

AFTER TENSION, DETENTE: A CONTINUING CHRONICLE OF EUROPEAN EPISCOPAL VIEWS ON NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

An earlier essay in these pages,¹ on the evolution of European episcopal attitudes concerning the morality of deterrence, despaired of any collegial consensus in the foreseeable future; for, while Anglo-Saxon (that is, Scottish and English) bishops seemed to be moving in tandem towards a definitive rejection on nuclear war, no prospects were evident of a parallel development on the Continent. The French and Dutch hierarchies in particular seemed certain to support (or, at least, not to condemn) the reigning Western military strategy, called "flexible response," which includes the optional recourse to inaugurating nuclear war in certain circumstances. Disarray in the ranks of the European bishops seemed inevitable. Now that all the projected evaluations of deterrence by the respective national hierarchies have been issued, it is appropriate to compare these episcopal documents and statements with the earlier predictions.

Happily, the predicted cacophony of episcopal voices did not emerge. Rather, a striking harmony marks the statements which have appeared in the interim. There is indeed a consensus on the primordial issue of the *use* of nuclear weapons, which found no comprehensive approval by any bishops' conference. Only the possible moral acceptability of the *threat* to use such weapons has been championed by some individual bishops and national hierarchies.

A review of these doctrinal developments since June 1982 most appropriately opens with mention of the address of John Paul II, read by Agostino Cardinal Casaroli, Papal Secretary of State, at the Second Special Session on Disarmament of the United Nations General Assembly on June 11 of that year. In a key passage which continues to reverberate in subsequent episcopal statements on the topic, Cardinal Casaroli said:

In current conditions "deterrence" based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself, but as a stage on the way towards a progressive disarmament, can still be judged morally acceptable. Nonetheless, in order to preserve peace, it is indispensable not to be satisfied with this minimum, which is always susceptible to the real danger of explosion.²

¹ F. X. Winters, "Nuclear Deterrence Morality: Atlantic Community Bishops in Tension," *TS* 43 (1982) 428-46.

² John Paul II, Allocution to the Second Special Session on Disarmament of the United Nations General Assembly, June 11, 1982. Text is to be found in *Origins* 12, no. 6 (June 24, 1982) 81-87.

It is notable that the Holy See did not attempt here to limit debate on the issue of the morality of deterrence. While apparently foreclosing the option of unilateral nuclear disarmament, the text itself leaves most other questions open for further debate. For example, it does not indicate whether the intention to use the arsenal is a legitimate means of deterrence, nor whether the mere threat to do so is morally tolerable. Indeed, there is no indisputable indication in the text itself that it is *nuclear* deterrence that warrants approval, since deterrence by conventional means alone might equally well correspond to the ambiguous formula used in the address. It is improbable that this lack of definition was due to inadvertence. Despite, or perhaps because of, these ambiguities, the United Nations address continues to animate the collegial process of discernment.

Under the general guidelines of this pivotal address, then, the European hierarchies have pursued their anguishing task of formulating moral guidance on the issues of security in the nuclear era. Papal guidance notwithstanding, they have woven a highly variegated tapestry of church teaching which continues to reveal both the national genius and the personal influence of the participants in this precedent-setting exercise of international episcopal collegiality.

ENGLAND AND WALES

Unlike their brother bishops of Scotland, who in 1982 condemned all use (or threatened use) of the nuclear arsenal,³ the Bishops Conference of England and Wales continues to defer pronouncement on the morality of nuclear deterrence. In its most recent statement explicitly treating the topic,⁴ they do not go beyond the caution that such strategies are not adequate long-term formulas for peace. While declining to offer definitive counsel to the faithful, the hierarchy has itself sought counsel from Her Majesty's Government on the nature and risks of the present strategy of deterrence. As announced at the conclusion of their annual meeting in 1982 (Nov. 11),⁵ the Conference voted to send a delegation to present a document on "Catholic Attitudes and Anxieties on Armaments and the Risk of War" to the Foreign Secretary, Mr. Francis Pym, who received them on Dec. 6, 1982.⁶ The working paper they presented poses concise

³ The Roman Catholic Bishops Conference of Scotland, "Disarmament and Peace," [London] *Tablet* 236 (April 10/17, 1982) 386.

⁴ Roman Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales, "A Pastoral Letter for Peace Sunday," Jan. 29, 1984. Text available from Commission for International Justice and Peace, 38-40 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1PD.

⁵ *Briefing* (Catholic Information Service Documentary Service, 74 Gallows Hill Lane, Abbots Langley, Herts., WD5 0BZ) 12, no. 37 (Nov. 19, 1982), pp. unnumbered.

⁶ *Briefing* 12, no. 40 (Dec. 17, 1982).

questions to the Government against the background of a brief summary of Catholic teaching on the morality of war. Briefly, the document articulated the following moral judgments: the principles of discrimination (moral immunity of civilians from direct attack) and proportionality (the requisite preponderance of good over evil [intended and collateral] effects of such discriminating strategies) obtain. Moreover, overt threats to execute immoral policies are morally indefensible. In addition, a crucial factual judgment is included in the statement of principles: "The deterrent effect of nuclear weapons, however, appears to depend on a readiness to use these weapons in a way which would result in the deaths of millions of civilians, and thus apparently transgress the moral requirement of proportionality." Against this stern backdrop, the following questions are placed before Her Majesty's Government: (1) Are there efficacious deterrent threats whose execution would not violate either the principle of proportionality or of discrimination? (2) What is the risk that such an initially discriminating and proportionate use of nuclear weapons would escalate? If such escalation is judged "inevitable," the limits of legitimate deterrence would consist in possession of the arsenal without intention or explicit threat to use it. No governmental response to these probing questions has been made public.

Basil Cardinal Hume, Archbishop of Westminster and President of the Bishops Conference of England and Wales, has continued to speak out on the question in his official capacity but without representing the Conference. His witness has been prominent if not unambiguous. Speaking in Cologne at the golden sacerdotal jubilee of Cardinal Hoffner, Hume evoked the papal address at the U.N., but then seemed to go beyond the papal text itself by saying that the (temporary) right to a (nuclear) deterrent included the right to threaten the arsenal's use.⁷ Hume's most important statement, however, was in an article published in the *Times* at the conclusion of the 1983 annual meeting of the Bishops Conference, Nov. 17, 1983. Here he breaks new ground by condemning for the first time definitively all use of nuclear weapons against any target whatsoever, even military ones. While he had revealed as early as 1980 his grave doubts whether such use of nuclear weapons could be controlled and thus remain morally acceptable, he has now apparently resolved these doubts negatively, concluding that the foreseeable consequence of such counterforce use would violate the two traditional limits on the use of force: discrimination and proportionality. Because of the weight of his witness on this point, his words merit citation in full: ". . . nothing could ever justify the use of nuclear arms as weapons of massive and indiscriminate

⁷ *Briefing* 12, no. 35 (Nov. 12, 1982) 10. It is reliably reported that the "threat" implied here is merely that inherent in the continued possession of the arsenal, not an overt statement.

slaughter. . . . There is a tension, then, between the moral imperative not to use such inhuman weapons and a policy of nuclear deterrence⁸

It is equally important to note, however, that His Eminence also seems to entertain the possible acceptability of a sincere intention to carry out the deterrent threat if deterrence fails. For the text continues: ". . . and a *policy of nuclear deterrence with its declared willingness to use them if attacked.*"⁹ While he is not explicitly endorsing the morality of such a conditional intention, a well-intentioned reader could responsibly conclude that the Cardinal accepts the moral probity of conditionally intending to do something he knows would be immoral. The novelty of such a position in Catholic moral teaching is the only factor that would detract from the possibility that Hume means to endorse explicit and sincere threats of executing the deterrent threat.

FRANCE

The week before Cardinal Hume's apparent attempt to wed the condemnation of all actual use of nuclear weapons with a possible approval of the overt threat of their use, the French hierarchy had voiced a similarly paradoxical view in their otherwise astonishingly restrictive teaching on the morality of deterrence. What caught the attention of many commentators was their blessing on the morality of overt threats of nuclear holocaust. Equally surprising, however, was their unpredicted severity in condemning any use of the French *strategic* arsenal. The key passage says:

This logic is, of course, a logic of distress; it cannot hide its inherent weakness. Certainly the reason for showing oneself capable of making war is precisely in order not to have to do so. . . . Threat is not use. It is the foundation of deterrence, a fact people often forget, attributing to the threat the same moral qualification as to use.

Nevertheless, the danger of the logic of deterrence is readily perceived. In order to leave the would-be aggressor no illusions regarding the credibility of our defense, one must show oneself resolved to take action if deterrence fails. The moral legitimacy of the transition to the act is more than problematic. Even more so since in France our deterrence "of the strong by the weak" that is, deterrence by the less strong, is not discriminating: lacking a very diversified arsenal, it still rests on an anti-city strategy condemned clearly and categorically by the Vatican Council. "Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation" (*Gaudium et spes* 80/4).

⁸ Basil Cardinal Hume, "The Church and Disarmament," [London] *Times*, Nov. 17, 1983, 12. Text also available in *Briefing* 13, no. 38 (Nov. 25, 1983) 4-6.

⁹ *Ibid.*; emphasis added.

But threat is not use. Does the immorality of use make the threat immoral? The answer is not obvious. . . . Confronted with a choice between two almost unavoidable evils, capitulation or counter-threat . . . one chooses the lesser evil without claiming to make a virtue of it!¹⁰

The French hierarchy thus unequivocally judges that any use of nuclear weapons against cities falls under the solemn condemnation voiced by the Second Vatican Council, which they cite. Since the larger, strategic elements of the French *force de frappe* are presumably (not being "discriminating," as the text mentions) targeted on cities, this judgment casts a very extensive shadow over the moral legitimacy of the centerpiece of French military strategy.¹¹

American commentary on the French letter has unaccountably focused, virtually exclusively, not on this sweeping condemnation of the strategy of massive retaliation, but on the companion teaching on the moral acceptability of the threat so to retaliate.¹² This novel dichotomy, between the morality of the physical act and that of the person's intention to commit it, is indeed worthy of note in an episcopal statement; for the Catholic tradition has always held that moral malice is not simply synchronous with the execution of a crime. Rather, the immorality of an act is believed to inhere in the spirit of the criminal, even before he has perpetrated the crime—indeed, even if he is frustrated in his attempt to do so or changes his mind before carrying out his plan. This ancient tradition seems to be endangered by hierarchical statements which seek to save both morality and the present posture of deterrence by claiming that the threat (presumably a sincere threat, thus including the contingent intention to execute it) is an amoral, or even a morally good, act. At stake here theologically is nothing less than the question of whether

¹⁰ Roman Catholic Bishops of France, "Gagner la paix," *La Croix*, Nov. 10, 1983, 12. English translation prepared by the French Embassy Press & Information Service (972 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10021) 8-9.

¹¹ Strategic nuclear forces are defined as those capable of reaching the homeland of the adversary—in this case, the Soviet Union. In this category fall their (5) nuclear attack submarines (carrying 16 single-warhead missiles each), their (18) intermediate-range (single warhead) land-based missiles, and their (34) strategic bombers (with multiple bombs). The remaining French nuclear forces, unable to strike the Soviet homeland, are called "tactical" and are not necessarily targeted against cities. While the present letter speaks of the entire French force as an anticity force, it is improbable that this is true of the tactical forces. Hence, from the argument offered by the French letter, the tactical forces could probably have been exempted from the condemnation. Other arguments, such as those derived from the uncontrollability of nuclear war, might lead to an equally comprehensive condemnation of strategic and tactical forces.

¹² Cf., e.g., the lead editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 26, 1983, "A Swell Week, Not Hell Week." For a clerical voice likewise celebrating the French pastoral letter, cf. James V. Schall, S.J., "French Bishops' Peace Pastoral," *Catholic Standard* (Washington, D.C.), Jan. 12, 1984, 13.

morality is coterminous with physical acts. It is not improbable, then, that the French letter (as well as the German one, to be discussed immediately below) will stimulate a wide-ranging debate on the morality of intention.

Since there appear to be no solid theological grounds to support the moral acceptability of a sincerely meant contingent intention to execute mass destruction, defense of the pastoral letter's position will probably crystallize around the thesis that governmental threats to commit such criminal acts are not sincere but merely a bluff resting on the desperate hope of being believed. If indeed this is the meaning of the French letter's formula ("Threat is not use"), it is evident that such a threat is not a credible deterrent; for if all the responsible civilian and military officials in France know that the threat is a bluff, surely the adversary knows this equally well. If, however, the bluff (falsity of the threat) is known, for example, only to the President and the Prime Minister, all the others in the chain of command are being assured by the Church that they may conscientiously prepare themselves to execute a policy of mass destruction if so ordered. This interpretation of the letter, while perhaps preserving deterrence, undermines the Catholic understanding of the (civilian and military) public servants' conscientious and constitutional responsibilities. In short, the French formula preserves either deterrence or morality, but not both.

FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

The longest and least analytical of the episcopal statements is the German letter, in which one paragraph out of 81 pages is devoted to the examination of the morality of the use (and/or intention of use) of nuclear weapons. The paragraph is the following:

EXISTING OR PLANNED MILITARY MEANS MUST NEVER RENDER WAR MORE FEASIBLE OR MORE PROBABLE

We clearly realize that this demand of ours will encounter opposition which can hardly be overcome. After all, weapons only provide an effective deterrent if their use can be threatened in a credible manner. From the standpoint of preventing war, however, the main elements of the strategy of deterrence are the mutual threat of unacceptable levels of destruction and the attendant risk. Precisely the prospect that conventional or nuclear war cannot be limited poses for one's opponent an incalculable risk which is intended to guarantee the mutual deterrent not to start war and indeed any war. The use of a threat of mass destruction which one must never carry out—a morally intolerable concept—is regarded as being particularly effective for the purpose of preventing war.¹³

¹³ "Out of Justice, Peace: The Church in the Service of Peace," Joint Pastoral Letter of the German Bishops. The official English version is published by Irish Messenger Publi-

No actual use of nuclear weapons is morally legitimate since any use would escape control and inaugurate mass destruction, which is condemned. But the "credible threat" to use them is accepted as being "particularly effective for the purpose of preventing war." It is striking that no argument is offered to establish that such threats, which are unarguably effective in preventing war, are the only means available to this end. No mention is made, for example, of the politically respectable, if not unanimous, view that the enhancement of conventional deterrent/defense forces would constitute a reliable and usable deterrent when paired with the retention of the present nuclear arsenal, even severed from the intention/threat to employ it. Nor does the letter indicate an awareness of the enormous stakes involved in the theological innovation which argues for the legitimacy of a sincere intention to commit an act known to be grossly immoral. Evidently, then, no attempt is made to argue in favor of such an innovation in the Catholic moral tradition.

THE NETHERLANDS AND BELGIUM

The Dutch hierarchy adopted on May 5, 1983, a pastoral letter which condemns all use of nuclear weapons while allowing the continued possession of the present arsenal, pending bilateral or multilateral reductions in the stockpiles.¹⁴ An extremely cautious approval is likewise tendered to the increasingly popular proposal of strengthening NATO conventional forces in order to offset the present conventional imbalance between the forces of East and West, thereby reducing the likelihood of an outbreak of nuclear war.¹⁵ No approval is given to the notion of making threats (serious or fictitious) to use nuclear weapons. The Dutch letter is thus by far the most comprehensive and detailed condemnation of nuclear war to appear in Europe since the Scottish letter of 1982. Ironically, perhaps, it is also the most theologically traditional, eschewing the recently modish notion that it is morally acceptable to threaten to do what is known to be immoral.

Two months later the bishops of Belgium issued a letter which avoids taking any position on the morality of the use or threat of nuclear war.¹⁶

cations (37 Lower Leeson St., Dublin, Ireland) 58-59. The passage in the original text (*Gerechtigkeit schafft Frieden: Wort der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz zum Frieden*. April 18, 1983 [Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, Kaiserstrasse 163, 5300 Bonn]) is found on pp. 53-54.

¹⁴ "Peace and Justice," A Letter by the Dutch Conference of Bishops on Nuclear Arms (Utrecht, May 1983) chap. 2, esp. pp. 12-17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 13.

¹⁶ "Désarmer pour construire la paix," La déclaration des évêques de Belgique," *La Libre Belgique*, July 20/21, 1983, 3.

CONCLUSION

With this summation of the British, French, German, Dutch, and Belgian episcopal positions on deterrence, we complete the survey of official Catholic contributions to the redefinition of public opinion within the nations of the Atlantic community on the volatile question of nuclear strategy; for the remaining NATO national hierarchies (Norway and Denmark on the northern flank and Greece and Turkey on the south, along with Italy¹⁷) have remained silent on the question.

In light of this survey, what judgement can be made about the workings of collegiality in this inaugural effort in the post-(Vatican II)conciliar Church to exercise its office as a moral guide? Contrary to the predictions submitted in these pages two years ago, the discord among the European episcopal conferences was short-lived. Consensus is the most apt description of the present West European ecclesial climate on the topic of security. While admitting the genuine diversity that persists among the various statements, particularly on the moral legitimacy of making serious threats to carry out in certain circumstances (i.e., the collapse of deterrence) acts admitted to be grossly immoral, a striking consensus has emerged on the morality of engaging in nuclear war.

The consensus covers three capital points: (1) no bishop or episcopal conference has approved the use of nuclear weapons in any circumstances whatsoever;¹⁸ (2) those episcopal statements which explicitly treat the issue uniformly condemn all use of nuclear weapons; (3) no episcopal statements call for immediate and unilateral dismantling of the present arsenal, although they uniformly insist that the right to retain this arsenal is limited in duration. There is, in short, a negative consensus on use of nuclear weapons and an affirmative consensus on (temporarily) retaining the nuclear arsenal itself.

This consensus has been further strengthened by being ratified by the Holy See; for in an address at the University of San Francisco on Nov. 18, 1983, Agostino Cardinal Casaroli undertook to summarize the state of Church teaching on these questions, in effect formalizing and publicizing the Vatican's blessing on the various national episcopal efforts to come to terms with the anguishing moral issue of deterrence.

All of which . . . obliges us to make a profound revision of traditional principles of evaluation, a revision which takes into account the difficulty—many would say the practical impossibility—of controlling those immense forces which man

¹⁷ It is generally assumed that the Italian hierarchy will not add to the statements emanating from the Holy See, including that noted below in n. 19.

¹⁸ It is noteworthy that even the French hierarchy, whose line of moral argumentation would have allowed them to approve the use of the French nuclear *tactical* forces, did not make this exemption; cf. n. 11 above.

succeeds in releasing, but which he seems incapable of containing and regulating according to the dictates of his conscience.

. . . the effects and consequences of a nuclear war are always such as to exclude even the hypothesis of recourse to them. It would really be a type of collective murder-suicide, notwithstanding the efforts made to limit the harm and consequences, by making nuclear arms more precise and more limited in their effects.

On this point there seems to be a consensus. There seems also to be a general agreement that nuclear weapons, used once for the first time to win a prolonged war . . . may now be produced and stockpiled, not in order to be used, but to prevent or forestall their use by the other side.¹⁹

This remarkable address by the Cardinal Secretary of State constitutes in itself an ecclesial event, revealing the new pattern of Vatican rapport with the collegial activities of national episcopal conferences; for it gathers up the fragments of national initiatives on the same question and multiplies their effect by underlining the core of consensus among them. The final word, then, as articulated by Cardinal Casaroli, is "consensus," a shared judgement by the bishops of the Western European nations that nuclear weapons have lost any legitimacy as military instruments of justice and security. Without doubt, the emergence of this unpredicted consensus among the Catholic leaders in Europe will prove a cardinal event for the evolution of public opinion in the region as well.

Georgetown University

FRANCIS X. WINTERS, S.J.

¹⁹ Text appears in *L'Osservatore romano*, weekly edition in English, Nov. 28, 1983, 5-7.