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Exodus or Entrenchment: The Catholic Dilemma of Duty

by

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The Impugnement

"Blest too are the peacemakers; they shall be called sons of God."

Matthew 5:9

Today we must ask ourselves who are the peacemakers? The Second Vatican Council professed, "All those who enter the military service in loyalty to their country . . . are contributing to the maintenance of peace."¹ Have recent moral interpretations changed the character of military service? With the specter of nuclear confrontation becoming a more pressing danger Catholics in the military are being called upon for an examination of conscience. In July of 1981, the Reverend Francis X. Winters, S.J., published a treatise in *America* which enjoins resignation on the part of Catholics who are in the chain of command for the control of nuclear weapons.

Father Winters pronounced this judgment as the only resolution of the apparent dilemma of those who are bound on one hand to obey their superiors and on the other to moral teachings which hold threatening nuclear war to be indefensible. Closer examination, however, reveals that the moral issue of military service is *not* so clear-cut.

In the earliest days of the Catholic church moral teachings—on both contemporary and timeless issues—were provided to the faithful in pastoral letters called epistles. Today they form a portion of the New Testament. Pastoral letters are still issued by the bishops as moral guidance. If issued as *ex cathedra* statements by the Pope, they are considered infallible and binding. In May 1982, "after hearing testimony in closed session from Secretary Haig, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and the director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Eugene V. Rostow, a committee of five bishops . . . retired . . . to prepare the first draft of a new church statement on the morality of nuclear war."² With this level of interest in the issues, serious examination of the morality of *deterrence* and the continued involvement of Catholics in the execution of that policy must be pursued.

The oath of office for military personnel does bind them to obey lawful orders. Currently, the lawful orders provided to the military regarding nuclear weapons support the position that:

It is the purpose of our nuclear forces and strategy to prevent nuclear attack in all possible contexts and from all possible causes.³

Nothing in the policy contemplates that nuclear war can be a deliberate instrument for achieving our national security goals, because it cannot be. The premise, the objective, the core of our strategic doctrine remains unchanged—deterrence.⁴

Aspiring to prevent nuclear war is consistent with morality. Yet, if Father Winters is right, it would seem that the mere *potential* for the vagaries of international politics to subvert those aspirations is by itself sufficient to taint service to one's country. Apparently the teachings of Vatican II on military service are thought to be *passé*.

The Impasse

"The Catholic may not . . . merge his religious and his patriotic faith, or submerge one in the other."

John Courtney Murray, S.J.

Have things changed so drastically in the past two decades? Father Winters firmly believes so for he tells us:

Catholic officials in the U.S. Government who hold responsibility for our nuclear deterrent policy are now seemingly put in an unsupportable dilemma because they have, by oath of office, political or military, assumed a Constitutional obligation to execute and/or articulate, as required by political circumstances or official directives, our nuclear deterrent policy . . . Catholics . . . are now forbidden by conscience from meeting these constitutional responsibilities under pain of serious sin. Resignation of office is their only morally viable option.⁵

This more restrictive position is unquestionably within the purview of the church. Adopting this position would presumably require that the Pope had become convinced a nuclear exchange would probably be precipitated rather than be deterred by US policy. This would warrant discarding the rubrics of Saint Augustine's "Just War Theory" and the "Principle of Double Effect," *a priori*.*

The Principle of Double Effect is the theologian's solution to his "no win" situation—the moral dilemma. It judges the solution in terms of motivation. That is, choosing good and allowing that some evil may occur, as well, as the result of the actions required by the choice. From this flows, among other things, the Just War Theory.

The Just War Theory allows for participation in armed conflict by considering its violence tolerable, though not desirable, because the desired end is a greater good, the restoration of peace and the preservation of justice. This theory has been a strong influence in the Catholic conception of morality.

The church, in 1968, offered a pastoral statement which addressed the idea of conscientious objection to the Vietnam conflict by Catholics. This issue is of significant value to our current discussion⁶ because it marked the last time the church was confronted with individuals being on both sides of the morality of military

*The author is not applying these theories to nuclear weapon use but considers they are germane to the policy of deterrence and general military service.

service. In that instance the theologians did not reject Just War Theory. They found a way for both sides to be right by leaving the issue to the individual conscience. Specifically, the statement reads as follows:

As witness to a spirited tradition which accepts enlightened conscience, even when honestly mistaken, as the immediate arbiter of moral decisions, we can only feel reassured by this evidence of individual responsibility and the decline of uncritical conformism to patterns, some of which included strong moral elements to be sure, but also included political, social, cultural, and like controls not necessarily in conformity with the mind and heart of the church.⁶

It would seem an appropriate precedent for allowing the Catholic, after serious reflection, to decide his own conscience concerning which strategy will best avert nuclear war.

One must ask what the outcome would have been if twenty years ago our only Catholic President had rejected the threat to use our nuclear deterrent and then in October 1962 found that the Soviet Union had installed nuclear weapons in Cuba. Would we have been able to effect the removal of those weapons with the threat of solely conventional force or would we have been faced with a *fait accompli* and have remained vulnerable to attack without warning and the attendant opportunity for nuclear blackmail? Was Kennedy immoral? Have the past twenty years tamed the Soviets? Is Cuba less irascible now that her forces are involved globally as surrogates? "Not knowing *who* it is you are dealing with is neither good politics nor good morals."⁷

The "Principle of Double Effect" is obviously at the very heart of "Just War Theory" so its application to the issue of military service is not unprecedented. As alluded to above this principle is germane to the issue at hand which is not the morality of nuclear war but the wisdom of mandating the resignation of Catholics as a means of avoiding it. The issue then is one of responsible stewardship by the Catholic. Is his stewardship more usefully spent in the service of deterrence or in taking a stand for disarmament? Both options seem noble, moral, and necessary. Stewardship is clearly the moral issue of our day. Dag Hammarskjold articulated it well when he wrote:

In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.⁸

Must we consider that one of these roads leads to moral turpitude?

Father Winters' article levies a further requirement:

If (military Catholics) judge that the bishops are gravely mistaken . . . they have another serious moral obligation, namely, to initiate a dialogue to correct their official teaching on the morality of nuclear deterrence.⁹

While the moral purpose of the resignation mandate, to lower the probability of nuclear war, is unassailable; the methodology itself is flawed, perhaps catastrophically. The undesirable effects which could flow from this proscription, were the Pope to adopt it, would have such far reaching impact that they demand the cudgel be taken up and the dialogue be joined. Otherwise an environment will be fostered which would be akin to the situation described by Hammarskjold when he wrote:

The (zealot) shouted in the market place. No one stopped to answer him. Thus it was confirmed that his thesis was incontrovertible.¹⁰

This issue is too important for complacency—apathy is anathema.

The Import

“It is the President’s responsibility, while working ceaselessly for peace, to ensure that the safety of the American people cannot successfully be threatened by anyone.”

DoD Annual Report FY '83

The policy of deterrence is not an innovation of the nuclear age, or even of this century. It existed long before there were nuclear forces to deter with or against. Deterrence is the main reason nations have raised and maintained standing armies through the ages. The concept of preventing war by being too strong to be successfully attacked has been consistently employed throughout recorded history. The reality that the history of mankind is replete with warfare would appear to be an indictment of the concept. What must be recognized is that deterrence did not fail in and of itself; war began because the deterrent had become ineffective. That is, the aggressors had assessed that their attack could be successful—their objective *could* be achieved—the deterrent was no longer credible.

Today the awesome destructive power of nuclear weapons has ushered in a metamorphosis in traditional deterrence. It has assumed a binary nature: nuclear and conventional.

For years we were able to provide a credible deterrent with limited conventional forces by linking nuclear retaliation to unacceptable military operations by the Soviet Union. Our nuclear superiority provided that credibility. That same nuclear superiority greatly reduced the demand on us for conventional forces, and we allowed the latter to atrophy. Today the nuclear parity possessed by the Soviet Union requires that we disconnect the linkage. Reconstituting our conventionally-armed power is critical—and difficult. As Steven Canby remarks, “Only the United States is seriously interested in a *true* conventional capability. European NATO has only limited interest in conventional forces. Their concern . . . is in the degree of American commitment to use strategic nuclear weapons.”¹¹ With nuclear parity we must take a broader view of deterrence in our strategy.

The aspect of deterrence which frequently escapes us is that it is not an attempt to overwhelm the opposition. It is a maintenance of a delicate balance. There must be enough power to prevent an attack but not so much that it convinces the opponent he is about to be subjected to aggression, thereby driving him to preemptive action. So, a policy of deterrence does not tie us to an ever spiralling arms race. In fact as technology such as the MX, Trident (D-5), and Tomahawk missiles emerge, other armaments can be drawn down in number or we can agree not to deploy the new systems in return for commensurate arms limitations. The arms reduction negotiations which began this summer are testimony to this; balance must be maintained for deterrence to succeed.

As nuclear arms are reduced or controlled, the balance of conventional forces becomes ever more crucial. That balance is not assured. Admiral Hayward cautions us on this point:

. . . we have entered a period in which any reasonable estimate of the balance falls within the range of uncertainty. In other words, the situation today is so murky one

cannot, *with confidence*, state the United States possesses a margin of superiority. If we do, it is so cloudy and tenuous as to be unreliable—both as a deterrent, and as assurance of our ability to prevail at sea in a conflict with the Soviets.¹²

Parity brings us face to face with one more issue which superiority allowed us to postpone, the national will to use strategic nuclear weapons. The current predicament has been a long time in the making. Arleigh Burke put it well in a lecture delivered at the Naval War College in August 1965. He pointed out that, “. . . the strategies of any nation depend on—and are limited by—the resources available to it, and the national will and ability to use those resources.”¹³ This is a critical factor in the deterrence equation. While the United States maintained clear superiority, the Soviets could not *afford* to question our resolve. But nuclear parity combined with conventional imbalance might tempt them to test our will. This is especially true when vast destruction of “countervalue targets” is no longer acceptable to ourselves. In 1970 Frank Uhlig described the environment which persists today.

It was politically acceptable in 1945 to decimate the populations of Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki by fire and blast, but that political acceptance has since been withdrawn Bombing by design or accident anything that could be considered to be “civilian” ha(s) become unacceptable.¹⁴

The importance of conventional capabilities has never been greater—concomitantly, deficiencies have never been more dangerous.

The Impact

“Our most severe readiness problem is shortage of personnel”

DoD Annual Report FY '82

What does the role of conventional deterrence have to do with the issue of an unacceptable policy of nuclear deterrence? The recommended course of action, the resignation of Catholics, would debilitate our conventional deterrent capability. There is no clear dividing line between our nuclear and conventional forces. When the Catholics involved in the control of nuclear weapons leave, our conventional forces suffer a one for one loss because they are the same people. That loss is unacceptable. The nature of the duties associated with nuclear weapons demands that those billets be filled. “Tactical” nuclear weapons are with all of our conventional combat arms. Navy ballistic missile submarines and Strategic Air Command B-52s possess a concurrent conventional utility. Air Force silos cannot accept manning shortages—other personnel would necessarily be reassigned, but the issue is more significant than a personnel shuffle. When the services lose a man at the end of an enlistment (the first opportunity to “resign” for enlisted personnel short of conscientious objection) that man is, for a significant time, irreplaceable. This is because he takes with him training and experience commensurate with his tenure which will take an equivalent period of time to restore. In peacetime these highly trained personnel perform duties essential to the maintenance and security of our nuclear arsenal. Is it moral to remove that expertise from our military? Moreover, is it safe?

Some would presume that clerics could do little to influence a bureaucracy built on the principle of separation of church and state. The Polish state is surely more

separate from the church than our own but it does not underestimate episcopal potency.

"The United States is 66 percent Protestant, 26 percent Catholic, and 3 percent Jewish."¹⁵ Assuming a normal demographic distribution into the military, the Catholic percentage of the armed forces is not insignificant. In a military establishment replete with manning problems, the impingement of moral sanctions will only exacerbate the deficiencies enumerated by Admiral Hayward in his report for fiscal year 1982.

. . . in the critical area of personnel . . . fleet-wide readiness degradations are due almost entirely to our serious and continuing shortages of mid-grade officers and petty officers.¹⁶

The efficacy of the policy, however, will be more pervasive than military retention. The resignation mandate portends a collateral abatement in accessions. It is inane to assume the church can proscribe military service for those on active duty now and simultaneously condone the enlistment of others. The available manpower pool will be reduced concurrent with the exodus of key personnel, making the damage irreparable.

In the broader view, the Catholic church is not merely an American institution. Catholic means universal. The bastion of our strategic alliances is built on the geography once called the Holy Roman Empire. Great Britain and France have major nuclear arsenals of their own. Other European nations are becoming increasingly involved in the control of forward based US systems. Those meager conventional forces in Europe, US and Allied, promise to include some Catholics. This will *not* be an issue for the Soviets. What does this bode for conventional balance?

Before concluding our discussion of impact, to be thorough, we must consider ecumenism and what it augurs. The old saw about the group of new arrivals in heaven being cautioned while receiving an orientation tour on judgment day to remain silent while passing the home of the Catholics "because they think they're the only ones up here" is pertinent. The Catholics do not have a monopoly on morality. If the Pope is persuaded to issue the resignation edict each major religion will be in receipt of a *de facto* fiat to review the question and assume a position. They will not have the opportunity to remain silent.

Are these results representative of the end the means were intended to elicit? "Consequences and results, though not all, are part of the reality that we judge when we make a moral judgment. Not to assess them and be sensitive to them is ethically irresponsible."¹⁷

The Impotence

"We know only too well that war comes not when the forces of freedom are strong, but when they are weak. It is then that tyrants are tempted."

Ronald Reagan (16 July 1980)

Father Winters' enunciation of his perception of the current moral teaching of the church forecasts far reaching consequences. While none can claim precognition, the potential exists for the emasculation of our conventional forces.

Soviet adventurism in Afghanistan may foreshadow a burgeoning willingness to employ military force to ensure the success of the socialist revolution. Poland, Iraq, Lebanon, and Argentina offer geography for speculative venture. Will a weakened conventional force present the question to the Politburo, "Can the West successfully challenge this initiative?" Do we dare invite additional adventurism?

The imbroglio of ideology could spill over into military action. A weakened conventional force confronted by a numerically superior, militarily potent adversary might surrender to prevent an international Dunkirk—or it might choose to defend its territory, principles, and freedom with its only remaining alternative, "tactical" nuclear weapons. In *The Bedford Incident* Mark Rascovich dramatically portrayed the moment of decision just before the accidental attack.

He's more desperate than smart at this point Captain You are going to force him to fight. This is a careful responsible commander you're dealing with, but he has reached his limits. Let him surface and let him go or he is going to fight.¹⁸

Father Winters advocates continuing the use of military force for deterrence but only through conventional means. An examination of our situation, however, reveals that a Catholic exodus would probably not only debilitate the strength of our nuclear forces but would, more significantly, reduce the readiness of our conventional forces so drastically that we would be relegated to a position from which we could only hope to defend ourselves by using nuclear weapons. Instead of leading us away from Armageddon the policy of mass resignation on moral grounds and the concomitant impact of this tenet on accessions would press us ever closer to the precipice and could prove our catafalque.

Catholic resignations are not the *deus ex machina* to forestall our *Dies Irae*.^{*} The epistle may prove our epitaph.

*The day of wrath, judgment day, a hymn in the requiem mass.

NOTES

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2. "Nuclear Fission: Catholic Church is Divided Over Atomic Weapons," *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 June 1982, pp. 20:1-2.
3. U.S. Dept. of Defense, *Annual Report to the Congress, Fiscal Year 1983* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1982), pp. 1-19.
4. U.S. Dept. of Defense, *Annual Report to the Congress, Fiscal Year 1982* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1981), p. 43.
5. Reverend Francis X. Winters, S.J., "The Bow or the Cloud? American Bishops Challenge the Arms Race," *America*, 25 July 1981, p. 29.
6. Statement of the American hierarchy, quoted in John Cogley, *Catholic America* (New York: Dial Press, 1973), p. 273.
7. Daniel C. Maguire, *The Moral Choice* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978), p. 148.
8. Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (New York: Knopf, 1967), p. 122.
9. Winters, p. 29.
10. Hammarskjöld, p. 161.
11. Steven L. Canby, "NATO Defense: The Problem is Not More Money," Robert Harkavy and Edward A. Kolodziej, eds., *American Security Policy and Policy-Making* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1980), p. 87.
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13. Arleigh A. Burke, "National Strategy," *Naval War College Review*, October 1965, p. 27.
14. Frank Uhlig, Jr., "The Opportunity and Challenge Facing the Navy," *Naval War College Review*, February 1971, pp. 22-23.

15. E.J. Kahn, Jr., *The American People: The Findings of the 1970 Census* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1974), p. 31.
16. *CNO Report*, p. 22.
17. Maguire, pp. 158-159.
18. Mark Rascovich, *The Bedford Incident* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), p. 306.

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