

Gulf crisis

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"What I believe is the weakness of both the letters is that they don't make conclusions as to whether or not there is just cause (to go to war with Iraq)," remarked Monsignor Shannon, current chaplain at the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse. Indeed, Pax Christi USA, a Catholic peace group, noted that such an issue was of the utmost importance to Catholics in the armed services who are facing the prospect of war.

"If the United States should launch an unprovoked attack against Iraq, what should Catholic soldiers do? This is a question that must be answered by each individual in their own hearts," Detroit's Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton wrote in a November Pax Christi USA statement signed by 28 other bishops.

Determining whether a war with Iraq would be "just" is rather difficult, given the complexities of the modern world, according to Michael A. Mahoney, pastoral assistant at St. Columba/St. Patrick in Caledonia and a retired U.S. Marine Corps major.

"In many respects, I think it's like, 'The beauty is in the eye of the beholder,'" Mahoney said of measuring any possible war by the just war theory — a theory he studied extensively at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I. "When you look at it from a philosophical viewpoint, it's very difficult to determine whether just-war criteria is met."

To illustrate the problem, Mahoney noted that Iraq's threatening presence in an area whose resources are arguably vital to the U.S. economy could be considered similar to the threatening presence of an enemy right across a nation's border.

Mahoney pointed out that the military often considers a nation's vital interests abroad to be as worthy of defense as is the nation itself. He said the question for many in the military would then be: "Are our vital interests at stake? ... The president and everyone down the line has to take care of that (question)."

"Down the line," several diocesan Catholics are already calling for open dialogue on where the church stands regarding the nation's preparation for a possible war. Last week, about half of the 40 parish pastoral assistants attending a day of

recollection at the Cenacle Center for Spiritual Renewal signed a letter calling on the diocese's Division of Social Ministry to mark a diocesan day of prayer and fasting for peace in the Persian Gulf.

The letter also urged that "our people ... be reminded of our tradition of conscientious objection in our faith," said Sister Mary E. Wintish, pastoral assistant at St. Patrick's in Savannah and St. John the Evangelist in Clyde.

In response to the letter, the social ministry division will ask pastors in the next week to set aside an upcoming weekend for prayer, fast and action on the Persian Gulf crisis, said M. Lourdes Perez-Albuerne, associate director of Justice and Peace for the diocesan Division of Social Ministry. Pastors will also receive a packet with materials giving guidance on political action parishes can take, she said.

When asked what stand the division will ask parishes to take on the crisis, Perez-Albuerne replied: "I think our stance is ... we need to exhaust all peaceful means to resolve it."

The pastoral assistants also wanted the social ministry office to establish a network to help young Catholics explore the various options — including conscientious objection — available to them if a draft were to be reinstated, Sister Wintish said.

If the United States goes to war, it almost undoubtedly would implement a draft, remarked U.S. Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga., during a Nov. 28 interview on ABC News' "Nightline."

Nunn, chairman of the U.S. Senate's Armed Services Committee, told "Nightline" host Ted Koppel that the military eventually would have to begin rotating troops stationed in the Persian Gulf back to their home bases. Currently, he said, the volunteer services do not have enough men and women to create a rotation pool that can sustain the huge U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia.

"If you're going to put 450,000 troops there and you were going to keep them for a year or 18 months and you were going to have some meaningful rotation policy ... then you'd have think seriously about a draft," Nunn said.

Nunn emphasized, however, that if the United States avoids actually going to war, it could maintain fewer troops in the region without initiating a draft.

Still, the possibility of a draft — and reports that a few reservists and military

regulars have refused to go to the Persian Gulf with their units — raises the issue of whether Catholics would be morally bound to fight in a war against Iraq.

"I think the leadership of the diocese needs to speak out more forcefully on this issue," Sister Wintish asserted, adding, "I think there are a lot of people yet who don't understand (their) options ..."

According to documents of the Second Vatican Council and statements the U.S. bishops have made during the last three decades, Catholics who are sincerely opposed to war have a right to conscientious objection. Such documents also assert that the government has an obligation to enable such conscientious objectors to serve their country in non-combat situations.

In 1967, during the Vietnam War, the U.S. bishops upheld the right of a citizen to be selectively objective — refusing, on conscientious grounds, to fight in a war that is unjust, while agreeing to fight in one he or she considers just.

The Faith and Resistance Community, a Catholic anti-abortion and anti-war group, has already made up its collective conscience on the justice of a potential war against Iraq.

On the group's behalf, Father Robert Werth, pastor of St. Bridget's in Rochester, recently penned a letter to Bishop Clark, asking him to advise Catholics on bringing the Persian Gulf issue "into the heart of our religious community, both to our national church leaders and to our local congregations."

"As Catholics, we desperately need the alternative Christian vision which alone will save us from our own destructive violence," the letter continued.

The peace group also asked the bishop to have two prayers incorporated into all

Masses within the diocese. One prayer was for "Christ-like love of our enemies," and the other was "for the historical victims of homicide by Christians." Group members cited Jews as examples of such victims.

Bishop Clark turned down the group's request for the addition of the two prayers, according to Father Paul J. Tomasso, secretary to the bishop. The prayers the group wanted were too "specific" and did not follow the church's guidelines for general intercessory prayers, he said.

"Their choice of words could confuse people in a misleading way," the bishop's secretary said, adding that Bishop Clark is "endorsing their desire to pray, but not the specific wording."

Father Tomasso said Bishop Clark suggested that his Aug. 27 letter calling for prayer and fasting for peace in the Middle East last August already provided suitable guidelines for intercessory prayers during Mass.

At a meeting of the Faith and Resistance Community on Saturday, Dec. 2, the group decided to ask the bishop to create a public forum for Catholics to debate the justice of a potential war against Iraq.

The group plans to create some type of ongoing "witness" for peace at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Rochester — where the bishop resides — and to march in an ecumenical demonstration against the United States' gulf action. The demonstration will take place on the afternoon of Dec. 16 in downtown Rochester.

Whatever happens in the Persian Gulf region, the recent reaction of prominent Catholics at both the national and local levels portends a possible division between Catholics who support the president's stand on Iraq and Catholics who oppose it — and expect their church to do the same.

Morality of war

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would ever admit that it was fighting an "unjust war?" As Thomas Merton has said: "God is always the first one to be enlisted in war." It has been a particularly American characteristic to believe that in war God is always on our side.

(2) The second condition is that war must be declared by legitimate authority. Events in recent American history have blurred the answer to the question: Where does legitimate authority to "declare" war lie?

(3) War must be a last resort. All non-violent means of negotiation must have been exhausted. The existence today of international means for such non-violent negotiations make it much more difficult to verify this condition and more inexcusable for a nation to attempt to go it alone in a situation of conflict.

(4) There must be reasonable hope for success. If a nation is almost certainly going to lose and thus be placed in a worse situation than before, it would not be justified in going to war.

(5) The principle of proportionality must be observed. There must be a proportion between the good one seeks to achieve and the evil one permits in order to achieve that good. If the evil out weighs the good, war is not justified.

(6) The means used in conducting the war must be just. Among other things this calls for the principle of discrimination. Military targets must be distinguished from

civilian population centers. The carpet bombing and fire bombing of cities that occurred during World War II and especially the dropping of the atomic bomb on both Hiroshima and Nagasaki could never meet the requirements of the principle of discrimination.

Upon careful reflection on these conditions and a close reading of the Sermon on the Mount, it seems clear to me that the theory of just war has lost its meaning and value. The way in which war will be conducted today and the highly sophisticated character of the weapons that will be used make it almost impossible to think that the conditions of the just war could ever be fulfilled.

In October of 1961 Thomas Merton wrote in the pages of *The Catholic Worker*:

There can be no question that unless war is abolished, the world will remain constantly in a state of madness and desperation in which, because of the immense destructive power of modern weapons, the danger of catastrophe will be imminent and probably at every moment everywhere. Unless we set ourselves immediately to this task, both as individuals and as religious groups, we tend by our passivity and fatalism to cooperate with the destructive forces that are leading us inexorably to war ...

An internationally recognized Merton scholar, Father Shannon is professor emeritus of religious studies at Nazareth College of Rochester.

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