

Study guide

This study guide is intended to assist Catholics as citizens of the United States to identify the major themes of the pastoral letter and to reflect upon their significance.

The guide is keyed to each section of the letter, which includes an introduction, four major sections (with subheadings), and a conclusion. The guide introduces each section with a brief description of its content and several questions to stimulate reflection upon the text. It is intended to be used with the text of the pastoral, and not as a substitute. The guide can be used for personal study or group discussion of the pastoral letter.

Introduction

Fear of nuclear war is real and growing. The bishops, as the teachers of the church, express their obligation to call their community of faith to conscious moral choices about the possession and use of nuclear arms.

1. Do you agree with the statement that as bishops, who minister in a superpower, they have a special responsibility to call the Catholic community to shape a "conscious choice" in response to the threat posed by nuclear weapons to the future of creation?

2. What role has the church traditionally attributed to bishops? How does it give them the authority to produce pastoral letters on current moral issues?

I. Peace in the modern world: Religious perspectives and principles

Catholic social teaching is a mix of scriptural, theological and philosophical elements which has evolved into a unified moral perspective on social, political and economic affairs. The bishops recognize that not all of their statements in this pastoral letter have the same moral authority. Their applications of universal, binding principles to specific situations (judgments) are not binding conscience. However they are to be given serious consideration in the formation of conscience. In bringing the light of the Gospel to bear on the signs of the times, the bishops also intend to contribute to the national public policy debate on war and peace. The bishops call for honest discussion of this letter in an atmosphere of charity.

1. What other social issues do you remember the bishops addressing in the past?

2. How has Catholic social teaching come to be? What is its purpose? Can it add anything important to the public debate of social issues? What role do you have in the development of this theology on war and peace?

3. Can Catholic social teaching serve as a guide in your personal decision-making?

4. How can Catholics of vastly differing views discuss the nuclear arms race with civility and charity?

A. Peace and kingdom

In the scriptures, peace has many dimensions. All of them reflect the achievement of union with God. Peace is found in fidelity to covenant between God and God's people, characterized by justice and mercy. Jesus rooted peace in love, which was incarnated in His life and teaching.

1. What is the connection which the text makes between peace and justice? Does this reflect your understanding of human history?

2. The scriptures are full of images of war and violence. How do they relate to its message of peace?

3. If the peace of God is a peace which the world cannot give, in what sense do we work for peace?

4. How many ways of understanding peace can you identify from this section?

B. Kingdom and history

The reign of the kingdom of God, a kingdom of peace and justice, has begun now, in our time. Christians live in a time of tension between the vision of that kingdom of peace and justice and its realization in life today. This pilgrim existence faces people of good will with moral options which may differ from each other.

1. How does the debate over the Christian response to the arms race reflect the pilgrim existence described in the draft?

2. Can you think of other important contemporary issues over which Christians disagree in good faith?

C. The moral issues for the kingdom

Two legitimate moral responses to unjust aggression exist for individual Christians: 1) participation in the common defense under certain circumstances (just-war criteria); 2) non-violent resistance or opposition to military service. Both are based on a pessimistic assessment of violence as a means of achieving peace. The conditions of conduct of a just war are enumerated and explained. Questions about their relevance to modern warfare are raised and discussed.

1. The pastoral letter asserts the two traditions "support and complement one another"? Do you agree with this?

2. When, in your judgment, has our nation fulfilled or violated the conditions for engaging in a just war? Evaluate a conflict in our history according to the seven points outlined.

3. What is your personal reaction to this recognition of two possible Christian responses to war?

II. War and peace in the modern world: Problems and principles

The age of nuclear arms and the prospect of their use raises profound questions about the moral traditions of the church. The power of nuclear arms threatens the created order and the future existence of the human race: "the meaning of sin in its most graphic dimension."

The nuclear age challenges the church to examine its moral tradition in relation to the unique dangers of nuclear warfare.

• Do you think that nuclear war is essentially different from conventional warfare? Why or why not?

A. The new movement

The popes have taken strong exception to past and prospective use of nuclear arms, as well as criticizing the arms race. A body of knowledge is being assembled and broadly discussed, which indicates the disastrous aftermath of any nuclear exchange. Yet, we are caught in previously developed systems of nuclear deterrence in a world of independent nations. The political dilemma which we face strains our capacity for moral reasoning and action. Yet peoples' concerns about the arms race are growing.

1. What is the moral task outlined in the letter? Is it possible? Why or why not?

2. Do you think that the impact of the arms race on our economy, psychological health, and social order is as serious as the bishops claim? Or is this simply the price of national security?

3. Do you agree with the statement: "our arguments in this pastoral must be detailed and nuanced..."? Or should a simple "no," to the possession and use of nuclear arms be the direction of the statement?

B. Religious leadership in the public debate

Pope John Paul II has called for a peace constituency to make possible public policies which limit the actions of government in the development and use of nuclear arms. The bishops understand their letter contributes toward the building of that constituency. The bishops address four issues of deterrence in principles and policy: 1) use of nuclear weapons; 2) the policy of deterrence in principle and practice; 3) reduction of the danger of war; 4) long-term measures of policy and diplomacy.

We live in a pluralistic society. Some understand the exercise of leadership by bishops, on public policy issues, to transgress our constitutional separation of church and state.

• How do you understand church and state separation? Does this document endanger that arrangement? What are the limits of religion in public policy debates?

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