UNJUST WAR!

An examination of the material cooperation of the U.S. Catholic Bishops with the objective evil of unjust war.

By Bob Waldrop, Romero Catholic Worker

When the United States declared war on the people of Iraq, Pope John Paul II judged that to be an unjust war, a decision confirmed by Cardinal Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict. The U.S. bishops' position was summarized in their November 2002 statement: "With the Holy See and bishops from the Middle East and around the world, we fear that resort to war, under present circumstances and in light of current public information, would not meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching for overriding the strong presumption against the use of military force." We ask: Did the US bishops actually believe what they said and what Pope John Paul II said?

One bishop certainly did. The Most Reverend Michael Botean, of the Eparchy of St. George in Canton for the Romanians wrote to his people, during Lent 2003, saying:

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One bishop certainly did. The Most Reverend Michael Botean, of the Eparchy of St. George in Canton, must declare to you, my people, for the sake of your salvation as well as my own, that any direct participation and support of this war against the people of Iraq is objectively grave evil, a matter of mortal sin. Beyond a reasonable doubt this war is morally incompatible with the Person and Way of Jesus Christ. With moral certainty I say to you it does not meet even the minimal standards of the Catholic just war theory. Thus, any killing associated with it is unjustified and, in consequence, unequivocally murder. Direct participation in this war is the moral equivalent of direct participation in an abortion. (Emphasis added.)

That statement of moral certitude was not shared by the rest of the Bishops. The attitude of the US Bishops, as individuals responsible for dioceses, and acting as the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, can only be described as that of moral relativism:

People of good will may differ on how to apply just war norms in particular cases, especially when events are moving rapidly and the facts are not altogether clear. Nov 2002. People of good will may apply ethical principles and come to different prudential judgments, depending upon their assessment of the facts at hand and other issues. Sept 2002. War has serious consequences, so could the failure to act. People of good will may and do disagree on how to interpret just war teaching and how to apply just war norms to the controverted facts of this case. We understand and respect the difficult moral choices that must be made by our President and others who bear the responsibility of making these grave decisions involving our nation's and the world's security. March 2003.

The Most Rev. Edwin O'Brien, then Archbishop for the Military Services, on the Solemnity of the Annunciation, March 25, 2003, advised Catholic members of the US Armed Forces –

Given the complexity of factors involved, many of which understandably remain confidential, it is altogether appropriate for members of our armed forces to presume the integrity of our leadership and its judgments and therefore to carry out our military duties in good conscience.

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Abortion and Unjust War

The US bishops’ attitude of moral relativism about the war – “we think it’s wrong, but if you choose a different way, that’s fine with us” – is not what they say about abortion. On that issue, they give clear moral guidance. It is an objective evil. But so is direct involvement with unjust war. Unjust war at all times and under all circumstances is a moral evil on the part of the aggressor. Here is how Bishop Botan constructed his argument on the moral equivalency of involvement with the Iraq war and involvement with abortion:

The Church teaches that good ends do not justify the use of evil means. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states this principle succinctly:

“One may never do evil so that good may result from it.” (1789) One contemporary example of this would be abortion. Abortion is intrinsically evil; hence regardless of the good that may seem to issue from it, a Catholic may never participate in it.

Paragraph 2309 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “The strict conditions for legitimate defense by military force require rigorous consideration. The gravity of such a decision makes it subject to rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy” (emphasis added). Since war is about the mass infliction of death and suffering on children of God, Christians can enter into it and fight in it only if the war in question strictly meets all the criteria of the just war theory, and only if these same standards are likewise meticulously observed in the course of fighting the war. Vague, loose, freewheeling, conniving, relaxed interpretations of Catholic just war theory and its application are morally illegitimate because of “the gravity of such a decision.”

“The evaluation of these conditions of the just war theory for moral legitimacy belongs to the prudential judgment of those who have responsibility for the common good,” states the Catechism. (2309) However, the nation-state is never the final arbiter or authority for the Catholic of what is moral or for what is good for the salvation of his or her soul. What is legal can be evil and often has been. Jesus Christ and his Church, not the state, are the ultimate informers of conscience for the Catholic.

This is why the Church teaches as a norm of conscience the following: “If rulers were to enact unjust laws or take measures contrary to the moral order such arrangements would not be binding in conscience.” (Catechism 1903) She also warns “Blind obedience [to immoral laws] does not suffice to excuse those who carry them out” (Catechism 2313). When a moral conflict arises between Church teaching and secular morality, when contradictory moral demands are made upon a Catholic’s conscience, he or she “must obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29).

It is a tragedy of historic proportions that the United States Catholic Bishops turned a deaf ear to the cry of the poor in Iraq for life and opted for moral relativism and the consequent material cooperation with the objective evil of unjust war.

The Fruits of Moral Cowardice

The fruits of the bishops’ moral cowardice are all too evident. Millions of people throughout the Middle East hate us because someone that they knew and loved died in our war. We laid the plowed like a field, and Jerusalem reduced to rubble, And the mount of the temple to a forest ridge.

Thus says the LORD regarding the prophets who lead my people astray; Who, when their teeth have something to bite, announce peace, But when one fails to put something in their mouth, proclaim war against him. Therefore you shall have night, not vision, darkness, not divination Then shall the seers be put to shame, and the diviners confounded; They shall cover their lips, all of them, because there is no answer from God. . . Therefore, because of you, Zion shall be plowed like a field, and Jerusalem reduced to rubble, And the mount of the temple to a forest ridge.

A PRAYER TO OUR LADY OF SORROWS FOR THOSE WHO WILL DIE TODAY IN WAR

Our Lady of Sorrows, we pray for all those who will die today because of war and economic chaos, especially the children. Prepare them for the agony, despair, and terror of the violence that is upon them. Comfort them and hold them close to the bosom of your most Immaculate Heart as they drink deeply of the bitter cup which is forced upon them. Wipe their tears, calm their fears, welcome them to peace and safety. Eternal rest grant to them, and may perpetual light shine upon them. Our Most Holy Lady of Sorrows, Help us fulfill the promise of your song. Inspire us to hasten the day of the overturning of thrones of tyranny, and the scattering of the unjust. Give us your grace and strength to stand against the demonic powers which prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.

WORKS OF JUSTICE AND PEACE

A statement of the mission of the Oscar Romero Catholic Worker community.

+ **LIVE** simply and justly in solidarity with the poor and marginalized and be a good neighbor. Make no war on them, rather, be one with them in spirit, truth, and love.

+ **HEAR** the truth when it is spoken to you. Discern the signs of the times and speak truth -- to power, to the people, and to the Church.

+ **MAKE** injustice visible -- witness, remember, teach, proclaim, tell. Light candles, do not curse the darkness.

+ **PROTECT** the poor and powerless-- listen, learn, educate, organize, empower participation, and respect life from the moment of conception to the time of natural death.

+ **WORK** for reconciliation with truth, evangelism, catechesis, orthopraxis.

+ **CELEBRATE** life, goodness, beauty, virtue, responsibility, and joy. Practice peace, non-violence, servant leadership, harmony, community, voluntary cooperation, and the proper stewardship of God’s creation. Pray without ceasing.

+ **ENSURE** fair distribution, subsidiarity, economic opportunity, justice, and food security for everyone everywhere.