

A CATHOLIC COMMUNITY RESPONDS TO THE WAR LIVING WITH FAITH AND HOPE

INTRODUCTION

We are a group of individuals from Catholic institutions and religious congregations, as well as organizations with ministries to the Catholic community, who have gathered together to reflect in the light of our shared faith on the attacks of September 11 and on the response of our government to those attacks. In particular, we wish to respond to the invitation of the U.S. Catholic Bishops to engage a dialogue on the appropriate response of the Catholic community to the U.S. “war on terrorism.”

At their recent semi-annual meeting, the bishops issued a Pastoral Letter entitled “Living with Faith and Hope after September 11th” in which they reviewed our government’s response to those events, particularly in declaring war on the presumed perpetrators of the tragedies in New York, Arlington, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. The bishops call for dialogue among Christians and with other faith communities as a means to achieve peace. In that spirit of dialogue, we wish to comment publicly on the current crisis applying the principles the Pastoral Letter raised.

LIVING WITH FAITH AND HOPE

The bishops acknowledge and sympathize with all Americans in our national tragedy, sharing “the loss and pain, anger and fear, shock and determination” we feel at this time. They appeal to religious convictions as we seek answers and appropriate mechanisms of response to the horrors inflicted on the thousands of innocent people affected by the September 11 atrocities.

We affirm and echo the bishops’ outline of additional areas of concern that need to be addressed in the aftermath of that fateful day. These include: the need to redefine security; the call for a Palestinian state and security for Israel as the only way to bring peace to the Middle East; condemning the deadly use of sanctions against innocent populations in Iraq; calling on the U.S. to address terrorism in Sudan; pointing to our government’s failures in helping development efforts to overcome the worldwide scandal of poverty; criticizing our alliances with countries which violate human rights; urging the U.S. to reverse both its predominant role in the international arms trade as well as the growing proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. The bishops also state that our country should promote a more effective, responsible and responsive United Nations organization.

These observations by the bishops are welcome in a world which, because of its economic imbalances and propensity to violence, creates conditions for a breeding ground for the kind of unconscionable attacks that our nation suffered on September 11. Their call for prayer, fasting, teaching, witness, dialogue, service, solidarity and hope should be reaffirmed in all of our faith communities struggling to respond to our own pain and that of all Americans.

THE WAR

The principles of Catholic moral teaching make possible, indeed demand, a judgment on the morality of our government’s massive military response to the events of September 11th. The bombing of Afghanistan which began on October 7 and the war that continues unabated come under the same Gospel judgment as all of those realities which the bishops name so accurately as requiring resolution if our world is ever to be safe.

It is unfortunate that some media interpreted the bishops as judging this military campaign to be “moral”. Instead, what the bishops did was offer guidelines for making such a moral judgment. We wish here to apply those guidelines to the current “War against Terrorism” as a way of inviting the entire Catholic community into further dialogue and deeper discernment. The serious restrictions which Catholic moral teaching has placed on warlike actions – the so-called “Just War Theory” – in practice rule out modern warfare, as Pope John Paul II pointed out in judging the Gulf War. We believe these restrictions also judge this war to be immoral, even though it appears to have just cause. For example, the strong moral requirement of immunity for non-combatants and the inadmissibility of indiscriminate attacks on innocent people are violated in the “collateral damage” suffered by innocent city dwellers in Kunduz, Kabul, Kandahar and elsewhere in Afghanistan.

In addition, as the bishops’ statement points out, the principle of proportionality must govern any nation’s political and military decisions. In “Just War” parlance this means that the damage to be inflicted and the costs incurred by war must be proportionate to the good expected by taking up arms. In our judgment over two months of daily bombings with all of their attendant human and material costs, including tremendous military expenditures that rob from the poor, are not proportionate to our legitimate right to seek out and bring before an international court of justice those responsible for the September 11th attacks.

It disturbs us, as well, that many of the effects of the bombing on non-combatants are withheld from the U.S. public by the military or a self-censored media. A report issued on December 10th by University of New Hampshire professor Dr. Marc Herold documents at least 3,767 civilian casualties in nine weeks of the U.S. air war upon Afghanistan. As Catholics convinced that each person is an equally valuable member of the human family, we know that the innocent Afghanis killed by our bombs are as important as the people lost in New York, the Pentagon and Pennsylvania. Both sets of victims point to the tragedy of what is happening in our world and to what our faith calls for in response.

Another condition cited by the bishops for a military action to be considered justified is the probability of success. While this is admittedly a difficult criterion to apply, it is intended to prevent an irrational resort to force. The U.S. government’s stated intention is to end terrorism worldwide through political pressure and military force.

“The world is divided between rich and poor societies, a divide that makes the humankind look fragmented. This broken world arising from unbearable inequalities can experience nothing but instability”
Excerpt from “Christ our Peace” – November 6, 2001
Pastoral Letter of Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM)

To us it is clear that no country, even one as powerful as the U.S., can successfully end terrorism by the warlike actions we are witnessing today. The overwhelming military response fuels anger and hatred, and serves to inspire new recruits to the causes espoused by those who commit acts of terror. Key is the need to address injustices and root causes that create the fertile soil in which disinherited and disillusioned people are recruited into terrorism.

Another “Just War” principle demands that any military response must be a last resort – that all peaceful alternatives must be exhausted before a country may turn to war. It is clear to us that the interval between September 11 and October 7, when the U.S. began to bomb, was used by our government to build an international coalition for a military response. The refusal to present evidence of Osama bin Laden’s guilt to the government of Afghanistan and the immediate rejection of their offer to turn him over to a third country signified a clear refusal on the part of the U.S. to seek peaceful solutions.

We are convinced that the attacks on U.S. cities and citizens constitute criminal acts to be dealt with by careful international police investigations. The perpetrators should have been sought out and brought to

trial before such a tribunal as the World Court at the Hague. While we join our voices to the global chorus condemning many dimensions of the oppressive Taliban rule in Afghanistan, none of these justifies the military action of the United States, since it can in no way be considered a “last resort”.

We believe that these moral assessments demand a new direction in the worldwide response to terrorism. In addition we invite our bishops and all Catholics to rethink the “Just War” tradition and seek a new paradigm for judging questions of war and peace today.

What follows are suggested steps to be taken in that regard, offered here to stimulate further reflection and discernment. It is our hope that voices might be raised at every level of our faith community in support of such steps, which we consider essential for achieving true peace.

FURTHER ACTIONS

1. The bombing and the war against Afghanistan must stop and no new theater of military action should open. Let multinational police action replace these military efforts to capture the perpetrators of the terrorist violence of September 11th and turn them over to an international court.
2. The rhetoric of war should cease. Without doubt the destruction done in New York, Arlington, Virginia and Pennsylvania was massive. In fact, it represents a grave crime against humanity, the crime of mass murder. The act bears a greater likeness to the terrible crimes of international criminal networks than it does to war.
3. For these reasons, we call on the executive and legislative branches of our government to support and ratify the International Criminal Court. Failure to do so represents a failure to establish an appropriate and vital tool to address exactly these types of crimes.
4. Control of information has become a foremost weapon of modern warfare. As people of faith, together with all citizens committed to the truth, we demand an end to censorship in any form and under any pretext. We need alternative reliable sources of information, as well as the existing media establishment, asserting courageous leadership in pursuing the full truth.
5. All the results of the bombing and other acts of war in Afghanistan must be made known, no matter who is responsible. The true extent of civilian casualties must become public and as real to us as are the U.S. casualties in the war.
6. We must see to the rebuilding of Afghanistan, which will require a sustained commitment of support from the United States. It is morally unacceptable for a senior U.S. official to say public comments like, “We’re here to get these people. That’s why we came. Then we’re leaving”. The U.S. bears responsibility for what we have done to Afghanistan. As the history of the 20th Century has shown – including previous U.S. government involvement in Afghanistan – only a commitment to help devastated nations rebuild a decent way of life for their people can prevent future wars and terrorism.
7. A just and sustained resolution of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, so significant and symbolic in the Arab world, requires immediate and active engagement on the part of our country, along with the international community. In their letter the bishops make this point most emphatically.
8. Fear of terrorism is being used to create a climate in which some of our Constitutional rights and liberties are being threatened. Checks and balances set in place by the Constitution are also being

jeopardized. We call on our Congressional representatives to protect these rights and liberties in accord with their sworn responsibilities to defend the Constitution of the United States.

9. Greater focus needs to be placed on the larger context in which these awful events occurred -- massive poverty, discrimination and unjust global economic systems. It would be of inestimable value for the cause of peace to establish a government commission to study the grievances which are manipulated by perpetrators of desperate attacks like that which we endured on September 11th. Broad consultation must be undertaken. As Catholics, we can draw on our international networks of Catholic institutions, religious and missionary communities, and worldwide dioceses as valuable resources for important information and faith-based judgments regarding local situations across the globe, along with their partners in the larger interfaith community and non-governmental organizations in the countries where they work. We need to listen to their voices and to the voices of the marginalized, the poor, and the victims of war and injustice whom our colleagues in faith accompany. We need to call upon all of these resources as our partners in study and discernment, and particularly in service of stopping a spread of U.S. military action to other countries.

“International cooperation in the fight against terrorist activities must also include a courageous and resolute political, diplomatic and economic commitment to relieving situations of oppression and marginalization which facilitate the designs of terrorists.”

-Excerpt from 2002 World Day of Peace message, John Paul II

10. Religious justification has been used as an indispensable tool of warfare. Therefore, Catholic responses after the crimes of September 11th and especially after the commencement of bombing on October 7th must come under review and re-evaluation. The comments made within hours and days by prominent church people justifying military retaliation in the name of Just War principles may have contributed to an immediate war-making response on the part of our government. Such declarations also gave the impression that the church understands itself as a legitimate and authoritative moral voice in giving permission for war. We are convinced that the first, and second, and last words from leaders in the Catholic community must promote and explore and lead the way along every possible peaceful avenue to conflict resolution and the achievement of justice for all.

11. Finally, we call for the convening of fora throughout the faith community to discern and chart a new Catholic paradigm to replace Just War Theory. It is time.

CONCLUSION

We offer these reflections as our best prudential judgments in promoting that dialogue called for in the bishops' Pastoral Letter. We pray that this attempt to articulate a more specific and far-reaching Catholic moral consensus will be taken seriously and evoke further respectful and discerning dialogue.

Our life as a people of faith, the direction of our beloved country and above all, the lives of millions across the world demand that we take seriously the Gospel challenge and seek, practice and pursue peace through just and non-violent means. Our example in this witness is the Jesus of the Gospels, the one who calls peacemakers blessed, who calls us to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors, who reminds us that forgiveness is at the heart of our faith, and that those who show mercy will have mercy shown them. In that spirit we offer these reflections and call on our sisters and brothers in faith to join us in this urgently needed witness of justice and peace.

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