralists throughout the years of the Cold War. The English bishops as a body, unlike their Scottish brothers, have not given a strong lead in the movement for nuclear disarmament.

Of course it is harder to keep insisting on these moral principles when you are addressing governments and military planners. They tend to be a little more self-confident than women seeking abortions. They can put a great deal of pressure on an episcopal conference, as Wittner's article in this issue shows.

It is not easy to make a strong stand in the face of such people. It is evidently not easy for the Church to speak clearly now, on the basis of her just war tradition, on the crisis in the Gulf (which may have become a war by the time this Comment is in print). It has become harder with time, as occasions of compromise and failure of nerve have become

ingrained habits. The clear language of the right to life, the rejection of consequentialism, and so on, has gradually been eroded.

President Bush says that ‘no price is too heavy to pay’ to force an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait, in a clear denial of the Christian demand that the harm caused by going to war should not be disproportionate to the evil that the use of force seeks to remedy. The bishops could respond to these sentiments as resolutely as they have responded to, for example, changes in abortion legislation. There *are* prices that would be too heavy to pay.

Those who suggest that sanctions should be given more time are being jeered at as ‘appeasers’ (though surely the real appeasers have been those who have for years armed and supported Saddam’s regime, in spite of his repressive and genocidal policies). But the unprecedented UN response and the massive blockade of Iraq are hardly an appeasement. It is part of the just war teaching that all non-violent means of resolution be exhausted before force is used. And while some MP’s accuse less bellicose colleagues of ‘lacking the stomach for a fight’ we are waiting for the loud evangelical voices of the bishops to be heard, proclaiming the gospel from the roof tops.

President Bush said in early January, ‘If force is used, the generals’ hands will not be tied behind them. This concept of “well, you can only do so much, but not more,” is unacceptable to me.’ But the notion of *ius in bello*, integral to Catholic teaching (and to International Law which our armies are ostensibly defending) states exactly the opposite. It states that there are a whole list of things you may not do, even if you have gone to war for justifiable reasons. You may not torture or murder prisoners, nor target civilian populations, even when there may be some military advantage in doing so.

It is difficult to say these things when, as Robert Dodaro pointed out last month, modern war is so heavily ‘advertised, marketed, supported by shaped public opinion ... and disinformation.’ Again, the Scottish bishops have spoken clearly on these issues, and not hesitated to confront the government on certain aspects of policy. But this government has no mandate in Scotland anyway, and has developed a selective deafness which filters out Scottish accents.

The English and Welsh bishops naturally want to keep talking to policy-makers. They want to be taken seriously and not dismissed as extremists or unrealistic. But the criteria of Just War teaching are not unrealistic or irrational, and many men and women—not just Catholics—would rejoice to hear Catholic doctrine affirmed as loudly and unambiguously concerning war as it has been in other discourses.

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