

# AN OPEN LETTER TO THE AMERICAN HIERARCHY

## Schema XIII and the Modern World

*Thomas Merton*

You are about to return to Rome, as this is written, for the most decisive session of the Second Vatican Council. Schema XIII on the Church in the Modern World is, from a pastoral viewpoint, of such unique importance that one may believe the whole work of the Council stands or falls with it. You who have listened with patience to so many opinions will surely bear charitably with yet one more expression of Christian concern. It is written not in order to defend a merely partisan view, but to insure that the great work done by the previous sessions is not prejudiced by any ambiguity or hesitation in confronting one of the most crucial problems of our time.

The task of the Council remains that of proclaiming the Gospel of love, hope and reconciliation to modern man, in a language that he will understand, without any alteration or distortion of the essential Gospel perspectives. The message of salvation is not bound to any particular time or culture, and its true perspectives look above history and beyond it. Hence, in order to convince the world that Christianity is not necessarily identified only with a medieval or baroque Christendom, we do not need to assert that it is fully identified with technological society in all its present confusion. The Christian is called, as always, to a decision for Christ—not to a decision for this kind or that kind of society. He is called to obey the Gospel of love for all men, and not simply to devote himself to the interests of a nation, a party, a class or a culture. The message of the Church to the modern world therefore remains, as it has always been, an eschatological message.

It is precisely this eschatological viewpoint, above and beyond limited and pragmatic options, that confers upon the Church's pronouncements a certain authority even in the minds of those who do not believe in her teachings. Not only should we resist the temptations to ignore or evade this aspect of the Council's task, but we should frankly admit

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its special relevance in a time when man has in his hands incalculable power for destruction and can even, if he so chooses, destroy himself along with his civilization.

While admitting that there is no sense in getting hysterical about this danger, and while retaining a hope that man will never go so far as to abuse madly his awful power, we must nevertheless soberly take into account the fact that he *has* this power. He has it permanently, and remains perfectly capable of abusing it.

We are aware, too, that in spite of a universal desire for peace and in spite of the Church's reiterated and anguished appeals for peace, governments continue to devote by far the greater portion of their budgets to armaments and preparations for war, and indeed continue to show a marked inclination to settle international dispute by violence, or the threat of violence, rather than by more peaceful and reasonable means. In a word, if we consider this as an expression of a basic moral attitude, we are compelled to admit that with all its humane possibilities, the modern world remains committed to force and, indeed, can be said to "believe in" the primacy of power and of violence.

Schema XIII is concerned with the Church's mission in a world which still believes in war, from guerrilla warfare to total and even nuclear war, while cold war and deterrence by terroristic threat of violence seemingly remain with us as permanent features of our civilization.

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We must be resolutely convinced that this is one area in which the Church is bound not only to disagree with "the world" in the most forceful terms, but intervene as a providentially designated force for peace and reconciliation. We must clearly recognize that the Church remains perhaps the most effective single voice speaking for peace in the world today. That voice must not be silenced or made ineffective by any ambiguity born of political and pragmatic considerations on the part of national groups.

Whereas a few years ago it was common for our statesmen to protest that they never expected nuclear weapons would actually be used, or where perhaps they proposed the use of tactical nuclear weapons only, more recently we find strategists and publicists, speaking with a certain note of authority, advocating the calculated use of nuclear weapons even on a large scale (e.g. "city-trading") as part of a rationale (if not a mystique!) of escalation. Such proposals may exercise a nefarious fascination on those theologians who are willing to equate "controlled use" of nuclear weapons with an uncontrolled use that is in fact brutally and cynically *calculated*, and which includes in its calculations the deliberate and terroristic destruction of defenseless and innocent non-combatants *precisely because they are defenseless and non-combatant*. This is what "city-trading" would involve.

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In the article on modern warfare, which you will, we hope, be discussing, you will understandably not wish to deny to nations a right which the Church has traditionally admitted, namely to defend themselves by just means against an unjust attack. On the other hand remember that you, the American hierarchy, will be sitting in the Council as citizens of a nation which is waging an undeclared war, the rationality and effectiveness of which are, to say the least, somewhat dubious. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that you might be identified, in the Council, as members of a nation which would willingly carry its escalation of senseless warfare to the point of once again involving the entire world in a global conflict.

We must soberly face the fact that no government engages, however unreasonably, in warfare, without advancing plausible motives for doing so. Once those motives have been advanced, it becomes almost inevitable that the average citizen, without access to adequate information, should have no choice but to support his government and bear arms if called upon to do so.

The history of World War II has shown that in fact thousands of German Catholics participated, on this basis, in a war effort that has since revealed itself to have been a monstrously criminal and unjust aggression.

On our own side in that same war, those who defended their nations in a manifestly just resistance, waged at first by just means, eventually found themselves unknowingly cooperating in acts of total, indiscriminate and calculatedly terroristic destruction which Christian morality cannot tolerate and which

the modern Popes have repeatedly and explicitly condemned.

The Council must not only reiterate in the strongest terms this condemnation of indiscriminate terroristic destruction, but must clearly guide the Christian conscience of those who are obliged to avoid participating in objectively criminal acts. This not only involves a clear statement of principles, but also a recognition of the fact that modern technological warfare *as such* is a proximate and almost unavoidable occasion of crime on a massive scale and has therefore ceased to be reasonable and even an effective means of achieving the legitimate ends for which it is undertaken.

However, the problem of war is far too complex to be solved by lofty principles and good resolutions. Man is an unwilling but tightly constrained prisoner of an age-old psychology. If he cannot liberate himself from this state, he will be doomed to gradual or to sudden self-destruction. The Church must therefore offer man in general and Catholics in particular some concrete and practical means of liberation from this servitude.



Ricci\*

First, the individual conscience must be able to refuse cooperation in acts and policies which though justified in the abstract by specious arguments lead in concrete to immoral and disastrous consequences.

Second, men must be encouraged to seek other methods of resisting evil and of solving problems of conflict. We know that mere arbitration among politicians is often fruitless, and no one can relinquish his responsibility, trusting that all problems will be solved at the conference table. Strong action may be required in order that suitable conditions for negotiation may be brought about.

But man must now learn how to fight for his rights by non-violent methods which are effective by the very fact that they avoid the use of force and appeal directly to truth and to conscience. It is imperative to stress the obligation of conscientious protest against a fruitless and immoral use of force, and to encourage the crucially necessary exploration of new non-violent methods of conflict-resolution.

This is the real heart of the problem of modern

war. So great is the problem that the creation of a Post-Conciliar Commission to study it and implement the Council's decisions, seems to be urgently necessary. The question of "the Bomb" is of secondary importance.

Certainly the theoretical issue of the morality of this or that modern weapon is something that admits of technical debate. But even assuming that the Council could exactly define the limits within which such weapons might properly be used, we would have to recognize that in practice there are few, if any, governments on this earth today that would ever confine themselves to moral limits defined by the Church. But on the other hand every militarist and political opportunist would gladly and noisily avail himself of the Church's declaration in favor of new weapons, in order to justify his own unprincipled use of force. Meanwhile the average man, unused to fine theological distinctions, might interpret an official toleration of nuclear armaments simply as an unqualified approval of war in all its forms, and without limitation.

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The common man, the poor man, the man who has no hope but in God, everywhere looks to the Church as a last hope of protection against the unprincipled machinations of militarists and power politicians. Would it not be a dreadful thing if the Council were to say something, even by implication, to destroy the hope of the defenseless and thrust them further into despair?

Rather than expecting a formal, technical assessment of the morality of this or that weapon, the world rightly looks to the Council for the strongest and most unequivocal appeal for the renunciation of force in favor of reasoned negotiation and non-violent methods of struggle for a just settlement of conflicts. Above all, the Church cannot evade her duty to speak out in defense of the innocent and uninvolved non-combatants who, in ever greater numbers, necessarily become the victims of massive and terroristic use of force in the modern war. The indiscriminate slaughter of *all*, combatant or non-combatant, must be unequivocally condemned.

The individual Christian conscience must be liberated from a forced automatic submission to any policy which might lead to such a use of force. But as a correlative to this, the Christian should not consider himself entitled to remain a passive by-stander. The Christian law of love and sacrifice demands that the Christian devote himself in some way to non-violent methods of resisting and overcoming evil with good. But if these methods are unknown

to him, or if their use is presented to him only in equivocal and confusing forms, he will not know what to do. Catholics must therefore actively and intently study the new methods of non-violent resistance in order to use them in a truly Christian way.



Let us return to our principle: the task of the Council is to affirm the Church's eschatological message of love and salvation in terms which are most relevant to the modern world. In this instance, then, the problem is that of stating *the Church's view of modern war in the light of the eschatological message of salvation.*

The preaching of Our Lord opened with these words: "The time is accomplished and the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand: repent and believe the Gospel." (Mark 1:15) This summary of the whole message of salvation includes, in the one word "repent," the summons to total obedience to God which is in turn summed up in the New Commandment of reconciliation and love. Whatever the Council says on war must be said in such terms that the primacy of love is stated with a clarity that cannot be doubted or misconstrued. Any attempt to introduce fine moral distinctions that would savor of evasion and pharisaism must be regarded, in this context above all, as a most serious temptation and a grave danger for the Church in the modern world. Any impression of equivocation in this matter which is a source of anguish and horror to so many men, would tend to give irreparable scandal.

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But ambiguity cannot be absent from any statement on modern war that is dictated by an implicit practical belief in the prime efficacy of force. It is of course quite natural that bishops should share in the public opinion of the society to which they belong. But the Church is in the world as a body that is not able to agree with all that the world believes. The Church is implacably opposed to principles of thought which imply an enslavement of

Christian conscience to the powers in the world that are completely hostile to Christ and to His love. One of those principles is the practical belief in the efficacy of power and force to accomplish ends which love and faith "cannot achieve." Characteristic of the "realism," which St. Paul called the wisdom of the flesh and of the world, is its conviction that the love which Christ preached is illusory and inefficacious in the conduct of every day affairs, at least in public life.

We are not unfamiliar with a Christianity which in effect compromises with this ruthless spirit. The compromise is quite simple, and consists in this: as to our interior motives, yes, we admit the primacy of love. But in the conduct of political life we agree with the world: what counts is naked *power!* Hence, one concludes upon a ruthlessly efficient use of force that is guided by interior motives of "love." The exigencies of a modern power struggle do, of course, demand one's entire attention, and hence, having started with an initially pure intention of "love" one gets lost in the brutal realities of an escalating con-

flict. A love which was at best abstract to begin with soon vanishes altogether. When the dust and smoke clear, one devoutly hopes one will be able to return to himself and make an act of contrition for any excess that may have occurred. . . . Or one hopes that there will still be someone left to be sorry!

It hardly seems sufficient for the Council, speaking as the Church in the modern world, to make a practical option in favor of power over love, and then hastily add that even though power is in effect more efficacious, one must try to prefer love at least *in abstracto*.

What matters is for the bishops and the Council to bear witness clearly and without any confusion to the Church's belief in the power of love to save and transform not only individuals but society. Do we or do we not believe that love has this power? If we believe it, what point is there in using language of adroit compromise in order to leave the last word, in matters which affect the very survival of man, not to the Gospel but to power politics?

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*"Were formal convention (i.e., contract) the sole basis of obligation in the international sphere, it is obvious that the United States would have no obligation to aid any but those it chose to aid and on such terms as it chose. The obligations that arose out of foreign aid agreements would themselves then constitute moral obligations, but there would be no obligations to enter into such agreements in the first place. . . . It is doubtful whether self-interest alone can ever provide an adequate basis for an effective long-term foreign aid program, especially when the most evident early results of such a program are likely to be increased popular unrest, political repression, and growing ingratitude and resentment toward foreign benefactors. A recognition of our objective moral responsibility for the well-being of our fellow men may be absolutely necessary to sustain the kind of aid program which is required to create a world environment in which free societies may grow and flourish."*

*from*

## **foreign aid: moral and political aspects**

*by victor ferkiss*

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