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Catholic Conscience and Nuclear Weapons

Joseph J. Fahey¹

This essay briefly explores the history of Catholic ethics on war and peace. It then discusses Catholic social teaching regarding nuclear weapons, and the movement from conditional acceptance to the position of the unacceptability of even possessing nuclear weapons because they are intrinsically evil. The essay concludes with a discussion of the meaning of this development for policy makers and those who work in the nuclear weapons field as well as for average Catholics.

Introduction

The earliest Christians embraced pacifism in response to the Sermon on the Mount. Christians rejected bloodshed whether it be capital punishment, gladiatorial contests, and military service. They were called to the higher ministry of reconciliation and the law of talion of old – an eye for an eye --was replaced by the call to love even our enemies. This grand law of love characterized Christian life in the early centuries when Christians were persecuted by Roman authorities for their fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus. When Roman soldiers converted to Christianity, they rejected bloodshed and hatred of enemies embracing instead active love for all. St. Martin of Tours (316-397 CE) was representative when he stated, “Hitherto I have served you as a soldier, let me now serve Christ...I am a soldier of Christ and it is not lawful for me to fight” (see Fahey, 2018; 2005).

The conscientious witness of the early Christians to renounce bloodshed and service in military forces has continued down to our own time. This was true even when some in the Church embraced the Just War theory (fifth century) and even engaged in the savage bloodshed of the Crusaders and later the Conquistadors (eleventh century). While pacifism retreated to monastic and clerical life after the fifth century there were, nevertheless., many examples of individuals and small groups who maintained the peacemaking witness of the early Christians. We also do well to remember that the embrace of the Just War was done reluctantly and as late as 1000 CE various *Penetentials* and *The Peace of God* and *The Truce of God* severely restricted weapons in war, the number of those who could be killed in war, and the time of year when fighting to could take place. Even during the brutal Crusades there were peace movements that opposed bloodshed. The Third Order of St. Francis which exempted lay people from military service is but one example of Medieval peace movements. Hence, while the term “conscientious objection” is of recent origin, the obligation to conscientiously observe severe restrictions on war

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and to opt instead for nonviolent alternatives is quite old in Christian history (see Fahey 2018; 2005).

While members of the Historic Peace Churches—Mennonites, Brethren, Quakers—have traditionally been exempt from military service, the idea that Roman Catholics could refuse military service with the approval of ecclesiastical authorities occurs only after World War II. During WWI, for example, Ben Salmon an American Catholic war resister opposed the war on the Church’s teaching on Just War and was imprisoned and sentenced to death for his stand. He sought support from clergy but received none. The few Catholics who resisted WWI simply did so without clerical or hierarchical support. During WWII Catholics in many warring countries were urged on by the hierarchy in their native land to serve in the military. There were Catholic conscientious objectors but few received any official support and, as in the case of Blessed Franz Jaegstatter in Austria, his priest and bishop refused to support him in his refusal to serve in the Nazi army. (I interviewed some WWII Catholic COs and almost all told me no priest would support them.)

Catholic Teaching on Conscience and War

A dramatic change on Church teaching on conscientious objection to war took place after World War II. These quotations, among many, represent that change:

St. John XXIII wrote in 1963:

“Therefore, in this age of ours which prides itself on its atomic power, it is irrational to believe that war is still an apt means of vindicating violated rights” (Pope John XXIII, 2016, n. 127).

The Second Vatican Council stated in 1965 in *Gaudium et Spes* :

We cannot fail to praise those who renounce the use of violence in the vindication of their rights and who resort to methods of defense which are otherwise available to weaker parties, provided that this can be done without injury to the rights and duties of others or to the community itself (Second Vatican Council, 2016, n. 78).

Every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and man which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation (n. 80).

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 (n. 81).

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church:

Every member of the armed forces is morally obliged to resist orders that call for perpetrating crimes against the law of nations and the universal principles of this law. Military personnel remain fully responsible for the acts that they commit in violation of the rights of individuals and peoples, or of the norms of international humanitarian law. Such acts cannot be justified by claiming obedience to the orders of superiors (2004, n. 503).

Conscientious objectors who, out of principle, refuse military service in those cases where it is obligatory because their conscience rejects any kind of recourse to the use of force or because they are opposed to participation in a particular conflict, must be open to accepting alternative forms of military service. ‘It seems just that laws should make humane provisions for the case of conscientious objectors who refuse to carry arms, provided they accept some other form of community service (2004, n. 503).

Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the International Symposium “Prospects for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament”:

Nor can we fail to be genuinely concerned by the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental effects of any employment of nuclear devices. If we also take into account the risk of an accidental detonation as a result of error of any kind, the threat of their use, as well as their very possession is to be firmly condemned. For they exist in the service of a mentality of fear that affects not only the parties in conflict but the entire human race. International relations cannot be held captive to military force, mutual intimidation, and the parading of stockpiles of arms. Weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons, create nothing but a false sense of security. They cannot constitute the basis for peaceful coexistence between members of the human family, which must rather be inspired by an ethics of solidarity (10 November 2017).

Perhaps the most hotly debated item in the 1983 US Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on *The Challenge of Peace* was the question of whether nuclear deterrence would be condemned as intrinsically evil. If so, the pastoral implications—especially for scientists and technicians who design and make nuclear weapons and military personnel who serve in any capacity in nuclear warfare—were enormous. The US Bishops, however, did not condemn deterrence and the possession of nuclear weapons adopting instead the position of Pope John Paul II in a 1982 letter to the United Nations that “deterrence based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself but as a step on the toward a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable.” (As Chief of US Chaplains Admiral Msgr. John O’Connor told me in 1976, “If nuclear deterrence is condemned no superior officer involved in nuclear weapons warfare would be able to trust a Catholic under his command.”)

Pope Francis’s 2017 statement that “the threat of their use (nuclear weapons), as well at their very possession is to be condemned” leaves no room for doubt or distinction: nuclear weapons

are intrinsically evil. *Hence, nuclear weapons may not be developed; nuclear weapons may not be used as a deterrent; and nuclear weapons may not be used in warfare.* In fact, the very act of making nuclear weapons is in itself intrinsically evil since the manufacture of nuclear weapons steals funds that should be used to promote the universal common good. Catholic teaching is now unambiguous on this subject.

Therefore, those nations who manufacture and possess nuclear weapons are engaged in an intrinsically evil act. This evil act directly involves those scientists who design these weapons, the manufacturers who make the weapons, the politicians who approve the funds to create the weapons, and the members of the military who are assigned to bombers, missile silos, and naval vessels that will fire these weapons when ordered to do so.

Catholic Teaching on Cooperation with Evil

Catholic teaching holds that cooperation with evil takes two forms: *formal* and *material*. People *formally* cooperate when they concur with the intent or act which is evil and they perform the evil act itself. In this case, a person is guilty of evil when they directly design, or fund, or manufacture, or use nuclear weapons. *Material* cooperation with evil means that one does not approve of the intent or the act that creates nuclear weapons but they nevertheless contribute in some way to the existence of nuclear weapons. Material cooperation may be *immediate* when, while a person does not support the intent to do evil, nevertheless contributes in some way without which the evil act cannot be done. Material cooperation may be *mediate* when a person participates in evil through in an indirect and non-supportive way.

When we apply these principles to the possession of nuclear weapons and their use for deterrence purposes, the conscience of those involved is challenged by these facts:

1. People are *formally* guilty of cooperation with evil when their intention and actions are to directly design, or fund, or manufacture, nuclear weapons. This group includes scientists, political leaders, corporations that manufacture nuclear weapons, and military personnel who are deployed to maintain and use nuclear weapons. *Formal* cooperation with evil is always gravely morally wrong. A moral action that is gravely wrong in Catholic teaching is a mortal sin.
2. People are *materially* guilty of cooperation with evil when while they are not directly involved in the design, funding, manufacture, and deployment of nuclear weapons but nevertheless commit actions without which nuclear weapons cannot be produced. People are guilty of *immediate* cooperation with evil when they provide the material (capital) that is essential for the immoral act to occur. Citizens who pay taxes that in part fund nuclear weapons are guilty of *immediate material* cooperation with evil since these taxes result in nuclear weapons research, development, and deployment. People may engage in *mediate* cooperation with evil if they provide material that is not necessary for the commission of the immoral act. Hence, military personnel such as cooks, medics, and office personnel may not be guilty of cooperation with evil (although as citizens that portion of their federal taxes directed to weapons of mass destruction may result in *immediate* cooperation with evil for which they are morally culpable.)

Hence, Church teaching on cooperation with evil poses a most serious challenge to the consciences of very large segments of society in nuclear weapons producing countries (together the US and Russia produce 92% of nuclear weapons, with the US by far in the lead in overall military spending and arms exports). When Church teaching was that the possession of nuclear weapons was acceptable as long as disarmament was being pursued, scientists, politicians, defense corporations, soldiers, and citizens could continue to participate in nuclear weapons planning and production, although with a most uneasy conscience.

But at last the fiction of nations producing weapons while at the same time seeking disarmament has been exposed. The nuclear arms manufacturers and their governmental supporters have not been seeking disarmament.

The fact is that the nuclear weapons producing powers—mainly the US—never intended to do anything but to produce more plentiful and more powerful nuclear weapons if for no other reason than these weapon systems are highly profitable. And, it is a fact that the US *always* intended to use these weapons in warfare and continues to do so under President Donald Trump.

Pope Francis has exposed the obscenity of the nuclear arms race that only races for profit at the expense of people. Pope Francis has issued a clarion call to peace that the world simply cannot ignore. And we do well to remember that the Catholic Church has issued many, many statements condemning the arms race even of conventional weapons since the Pontificate of Benedict XV before WWI. Was not the conventional bombing of Hamburg and Dresden and Tokyo not more horrific than Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

The large number of Catholic citizens who are involved directly or indirectly with the production of nuclear weapons are going to need a good deal of assistance as they examine their consciences on the question of whether they can keep their jobs or continue to pay taxes. Catholics in the military have a special burden of conscience that will demand a special wisdom to discern whether they are guilty of formal cooperation with evil. Courage will be demanded of all as they find there is no longer any safe place to stand or any time to wait for nations to begin nuclear disarmament. Citizens—including those in the military—simply cannot wait for their governments to act. Tragically, the burden is on each of us. We must be prepared to stand alone if necessary, in the face of nuclear catastrophe. But we are not alone. Catholic teaching tells us that the God of love is with us and that Jesus has shown us how to make peace in the Sermon on the Mount. Catholic teaching on world governance is the blueprint for a world of peace for all!

The following proposals are designed to assist in the formation of conscience for faithful Catholics—and all people of good will—who wish to form a correct conscience on the matter of nuclear weapons:

1. **Policy Planners:** A faithful Catholic who is tasked with planning, developing, and providing funds for weapons of war can no longer assist in any way with the preparation of

nuclear weapons (or conventional weapons of mass destruction). This will undoubtedly cause a crisis in conscience for those who had heretofore formed policy on the earlier teaching on the acceptance of “deterrence” These policy planners, from corporate executives to elected and appointed political officials must be instructed that nuclear planning is now a condemned activity by the Catholic Church and they should seek employment in fields other than that of nuclear planning. (NOTE: given the Church’s strong teaching, however, on aversion to any kind of arms preparation and spending, these officials do well to consider alternative forms of defense such as nonviolent national defense, diplomacy, and the pursuit of a governed world where war itself will be banned.)

2. **Military Service:** A faithful Catholic on active military duty who is involved with planning or supervising the deployment of nuclear weapons and those who serve in aircraft, surface naval ships and submarines can no longer in good conscience serve in any capacity that involves the very possession and possible use of nuclear weapons. Provision must be made in civil law and military law for those who conscientiously object to any military service that even remotely deals with nuclear weapons. Catholics who are refused assistance by military officials to join conventional military forces or to seek an Honorable Discharge for reasons of conscience should be supported by Church officials and lay Catholics with legal and moral assistance. Selective Conscientious Objection is a Catholic teaching that should be enshrined in civil law.

3. **Civil Society:** Faithful Catholics who are citizens of those nations which possess nuclear weapons have a moral duty to vote for officials who will support their nation signing the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. If they are given an opportunity to vote directly for budget items that involve nuclear weapons, they should vote in the negative. Catholic dioceses and parishes should make information available to Catholics on Church teaching on the condemnation of deterrence and nuclear weapons along with materials on peacemaking, nonviolence, and the necessity to ban war through international law and governance.

4. **Educators:** Those in the teaching profession—from grade school through university—can assist mightily in assisting Catholics to become informed about the condemnation of deterrence and nuclear weapons. Catholic schools and parishes should provide instruction for those of draft age who must decide if they will register for military service. Catholic colleges and universities should be distinguished by offering programs in Peace and Justice studies that offer all students the opportunity to examine matters of conscience and war.

5. **Global Governance.** Disarmament of any kind is simply not going to happen while we continue the system of sovereign nation states. People want security and protection and that can only be truly found in a system of world governance where international law will replace the international anarchy of today. Law can replace war and sinful military spending if we make the United Nations a system of democratic global governance. In the words of St. John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris*:

Today the universal common good presents us with problems which are world-wide in their dimensions; problems, therefore, which cannot be solved except by a public

authority with power, organization and means co-extensive with these problems, and with a world-wide sphere of activity. Consequently, the moral order itself demands the establishment of some such general form of public authority (n. 137).

The Vatican and local conferences of bishops should prepare a pastoral plan on the urgency of disarmament and the necessity for a freely chosen democratic Global Union of states that will not only outlaw war but will ensure the safety of our fragile planet for all generations to come.

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