

## THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS' STATEMENT

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Dear Sir: The Statement of the American Catholic Bishops on Vietnam issued on November 21, 1966, was at once a consolation and a disappointment. It is consoling that they avoided patriotic jingoism which has so characterized statements of Catholic hierarchies in the past. Their own history in this respect is not a happy one since from 1943-1945 they kept absolute silence on the immoral policies of the allies in obliteration bombing of German and Japanese cities, and this in spite of the fact that Pius XII had condemned it many times during the same period. It is also noteworthy that they have said nothing with regard to the atomic bombing of two Japanese cities—one of the most monstrous acts of war of our age—and this, once again, in spite of the fact that Paul VI called this act an “infernal massacre” and an “outrage against civilization.” We can be thankful that they have not put God's blessing on a war which is morally dubious in the extreme and for which Paul VI has ruled out any type of “military solution” for either side.

The statement was also a deep disappointment for those of us who are in agony over the actions of the U.S. government in that small country. No attempt was made to clarify this war in the light of the traditional “just war” theory, only the cliché that “it is reasonable to argue that our presence in Vietnam is justified.” The conclusion is given before the argument and, indeed, no argument is given. It is simply stated as a fact either *fide Catholica* or *quod erat demonstrandum*. The facts which support those who oppose this war are not even mentioned in the light of a just war or any other Christian theory.

How shall we justify the dropping of 680,000 tons of bombs in 1966 alone (one-half the tonnage dropped in Europe for all of World War II) on a small, non-industrialized nation unless we are so naive as to believe that it is being used against some bridges and roads? How shall we justify the spraying of rice crops which make combatant and non-combatant suffer and starve alike? How shall we justify the use of torture by those who are our “allies”? How shall we support a war in which it is conservatively estimated that, for every soldier killed, there are *at least* ten civilians destroyed? How shall we say that our presence is “reasonable” in a country where whole areas are considered enemy territories and whole

villages therein may be bombed or shelled? How can we support a “presence” which makes of that country a house of prostitution and an economic wasteland for the many poor and destitute? How shall we justify a war in which there are over a million refugees who are trying to escape not only Viet Cong terrorism but above all the bombs and navy guns of the Americans?

We are no longer in a “just war” by any traditional standards—no matter what the justice of the war may be; we are in the area of simple barbaric slaughter where ideology and pride will not permit us to move meaningfully toward peace. Or shall we argue that the nation's morality is not the same as that of the individual? This is contrary to traditional Catholic thought as well as to *Pacem* when John XXIII clearly said:

For the same natural law which governs relations between individual human beings must also regulate the relations of political communities with one another. (par. 80)

Or perhaps it will be argued that we do not know enough to make such a moral condemnation of this war. We shall never know *all* the facts but we now know enough to make a judgment with regard to the facts that we do know. The above can all be amply documented by unimpeachable sources. In the light of that, how can our presence be held to be “reasonable” in Vietnam? The war is vitiated by any criteria of “just war” one wishes to use and this should be sufficient for the Christian. Whatever the military outcome of the present war, its moral outcome by such means has already been decided. America has an ignominious role, whether she wins or loses, along with all those, political and ecclesiastical, who support her in that endeavor.

It is also significant that there is not one instance on record where any group of Christians opposed a war by their government because the war was considered “unjust.” There is not one instance on record where any national hierarchy denied support “in God's name” to its nation-state because a war was evil. This ought, perhaps, to give grave food for thought to Catholic bishops, to suggest that their mission in terms of war and peace today can no longer be one of approving a “reasonable presence” but *solcly* of being the voice of peace “in season and

out of season"—their mission should be like the peace vocation of the Pope with regard to the universal church. The age of *any* national hierarchy always supporting its government in war is forever gone; their mission is intrinsically limited by the very example of the Incarnate Word who was and is the Prince of Peace not the God of War. This moral limitation of the Gospel is most urgent today.

All of these facts must be examined and taken account of if we are to have a proper moral judgment of the war in Vietnam. This has simply not been done. As a matter of fact, in many religious groups we have simply a regression to the Crusade mentality which attributes all evil to a particular group. This is the sad legacy in the Christian community going back to the time of Constantine when, with the clearest conscience and in the name of God ("Deus vult"), Christians killed and massacred other Christians, heretics, infidels and witches. All this has now been transferred to "communism."

It is astonishing to reflect how, in time of war, the word of God tends to become complicated and diffusive. Suddenly His word has a thousand footnotes, refining, clarifying, explaining away. The powers of the state show a mysterious concern for the integrity of the word of God. They issue their own tracts and texts. Believers must see that the God of all men has suddenly taken sides for and against. A universal love has narrowed itself to accept hate and command hate. The message of peace is interpreted in favor of nationalism, of the ideologies of the moment, of the frenzies of human causes. One is reminded that German belt buckles issued by the Third Reich bore the inscription "Gott mit Uns."

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From a moral point of view, another aspect of this problem is illuminated by the Nuremberg Trials. This has become a point of deep embarrassment for the United States since the principles therein enunciated so clearly, apply to its expeditionary force in Vietnam. The principles are not new, of course, for they form the whole basis for the Christian idea of the "just war." Suarez and Vitoria of the 16th and 17th century formulated them and Grotius codified them but they were never seriously applied to concrete wars by theologians until the Nuremberg Trials (and even then it was the "secular" jurists and not the theologians who did so). That fundamental principle was clear; there are certain actions which are so criminal in nature that no superior "orders" by the state can excuse individual citizens (soldiers) from moral and juridical guilt in perpetrating them. Such are the crimes of torture and the indiscriminate

killing of civilians as well as any intentional genocide.

These principles do not rely on any positive law but upon the law of what we are by nature, and no "obedience to the state" can ever excuse the individual from them. And if it be argued that soldiers and Air Force officers of the U.S. Army do not "want" to kill but that in this type of revolutionary war it is a necessity, then it must immediately be answered that the principles apply not to intentions (which we can never judge) but to *actions* (which we must always judge). It is patent that U.S. actions—at least to a degree—come under the condemnation of these principles; this fact *in and of itself* vitiates the war morally and renders that war unjust.

By any measure of truth both the Communists and the Americans are tearing apart the very fabric and soul of Vietnam. We are thus no longer in an area of "just war" but simple barbaric destruction. To continue the war by *either* side is a crime against humanity itself and stands judged by the moral principles enunciated at Nuremberg.

Vietnam can then be seen as an opportunity for the Christian community to reassess its vocational fidelity to the work of reconciliation, constantly insisting that the rational use of violence has very definite limits and that, when nations ignore these minimal limits, they remove themselves both from the blessing of history and the blessing of the Lord of history. Admittedly, the problem remains, what are these limits? Where do we draw the line? The line of demarcation will not be easily drawn. It can be said, however, that certain practices in warfare have always stood outside the blessing of the Church: all methods of warfare which, either because of use or because of the weapon's nature, violate the right to life of non-combatants; the use of torture in obtaining information; the destruction of property—both military and non-military—of any nation with whom we are not at war.

Our conclusions are both simple and modest. They are dependent upon factual information, political analysis and application of some moral principles. Gone is the day when the Moral Theologian can make a major moral judgment based simply on various scholastic principles without the aid of the newsmen, the political and social scientist, etc. He is not excused from making moral judgment, but he must take known facts into account when making these. If anything comes through in Vatican II's analysis of the modern world, it is certainly this central fact. Thus, I think, one can make the following minimal judgments of this war:

1. The Catholic Church—clergy and laity—in the United States must second and bring to bear its

moral witness, responding to the calls by Pope Paul VI for a *bona-fide* negotiated settlement of this nefarious war in Vietnam. This will have a manifold effect on the present situation:

a. It will bring to bear a prophetic witness by Catholic Christians for peace instead of a prolongation of war. Of all Church groups, Catholics have been the most shamelessly silent on even the recommendations of their own Pope (inclusive of the hierarchy), not to say some of the most vociferous in calling for a military solution to a problem which is essentially non-military.

b. It will aid the President in his often proclaimed (even if at other times denied) desire for negotiated settlement, as opposed to those many voices which wish not only to settle affairs by military means but wish to raise the ante by further destruction and bombings.

2. All acts of terrorism and indiscriminate warfare must be unequivocally condemned by Christians, in and out of season, in and out of the pulpit. The torture of prisoners, even if done by those whom we support and whose responsibility we bear, is an act of total war and therefore unconscionable; rice-crop spraying and defoliation of crops must be condemned out of hand as injuring combatant and non-combatant alike, thus destroying the supreme principle of any justice in war according to Vatican II, namely, non-combatant immunity; the open bombing, village bombing, particularly in the South, also falls under the same ban of moral proscription; any intended bombing of Haiphong or Hanoi or more particularly the dikes of the Red River, whereby hundreds of thousands of civilians will die or starve, is to be branded as what it truly is: an unconscionable act of total war by the United States. All this, of course, does not negate or justify the violence and terrorism of the other side and it stands condemned by the same principles we have cited. It simply means that we have the power to say "no" to our elected representatives who bear responsibility for these actions. Otherwise, it seems to me, we deny the prophetic role of the Church in judging the end and the means of modern war which must be moral as well as social, political and military. This is the very least, it seems to me, we can expect and demand from our spiritual leaders in the hierarchy who bear direct responsibility for the guidance of consciences in these grave matters.

3. I think it is imperative that we re-examine our own attitudes toward the cold war. Vietnam is indeed a test case, but not in the way that Dean Rusk

envisions the problem. It is a test case of our willingness and ability to revolutionize the world as we know it—from a social, political and economic point of view. After all, the whole fifth section of the *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* forcefully reminds Christians that the real danger of peace comes from the agony of poverty and the despair of almost two-thirds of the world's population who have nothing in their future except more of the same.

The question of Vietnam, however, goes back to the roots of revolution in the modern world. John Kennedy recognized this as one of the chief characteristics of international life today and the Council saw in it the active presence of God as men everywhere seek their rights, their dignity and their independence. It seems that American foreign-policy makers—at least since Kennedy's death—fail to see this "sign of the times." They not only fail to give this two-thirds of the human race a viable choice between right-wing dictatorship (Franco, Diem, Ky, Chiang Kai-shek, Latin dictators) and communism, but seem to oppose any revolution which has left-wing connotations. This indeed is one of the most tragic aspects of American foreign policy today. The Americans could have won the war in Vietnam between 1954–1959 in the only way it could be won: by social, economic and political reform with massive injections of financial and technological aid. They chose, however, to oppose this true revolution and support dictatorship, with a pittance for aid. Now the Americans are spending over a billion a month for death and destruction which, no matter how the war finally goes, will merit for them the unending hatred of generations of Vietnamese.

The lesson is so simple. We must aid the underdeveloped, economically and socially, in their revolution for true freedom from want and misery. This is the true revolution alive in the third world which communism uses but does not create.

4. Finally, I submit that from a moral point of view based on what is happening and has already happened in Vietnam, the Americans have lost their chance to win this war in the abovementioned sense. They, therefore, have forfeited their rights to regain by military means what they have lost in political and social failure of the 1954–1959 period. The only moral stance can be something like the so-called "enclave" theory of General Gavin and Ambassador Kennan. By such measures we would not decimate the country as we are presently doing and at the same time we would protect those who have been our friends, while holding out for meaningful negotiations.

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