

Some Reflections on the American Catholic Bishops' Peace Pastoral

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For more than three years now, the American Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter on war and peace has been the subject of extensive comment. Most of this comment has, with good reason, focused on the bishops' specific discussion of the ethics of nuclear threat. Comment has focused, in other words, primarily on the letter's specific judgments about the possession and use of nuclear weapons and on the general call for movement toward nuclear disarmament. Yet there has also been another, broader type of comment concerning the significance of the letter for the future of the Catholic Church in America and, even more broadly, concerning its possible significance for our country as a whole.

The bishops themselves call attention in a variety of ways to this larger context of discussion. Indeed the global crisis to which we have been brought by the nuclear arms race — what the bishops, quoting the Second Vatican Council, refer to in the opening sentence of their letter as “a moment of supreme crisis facing the whole human race” (#1) — is itself but one of the most terrible manifestations of a deeper and more complex and equally global crisis in our received political and religious traditions. Thus, however important the specific ethical discussions of nuclear policy, it would seem that we will not actually begin to move from under the shadow of the nuclear threat without a broader and deeper renewal of the ethical (and thus the political and religious) life of our people. What, then, might be the significance of the pastoral letter for such renewal in the life of the American Catholic community and for the possible renewal of that broader vision of American life which Robert

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Bellah has, aptly I believe, called our civil religion?¹ What might be its potential for refocusing American identity and purpose at this fateful time in American and world history?

Of course, such a focus on the pastoral's possible broader significance may well be exaggerated. It may, indeed, be an empty fantasy, given the mad momentum of the arms race and the continual degeneration of American public life into the irrational pursuit of corporate power and profit, on the one hand, and the despairing pursuit of private pleasure, on the other. Yet such a reading is at least consistent with the explicit purposes given by the bishops themselves. For their intention clearly is not simply to make specific judgments about nuclear weapons, but to speak words of both hope and challenge (#2) to their church and to the nation as a whole, and to call for that "moral about-face" (#333) without which the specific judgments about nuclear weapons would be quite ineffectual. They see their letter as "a contribution to a wider effort meant to call Catholics and all members of our political community to dialogue and specific decisions" (#6) and they urge that we as a people "have the courage to believe in the bright future [of] a world freed from the bondage of war [and thus] able to make genuine human progress" — "not a perfect world but a better one" — and to believe in a God who wills such a world for us (#336-37).

That such broader intentions are involved in the bishops' "challenge of peace" has been underlined recently by the appointment of Cardinal Joseph Bernadin of Chicago to chair the bishops' national pro-life committee. He also chaired the committee which drafted the pastoral letter. In his new capacity he has quite deliberately, in a number of major public addresses, called for both church and nation to develop a "consistent ethic of life" which would not only bring together peace and pro-life movements, but would include such related "life" issues as opposition to capital punishment, struggle against poverty and world hunger, and commitment to racial and economic justice.²

Thus the "new moment" the bishops speak of (#126) which provides a context for their letter is not simply a critical moment in the arms race brought about above all by growing world-wide awareness that the real and present danger is global nuclear suicide, but more broadly a moment of crisis in the life of the American Catholic Church and in the life of the nation, and a moment of opportunity (however remote) for that refocusing and renewal without which the possibility for a reversal of the arms race may well be irretrievably lost.

Of course, the idea of a crisis in American culture can be (and has been) discussed in a variety of ways — in terms, for instance, of the after-effects of Vietnam, or in terms of the development of post-industrial technology, or as an

¹ Robert Bellah, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 168-93.

² Joseph Bernadin, "Cardinal Bernadin's Call for a Consistent Ethic of Life," *Origins* 13 (29 Dec. 1983): 491-94. See also his "Enlarging the Dialogue on a Consistent Ethic of Life," *Origins* 13 (5 April 1984): 705, 707-9.

aspect of the multi-national thrust of contemporary capitalism. Yet perhaps the deepest cause of the contemporary crisis, as already indicated, is the gradual erosion of a shared sense of the good previously mediated through national institutions and history — a collective national myth which gave meaning and purpose to action by providing a transcendent standard for direction and judgment. This “civil religion,” nurtured by the various particular religious traditions yet shared across confessional lines, is foundational for maintaining political ideals which restrain the raw exercise of power and focus collective effort in the pursuit of liberty, justice, and peace for all. Yet recently Robert Bellah, with disturbing insight, has described the breaking of the covenant of civil religion, its reduction to mere ideological legitimation for the exercise of power and the pursuit of narrowly partisan or chauvinistic interests, or its increasing irrelevance for a narcissistic and forgetful generation whose leaders have generally been unable or unwilling to attempt the needed reappropriation of received traditions in a new, global, and increasingly fragile world situation.³

At root, of course, for all of its historic particularity, the American civil religion depended upon and mediated the deeper classical traditions of Western reason and revelation. Thus the crisis of American civil religion is fundamentally but one instance of the undermining of received traditions of good in that broad upheaval of life and consciousness typically referred to simply as modernity. It is a story that has been told often, initially as a tale of victory, but increasingly with a sense of loss and even dread.

Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, has recently characterized the dominant pattern of modern life as “bureaucratic individualism” — the end product of a process whereby critical or relativizing rationality has gradually pervaded all aspects of human life, public and private.⁴ All language of good, of ends, has as a result been transformed into the language of values (which are sharply distinguished from facts), into matters of free and fundamentally private individual choice. Reason finally tells us nothing of ends. Its domain is technique or expertise about means. Thus, the only end that can be publicly agreed upon is freedom itself, or, more accurately, the pursuit of means (or power) for the exercise of freedom. For MacIntyre, then, the basic role models for modern American culture are the manager and the therapist — those experts in the manipulation of means in the public and private spheres respectively who quite explicitly disavow any claim to the knowledge of ends. Thus, too, the essence of modern political life has become administration — not public debate about the common good, but the organization of expertise which in theory serves the ends of contractually related, free individuals, but which in practice typically serves the ends of the most powerful. More concretely, the end of corporate power has become, quite literally, the endless pursuit of power

³ Robert Bellah, “American Civil Religion in the 70’s,” in Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); and his *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 22–34.