

AMNESTY

"We should like also to express the humble and sincere desire that in this present Holy Year too, in accordance with the tradition of previous jubilees, the proper authorities of the different nations should consider the possibility of wisely granting an amnesty to prisoners, as a witness to clemency and equity, especially to those who have given sufficient proof of moral and civic rehabilitation, or who may have been caught up in political and social upheavals too immense for them to be held fully responsible."

Pope Paul VI in *Apostolorum Limina*, officially proclaiming the Holy Year

These words of the Holy Father on the opening of the Holy Year have many applications. They apply to political prisoners in some nations under military rule, to persons whose right to emigrate is inhibited by government policy, to those who are prisoners of war or social revolution, and in the United States, to those whose consciences did not allow them to take part in the Vietnam war.

We focus our attention here on this last group, and present the rationale for amnesty of the United States Catholic Conference as presented by Father J. Bryan Hehir before the House of Representatives.

"The manifestations of the need for reconciliation are nowhere more apparent than in the lives of those directly touched by the (Vietnam) war. The consequences of the war are diverse and call for a plurality of modes of reconciliation. On a prior occasion the Catholic bishops of the United States called attention to the needs of returning veterans, especially the wounded and the prisoners of war (Resolution on Imperatives of Peace, November 16, 1972) ... The reintegration of these returning veterans into the full life of the society

and the provision for their medical, social and economic needs is one dimension of reconciliation due to them because of the valor they have displayed and the sacrifices they have made.

"An equally important task of reconciliation... relates to those young men whose critical judgment of the Vietnam war led them to resist military service. This testimony in favor of amnesty is rooted in prior evaluations which the American Catholics bishops have made about these young people. ('Human Life in Our Day,' chapter 2, The Family of Nations, November, 1968)...

"It is our belief that in the present context of our country the granting of amnesty is a work of reconciliation. It is important to specify what we mean by amnesty: to grant amnesty requires both an understanding of its precise meaning and a recognition of how it relates to reconciliation.

"Amnesty does not mean that society or the nation 'forgives' a person for his unlawful acts. Rather, amnesty is a healing act of deliberate and selective 'forgetting,' used in situations where the nation both admits its own need for reconciliation and recognizes that need for healing of injustices suffered by the individuals in question. To grant amnesty, then, brings about healing and reconciliation to some divided members of society and reconciliation of these matters with society as a whole. The government's grant of amnesty becomes the law's own way of undoing what the law itself has done.

"Who should be granted amnesty? Three broad categories of cases become evident. First, those young men who were subject to the draft but whose informed conscience led them to oppose participation in the Vietnam war, even though they could not say in conscience that they were

opposed to all use of military force. These selective conscientious objectors are now serving prison terms.

"Secondly, we also recognize that an additional group of young men are in a somewhat similar position, that is, men in military service, who for reasons of the consciences were compelled to refuse to serve in the war and who are imprisoned or given less than honorable discharges.

"Thirdly, there is the group of young men who have left the country or who have remained in the country as fugitives from the law."

To summarize then, the following points must be kept in mind regarding amnesty for those who refused to take part in the Vietnam war:

1. Amnesty must be seen as an act of reconciliation, an act whereby society is able to grant full acceptance to those who responded to the voice of conscience even though their personal conscientious decision was not in conformity with prevailing law.

2. Amnesty is not an affirmation that the individual was right and society was wrong. It is an affirmation that society's best intuitions are well served by setting aside any further debate on the justification for the individual's action, and by re-integrating the individual into society.

3. Amnesty involves some risk. There is of course the possibility that some who acted from base or selfish motives will also benefit from amnesty. The justification for this risk is that some type of amnesty will heal serious wounds within society. It is hoped that even those who originally acted from improper motives will rise above their own smallness. Yet, some may not. Even in this latter case, it is more productive for peace and justice to reconcile the vast majority at the risk of benefiting a very few who remain alienated or hostile.

GUN CONTROL

"The tragic statistics describing the number of abortions in our country mount so quickly that we barely realize the effect this has on our national conscience. We are becoming a nation that exhibits little concern for life and the rights of the defenseless ...

"The concern of the Pro-Life Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops is not only for the defenseless unborn. It is a concern for human life wherever it is under attack or threatened.

"As Archbishop of Chicago, I call upon legislators to re-investigate the possibility — and indeed, the necessity — of more stringent gun controls ...

"Vigorous public support is needed to establish realistic gun controls. To the fearful questions asked after each tragic murder: 'Are they ever going to outlaw guns?' we need to answer 'Yes,' and we need to do it now.

"Write to your Congressman, urging that stringent firearms controls might become a federal priority. Speak out for life."

John Cardinal Cody
Archbishop of Chicago

This statement was prompted by the death of two young patrolmen in Chicago — part of a long series of senseless shootings throughout the nation. The shootings took place at about the same time that Cardinal Cody, along with Cardinals Krol, Manning and Medeiros, testified before the U.S. Senate on the need for legal restrictions on the sale and possession of firearms, particularly handguns.

Death by the gun is not a rare occurrence in our society, and freedom to possess and use firearms must be weighed against the proliferation of such weapons, and in the words of Cardinal Cody, "must give way to natural rights of all people to safety and public

protection from those who misuse such weapons."

Most citizens are unaccustomed to firearms, and generally underestimate the magnitude of the problem. Unfortunately, for many, it only becomes real when one is staring into the barrel of a gun held by a hostile attacker. Let us look at some of the statistics on guns in the United States.

1. It is estimated that there are more than 170 million guns in America — more than triple the number of families. Forty million of these are handguns.

2. Per capita ownership of handguns in the United States is the highest in the world. There are 135 handguns per 1,000 people, or four handguns for every 10 households.

3. Law enforcement officials claim that the majority of guns used for criminal purposes are illegally possessed, but almost all were at one time legally manufactured and sold. In Boston in 1972, only one of 43 handgun murders was alleged to have been committed by a legally registered owner.

4. The FBI estimates that almost two out of three armed robberies are committed with guns, and local law enforcement authorities confirm that the handgun is the most commonly used robbery weapon.

5. From 1966 through 1972, 621 policemen were killed in the United States. Ninety-five per cent were killed with firearms, and seven out of ten were killed with handguns.

6. In 1971, the last year for which FBI figures are available, almost 9,000 Americans were murdered with handguns — more than with all other types of weapons combined.

7. According to the National Safety Council, accidents with firearms are the fifth most common cause of accidental deaths in the United States.

In spite of the frightening statistics and the growing realization that serious restrictions on firearms is an urgent necessity, the U.S. Congress has been unable to pass effective gun control legislation. And the current law, dating to 1968, has not been effective in curtailing the sale and use of firearms for criminal purposes.

A strict gun control law, however, would not impede the hunter or sportsman, although it might require registration of firearms intended for such purposes. Nor would a strict gun law prohibit persons from owning guns.

The continued manufacture and sale of firearms is a serious threat to law and order, and it makes it easy for the criminal or the emotionally unstable person to seriously harm others. Unfortunately, it also leads people to settle minor disagreements by resorting to armed violence.

In light of these many factors, new gun control legislation is needed that will:

- Require the registration of all firearms;
- Require licensing of all firearm owners;
- Require special licenses for handguns;
- Ban the manufacture, importation and sale of the Saturday Night Special — the cheap, small and unsafe handgun that cannot be used for sporting purposes;
- Require stricter safeguards to prevent gun thefts from manufacturers, stores and warehouses, including government storage facilities.

These are but the basic elements of a gun control law, and more specific details will undoubtedly be covered in a good bill. However, each of us must understand the seriousness of the problem and the moral imperative for stricter control of firearms. We must also realize that gun control will only be achieved when each of us makes the effort to persuade our elected officials that the good — and safety — of all requires the limitation of the rights of a few.