

## A House Divided

*Even the death of a large number of people because of war is a lesser evil compared to the material and spiritual enslavement of whole nations.*

The Roman Catholic Church is no longer the unshakable fortress of conservatism it used to be; it has become a Church with a great divergence of opinions. Many, bishops, priests and nuns have joined the current wave of anti-war movements. The new political activists are resisting the testing in Canada of the cruise missile. Social action is high on the agenda. At the Canadian Conference on Religion and World Peace held in Toronto in January 1981, Dr. Gregory Baum of St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, said that violence must be eliminated by dialogue and peaceful means of restoring conflict. Christians must fight against the underlying causes of war, such as poverty and economic injustice. There are also Catholics who advocate violence to achieve justice. Some Catholic theologians view the revolutionary struggle in Central America as "just wars." In the Philippines, a few priests have even joined the communist National People's Army (NPA) in their opposition to the Marcos regime. The cross and the rifle are held in the same hands.

The U.S. Catholic bishops pastoral letter on war and peace condemns any first use of nuclear weapons. It supports the "freeze" movement (calling for a bilateral halt to the production, testing and deployment of any further nuclear weapons). As many Catholic bishops move towards a Quaker view of the need for national defense, the question is being increasingly asked: For whom do the bishops speak? Do they have the wholehearted support of their constituency? There appears to be a sharp division within U.S. Roman Catholic ranks.

Michael Novak, a Catholic scholar on religion and public policy at the American Enterprise institute declares: "Throughout the post-war era, it is the American deterrent that has kept the nuclear peace. Renouncing that deterrent would be as sure a way of bringing about war as one could devise. Such a consequence cannot be moral."

Even before the bishops began drafting their statement, a group of influential laymen, disturbed by the drift towards pacifism, began to organize the American Catholic Committee. Its first conference included speakers such as Bishop John J. O'Connor, an official of the Catholic military chaplaincy, and Frank Shakespeare, head of the agency that sets policy for Radio Free Europe. Shakespeare told the gathering that, "We as American Catholics have a responsibility to defend our people from becoming martyrs—whether literally to a nuclear holocaust or living martyrs under domination of an atheistic power." Bishop O'Connor said: "An individual in conscience can say, 'I will in no way involve myself with nuclear weapons.' A state cannot do this."

Another group, the Committee of Concerned Catholics, issued a statement declaring: "... At the present time, the U.S. is confronted with a powerful and aggressive rival ... Faced with this growing threat, the U.S. cannot responsibly ignore its defense obligations. All Americans agree that nuclear weapons are horrible ... But since we

cannot eliminate the existence of nuclear arms, we must be careful to avoid steps that in the name of peace, might make war more likely ... In the full Christian sense of the word, peace is something more than the absence of war."

It is apparent from these points of view that the U.S. bishops are certainly not speaking on behalf of all Americans!

### **The drift toward pacifism**

What the U.S. bishops are propagating should not come as a surprise to those who have followed the developments within the Roman Catholic Church. Let recent history speak for itself.

Pope Pius XII (d. 1958) acknowledged that force could be used as an instrument of justice in the international order. In his 1956 Christmas message he rejected pacifism. But he opposed the use of nuclear weapons. He was convinced that nuclear war would result in total destruction of both the aggressor and the attacked. However, his stance on nuclear weapons was ambiguous. On the one hand, he wrote that atomic weapons can be used as a deterrent to prevent surrender to a conscienceless aggressor; on the other hand, he preferred surrender to the communists rather than having to resort to nuclear warfare to preserve freedom. In an address to military doctors on October 19, 1953, he said: "If the damage caused by war is disproportionate to that of the injustice suffered, it may well be a matter of obligation to suffer the injustice."

In 1961, the German Catholic theologian Franziskus Stratmann wrote that nuclear weapons may never be used, not even in defense. If conventional weapons fail to bring victory than nothing remains but to suffer the injustice. Stratmann said that surrender to the communists is better than the use of nuclear weapons to keep your freedom". . . It is better to accept the darkness, to surrender ourselves to the all-holy justice and mercy of God, than to take part in mass murder only because the other side commits it. In the long run only this attitude will lead to success."

In 1962, the Catholic moral theologian Bernard Haring taught that war is only permitted after everything else has been done to resolve the conflict. Absolute pacifism, the principle of refusal to use any kind of force against the aggressor will only encourage evil. Haring opposed surrender to communism. Even the death of a large number of people because of war is a lesser evil compared to the material and spiritual enslavement of whole nations.

Pope John XXIII, whose influence far out-measured both his age and the shortness of his time in the papacy, became the "peace-pope." He gave a boost to Catholics with pacifist leanings. His encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* (1963), contained a strong criticism of the arms race and the balance of terror on which it rests. No explicit endorsement was given to the right of self-defense for people and the state. He wrote: "Therefore in this age of ours, which prides itself on its atomic power, it is irrational to think that war is a proper way to obtain justice for violated rights."

Since the Second Vatican Council, many Catholic theologians have continued to assert the right of legitimate defense; no attempt has been made to redefine or correct *Pacem in Terris*. The encyclical has its ambiguities, yet it is clear that it heralded a new approach to war and peace in the Church of Rome. This new attitude lent support to conscientious objectors and the philosophy of nonviolence. An outright endorsement of the pacifist position occurs for the first time in Catholic moral teaching in Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. "The horror and perversity of war are immensely magnified by the multiplication of scientific weapons ... (Such) considerations compel us to undertake an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude." The object of mankind must be the abolishment of all wars. "it is our clear duty, then, to strain every muscle as we work for the time all war can be completely outlawed by international consent." After all is said and done. Vatican II does not demand unilateral disarmament. It calls for a disarmament "proceeding at an equal pace according to agreement, and backed up by authentic and workable safeguards."

In 1976, the U.S. bishops in line with Vatican II, condemned not only the use of nuclear weapons, but also the policy of deterrence because of the intent to use them: "Not only is it wrong to attack civilian populations, but it is also wrong to threaten to attack as part of a strategy of deterrence" (*To Live in Christ Jesus: A Pastoral Reflection on the Moral Life*).

The 1982 draft on nuclear weapons issued by the American bishops has historic precedence. The whole discussion on nuclear strategy illustrates that the Catholic position is ambiguous and at times, even contradictory. The final judgment on the issue remains an open question. The once unified Church of Rome is now a house divided, not only on the question of war and peace, but also on a host of other ethical considerations.

Johan D. Tangelder  
May, 1984