

World & Nation

The peace pastoral after five years: Assessing the impact

By Jerry Filteau

Washington (NC) — May 3, 1983, Chicago: The Catholic bishops of the United States have just declared in a 160-page pastoral letter that they cannot imagine a morally acceptable use of nuclear weapons.

A policy of nuclear deterrence, they say, can be justified only if certain strict conditions are met. Among them:

- Policies must be aimed only at defensive sufficiency and balance, not superiority.
• Progressive disarmament and prevention of nuclear use are the only acceptable deterrence goals.

• Nuclear powers must avoid or remove themselves from any counter-population, first-use or limited-war-winning nuclear strategies.

Since the bishops approved "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response," what has the pastoral accomplished?

Two positive points in any five-year assessment must stand out:

• The pastoral generated widespread discussion of the moral dimensions of nuclear deterrence and U.S. defense policy. Morality — once outside or barely on the fringes of the nation's nuclear policy, strategy and technology debates — has come to be treated as an important and at times central element in those debates.

• The pastoral is now a basic resource in discussions on nuclear morality in the public, religious and academic spheres. It has become a standard reference in writings on arms control, security and international affairs as well as in works on ethics and moral theology. It is taught and debated in everything from parish and diocesan workshops to graduate courses in international affairs institutes of major universities. It is required reading for some courses at the Defense Department's National War College.

On the negative side, it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern any direct impact of the pastoral on U.S. or Soviet nuclear policies and strategies.

• In a just-released analysis of nuclear deterrence, another committee of U.S. bishops has found that since the pastoral was issued, both sides have deployed "weapons which, in both number and kind, run contrary to the conditions of 'The Challenge of Peace.'"

• Other crucial elements in what the bishops viewed as a comprehensive program to reduce world tensions and create a more just and peaceful political order remain virtually untouched.

Despite the pastoral's advice, for example, regional conflicts continue to be transformed into testing grounds for U.S. and Soviet influence. Global arms trading and spending on conventional weaponry have grown instead of decreasing. Instead of progress toward nuclear non-proliferation, the number of nations attaining or nearing nuclear capability has grown. The bishops' call for a comprehensive test ban treaty has been ignored.

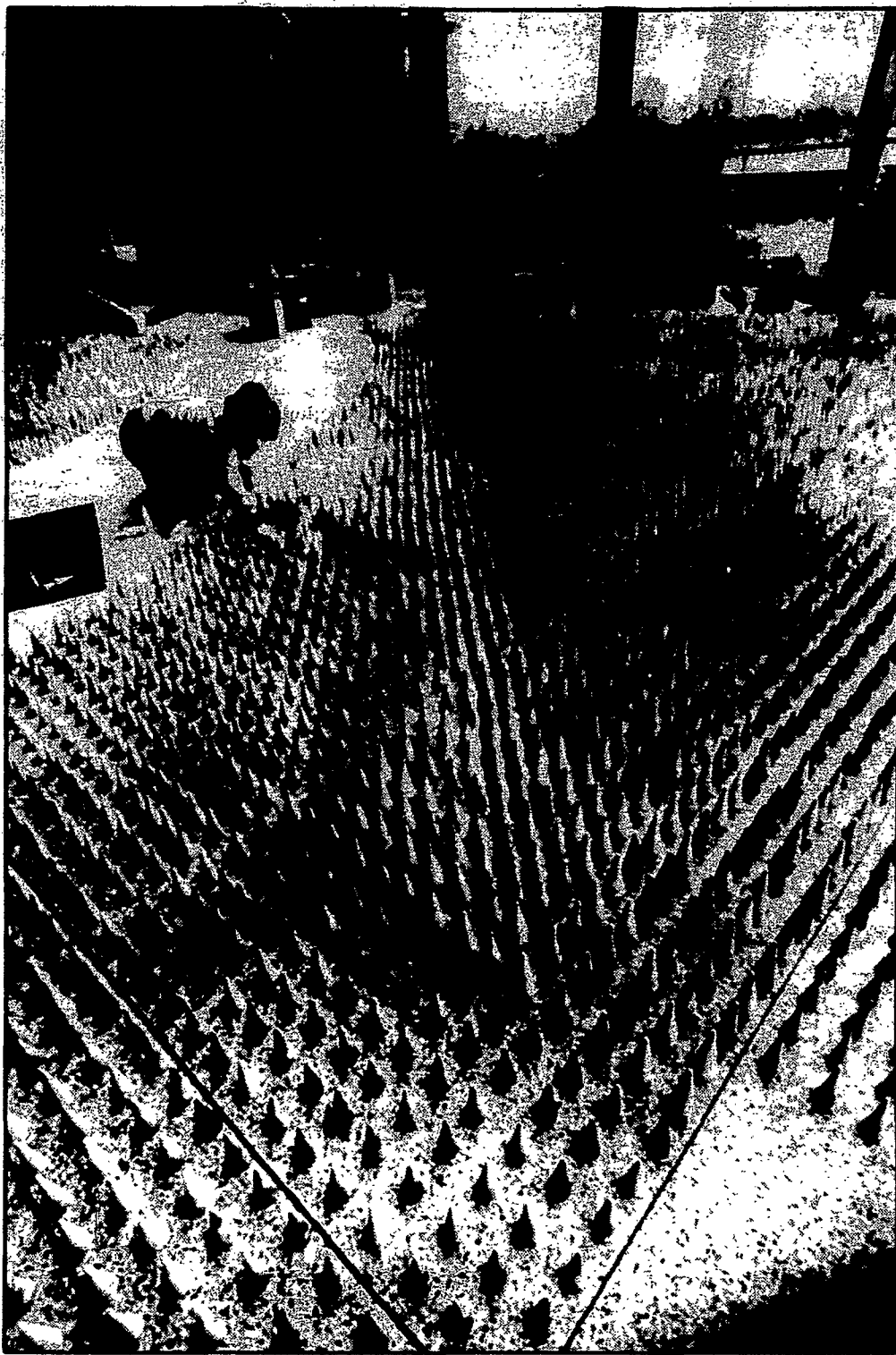
Instead of strengthened international instruments to promote global development, justice and peace — which the pastoral called essential to the long-range construction of a more peaceful world — the 1980s have seen a substantial weakening of the influence of existing international institutions and resistance to the formation of any new ones.

But the peace pastoral was a far-ranging document inviting assessment on a variety of fronts beyond its specific impact on U.S. nuclear policy and policy debates, or on Catholic thinking and public opinion about those issues.

On the international Catholic scene, the U.S. bishops inspired the bishops of a number of European countries to issue companion reflections or pastoral statements on nuclear deterrence. Within a year, translations of the U.S. pastoral were published in all the major European languages.

Ecumenically, the Catholic pastoral was used by a number of other U.S. religious groups in developing their own statements on peace and the nuclear threat, and it has become a part of their ongoing reflections on those issues.

In the U.S. Catholic community, the open process of expert and grassroots consultation and public discussion that was used to develop the pastoral has become a model for the way the bishops approach pastoral teaching on other major issues confronting the U.S. Church and society. That approach was imitated in the bishops' 1986 pastoral on the economy and again in their still-unfinished pastoral on women's concerns and sexism.



Surrounded by small spikes of "weapons," Boston artist Barbara Donachy works to install an exhibit depicting the enormity of the nuclear arms arsenal.

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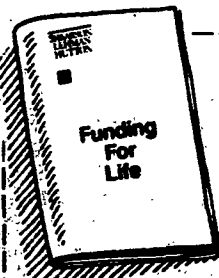
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