

Bishops offer restrained statements on war

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Three weeks ago I commented on the U.S. Catholic bishops' apparent lack of "aggressive follow-up" to their November letters to the president and the secretary of state concerning the crisis in the Persian Gulf.

Both letters had called attention to the traditional moral criteria for a just war, and both concluded that the moral case for war against Iraq had not yet been made. They cited in particular the principles of proportionality and of last resort.

I noted in the column that the bishops seemed to have been "relatively quiet" during the historic debates in both houses of Congress on whether to continue with the sanctions or to authorize war.

Information not available to me at deadline reveals that the bishops had been in touch with the president and the Congress just before the outbreak of hostilities.

Archbishop John Roach of St. Paul-

Minneapolis, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Policy, sent a letter on Jan. 7 to each member of Congress. The prelate argued that "a resort to offensive military action in this situation could well violate traditional moral criteria, undermine domestic unity and global solidarity against Iraq and bring about an exceedingly dangerous, divisive and bloody war."

"We hope and pray," he added, that "our nation will continue to choose determined and united pressure over the dangerous human and moral consequences of war."

The U.S. Catholic Conference released the Roach letter on Jan. 11, the day before the final voting in the House and Senate on the two sets of competing resolutions regarding the gulf crisis: one urging that we stay the course with sanctions, and the other authorizing the president to go to war.

Nothing indicated, however, that the

bishops' conference was supportive of the Mitchell-Nunn and Hamilton-Gephardt resolutions, even though both resolutions shared the bishops' moral reservations about the war.

On Jan. 15, three days after the passage of the resolutions to authorize war and one day before the bombing of Iraq, Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk of Cincinnati, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, released and sent a statement to the White House renewing the bishops' call to "resist and reverse Iraq's brutal aggression by determined but peaceful means."

He noted that the failure of diplomatic efforts, the congressional votes to authorize war, and the passing of the Jan. 15 deadline set by the United Nations "do not relieve our nation and our leaders of the terrible responsibility of clearly meeting the moral tests to justify the resort to war."

Although acknowledging that "people of good will can disagree about the applica-



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tions of (the) principles" for a just war, Archbishop Pilarczyk noted that the bishops were "profoundly concerned about the moral dangers of war" and believed that "offensive force in this situation would likely violate the principles of last resort and proportionality."

"The presumption," he concluded, "is still for blockades not bombs, diplomacy not destruction, words not war."

Other bishops spoke out on their own, either to call their people to pray for peace or to express their concern about the moral legitimacy of going to war at this time and under these circumstances.

One of the strongest statements came from Chicago. "I am personally convinced," Cardinal Joseph Bernardin wrote in this archdiocesan newspaper, "that military action at this time would in fact violate the church's just war teaching."

At the conference level the bishops adopted a more restrained approach. Their letters and statements made no explicit reference to the resolutions under debate in Congress, and their moral concerns were carefully nuanced.

Going to war, they said, "could well violate" or "would likely violate" the moral criteria for a just war.

On the other hand, the leaders of 15 Protestant and Orthodox denominations threw their collective weight behind the congressional resolutions in favor of sanctions over war.

Not only did they issue a statement, but they also agreed to make personal telephone calls to members of Congress and several of them went to Washington on Jan. 11 to make a group appeal on behalf of the resolutions favoring sanctions over the authorization of war.

Did Catholic legislators feel any pressure from their own pastoral leaders to vote for sanctions over war? Was any pro-life representative or senator urged to be consistent (as in "consistent-ethic-of-life")?

Would the bishops have acted any differently had there been, instead of a resolution authorizing war, a resolution authorizing a radical liberalization of federal abortion laws?

I don't know the answers, but some Catholics troubled by the morality of this war may be wondering.

Concern for wealth can shift focus from heaven

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"Master, there is someone here to see you," John said to Jesus. Jesus turned and saw a young man who was dressed in fine clothes. As soon as the man spoke, Jesus could see that he had been well educated.

"Excuse me, teacher," he said, "there is something I'd like to ask you. I've heard you speaking about a new kingdom. What must I do to inherit a place there and receive the eternal life that you have promised your followers?"

"Do you know the commandments?" Jesus asked him.



"Of course, I have learned them and kept them from the days of my youth," he smiled. "You must not steal or cheat others. Do not commit adultery or murder. And I've given great honor to my parents, too."

"There is still something else," Jesus replied. "You are obviously a person with great wealth and material goods. Sell all that you have and give the money to the poor. Come and follow me. Then your treasure and reward will be in heaven."

Suddenly, the man's expression changed to one of disappointment. He was speechless. All he could manage to do was nod his head sadly and turn away.

It was John who spoke next. "Jesus, there are many wealthy people in the world. Are you saying that none of those who lead good lives will inherit eternal life?"

"There is nothing wrong with money or material possessions in themselves," Jesus said. "Rather the attitude of people toward them."

The rest of his apostles gathered around Jesus as he told them a story so that they would all understand.

"In a certain region, there lived a farmer. One year, he had a windfall of sorts. The weather was just right; his soil was good. Not only did his first crops grow in abundance, but a bumper crop was produced as well," Jesus said.

"This man had no wife or children," Jesus continued. "And he made it a point to not make too many friends. 'Friends will make demands of me,' he said. 'They will ask me to give them part of my goods. Better to be alone.'"

Jesus continued, "After the rich harvest, he thought, 'What will I do with all of my food? There's enough for me to live on for years to come. I can rest and have the good life!'"

"So he made elaborate plans to tear down all his old barns and have new larger ones built," Jesus said. "But that night, the rich farmer died. And all of his scheming came to nothing."

Jesus looked around at his apostles and said, "Do you understand now? That is what it will be like for those who worry about storing up things for themselves in this world. The world is a temporary thing. My father knows about all your needs. Always seek the kingdom first. The rest of these things will take care of themselves."

Scripture reference: Luke, Chapter 12:16-34; 19:18-30.

Meditation: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

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