

By FR. ROBERT BYRNE

The title of this section of the pastoral letter reflects the tension between the vision of God's kingdom of peace and justice and its concrete realization in history — a tension faced by all Christians. The Christian vision of the reign of God contains a presumption against the horror and perversity of war. At the same time, the Christian lives in a world where self-defense against aggression is both an obligation and a right for individuals and nations.

Looking at the world as it is, not simply as we would want it to be, the bishops address the principle of legitimate self-defense. The Christian cannot be indifferent in the face of unjust aggression which threatens the good of humanity. The pastoral cites the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council and statements of Pope Pius XII and Pope John Paul II which clearly support the right and duty of individuals and nations to defend against unjust aggression. However, given this obligation of defense, individuals and governments must choose means of defense which are morally justified.

The bishops stress this distinction between the right of defense and the means of defense because there has been much misunderstanding about those who resist bearing arms and those who bear them. There should be no misunderstanding concerning the obligation to defend the welfare of peoples — the Christian cannot remain indifferent or apathetic — but there are disagreements about how these goods may be defended most effectively. Some individuals believe strongly in conscience that they are best defending true peace by refusing to bear arms or by engaging in "active non-violence." Others have responded sincerely by bearing arms in military service. Catholic teaching, according to the pastoral, sees these as complementary responses in the sense that both seek to serve the common good. The basic difference between them is the individual's perception of how the common good is effectively defended.

While these complementary options are open for individuals, the bishops recognize that the options for governments may be more limited. A government must defend its people when threatened by armed, unjust aggression, even by armed force as a last resort. The Second Vatican Council had been very careful to note this fundamental right of defense. The need, right and duty to maintain even now, an appropriate armed defense while exploring non-violent methods of defense as a possibility for the future, reflects the tension for the Christian living in this world.

The bishops maintain that governments must also raise the crucial question of appropriate means for defense. They do not suggest that armed force is the only defense against unjust aggression, regardless of circumstances. They strongly encourage serious and continuing study and efforts to develop programmed methods for both individuals and nations to defend against unjust aggression without using violence.

clear weapons. These statements reflect not only the concerns of the hierarchy, but also the voices of our people, who have increasingly expressed to us their alarm over the threat of war. In this letter we wish to continue and develop the teaching on peace and war which we have previously made and which reflects both the teaching of the universal church and the insights and experience of the Catholic community of the United States.

It is significant that explicit treatment of war and peace is reserved for the final chapter of the pastoral constitution. Only after exploring the nature and destiny of the human person does the council take up the nature of peace, which it sees not as an end in itself, but as an *indispensable condition* for the task "of constructing for all men everywhere a world more genuinely human." (19) An understanding of this task is crucial to understanding the church's view of the moral choices open to us as Christians.

## C. Moral Choices for the Kingdom

In one of its most frequently quoted passages, the pastoral constitution declares that it is necessary "to undertake a completely fresh reappraisal of war." (20) The council's teaching situates this call for a "fresh reappraisal" within the context of a broad analysis of the dignity of the human person and the state of the world today. If we lose sight of this broader discussion we cannot grasp the council's wisdom. For the issue of war and peace confronts everyone with a basic question: What contributes to, and what impedes a more genuinely human world? If we are to evaluate war with an entirely new attitude, we must be serious about approaching the human person with an entirely new attitude. The obligation for all of humanity to work toward universal respect for human rights and human dignity is a fundamental imperative of the social, economic and political order.

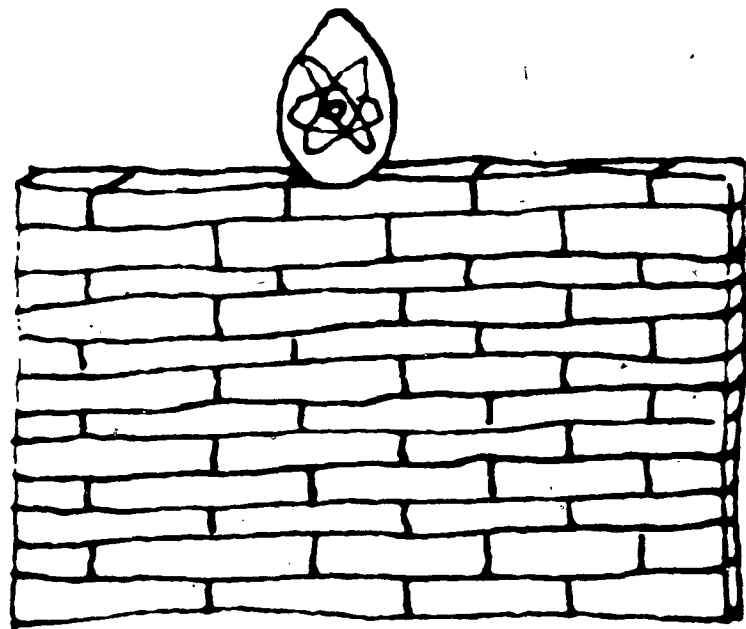
It is clear, then, that to evaluate war with a new attitude, we must go far beyond an examination of weapons systems or military strategies. We must probe the meaning of the moral choices which are ours as Christians. In accord with the vision of Vatican II, we need to be sensitive to both the danger of war and the conditions of true freedom within which moral choices can be made. (21) Peace is the setting in which moral choice can be most effectively exercised. How can we move toward that peace which is indispensable for true human freedom? How do we define such peace?

### 1. The Nature of Peace

The Catholic tradition has always understood the meaning of peace in positive terms. Peace is both a gift of God and a human work. It must be constructed on the basis of central human values: truth, justice, freedom and love. The pastoral constitution states the traditional conception of peace:

"Peace is not merely the absence of war. Nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies. Nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called 'an enterprise of justice' (Is. 32:7). Peace results from that harmony built into human society by its divine founder and actualized by men as they thirst after ever greater justice." (22)

Pope John Paul II has enhanced this positive conception of peace by relating it with new philosophical depth to the church's teaching on human dignity and human rights. The



Philip Burke "War Heads"

relationship was articulated in his 1979 Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations and also in his World Day of Peace Message of 1982:

"Unconditional and effective respect for each one's unscriptable and inalienable rights is the necessary condition in order that peace may reign in a society. *Vis-a-vis* these basic rights, all others are in a way derivatory and secondary. In a society in which these rights are not protected, the very idea of universality is dead as soon as a small group of individuals set up for their own exclusive advantage a principle of discrimination whereby the rights and even the lives of others are made dependent on the whim of the stronger." (23)

As we have already noted, however, the protection of human rights and the preservation of peace are tasks to be accomplished in a world marked by sin and conflict of various kinds. The church's teaching on war and peace establishes a strong presumption against war which is binding on all; it then examines when this presumption may be overridden, precisely in the name of preserving the kind of peace which protects human dignity and human rights.

### 2. The Presumption Against War and the Principle of Legitimate Self-Defense

Under the rubric, "curbing the savagery of war," the council contemplates the "melancholy state of humanity." It looks at this world as it is, not simply as we would want it to be. The view is stark: ferocious new means of warfare threatening savagery surpassing that of the past, deceit, subversion, terrorism, genocide. This last crime in particular is vehemently condemned as horrendous, but all activities which deliberately conflict with the all-embracing principles of universal natural law, which is permanently binding, are criminal, as are all orders commanding such action. Supreme commendation is due the courage of those who openly and fearlessly resist those who issue such commands. All individuals, especially government officials and experts, are bound to honor and improve upon agreements which are "aimed at making military activity and its consequences less inhuman" and which "better and more workably lead to restraining the frightfulness of war." (24)

This remains a realistic appraisal of the world today. Later in this section the council calls for us "to strain every muscle as we work for the time when all war can be completely outlawed by international consent." We are told, however, that this goal requires the establishment of some universally recognized public authority with effective power "to safeguard, on the behalf of all, security, regard for justice and respect for rights." (25) *But what of the present?* The council is exceedingly clear, as are the popes:

"Certainly war has not been rooted out of human affairs. As long as the danger of war remains and there is no competent and sufficiently powerful authority at the international level, governments cannot be denied the right to legitimate defense once every means of peaceful settlement has been exhausted. Therefore, government authorities and others who share public responsibility have the duty to protect the welfare of the people entrusted to their care and to conduct such grave matters soberly.

"But it is one thing to undertake military action for the just defense of the people, and something else again to seek the subjugation of other nations. Nor does the possession of war potential make every military or political use of it lawful. Neither does the mere fact that war has unhappily begun mean that all is fair between the warring parties." (26)

The Christian has no choice but to defend peace, properly understood, against aggression. This is an inalienable obligation. It is the *how* of defending peace which offers moral options. We stress this principle again because we observe so much misunderstanding about both those who resist bearing arms and those who bear them. Great numbers from both traditions provide examples of exceptional courage, examples the world continues to need.

Of the millions of men and women who have served with integrity in the armed forces, many have laid down their lives. Many others serve today throughout the world in the difficult and demanding task of helping to preserve that "peace of a sort" of which the council speaks.

We see many deeply sincere individuals who, far from being indifferent or apathetic to world evils, believe strongly in conscience that they are best defending true peace by refusing to bear arms. In some cases they are motivated by their understanding of the Gospel and the life and death of Jesus as forbidding all violence. In others, their motivation is simply to give personal example of Christian forbearance as a positive, constructive approach toward loving reconciliation with enemies.

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