

QUESTIONS OUT OF THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

A panel is not a very good setting for expressing all one's ideas on a topic. That is very frustrating for me, as I have rarely been as excited about a church event as I am about the pastoral letter. My excitement, like yours, is largely related to the issue and the courage with which the bishops confront it; but I also think the debate has clarified a number of long neglected problems in Catholic teaching. Now that these problems are out in the open, we can perhaps deal with them in the scholarly community with the same honesty and humility that the bishops have shown.

I have been asked to raise several questions, from the perspective of the American experience, regarding a "positive theology of peace."

1. *Does Christianity require defeat?*

Americans do not like to lose; Christians often exaggerate the virtues of losing; sometimes they even seem to want to lose. That may be as it should be, but might I suggest that a loser's theology may ground resistance to war, but it cannot ground a positive theology of peace.

I have been particularly fascinated by the differences in language and the structure of argument in parts one and four as contrasted with parts two and three; the two "styles" of teaching described in the pastoral letter. This difference becomes dramatic at the beginning of part four. After laboring over fine distinctions between combatants and non-combatants and achieving a "strictly conditioned moral acceptance" of deterrence, the bishops call their readers to the hard, ambiguous work of making peace through negotiation, formulation of more just international policies and support for multilateral and international agreements and institutions, in other words to political work aimed at finding alternative policies, winning their acceptance and making them work once adopted. This is very good, but it doesn't last. When they get back to church, in part four, they tell us, as they did in part one, that we will probably not pull it off. We are a minority, we are supposed to be "doers of the word and wayfarers with Jesus," which unfortunately "means that we must never expect complete success in history and we must regard as normal even the path of persecution and the possibility of martyrdom." The reason for this pessimism is obvious: "we live in a world increasingly estranged from Christian values," an absolutely incredible statement which flows less from their admittedly rather bleak policy analysis than from the assumptions set forth in part one. There they began their effort to awaken enthusiasm for public life and political action by describing the present situation almost exclusively in terms of fear and danger; although the religious vision of peace is "objectively based and capable of progressive realization," we are told that its realization in this world is ultimately impossible, for such dreams rest on "hopes that cannot be realized." Anyway, Christians know what's up: although "the causes of war are multiple and not easily identified. . . . Christians will find in any violent situation the consequences of sin; not only sinful patterns of domination, oppression and aggression, but the conflicts of values and interests which illustrate the limitations of a sinful

world." So, like the true believers in Morris West's *The Clowns of God*, we had better stick together; the word is "solidarity" in this "increasingly secularized society."

Where does this lead? To repentance, prayer, fasting and almost pathetic requests for exemptions from having to push the button or get drafted and suggestions some of us might eventually have to quit our jobs. This is the language of a reluctant sect, seeing itself dragged by its master to the margins of life, desperately trying to maintain a hold on the world, haunted by notions of responsibility derived from another era, but convinced that the promise of peace, "objectively based" though it might be, is not really "capable of progressive realization." Nothing could be further from the spirit of tough-minded political engagement aimed at reducing the possibility of war, working for negotiation in a dangerous world and struggling to open the door to internationalist alternatives to war. Religious images that are pessimistic, judgmental and filled with the language of repentance and fatalism are hardly the basis for winning a public hearing, inspiring sacrifice and long term dedicated effort, or awakening imaginations to the possibility of new ways of organizing international relations and foreign policies.

Reflection on the signs of the times is supposed to generate a theology which pulls us more deeply into, not above or away from, the world, which in our case is the United States. If we in fact do not choose to enter monasteries, or their modern equivalents, then we are supposed to be actually trying to change things. A theology that says it is impossible, or so difficult that only a fool would try, is not very helpful pastorally or politically. It usually arises from the self-interest of church or churchmen and has little to do with disinterested evaluation of the situation. Conversely a positive political theology, and therefore a positive theology of peace, must see some silver linings in the clouds, must have a very strong faith in people, must suggest that God wants us to help his creation not only survive but fulfill its purpose. Whether this means revival of a "theology of glory" is not clear to me, but we might benefit from a dose of Walter Rauschenbusch, tempered by early Reinhold Niebuhr.

2. Who did God put in charge?

Catholics, Europeans, and other un-American types love abstractions, and none more than "the state." For example, the bishops argue that the state has an obligation to defend its citizens, but one has to wonder about this "state" of which they speak. Some years ago some ethicists were discussing this kind of thing when Gordon Zahn intervened: "Gentlemen, the state we are discussing is dominated by Lyndon Johnson." He then suggested that the course of Johnson's public career might have left him something less than an objective, disinterested decision maker, this fifteen years before Robert Caro. On this matter of the state's obligation to defend its citizens I prefer a man who wrote his local newspaper after reading that his city council would be discussing the nuclear freeze: "these guys can't get a pothole fixed on my street, the schools are falling apart, you can't walk on the streets and the fire department is incompetent, and

they're going to discuss nuclear war." When we realize that Reagan, Weinberger, Clark and their Russian counterparts are not much different from our local aldermen, we will get a better fix on the state.

Or, again, the bishops limit the right of the state to defend its citizens. "True self defense may include the protection of weaker states," they write "but (it) does not include the seizing of the possessions of others or the domination of other states and peoples." What, then, has the cold war been all about? Would anyone seriously argue that American and Soviet foreign and military policy is centered on an abstract self-defense or an altruistic defense of the rights of small nations?

My letter writer represents a wise tradition. Colonial Americans got so ripped off by the state they came to regard all government as a source of danger to themselves. Finding no one they could trust to be the state, they turned to themselves. I think a lot of Jewish refugees from the ghettos of eastern Europe and Catholic peasants from feudal areas, to say nothing of the Irish, shared the skepticism about the state of those Protestant New England farmers. Indeed, I think most of them regarded the language of good government, the public interest and common good as a cover used by their betters to get something for themselves.

American public theology once shared some of this skepticism but the mainline churches have more or less lost touch with it. Catholics were suspicious of the state, but their theologians were enchanted by right reason, ignoring the fact there were few right reasoners around. The papal record on the state has been particularly unhelpful. Whether it's the British civil service or the Richard Allens of this world the state is composed of men and women like us: they are on the make or if they have it made, they are covering their flanks. Who of us is not doing the same? A positive theology of peacemaking, must contain at least three propositions: (1) Christian revelation is all well and good but there is no custodian of that revelation sufficiently disinterested and unworldly that he or she can be trusted with power over our lives; (2) right reason is also very good, but unfortunately there are no right reasoners to whom we can give political power and authority; (3) as neither faith nor reason, in themselves, can be the basis of political organization, then all that is left is us. Peace will not be made by "the righteous use of superior force" (Teddy Roosevelt's phrase; it could be Michael Novak's) nor by a political candidate comparable to E.T.; it will be made, if at all, by you and me. In other words a critical look at the state in theological terms must also, I think, become a positive theology of democracy and self-government. Elements of such a theology are around, some in liberation theology; construction would benefit from a critical examination of the social history of American politics.

3. *Where do we live?*

The story is told that after a brutal mining strike in West Virginia the union struck a deal with the bosses and the men went back to work. Radical agitators like Mother Jones were furious that the workers had not

held out for revolution. One miner, asked what he thought of this, noted that "Mother Jones don't live here. In fact, Mother don't live anywhere." Christians are like that sometimes; an estranged or besieged minority unluckily set down in this "neo-pagan" society. Well, we need only look around this hotel to know with Pogo that we have met the enemy, and it is us. On every issue, from family life and morality in media to economic justice and nuclear strategy, Catholics and Catholicism stand on both sides, as persons, as an institution, as an ideology. To deny the power and authenticity of Christian non-violence would be to deny a part of ourselves; to ignore the realities of power and the ambiguities of politics would be to deny another part of ourselves.

Too much Christian commentary on public affairs is excessively deferential, making its bows to church-state separation and renouncing any intrusion into politics. Very often that is simply silly, as if we were Christians over here and Americans over there; religious people at certain times and citizens at others. What usually happens, of course, is that this leads either to a religious renunciation of worldly responsibility, as in the statement that we are a minority in an increasingly secularized society, or a worldly trivialization of moral demands, as in the suggestion that two or three rural farmers unintentionally killed in North Dakota are less important than a million New Yorkers killed with equal indirectness.

In fact of course we are Christians and Americans all at once, American in our Christianity and Christian in our Americanness. This world is already in us, shaping and informing even our supposedly religious symbols and language, while the church and all of us are simultaneously in the world, a world which we, with others, have made. The two styles of discourse are not one, which is Catholic and ours, and one which is public and largely theirs, but two expressions, ways of embodying our living experience as American Catholics. We reject a sectarian, non-political Christianity not as Catholics or Americans, but as both, for it does not adequately express our experience or our responsibility as people who are church members and citizens all at once. We similarly reject an amoral realism on both Christian and American grounds. As decent human beings we recognize the justice of granting exemptions to persons of eccentric belief, but our dissent is not like that, to be satisfied by provision in a manual, alternative service, or refusal of work. We claim that our position is the proper American position and it cannot be marginalized by toleration. If we remain in the midst of life and do not join that monastery or revolution, it is not because we have made a second best choice but because we have been called there and believe it is right for us to be there. We want no exemption, but policies, goals, strategies to which we can give our whole hearted support, to which we can devote our lives. To get them, we will have to admit that, yes, we do live here. This world is our world; we claim a right and an obligation to share in its life and help shape its destiny. Unlike Mother Jones, we live somewhere, in this nation, our nation, among this people, our people. Joseph Komonchak's recent comments on the church and the world, and John Coleman's recent essay on

Christian citizenship, move us in the right direction. A review of some of the literature of American Studies might help overcome the no longer useful dualism of religion and society by turning us toward culture (with all its methodological problems) as the locus of an American political theology.

4. *Does love matter?*

In the pastoral letter, after a long discussion of Christian perspectives on politics, the bishops leave Jesus behind when they enter the Pentagon, for the policy discussion, because explicit Christian symbols and language are defined as inappropriate for the public conversation. Unfortunately they also leave love behind, by implication confining it to "an option" for individuals and sentiment for church. As American Catholicism becomes more evangelical, with more and more people asking as their fundamental moral question "What would Jesus do?" I suspect that such pro-church, anti-world rhetoric will find a warmer response than the measured rationality and labored abstractions which inform parts two and three. That may be good for church morale, perhaps even for church integrity, as Catholics will share less and less of the responsibility for what exists, but it will hardly contribute to stopping the drift toward war, much less to building a new structure for peace.

Theologians should stop being shy about the good news, which is simply to say that if there is anything to that objectively based, progressively realized business, surely it has something to do with love. Americans have had their own idea of the beloved community, and they used to talk about the public importance of "brotherly affection"; a few Quakers and other fanatics actually tried to love enemies, but, in general, Americans have been persuaded to confine love to private life and intimate relations. Unfortunately the churches have told them not only that such a restriction of love is acceptable, they have even argued it was required. That is most unfortunate, because in the end we will probably die less from lack of civility than from the absence of passion.

In one thing above all the bishops are right: if we are to survive, much less achieve some rudimentary kind of justice, we are going to have to change the world. To deny the necessity of large scale institutional change, such as the subordination of nation states to the common good of the human family, is to live in illusion and self deception. To live in the truth, something more is needed than the abstract proposition that people are worthwhile. That something is love. If love must be confined to only one of the two "styles," if love, like Jesus, is inappropriate for public discussion, then we are not likely to persuade many people to make the sacrifices needed to build a peaceful and a just world.

The bishops quote Pope John Paul II at Hiroshima telling a largely non-Catholic audience that human survival itself has become a matter of "conscious choice" and "deliberate policy," but they neglect even more challenging passages where, without forcing a sectarian Christian "style" on his pluralistic audience, he nevertheless speaks truths which must be heard if we are to change and in the process change our world.

The task is enormous. Some will call it a utopian one. The building of a more just humanity or of a more united international community is not just a dream or a vain ideal. It is a moral imperative, a sacred duty The construction of a new social order presupposes, over and above the essential technological skills, a lofty inspiration, a courageous motivation, belief in man's future, in his dignity, in his destiny In a word, man must be loved for his own sake.

The passion for justice and the passion for peace alone will change our world, and that passion must derive, from love. The Christian proclamation of love is not a matter for our consumption alone, but a good news for all the world. A church composed of people who believe in the reality of love, who try hard to really love each other, and who actually try to live as loving persons in the midst of life might make a difference. Reaching for anything short of that goal, be it the "peace of a sort" or a purely churchly martyrdom, is less than our Lord has a right to expect.

5. Is our problem to find a political theology, or to recognize that all theology is political?

The trends of theology don't come from the sky; they are not the product of disinterested scholarship on the part of men and women living in isolated libraries; they arise from and have their fate determined by larger currents in the culture at large, as we learn from the social history of religious ideas. Theologians, like other scholars, pay little attention to the politics of culture and scholarship so, in the end, their ideas become the playthings of larger forces beyond their control. As I read the interest in a positive theology of peace, it is not a matter of another specialty or a subsection of ethics, but an invitation to do a serious political analysis of the discipline and the institutions in which the discipline is practiced and seek new foundations for our work which will in fact contribute to changing the world. We are already involved, unfortunately; there is no escape from responsibility.

I believe with Michael Novak that culture is the battleground on which our future will be determined. If Novak and his friends win the struggle to provide the images, metaphors and symbols, the ideology and intellectual constructs through which Americans make sense of their experience, then they will also win the battle to determine economic, social, and military policy. We in the church carry on silly arguments about religion and politics, and, while we argue, the battle is being lost. We Catholics have some unique resources to bring to that battle, some wisdom to contribute to the cultural debate, we can make a difference. To do that, we will have to understand that everything we do in church and in theology has public consequences; an other-worldly piety, an anti-worldly ethic, a detached, academic theology, all contribute to privatizing religion and corrupting public life, quite as much as the defeatist dualism of Novak, the militant righteousness of the Moral Majority, or the demonic civil religion occasionally voiced by the President. Unless you and I do all we can to shape a more humane, more hopeful, and more constructive language of public discourse, and a more challenging Christian understanding of historic and civic responsibility, their images will push ours aside, and we will have no

one to blame but ourselves. Once again the enemy is us—we must be more determined than ever to make our scholarship truly public, in the emerging public life of the church and, with our church, in the public life of the nation. So the question is not is there a political theology, but which political theology do we choose?

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RITUAL AND PEACE

For believers in the Lord Jesus, peace is both a gift from God and a task for Christians. As a matter of fact the gift and the task stand in a reciprocal relationship to one another. Our openness to receive God's gift is conditioned by our own desire and hunger for peace. And that stimulation of desire is part of the Christian task.

By saying this I in no way intend a kind of Pelagian heresy which contends that we earn or create God's peace by our actions. God's gift is always pure graciousness. We do, however, create the conditions of possibility for more readily and radically receiving that gift.

The task of desiring and hungering for peace involves a profound conversion, a transformation of consciousness within individuals and within Christian communities. Making peace must always include making peacemakers. Political strategies, social structure and economic programs will fall on deaf ears unless persons are disposed toward peace instead of violence, toward creative cooperation instead of destructive competition. Ritual can be a powerful action in shaping the makers of peace.

The difficulty of making peacemakers in our society is exacerbated by the over-masculinized mission and values of the Western world and the church in the West. As Daniel O'Hanlon perceptively pointed out in the opening address of this convention, our masculine dominated secular and ecclesial societies are characterized by rationality, aggression, competition, power and control. What tends to be undervalued are the more feminine characteristics of intuition, imagination, receptivity, holistic consciousness, empathy and communing. The latter more likely lead toward peace; the former toward violence.

I must say, parenthetically, that this categorization of masculine-feminine traits cannot be immediately applied to specific men and to women in so categorical a fashion. For surely women, despite feminine traits, and even in a pre-feminist age, have their own methods (masculine-learned?) of aggression, power, and control. All of which prompts me to place the root problem of making peacemakers further back in history than the West's overemphasis on ego and the masculine. It would seem rather to have begun in the beginning and carries the not often heard label of original sin, i.e., oriented toward self and away from peace with others from our origins.