

The Catholic Church and the Arms Race

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The modern history of the quest to control the arms race and to seek disarmament has not been distinguished by religious leadership in this area. That is, until now. Today, our major Protestant and Catholic churches are addressing themselves to these problems with a sense of urgency that would amaze Christians of even the last generation. While this is prompted by a renewed interest in the Social Gospel, it is also inspired by the realization that our entire civilization is in jeopardy due to the arms race which threatens us all.

It is estimated that the United States has spent nearly \$2 trillion on past, present, and future wars since World War II, and if that trend continues we are likely to spend close to that sum in just the next decade. We spend \$400 billion a year on things military, and it has been estimated that nearly half the world's scientists and technologists devote their talent and energy to weapons research and development. Another estimate: There are 22 million teachers in the world and some 22 million soldiers, and we spend sixty times more on each soldier than we do on each teacher. The United States alone has a nuclear stockpile of more than 30,000 strategic and tactical nuclear weapons and continues to produce three new hydrogen bombs daily. One could go on and on.

All of this takes place at a time when international security is at its most precarious point in history, and many scientists—at the Stockholm Peace Research Institute and at Harvard and MIT—predict that a nuclear war is “inevitable” before the end of the century unless we drastically reverse the arms race.

But there are no signs that the arms race is anywhere near a reversal stage. Even such arms limitation treaties as SALT II in fact impel the arms race rather than limit or reverse it. It is argued that “rational” men would never intentionally begin a nuclear war; but even if we accept that premise, what is to prevent a nuclear war by accident or through madness or terrorism? Every dollar we spend on arms is a dollar spent on increasing global insecurity.

Astute students of history realize that inefficient social institutions do not change primarily because of a

moral imperative but because it becomes a practical necessity to do so. (Still, even the institution of slavery was slow to change, even after it was realized that it had become inefficient, because it had become part of a culture, a way of life.) Anyone who has contemplated the nature of World War III or of even a (theoretically) limited nuclear exchange knows that we have to alter drastically our social institutions or philosophies of war, defense, deterrence, and mutually assured destruction. But realization of the practical necessity of reversing the arms race will come to naught unless the realization is accompanied by appropriate moral and theological principles to support a strategic program.

It is the purpose of this article to provide a theological context for arms limitation and disarmament. The discussion will deal primarily with Roman Catholic theological assertions, although those who affirm the broader Judeo-Christian tradition can identify with some major themes presented.

Perhaps the best-kept secret among Roman Catholics is the official position that their popes, bishops, and theologians have taken on the arms race. Every pope who has had to deal with nuclear weapons—from Pius XII through John Paul II—has condemned the arms race and particularly the use of atomic, biological, and chemical weapons because of their indiscriminate nature and threat to all future life.

Pope Pius XII, in referring to the use of nuclear weapons, stated in an address to the World Medical Association on September 30, 1954:

Should the evil consequences of adopting this [nuclear] method of warfare ever become so extensive as to pass utterly beyond the control of man, then indeed its use must be rejected as immoral. In that event, it would no longer be a question of “defense” against injustice and necessary “protection” of legitimate possessions but of annihilation, pure and simple, of all human life within the affected area. This is not lawful under any title.

Clearly, nuclear weapons have passed “beyond the control of man” in any meaningful way. It is conservatively estimated that the U.S. and USSR together can destroy the world some fifteen times over. This can hardly be

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called “defense” or “protection”; it is, in Pius’s terms, “annihilation, pure and simple.”

The nuclear “storm that threatens every moment” caused Pope John XXIII to take an even stronger stand on the arms race. In *Pacem in Terris* he stated:

Justice, right reason and humanity, therefore, urgently demand that the arms race should cease; that the stockpiles which exist in various countries should be reduced equally and simultaneously by the parties concerned; that nuclear weapons should be banned; and that a general agreement should eventually be reached about progressive disarmament and an effective method of control [112].

John XXIII also issued a strong challenge when stated: “...it is contrary to reason to hold that war is now a suitable way to restore rights which have been violated” (127).

The Council Fathers of Vatican II sought “an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude” and issued the only condemnation at Vatican II:

Against any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with the population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation [*Gaudium et Spes*, 80].

While many have observed that the Council Fathers condoned nuclear stockpiles for “deterrence” purposes, such a conclusion is not supported by the text. The Fathers observed that “many” regard deterrence “as the most effective way by which peace of a sort can be maintained between nations at the present time” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 81). But they then stated their own position: that deterrence “is not a safe way to preserve a steady peace. Nor is the so-called balance resulting from this race a sure and authentic peace” (81). This is hardly an endorsement of deterrence or of a balance of terror. The Council Fathers then concluded:

Therefore it must be said again: the arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which injures the poor to an intolerable degree. It is much to be feared that if this race persists, it will eventually spawn all the lethal ruin whose path it is now making ready [81].

The Vatican Council, then, condemned total war, the indiscriminate use of weapons, the arms race, and concluded that deterrence, rather than insuring our security, was a “trap” that could eventually end not in peace but in nuclear holocaust.

It would take volumes to document Pope Paul VI’s teachings on the arms race, and it is fair to state that perhaps no other pope in Christian history has so vigorously condemned war and spoken for peace through social justice. Many will recall Paul VI’s words to the United Nations on October 4, 1965:

If you want to be brothers, let the weapons fall from

your hands. You cannot love with weapons in your hands. Long before they mete out death and destruction, those terrible arms supplied by modern science foment bad feelings and cause nightmares, distrust, and dark designs.... They lead astray the mentality of peoples.

Because of humankind’s “weakness” and “wickedness,” Paul observed that “defensive armaments will, alas, be necessary,” but we should note that he used the expression “defensive” armaments and nowhere endorsed the balance of terror that is created by the world’s vast nuclear stockpiles.

In *Populorum Progressio* Paul VI stated that, given the degree of social injustice in our world, “every exhausting armaments race becomes an intolerable scandal.” In his annual Day of Peace message Paul consistently called for an end to the arms race and referred to the bombing of Hiroshima as a “butchery of untold magnitude,” and in 1977 called for the “elimination of this senseless cold war.” Few popes have spoken as passionately on the need for disarmament.

In 1971 the Second World Synod of Bishops urged in *Justice in the World* that the United Nations be supported—support for the U.N. has been very strong from Pius XII to John Paul II—because it was the “beginning of a system capable of restraining the arms race.” The bishops then stated that “it is absolutely necessary that international conflicts not be settled by war” and called for a strategy of “non-violence” in settling disputes as more befitting of human nature.

In 1976 the Holy See issued extremely strong testimony at the United Nations on the arms race, condemning it “unreservedly.” The Holy See called the arms race “a danger,” “an injustice,” “a violation of law,” “a form of theft,” “a mistake,” “a wrong,” and a “folly.” The testimony stated that the arms race “*is itself an act of aggression* against those who are the victims of it. It is an act of aggression, which amounts to a crime, for *even when they are not used*, by their cost alone, *armaments kill the poor by causing them to starve*” (emphasis in original). Regarding deterrence, the testimony declared: “The severity of the diagnosis is thus clear. In the eyes of the church, *the present situation of would-be security is to be condemned.*”

These sentiments were echoed by the bishops of the United States in their 1976 pastoral, *To Live in Christ Jesus*: “As possessors of a vast arsenal, we must be aware that not only is it wrong to attack civilian populations but it is also wrong to threaten to attack them as part of a strategy of deterrence.” Clearly, the Church’s thought on the issue of the arms race is evolving. It has moved from a position of condemning the use of nuclear weapons to questioning seriously their very possession as part of a strategy of deterrence. This will undoubtedly make many American Catholics very uncomfortable: It is one thing to be a “nuclear pacifist” in regard to the use of nuclear weapons and quite another to criticize governmental policies that permit their possession.

In his short pontificate John Paul II has continued the bold statements of his predecessors about the arms race. In *Redemptor Hominis* he stated:

The Church, which has no weapons at her disposal apart from those of the spirit, of the Word and of love, does not cease to beg everybody in the name of God and in the name of man: Do not kill! Do not prepare destruction and extermination for men!

Despite these statements by Catholic leaders (as well as leaders of all world religions, including those of the Jewish and Protestant traditions), not one nuclear weapon has been destroyed and our world continues its research and development for ever more frightening weapons. Still, we should not lose heart. We must continue to provide moral and theological support for those who are attempting to reverse the arms race.

Theological reflection on the arms race must undergird any religious quest for disarmament. There are six theological assertions that I believe are relevant to a Catholic understanding of the need for disarmament:

The *first*, and central, theological reflection must deal with the biblical assertion that God is the creator, sustainer, and guide to our world and history. It is true that in the past, followers of both Moses and Jesus have made our God a narrow, nationalistic God of wrath, but this is hardly reflective of the universal, compassionate, fatherly God as revealed to us through Jesus. Our scriptures tell us that God is concerned with love, peace, life, justice, and mercy. Our God is a God who loves all people and who wishes our common survival. Our God is the God who forgives the prodigal son rather than destroy him, just as He would forgive the prodigal nation rather than destroy it. Our God tells us to forgive our trespassers, to love our enemy, and to do good to those who hurt us. In short, our God is a God who is pro-life in all its forms, from individual survival to national and international security.

Christian theology can hardly justify national policies of war, the threat of war, and the continued denial of the necessities of life to the poor and oppressed. I believe that our faith tells us that our God will not abandon us though we may abandon Him and that our God—if we are receptive to His grace—will always provide for us and give us the grace necessary to overcome even the scourge of war itself.

Our *second* theological reflection deals with a theology of human nature. It is basic to Catholic theology that even after the Fall man is still good, but weak. While he lost the theological gifts, he did not lose the natural virtues God had given him. Thus Catholic theology has always held that some measure of peace and justice was possible in this world, since man was not “depraved” by original sin. The view of “innate depravity”—be it cultural, biological, or theological—which holds that man is an instinctive killer and that, therefore, wars are inevitable, is not consistent with a Catholic view of human nature. Even natural man has the possibility to make world peace, and we must therefore continue to base our hope for world peace at least partially on the concept of natural law. In traditional Catholic thought there is no inevitability about war and the arms race. War is an unnatural and, therefore, immoral human activity that

does not flow from our nature but, rather, from a denial of that nature. Let us not continue to say we are “only human” when we make war; let us say that we are “not yet human” and that is why we engage in violence and so despair of more humane solutions to our problems. This Catholic view of human nature is greatly relevant to a world that needs a more positive, yet realistic, assessment of the human condition.

Part of that realistic assessment is our *third* theological element: sin. Sin is part of, but not essential to, the human condition and is best described as a separation from the three constitutive elements of a total humanity: from God, from the community, and from ourselves. For too long, however, we have stressed only the personal nature of sin and stressed individual man’s separation from God, while ignoring man’s activities in the community or corporate sphere. In short, while we have given sufficient attention to individual vice and virtue, we have not paid attention to the sin that exists in the very economic, political, educational, and religious structures of our society as well.

All of us have met people who, as individuals, were quite moral but, as members of groups, were quite immoral. There are people, for example, who would not dare utter a curse word but would willingly condemn another to death or bomb a defenseless city if they believed that to be part of a righteous cause. While we live in the human condition, none of us can be free of the influence of corporate sin. But all of us must have the faith that in the end even our sinful structures can be overcome by the saving grace of Christ. The Christian faith tells us that we are not doomed to a cyclic theory of history, which holds that history is out of our control. The Christian believes in a meaningful human history that is directed by God and which God will one day bring to fulfillment. The great corporate sins of the twentieth century—war, terrorism, the denial of human freedom, and continued economic injustice—must be confronted by a theology of hope, which believes that such great problems are also great opportunities for the Christian to exercise prophetic witness in our world. The greatest sin—the greatest obscenity—of our time is war and preparation for war, but we must not deny our own faith, which tells us that we can bring order to what is a very disordered world.

To speak of the natural goodness of man and of his sin would not be complete without speaking of a *fourth* theological element: redemption. Christians believe that they are a saved people and, because of the presence of the redeeming Christ in our midst, we are already living in the final times—we are already living in the partial presence of the Kingdom of God. Our Christian faith tells us that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we are restored fully to God’s life and, because of the readily available grace God has granted us, we can indeed fulfill the vision of Isaiah, who prophesied that men would beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks, and not train for war anymore. In the words of Pope Paul VI: “Faith is needed to discover the system of forces within the whole human situation, into which the transcendent work of God is inserted and makes it capable of higher effects which



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"The United Nations organization has proclaimed 1979 the Year of the Child. In this perspective we must ask ourselves whether there will continue to accumulate over the heads of this new generation of children the threat of common extermination, for which the means are in the hands of the modern states, especially the major world powers. Are the children to receive the arms race from us as a necessary inheritance? How are we to explain this unbridled race?"

"The ancients said *Si vis pacem, para bellum*. But can our age still really believe that the breathtaking spiral of armaments is at the service of world peace? In alleging this threat of a potential enemy, is it really not rather the intention to keep for oneself a means of threat in order to get the upper hand with the aid of one's own arsenal of destruction? Here, too, it is the human dimension of peace that tends to vanish in favor of ever new possible forms of imperialism.

"It must be our solemn wish here for our children, for the children of all the nations on earth, that this point will never be reached."

humanly speaking are impossible. We need the help of the 'God of peace' " (Phil 4:9).

If man is to overcome his sin through the saving grace of Christ, he must do so in the context of our *fifth* theological element: a theology of politics. We must view the political world not only in Augustinian terms (as one who sees the political profession as the natural consequence of man's sin) but also in biblical terms (an assertion that it is the political world that is the sphere of God's liberating activity). A theology of politics is a logical extension of a theology of redemption, since a Christian concept of redemption is intimately connected with the necessity for political freedom and economic justice. We must become creatively involved in our political process, criticizing it where necessary and supporting it where possible. While the Church must never again become the political sphere, it must nevertheless reject the false premise that religion has nothing to do with politics. In the words of Mohandas K. Gandhi: "Anyone who says religion has nothing to do with politics does not know what religion means."

The *sixth*, and last, element of theological reflection deals with a theology of nonviolence. For too long we have regarded nonviolence as peripheral to the Christian life, either because we did not believe that nonviolence was an appropriate or realistic response to violence or because we viewed nonviolence as a sign of weakness and violence as a sign of strength. Whatever the cause, we urgently need a theology of nonviolence because, increasingly, nonviolence is the only practical way to avoid the holocaust that can consume us all. We must realize that Jesus' command to love our enemies and not to live by the ethic of the sword was not an accidental or frivolous portion of the Gospel message. Jesus was merely pointing out that if we are to build the kind of

kingdom he envisioned, we must use the tools of nonviolence and conversion of our enemies.

To use violence or the threat of violence to establish justice and peace is to assert that we can attain a good end through evil means. In the final analysis, the end is always produced by the means and we must, therefore, pay as much attention to the ethical nature of our "means" as we do to the morality of the "end." The means and end must be ethically convertible terms; thus, we must ever be able to substitute the one for the other. In short, it is nonviolence, never violence, that produces peace—or, in A.J. Muste's terms, "There is no way to Peace, Peace is the way." It is difficult to understand how war or the threat of massive destruction through a policy of deterrence can produce peace or reconciliation. In 1971 the World Synod of Bishops declared that justice was "constitutive" of the Gospel message. Let us hope that the day is not far off when another synod will declare that nonviolence is also a constitutive, essential element of the Gospel of Jesus.

There are vital resources that our Catholic Christian tradition must offer the world if it is to survive. The Christian faith must remind Christians that we have here no permanent city and that our task is to serve as fair, just, and peaceful trustees of God's good creation until He calls us to our true home. We cannot let either fear or pessimism dilute the Gospel message for our world. We must be bold, courageous, and ever ready to take the risks that the radical nature of the Gospel daily demands of us. The greatest obstacle to world peace is the judgment of too many of us that peace is impossible, out of our reach. In the words of Pope Paul VI:

We conclude...by reaffirming our conviction that Peace is a duty, Peace is possible. This is the message we keep repeating, a message that makes its own the ideal of civilization, echoes the aspirations of peoples, strengthens the hope of the lowly and weak, and ennobles with justice the security of the strong. It is a message of optimism, a presage of the future. Peace is no dream, no utopia, no illusion. Nor is it a labor of Sisyphus. No, Peace can be prolonged and strengthened. Peace can write the finest pages of history, inscribing them not only with the magnificence of power and glory but also with the greater magnificence of human virtue, people's goodness, collective prosperity and *true* civilization: the civilization of love.

Just as the inhumane social institution of slavery was ended by a combination of practical strategies and moral and religious prophets, so the arms race must be reversed by a combination of the two today. We will not labor practically to end the arms race and pursue disarmament unless we have a vision of faith that will sustain us in this most difficult and challenging task. A dramatic vision of a drastically disarmed earth is offered us in Catholic social thought. It may not be enough to inspire us to give life to future generations, but it is a beginning, and in that sense it at least offers hope. What remains to be seen is whether this hope shall bear fruit. **WV**