

The Challenge of Peace: Moral Judgments on Nuclear Deterrence

Fourth in a series
By Jim Lackey

Washington (NC) — Of all the topics addressed in the U.S. bishops' new pastoral letter on war and peace the most complex is nuclear deterrence — the possession and threatened retaliatory use of nuclear weapons.

Deterrence also gets the most detailed treatment in the pastoral, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response."

That the bishops would spend more time on deterrence than on any other issue is no surprise, considering the manner in which the Second Vatican Council left the question unresolved and the extensive debate in the Church in recent years on the issue.

In 1981, before the committee he headed began its massive drafting project, the then-Archbishop Joseph L. Bernardin of Cincinnati (now cardinal in Chicago) noted that Vatican II clearly had condemned the use of weapons of mass destruction. But the "unfinished agenda" of the council, he said, was a moral judgment on the mere possession of nuclear weapons for deterrence purposes.

Neither did Pope John Paul II settle the complexities of the issue in his now-famous judgment seven months later — as the first draft of the pastoral was circulating — that deterrence "may still be judged morally acceptable" if based on balance and used as a step toward progressive disarmament. The papal judgment, while leading the bishops in their pastoral to a "strictly conditioned moral acceptance of nuclear deterrence," still left them with the task of analyzing current deterrence policies and making recommendations for the future.

Included in those recommendations is the bishops' call for a "halt" rather than a "curb" in new nuclear weapons systems. The halt vs. curb debate, though only a difference of degree, received the most media attention during the two-day meeting in Chicago at which the bishops approved the pastoral.

In evaluating the concept of deterrence the bishops face at least two paradoxes. For one, in the section immediately preceding deterrence the bishops have ruled out virtually all uses of nuclear weapons, yet they arrive in the deterrence section at a strictly conditioned approval of possession of nuclear weapons even though the threat to use them is elemental to deterrence itself.

A second paradox in the evaluation of deterrence is that while targeting civilian populations for direct attack is immoral, targeting strategic outposts instead can make deterrence more unstable because each side will fear losing its

retaliatory abilities if fired upon first.

The bishops develop their strictly conditioned acceptance of deterrence by combining Pope John Paul's evaluation of deterrence with "concrete elements" of current nuclear deterrence policy. Those elements raise two issues of particular concern to the bishops: the targeting doctrine employed by the United States in its policy of nuclear deterrence, and the relationship of deterrence doctrine to war-fighting strategies.

Targeting doctrine is important to the moral assessment of nuclear deterrence, the bishops say, because it helps determine what would happen if nuclear weapons were ever used. Targeting civilian population centers, for instance, clearly would be immoral because of the principle of non-combatant immunity.

On that issue Reagan administration officials told the bishops during preparation of the pastoral that U.S. strategic policy does not target the Soviet civilian population as such.

But the enunciation of such a policy does not complete the analysis, the pastoral indicates, because an attack on a military target can result in "indirect" but massive civilian casualties violating the moral criterion of proportionality. It also creates the paradox of a more unstable deterrence relationship because of the fear by each side that they may lose their defensive capabilities unless they fire first.

"A narrow adherence exclusively to the principle of non-combatant immunity as a criterion for policy is an inadequate moral posture for it ignores some evil and unacceptable consequences," the bishops determine.

The other issue — the relationship of deterrence doctrine to war-fighting strategies — is also a major concern of the bishops because, while a war-fighting capability enhances the credibility of the deterrent, it also may convey the notion that nuclear war can be fought within precise limits.

"We have already expressed our severe doubts about such a concept," the bishops note.

"These considerations of concrete elements of nuclear deterrence policy, made in light of John Paul II's evaluation, but applying it through our own prudential judgments, lead us to a strictly conditioned moral acceptance of nuclear deterrence. We cannot consider it adequate as a long-term basis for peace," the bishops say.

From there the pastoral leads into its series of interrelated evaluations and recommendations on deterrence policy, along with a series of strategic proposals which the bishops say they oppose.

In their evaluations the bishops judge that:

- Since nuclear deterrence exists only to prevent the use of nuclear weapons by others, planning for prolonged periods of repeated nuclear strikes is unacceptable. Such planning encourages the notion "that nuclear war can be engaged in with tolerable human and moral consequences."

- With deterrence as the only purpose for possessing nuclear weapons, sufficiency to deter is adequate and nuclear superiority must be rejected.

- Since nuclear deterrence is to be a step toward disarmament, proposed additions or changes in strategic systems or doctrines must be assessed in light of whether they make steps toward disarmament more or less likely.

The bishops recommend first, a halt in new nuclear weapons systems, then deep cuts in the arsenals of both superpowers, as well as a comprehensive test ban treaty, removal of nuclear weapons from areas likely to be overrun early in a war, and better controls to prevent inadvertent and unauthorized use.

They oppose:

- The addition of massive and highly accurate weapons that can render the other side's retaliatory forces useless. Such weapons — which the bishops indicate in a footnote could include the MX and Pershing II missiles — "may seem to be useful primarily in a first strike."

- Strategic planning which seeks a nuclear war-fighting capability beyond the need of simply deterring an enemy attack.

- Proposals which might blur the distinction between nuclear and conventional war, thus lowering the nuclear threshold.

In accepting even a strictly conditioned form of deterrence the bishops had to reject what they acknowledge to be the "many strong voices" within the Church "which challenge the strategy of deterrence as an adequate response to the arms race today." Some, the pastoral says, urged the bishops to condemn all aspects of nuclear deterrence, particularly because of the risk that deliberate or accidental detonation could lead to "something utterly disproportionate to any acceptable moral purpose."

But by condemning virtually all use of nuclear weapons, and by placing such strict conditions on the moral acceptability of nuclear deterrence, including real progress toward bilateral disarmament, the bishops have raised — but do not answer — a major question about whether any deterrence strategy can meet their moral guidelines.

NEXT: Specific steps to reduce the danger of war.

Father Bruce Ritter



BRIGHT, BRITTLE LAUGHTER

She came to us a year ago last April—she came, like many of our kids, at night because she was on the street and hungry. When we went to where she was, Grace was sitting in a corner, suspicious and fearful. She remained silent when I asked her the couple of questions we always ask: How old are you? Where are you from? Do you need a place to stay? Are you hungry? She nodded yes.

She let herself be led, reluctantly, upstairs to her new room—we gave her a shower, some clean clothes, and last, but not least, a warm meal.

She stayed a month, and to the delight of all of us, seemed to like it here. Grace grew with adolescent leaps and bounds: the start of a job, a high school equivalency program, the beginning of some love-giving and getting. She also fell back periodically: into her sadness, lying about where she got her money, her habit of bright, brittle laughter, wanting to go back to Joey who beat her up all the time. There were many confrontations, meetings, and conferences about Grace during that spring. What did she really want? What was the best thing for her? What should she do next?

One afternoon, I walked into the lounge and saw Grace lying rigidly on the couch cuddling her teddy bear. She said that she was leaving because no one cared about her except her teddy bear. She said these things smiling her ever-present, glass-hard smile, and when I grinned back at her (thinking she was into her usual playful pouting), Grace

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started to cry, and screamed: "Stop making fun of me. This is the only thing I care about. You don't care. Leave me alone. I'm leaving." She didn't. She stayed for another two weeks before, filled with a bitterness she could not understand and spewing curses, she walked out.

"She came at night because she was on the street—and hungry"

I see Grace from time to time. The most recent was last week on the street with a friend. She told me of her guy and the Fifth Avenue apartment where she was living; of another boyfriend with a motorcycle whom she was on her way to visit now. He's the one who wouldn't come to see her a few months back when she committed herself to a psychiatric hospital for depression. (It's better than overdosing, she said, like when I was 14 in New Jersey.) She seemed to want me to approve, knowing I wouldn't, yet wanting something—maybe the same things we gave her a year ago, whatever they were. And then her bright empty smile and the winking out of a little more hope in a face now older and just a little bit harder.

"We wanted her to change. She wouldn't, couldn't. Maybe just..."

I thought of Grace when writing this because she came to us for free, was able to stay because of the personal and financial sacrifices that others, like yourself, make. She left, to be free, when it started to cost her too much: we wanted her to change. She wouldn't, couldn't maybe. Maybe just didn't want to.

Growing up is the hardest thing any of us ever does. For the Graces of this world it's desperately hard. Judging from a merely human viewpoint, I guess Grace is not going to make it. I guess that's why the Lord said "Judge not." I'm overwhelmingly and relievedly glad to let Him do the judging.

Pray for Grace and all of our other kids. Pray for us. Help us if you can.

Here's my contribution to continue offering kids like Grace the chance to grow up. I've enclosed \$_____ please print:

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