

Blessed are the Peacemakers

Cardinal Keith O'Brien

Cardinal O'Brien is President of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland. Here he rejects any arms race, above all the nuclear one.

You are aware of the cause which brings us together. It is the invitation to enter into debate requested by our Prime Minister, Mr Tony Blair, regarding the possible renewal of the Trident Nuclear Weapons System. Chancellor Gordon Brown has given added urgency to this debate at this time, following on his own statement.

In my own presentation this evening, I intend to do two things: give some indication of the history of my own involvement in this issue; and give something of my Church's teaching with regard to nuclear deterrence.

Like any good Christian, the call to peace was quite simply basic to my call as a Christian. Aware of many Old Testament readings regarding 'beating swords into ploughshares' and texts like that, I saw the teaching of Jesus Christ as a natural continuation of the desire for peace among the people of the Old Testament, despite wars and conflicts which surrounded them.

Obviously, Christ himself was the great peacemaker. Peace and reconciliation was always an underlying theme in his teaching and we remember those very beautiful words of the Sermon on the Mount: 'Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God!'

'We try to realise as Christians that we are sisters and brothers and that the earth is our common inheritance. We have a responsibility to share this world with everyone else, to pass it on uncontaminated, unpillaged, unspoiled, to future generations. We have to rid ourselves of prejudice and mutual suspicion. We must totally reject any "arms race", any policy of revengeful slaughter, all greed and self-preservation at the expense of others.' And there I quote a statement from my own Bishops' Conference issued in 1982.

In that statement of 1982, the members of the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of Scotland stated with regard to nuclear weapons: 'We are convinced that if it is immoral to use

these weapons, it is also immoral to threaten their use. Some argue that the threat can be justified as the lesser of two evils. The crux of the problem is whether in any foreseeable circumstance a policy of self-defence based on the use or even the threat of use of these weapons of terrible destructiveness can ever be morally justified’.

Those words ‘if it is immoral to use these weapons, it is also immoral to threaten their use’ caused me to think deeply on this issue some 20 years ago.

Having that statement before us, the members of the present Bishops’ Conference of Scotland issued a statement regarding the possibility of the Trident replacement on 11 April 2006. We welcomed the Prime Minister’s comment that there should be the fullest possible public debate on the Trident Nuclear Missile System. And we stated then that: ‘We urge the Government of the United Kingdom not to invest in a replacement for the Trident System and to begin the process of decommissioning these weapons with the intention of diverting the sums spent on nuclear weaponry to programmes of aid and development’.

I myself developed my own thought in my Easter Sunday sermon on Sunday 16 April 2006, indicating that as Easter people we must not only be people of prayer, but people of action, living in that Easter promise of peace from Jesus himself, whose first words after his Resurrection were: ‘Peace be with you’.

In that letter I spoke of the consistent teaching of the Church on war, especially nuclear war – to which I will refer later.

I indicated that: ‘We here in Britain are in a marvellous position to take concrete steps towards making real the demand of Pope Benedict XVI in his New Year message (see *Spokesman 90*) for peace when he stated with regard to nuclear arms as a means of ensuring security in their countries that “This point of view is not only baneful but also completely fallacious. In a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims”’. I added that here in Scotland we have a duty to lead the way in campaigning for change because we have the shameful responsibility of housing these horrific weapons. And I called on my own people to demand that these weapons of mass destruction be replaced, but not with more weapons of mass destruction. Rather, I asked that Trident be replaced with projects that bring life to the poor!

On 15 May, I led representatives of the principal Churches here in Scotland in the signing of a petition on the replacement of Trident nuclear weapons outside the Scottish Parliament. The petition reads: ‘We the undersigned urge the Government of the United Kingdom not to invest in a replacement for the Trident System and to begin now the process of decommissioning these weapons with the intention of diverting the sums spent on nuclear weaponry to programmes of aid and development’. Copies of that national petition are available at this meeting and I do urge you to sign them and to bring them back to your own communities and towns.

In my own Archdiocese, I launched a process of education on the whole matter of ‘Nuclear Weapons and Catholic Teaching’ – with study evenings being organised throughout my Archdiocese. As a follow-up to this, our own Church’s

National Commission for Justice and Peace are making copies of this study evening, which is available in a power point presentation to all those who request it, as a means for further education of people throughout the length and breadth of Scotland.

In what I have said above, I have indicated something of the position of the Roman Catholic Church with regard to war in general and hinted at the position which I believe is now the firm teaching of the Church.

Over the centuries there have been various theories with regard to war and its justification. With regard to nuclear deterrence, we might say that the Catholic Church has moved along a line from reluctant acceptance of nuclear deterrence to a firm position against any form of deterrence – this progression having taken place over the past 40 years and being consistent in as much as it always has sought disarmament.

In a 1982 UN address, Pope John Paul II said: ‘In current conditions [ie, in 1982] deterrence based on balance certainly not as an end in itself but as a step on the way toward a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable’. And he added the crucial next sentence: ‘Nonetheless in order to ensure peace, it is indispensable not to be satisfied with this minimum which is always susceptible to the real danger of explosion’. Pope John Paul was referring to conditions in 1982, and they did not improve much throughout that whole decade.

By the 1990s it was becoming increasingly clear that the biggest nuclear powers had no intention of negotiating the removal of nuclear weapons, nor did they intend to disarm. Belief in the goodwill of the nuclear powers had been the mainstay of the Holy See’s reluctant acceptance of temporary nuclear deterrence. It had also realised, what it seems that nuclear nations have yet to realise, that the world is a very different place in the 21st century.

Cardinal Martino, as the Holy See’s Permanent Observer to the UN, addressed the First Committee of the General Assembly in 1997 as follows: ‘Nuclear weapons are incompatible with the peace we seek for the 21st century. They cannot be justified. They deserve condemnation. The preservation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty demands an unequivocal commitment to their abolition’. And in 1998, also before the UN, he went even further: ‘The most perilous of all the old Cold War assumptions carried into the new age is the belief that the strategy of nuclear deterrence is essential to a nation’s security. Maintaining nuclear deterrence into the 21st century will not aid but impede peace. Nuclear deterrence prevents genuine nuclear disarmament. It maintains an unacceptable hegemony over non-nuclear development for the poorest half of the world’s population. It is a fundamental obstacle to achieving a new age of global security.’

It seems then that far from being weapons which keep peace nuclear weapons in fact prevent peace, and we, the United Kingdom and other nations of the world who possess such weapons, are therefore also a stumbling block to peace. How can the Church remain silent, if the fundamental Easter gift of the risen Lord to his disciples is the gift of peace?

Returning to the UN, the current Permanent Observer of the Holy See, Archbishop Migliore, in May 2005, leaves us in no doubt about the clear and consistent nature of the teaching which we, the Bishops of Scotland, have a duty to pass on. ‘The time has gone for finding ways to a “balance in terror”; the time has come to re-examine the whole strategy of nuclear deterrence. When the Holy See expressed its limited acceptance of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War, it was with the clearly stated condition that deterrence was only a step on the way towards progressive nuclear disarmament. The Holy See has never countenanced nuclear deterrence as a permanent measure, nor does it today when it is evident that nuclear deterrence drives the development of ever newer nuclear arms, thus preventing genuine nuclear disarmament. The Holy See again emphasises that the peace we seek in the 21st century cannot be attained by relying on nuclear weapons.’

The Pope has, within months of the start of his papacy, confirmed and strengthened this clear and consistent teaching. In January of this year he addressed a remark to those few governments such as our own who hold the world to ransom with our nuclear weapons:

‘What can be said ... about those governments which count on nuclear arms as a means of ensuring the security of their countries? Along with countless persons of good will, one can state that this point of view is not only baneful but also completely fallacious. In a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims. The truth of peace requires that all – whether those governments which openly or secretly possess nuclear arms, or those planning to acquire them – agree to change their course by clear and firm decisions, and strive for a progressive and concerted nuclear disarmament. The resources which would be saved could then be employed in projects of development capable of benefiting all their people, especially the poor. In this regard, one can only note with dismay the evidence of a continuing growth in military expenditure and the flourishing arms trade, while the political and juridic process established by the international community for promoting disarmament is bogged down in general indifference. How can there ever be a future of peace when investments are still made in the production of arms and in research aimed at developing new ones?’ (Message for World Day of Peace, January 1st 2006)

As the Holy Father asks, how can peace have a future if we develop a replacement for Trident? With this promise of a public debate we have a golden opportunity to show that we can be a peaceful nation, not one which bullies and threatens other nations. We could, like so many other countries the world over who have dismantled their research programmes and have even given up their nuclear weapons, do this in the name of peace. Threatening behaviour changes the behaviour of the other, and peaceful action does too. This is the heart of the witness of Jesus, the heart of the Gospel, the heart of our sign of peace at Mass. We have a chance to be a nation of peace. Let us bury our belligerence, let us beat our swords into ploughshares and call on the world to follow our lead.

'I would not get too involved in the politics of independence, but I am happy that, if it is the wish of the people, Scotland becomes an independent country. ... In my travels I have had much experience of small countries and I have seen what benefits independence can bring ... Ireland would be an example of a country which has prospered since achieving independence. Additionally, other northern European countries such as Norway and Denmark exemplify the prosperity which self-determination can bring.

There is currently some frustration among the Scots about the way they have over what happens here, and that is part of what is pushing the independence movement. I can see this coming, perhaps not in the next few years, but before too long ... The recent debate on Trident is instructive. The groundswell of feeling in Scotland against the Trident missile system has highlighted a deep sense of frustration among many Scots. We have no wish to pay for or host these evil weapons, yet we have no power to remove them.'

Cardinal O'Brien quoted in Scotland on Sunday, 15 October 2006