



The Challenge for Peace: a 25th Anniversary Reflection of Then and Now

By Frank Cordaro

This year marks the 25th Anniversary of the US Catholic Bishop's "The Challenge for Peace" peace pastoral, and I can't help but feel nostalgic for those good old days. The writing of this peace pastoral marked the culmination of factors and history that pushed the Catholic Church into a rediscovery and recovery of the nonviolent, pacifist character of its founder, Jesus. The bloody wars of the twentieth century, especially WWI and WWII, had a lot to do with awakening our Church's senses to the true character of modern warfare, and the US-led Nuclear Arms Race impressed on the Church the urgency needed to address the issue. Starting with Good Pope John 23rd's Encyclical *Pacem in Terra* and followed by the Vatican II Council condemnation of nuclear weapons, the universal Church was turning its sights toward becoming a peace Church and away from its outdated, short sighted, unworkable and unbiblical Just War tradition.

The US Catholic Bishops' "The Challenge of Peace" pastoral was the US Catholic Church's articulation of where the universal church was headed in regard to these war and peace issues. Incorporating our own tragic lessons from the Vietnam War, taking stock of where the Nuclear Arms race was headed with our deployment of first-strike nuclear weapons systems, and assessing the stated US policy that justified the first-strike use of nuclear weapons along with the

growing belief in a winnable nuclear war, the Bishops in "The Challenge for Peace" restated clearly the Church's condemnation of the use of nuclear weapons, first-strike or otherwise. More importantly they raised the priority and the imperative for Catholics to embrace and seek out nonviolent means to address political conflicts and to push them toward the most Christ-like pacifist option. They restated the right of pacifist Catholics to be conscientious objectors to war and went even further when they stated that Just War Catholics could be selective conscientious objectors, leaving open to Catholics in the military the option to refuse to fight in wars they deemed unjust.

For many of us in the peace movement, the statement fell far short of where we wanted it to go. It and the economic pastoral that followed were the last consensus pastorals that the US Catholic Bishops Conference would write with a majority of the Bishops appointed under Pope Paul VI. Once the majority of the US Catholic Bishops Conference was made up of Pope John Paul II appointees, the issues of war and peace were tragically set aside for what they believed to be the more pressing concerns of "Catholic Identity." The prophetic energies within the US Catholic Bishop's Conference that once voiced the concerns of the larger Catholic social teachings (in which the war and peace issues had been a part) were replaced by the voices of Bishops championing the anti-abortion cause and thus squan-

dering the US Catholic Bishops' political equity on this single-issue concern.

Twenty-five years after its writing, we find ourselves in the fifth year of the Iraqi war and occupation, a war that Pope John Paul II called "immoral, unjust and illegal" from its beginning. The shocking realities of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib revealed to the world a US government acting with disregard for international laws, routinely violating basic human rights, justifying its use of torture, and plunging the US reputation to its lowest point in history.

Tragically we find ourselves celebrating the 25th Anniversary of "The Challenge of Peace" amidst pastoral sleepwalking in a collective Catholic amnesia. Today a new generation of US Catholics knows nothing of this peace pastoral. They do not think as Catholics when assessing the war in Iraq and our young know little to nothing of our Church's Just War Tradition, the pacifist Catholic option, nor of our stated support for conscientious objection. Today the US Catholic Church is shamefully more nationalistic than it is Roman Catholic, a spiritual state which is bad for our souls and bad for our nation.