

A PLEA TO THE CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE

A survey of deaths in Iraqi households, conducted by the prestigious British medical journal *The Lancet*, and published on October 28, 2004, estimates that as many as 100,000 more people may have died throughout the country in the 18 months after the U.S. invasion than would be expected based on the death rate before the war. The survey was conducted by researchers at Johns Hopkins University, Columbia University, and the Al-Mustansiriya University in Baghdad. The survey indicated that *violence* accounted for most of the extra deaths seen since the invasion, and *air strikes from coalition forces* caused most of the violent deaths, the researchers wrote in the British-based journal.

“Most individuals reportedly killed by coalition forces were women and children,” they said (Associated Press; BBC News; October 28, 2004). As of that date, 1,081 members of the U.S. armed services had also been killed, according to the U.S. Defense Department. At least 8,150 US soldiers have been wounded (CNN, November 1, 2004).

This horrific number of civilians (non-combatants) killed, as well as the laying waste of many population centers in Iraq, warrant condemnation by all persons of conscience. The bishops of the Second Vatican Council described such acts as “crimes against God and against humanity” (*Gaudium et Spes: The Church in the Modern World*, 80).

These realities must lie heavy on the Christian conscience and awaken a strong, articulate moral dissent, rooted in our faith in Jesus Christ, God's compassion incarnate.

Even for those who accept the traditional Just War doctrine, the evidence manifests that many, if not all, of the criteria of the just-war theory are *not* met in modern warfare, including the present wars. The traditional teaching, beginning with Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.), requires that *all the requirements must be fulfilled* before any war can be considered justified. Indeed, correctly understood, the Just War criteria were meant to *prevent and limit warfare*, and not — as is the present case — to condone it. The specific requirements of non-combatant immunity, last resort, proportionality between the goal and the actual effect of the war, and the consonance between ends and means, among others, are manifestly not fulfilled.

The realities of warfare have completely changed since the just war theory was formulated in the fourth and fifth centuries. Today, the violence of modern war, with its increasingly destructive weaponry, is *indiscriminate, impersonal, and ever more uncontrollable in its lethal effects*. According to a great many moral theologians, this raises for the Christian conscience the ethical judgment that *the traditional doctrine of just war cannot be applied to the highly technologized wars of today*.

Many other theologians and ethicists see the Just War doctrine, in any era, as itself *a betrayal of the gospel*.

When the late Pope Paul VI addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations, he cried out, “No more war. War never again.” This was not a general wish for peace. Rather, it was his critical assessment of the immorality of modern warfare, and therefore, the demands placed on

the consciences of persons and nations. War can no longer be accepted as a means for settling international disputes and conflicts, because of the immense horror it unleashes.

Given the above situation, we plead with our fellow Christians, including the chief pastors of the churches, to raise their voices, bringing the gospel of peace and the church's well-developed social teaching to bear on what has become a morally intolerable situation, for which we must answer.

“This I believe to be the privilege and the burden
of those who deem themselves bound by allegiances and loyalties
which are broader and deeper than nationalism,
and which go beyond our nation's self-defined goals and positions.
We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims,
and for those called enemy,
for no document from human hands can make these humans
any less our brothers and sisters.”

*Martin Luther King, Jr.,
April 4, 1967*

Fall/Winter 2004 Bulletin



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