

# MERTON, NONVIOLENCE AND THE BISHOPS' PASTORAL

by **Paul E. Dinter**

---

## 1. *Merton's Contemporary Witness to Sanity*

Although writing between fifteen and twenty years ago, Thomas Merton's understanding of the moral and political crisis of those years is startlingly contemporary, if not prophetic. His keen insight into the workings as well as the charades practiced by the society from which he "withdrew" in 1941 has been noted long before now, so it remains for us to do more than lionize him for his insight and prophetic charisma.

I wish, then, in this essay to turn to Merton's writings to shed some light on the contemporary crisis of our culture, that is, whether we can long endure the threat to our lives, institutions and everything else that the nuclear arms race poses. What is more, I wish to examine these writings as a basis for understanding how the two foundational documents which underlie the recent pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace* still have something to say to us today. Without these earlier works, *Pacem in Terris* of Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the bishops' pastoral would have been unthinkable.

But my purpose here is as much critical as it is historical, for I wish to use Merton's writings and their critique of our culture as a background against which to judge the adequacy of the pastoral letter twenty years after Merton's incisive wisdom was lost to us. At this early stage of the pastoral's reception, certainly any of my critical judgments are necessarily provisional and are undertaken in a spirit of gratitude for the effort of the Catholic bishops of this country. At the same time, the nature of the challenge of peace requires every effort we can muster to refine our response to God's promise.<sup>1</sup>

Let me begin, then, by stating that Merton's comments on the arms race and our attendant nuclear idolatry were so pellucid back in the 1960s that they could easily be describing our political and moral predicament today. I would like to take a look at some of them to establish anew, as it were, his credentials as a critic of contemporary culture.

Commenting on the need for alternatives to the arms race, Merton anticipated the notion, if not the language, of the Freeze by calling for a remedy that would "slow down our activity, especially all activity concerned with the production and testing of weapons of destruction."<sup>2</sup> He wanted this to be immediately followed by the reduction and elimination of nuclear weapons stockpiles; yet he was no "pollyanna" about this expectation. In another article he counsels:

Realize what we are up against. The military-industrial-political-academic complex, with the mass media at its disposal, is sold on military defense and the arms race and is obviously interested in ridiculing or discrediting all nonmilitary forms of defense -- in fact all alternatives to the arms race. (NVA, p. 93)

Merton knew that this resistance to alternatives grew not merely from political and ideological reasons but from economic ones as well. But he was strong in his affirmation that "it is not morally licit for us as a nation to refuse the risk because our whole economy now depends on this war effort" (NVA, p. 16). In other words, he would have us understand that there is a moral imperative to work for the conversion of our economy from a military to a civilian-based economy, a step the bishops in their pastoral were not so forthright about (cf. CP # 271).

Again, anticipating the strategic options examined in the pastoral letter, Merton characterized the admixture of deterrence and

1. For a later critique of *The Challenge of Peace*, cf. M. Gallagher, "Sidestepping the Challenge of Peace?", *Commonweal*, 16 January 1987, pp. 9-13 and E. Doherty, "A Classic Case of Consequentialism," p. 11.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), p. 16. Hereafter referred to in the text as NVA.

counterforce along with the arms race they fuel as a policy of total war and then added a trenchant comment about the way total war is packaged and sold.

What is essentially a power struggle is presented as an ideological and spiritual struggle, as a battle between light and darkness, and it is presented in a way that *Christians are convinced that there is no other way of defense than military defense.* (NVA, p. 92)

Even more strongly, Merton described an important element of the problem in his portrayal of various kinds of citizens that still accurately describes a frightening proportion of Americans. On the one hand, there are those who were cheered by the invasion of Grenada and our superpower meddling in Lebanon. Merton terms them "fanatics" who "yield to the pressures of inner resentment and frustration, and seek a show-down because they cannot bear the intolerable burden of waiting and uncertainty." On the other hand, there is the significant sector of the population whom he terms "the passive and despairing" who "accept the absurdity of life with a shrug and seek forgetfulness in an automatic drugged existence" (NVA, p. 78).

These latter are not isolated individuals in Merton's understanding but are products of what he calls "the mass mind" both in the Church and beyond who are affected by the "poisonous effect of the mass media that keeps violence, cruelty and sadism constantly present to the minds of unformed and irresponsible people" (NVA, pp. 19, 130). Merton's words regarding the "crude assumptions" which a majority of Americans held and the "state of mind" that accepted the inevitability of nuclear war which he found promoted through a form of thought control by the "American mass media" are strong (NVA, pp. 81, 114). So strong that they almost remind us of the chilling picture in George Orwell's *1984* of the way reality was controlled in fictitious Oceania. At the same time, Merton's opinions of the popular state of understanding and the role of the mass media in sustaining myths are echoed convincingly by a non-fiction writer, former Ambassador, now Professor, George Kennan. In his collection of essays *The Nuclear Delusion* Kennan excoriates the "journalistic establishment" for its role in the uncritical promotion of a "fantastic view of the monstrosity of our Soviet adversaries" that allows our government to pursue no alternatives to confrontation.<sup>3</sup> Kennan lays a good bit of blame at the door of the "commercial media of information" that are dedicated "to the over-

---

3. George Frost Kennan, *The Nuclear Delusion: Soviet-American Relations in the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), pp. 186, 196. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Nuclear Delusion*.

simplification and dramatization of reality rather than the education of the public" in much the same way that Merton deplores the "pseudo-news" and "manufactured event" of the print media.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the currency of Fr. Louis' observations goes beyond the stuff of our media-ized culture and its nuclear idolatry. In an essay published in 1961, "Peace: A Religious Responsibility," he takes Christians to task for their passivity with the following (strongly current) indictment: "An American President can speak of warfare in outer space and nobody bursts out laughing -- he is perfectly serious. Science fiction and the comic strip have all suddenly come true" (NVA, p. 114). Writing five years later in "Faith and Violence" against the background of ghetto riots, but in a way that is virtually prescient of our relationship to the violence daily committed in Latin America, Merton reveals to his largely white, middle-class readership:

Modern technological mass murder is not directly visible, like individual murder. It is abstract, corporate, businesslike, cool, free of guilty feelings and therefore a thousand times more deadly and effective than the eruption of violence out of individual hate. It is this polite, massively organized white-collar murder machine that threatens the world with destruction, not the violence of a few desperate teen-agers in a slum. But our antiquated theology, myopically focused on *individual* violence alone, fails to see this. It shudders at the fantasm of muggings and killings where a mess is made on our doorstep, but blesses and canonizes the antiseptic violence of corporately organized murder because it is respectable, clean and above all profitable. (NVA, p. 188)

Just before his death, in an essay entitled "War and the Crisis of Language," Merton again pinpointed two grave problems that continue to fog our perception of the depth of the crisis we face. Exposing to view the technological jargon of our political and military planners, he first denounced the discourse of the White House and the Pentagon in starkly contemporary terms as "the language of escalation," which he calls

the language of power, a language that is all the more persuasive because it is proud of being ethically literate and because it accepts, as realistic, the basic irrationality of its own tactics. The language of escalation, in its superb mixture of banality and apocalypse, science and unreason, is the expression of a massive death wish. We can only hope that this death wish is only that of a decaying Western civilization, and that it is not common to the entire race. (NVA, p. 186)

Permit me a second reference from this same powerful essay which will, I trust, further illustrate the kind of prophetic clarity which Thomas Merton can be said to have suffered from.

4. Thomas Merton, "Events and Pseudo-Events: Letter to a Southern Churchman," *Katallagete*, Summer 1966, p. 12. Also published in *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 145-164. Hereafter referred to in the text as "ESE".

Looking at the use of language and its corruption regarding arms negotiations, our hermit describes the recent futile Geneva talks as if he were a political commentator present at them. He writes:

Of course, verbal formulas have to be resorted to, in order to define what force is all about, to set conditions, etc. But the verbal formulas must be kept deliberately ambiguous, unclear. The clear and unmistakable message is not that of the *terms offered* but of escalation itself. In other words there is an *appearance* of dialogue on the verbal and political level. But the real dialogue is with weapons and may be a complete contradiction of what appears to be said in the prose of politics.

The effect of this, of course, is a vicious circle: it begins with a tacit admission that negotiation is meaningless, and it does in fact render the language of negotiation meaningless. (*NVA*, pp. 243-244)

Thus, the scenario that Merton painted, which is even more apt than when he typed the words twenty years ago, brings us in truth close to elements of the society which Orwell himself painted. In Erich Fromm's words, that is a society in which "the military will become dominant (in fact, if not in law)" with the result "that fright and hatred of a possible aggressor will destroy the basic attitudes of a democratic, humanistic society".<sup>5</sup> We can say, then, that Merton's critique of our society and our economy's militarization is at least as pertinent today as it was when shaped by the events of the 1960s.

But to say that everything today is the same as when Merton wrote would be an oversimplification. Beginning in 1963, with the publication of *Pacem in Terris* by Pope John XXIII, a profound change began to overtake the Catholic Church of which Merton was such a critical yet convinced member. Before returning to a more specific look at the crisis we face, I would like to examine Merton's understanding of the emerging Catholic tradition on peacemaking as prelude to presenting a critique of some elements in the bishops' pastoral letter from Merton's perspective on the nature of the challenge of peace.

## 2. From *Pacem in Terris* to The Challenge of Peace

Commenting on John XXIII's final encyclical, Merton wrote that at least part of the significance of *Pacem in Terris* was its recognition that "Catholics themselves were to a great extent out of contact with the rest of the world, enclosed within their own spiritual and religious ghetto"

5. Erich Fromm, "Afterword" in George Orwell, 1984 (New York: Signet/ New American Library, 1961), p. 262.

(NVA, p. 30). The publication of the pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response* represents the closing of an initial twenty year cycle that Pope John opened in 1963 with his audacious letter on peace. Though alive for only five of these years, Merton, through his writings, has remained one of the major influences on both theologians and peace-oriented communities in the church and, therefore, can help us understand how it is that *Pacem in Terris* and the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* led Catholics out of their political ghetto and paved the way for the bishops' pastoral in this country. At the same time, an examination of a number of Merton's writings can reveal elements of the tradition which the 1983 letter of the American bishops, for all its strengths, has seriously neglected.

Thus, in a short while, I wish to take up an examination of whether *The Challenge of Peace* measures up to Merton's critique of our culture and, hence, whether it goes far enough in clarifying the real challenge with which "peace on earth" presents us. But, first, I wish to look at Merton's commentary on the papal encyclical and pastoral constitution of Vatican II.

Merton's regard for John XXIII and his profoundly human papacy needs little emphasis.<sup>6</sup> Seeing in the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* a mixture of the "sanity of Aquinas" and the "radiant hopefulness" of Francis, Merton understood it as an important step in the work of moral renewal so long overdue in the West (NVA, p. 61). By itself, the letter challenged a host of convenient dualisms by which Catholics, in general, and particularly those in this country were wont to store up treasures in heaven while at the same time engaging in capitalist conquest here below. What appealed to Merton was the Pope's essential fairmindedness -- something he felt was essential if a climate of relative sanity could be restored to the international scene. He defined such a climate in terms of people understanding their plight "without hatred, without fury, without desperation, and with a minimum of good will" (NVA, p. 23).

If this was to be accomplished it would be the result of an acceptance of the basic principles of the encyclical: "The dignity of the human person and the primacy of the universal common good over the particular good of the political unit" (NVA, p. 23). The essential condition of this acceptance was human freedom which is understood neither in classically "liberal" or "libertarian" terms but as an orientation to truth by which we can "transcend even the most tragic injustices" and be more truly human because of

---

6. See, for example, Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1968), p. 302.

them (NVA, 23). In other words, the more freedom of choice available in the capitalist West (but nearly absent in the collectivist East) is *not* enough to ensure the moral freedom necessary for us to make the choice to survive.

Blocking the moral freedom to which Pope John summoned us are the essentially self-righteous attitudes we cultivate towards our political and ideological opponents. The kinds of double standards that are used by both the Pentagon and Kremlin led Merton to observe that

the extremists on both sides are mirror images of each other . . . . The leaders help to make a myth by their own pronouncements and slogans and because the myth is so willingly believed by the common man they themselves assume that this is a kind of divine ratification. Vox populi vox Dei. (NVA, pp. 25-26)

A restoration of human freedom rests upon the rediscovery of how the truly human and personal is discovered and developed not through competition or in dialectic but in the communality by which we contribute to the upbuilding of a society of nations mutually seeking peace and security. *Pacem in Terris* makes the step forthrightly from condemning philosophical individualism to exposing the inadequacy of nationalist individualism and engages in a critique of governmental authority which makes the claim that no form of government or public authority adequately promotes the "universal common good" at this time in history (PT # 135).

Taking his cue from the Pope's teaching, Merton analyzes the concept of authority outlined there and finds both the Marxist and the positivist (or "value-free") solutions to political authority equally dependent on a pessimistic view of human nature. Both social systems that have emerged from them rely on their power to compel obedience by external force rather than on the establishment of an order of justice whose agency is freedom.

Pope John, by contrast, building upon the Christian concept of the human person, expressed confidence that the need for truth was "congenital" with human nature. As a result, granting the certain action of God on the "interior being," believers are exhorted to have the confidence to dialogue with non-believers because they both share "the light of reason" and an attraction to truth. This understanding of human nature redeemed in Christ is not only, from a theological point of view, what makes all people *capax Dei* but is also, from a political point of view, what makes us, in Merton's words, "capable of desiring peace with justice" (NVA, p. 60).

Merton developed this Christian and humanist anthropology both as a commentator on *Pacem in Terris* and the Pastoral Constitution and in his own writings. So impressed was he with the centrality of personalism in

these documents that he commented that the Constitution could have been entitled "The Human Person in the Modern World." For, it is precisely our personhood and the transcendent human freedom that we are capable of that enables us to overcome what Merton terms "natural necessity" and act in a way that brings a "fully human solution" to the age-old problem of conflict and violence. It is our freedom, activated mainly through nonviolence, that tells us that although "conflict will never be abolished . . . a new way of solving it can become habitual" (NVA, p. 217).

Freedom, then, results not merely from a natural state of the human person but from the grace we experience in Christ and in the resulting transcendent character of our human dignity. In the Pastoral Constitution, Merton writes, "The person is defined in terms of freedom, hence in terms of responsibility also: responsibility to other persons and for other persons." No longer is the Christian "confined merely to a realm of inwardness and of pure intentions. It is not just a matter of interior charity and good will." Rather the context of Christian responsibility requires that we find our true maturity and fulfillment in a relationship of love, in reconciling activity that encompasses "social action, political life, work, and all other practical choices that affect our relations with others in the family, the city, the nation, and the world." Freedom, in brief, is not freedom *from* constraint as much as it is freedom *for* human development (NVA, p. 217).

The Council's humanist vision opened up doors to what could be termed a new moral epistemology as well as a new sense of how we fulfill our moral character through global responsibility. From this renewed Christian understanding of humanism (GS # 55) flow the Constitution's conclusions that call for the proper use of science in human development, the extension of education and making available the sources of culture to all people, reforms in the unhappy state of the world's economy that so discriminates against developing peoples and, lastly, a new attitude towards the nation state whose dedication to certain notions of its independence and security have provoked what the Council called the "melancholy state of humanity" as this is evidenced in the arms race. Without rehearsing here the Constitution's stance on the arms race and the nuclear crisis, as well as its explicit commendation of nonviolence, I would just note how positive was Merton's own estimation of the "deeply traditional Christian humanism" of the Pastoral Constitution and its sense of urgency, some-

---

7. Thomas Merton, "Christian Humanism in the Nuclear Age," in *Love and Living*, edited by Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), pp. 151-170.



thing that his own writings in the last three years of his life increasingly emphasized.

To say that Merton was quicker than most Catholics to understand the import of the documents under discussion would be no exaggeration. The global perspective, not to mention the affirmative anthropology that was expressed in both were foreign elements in a young and proudly chauvinistic American church. But learn we have -- slowly, moved by two opposite pressures: one "from above" as Pope Paul VI continued spelling out the implications in social, political and economic life of the church's mission to be a sign of the joy and hope of humanity and especially of the poor (GS # 1); and by a second pressure "from below" as Catholics in Latin America and activist groups in the United States began incarnating the gospel message more radically. Both these pressures on the Church in general and the United States bishops in particular were to come to fruition during the otherwise somnolent '70s, budding forth at the November 1980 annual meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. By the time the process begun at that meeting was completed, the fruits of *Pacem in Terris* and *Gaudium et Spes* were more bountiful than ever before. The process of de-ghetto-izing which Pope John began had come very far.

Thus it was that the letter *The Challenge of Peace* took its very starting point from the Pastoral Constitution's treatment of the "supreme crisis" that the human race today faces "in its advance toward maturity" (GS # 77; CP # 1). Similarly, the letter attempts to teach in continuity with the central affirmation of Vatican II which it characterizes as "the transcendence of God and the dignity of the human person" and seeks, in the same ways as the Pastoral Constitution, to address not merely the community of the faithful but the civil community as well (CP # 17-19). The letter describes the Church's role as servant of peace in a new situation by noting that the history of Catholic teaching on war and peace had focused on limiting the resort to violence in human affairs, yet it admits that this task "is not a sufficient response" to Vatican II's challenge to "undertake a completely fresh reappraisal of war" (GS # 80; CP # 23).

Here, however, we must pause to comment that, although the bishops' pastoral letter was developed in clear continuity with its papal and conciliar antecedents, it adopted a humbler tone in its refusal to offer a "final synthesis" of the "new appraisal" of war and peace and in substituting "an invitation to continue" such an appraisal as well as in allowing that "those who assess the factual data of situations differently" could disagree with the letter's moral judgments. These features of the letter

were, no doubt, appropriate and even necessary given the lack of agreement on many issues with the episcopal conferences of some European countries and with many influential Catholics high in the government establishment of the United States.

Even here, it can be argued that the bishops had opted to leave their own episcopal ghetto and risk getting dirty in the political highways and byways. I cannot help but think that Merton, who himself addressed a letter to the bishops of the world before the final session of Vatican II in 1965, would heartily approve.

Beyond these general points of agreement the question can be raised whether *The Challenge of Peace* is as faithful to the personalist and humanist perspectives of John XXIII and the Vatican Council as it could be and whether it might not have profited more from Merton's critique of our political culture than it did. Hence, I wish to look at some of the premises adopted in *The Challenge of Peace* and compare them with Merton's understanding of Christian humanism as a way of determining how far we in the United States have to go in confronting the real challenge of peace on earth.

### 3. *The Challenge of Peace and Merton's Critique of Our Culture*

For all its explicit citation of *Pacem in Terris* and the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, I wish to inquire whether *The Challenge of Peace* draws out their implications or "incarnates" the elements of the Catholic tradition to which I alluded above as clearly as it could have. There are two sticking points for me which only my reading of Merton has helped to clarify. They deal with the concept of human freedom and with the latter's emphasis on "defending peace." Examining these issues against the background of Merton's understanding of freedom in the earlier documents will, I think, be instructive.

As part of its attempt to evaluate war with a new attitude and pay sufficient respect to human rights and human dignity, *The Challenge of Peace* calls for a sensitivity both "to the dangers of war and the conditions of

true freedom within which moral choices can be made. Peace, it affirms, "is the setting in which moral choices can most effectively be exercised" (CP 67). While paragraph 17 of the Pastoral Constitution is footnoted here in the bishops' letter, there is to my mind serious question whether the import of the Council's text is the same as that in the letter. For, as was noted in Merton's commentary above, the Constitution's notion of freedom is not something consequent upon the establishment of a peaceful societal arrangement, but part of the transcendent nature of human dignity that empowers us, even in adversity and persecution, to choose the good. Freedom is first of all our orientation to the truth, something that must be elicited, not forced or compelled. But, as the Council text notes, since our "natural" freedom has been damaged by sin, freedom can only come to "full flower" through the action of grace wherein we both discover and act upon the dignity of our restored human nature. Yet we accomplish this, not as one individual over against another, but as persons whose identity "in the image and likeness of God" defines us more deeply than any of the forces that divide us or put us at enmity. According to Merton, it is precisely this freedom that enables us "to transcend even the most tragic injustices" and be more truly human because of them (NVA, p. 13).

Somewhat diversely, the bishops' pastoral defines human freedom differently when it equates it with the notion of "human rights" which need to be protected as part of preserving peace in a society. Drawing upon statements of Pope John Paul II warning against "the false peace of totalitarian regimes" and ideologies that hold up the prospect of peace as easily attainable (CP # 78), the letter concludes that there are times when the presumption against war may be overridden "in the name of preserving the kind of peace which protects human dignity and human rights" (CP # 70).

Now there is no doubt that societies differ in their understanding of the exigencies of human dignity and the way human rights are best preserved for their members. Nor is there any doubt that some societal arrangements do a better job at translating basic human freedom into various political liberties. But when the pastoral letter reduces the notion of transcendent freedom to consequent free activity, it ends up adopting an understanding of "peace" that is somewhat self-serving.

What I am saying, if I may be blunt, is that the letter argues from a bourgeois American position that our society fulfills the conditions for peace and freedom and that "theirs" (read: "the Soviet Union") does not. It is because this is an underlying perspective, I believe, that we find in the pastoral letter so many references to "preserving the peace," "defending

and protecting peace," "defending society," etc. I am not objecting to the awareness that certain human rights are not enjoyed by most of the world's peoples, but rather that there is a tacit assumption throughout the letter (which is also expressed more openly, cf. 250-254) that we in the United States are in possession of the kind of freedom that ensures human dignity and, hence, of the gift of peace, but others, less fortunate than we, are not.

Frankly, I shudder at the task of questioning both this tacit assumption and explicit expression and, in the confines of this paper, I doubt I could do so sufficiently. I would dare to do so only because I can look to Thomas Merton for a franker appraisal of the political culture in which we live. His critique of the underlying "basically materialistic view of life," which anticipated Pope John Paul II's analysis in *Laborem Exercens* of the similarity between dialectical materialism and pragmatic materialism, would have benefited the bishops greatly in their analysis of how we are to "live the tension" between the kingdom and history (*NVA*, p. 117). But such a critique is sadly lacking, at least in this pastoral.

I have already stated more fully how Merton's understanding of Christian freedom is not so reductionist as that of the pastoral letter. His insistence that we need to be freed from some of our own operative mythologies is not easily heard, but attention to his religious and political writings will stand us in better stead to measure our religious and political crisis more accurately.

A first element we might note strikes at the heart of some popular American and Christian presuppositions. Merton writes:

It is a serious error to imagine that because the West was once largely Christian, the cause of Western nations is now identified, without further qualifications, with the cause of God. The incentive to do this, and to proceed on this assumption to a nuclear crusade to wipe out Bolshevism, may well be one of the apocalyptic temptations of twentieth century Christendom. (*NVA*, p. 14)

Even more pointedly, he stated:

The interests of the West, the NATO, and the Church are all confused with one another, and the possibility of defending the West with a nuclear first strike on Russia is accepted without too much hesitation as "necessary" and a "lesser evil." (*NVA*, p. 83)

I am *not* saying that these remarks by Merton are directly critical of the bishops and their pastoral. What I *am* saying is that the bishops underestimate the extent to which our society's attachment to nuclear weapons and our acceptance of their possession, if not their use, results from more than a practical or strategic consideration, but is woven into the warp and woof of our national self-identity. Again, it is Professor George Kennan who writes

so perceptively of the moral implications of our willingness to use these weapons when he claims that in 1945 and thereafter

we embraced nuclear weapons with enthusiasm, used them against the Japanese, took them to our hearts, and unwisely based our military posture very extensively upon their cultivation. And having done this, we proceeded to destroy not only our moral position but our possibilities of effective leadership in efforts for nuclear arms control by declining to renounce the principle of "first-use" -- by insistently reserving to ourselves, that is, the option of using these weapons in any serious military encounter, regardless of whether they were or were not used against us. (*Nuclear Delusion*, p. 184)

By contrast, the bishops' pastoral deals with the issue of "first use" (and clearly supports NATO's adopting a "no first use" policy) without any sense of how deeply ingrained in the mythology of "defending peace" such a policy is. Their treatment is an exercise in casuistry and is likely to draw the response of most casuistic moral reasoning: it may support the convinced but it rarely induces the "change of heart" that Merton and Kennan see required on this issue.

In like manner, a deeper look on the part of the pastoral letter at the reality, rather than the theory, of the "just war" might have been helpful. For, the pastoral's presumption that the "rigorous conditions" of the just war teaching regularly guide our military planners or political decision-makers is wholly gratuitous (the footnoted letter of William Clark notwithstanding). Again, Merton is the far greater realist. He writes in an essay entitled "Target Equals City" that

it took five years for war to turn the Christian ethic of the "just war" inside out . . . . A country begins a defensive "just war." It starts by declaring its firm adherence to the ethical principles held by its Church, and by the majority of its civilian population. The nation accepts unjust suffering heroically. But then the military begins to grow impatient, seeing that its own methods of retaliation are not effective. *It is the military that changes the policy.* The new, more ruthless policy pays off. The civilian protest is silenced before it begins. (*NVA*, p. 97)

This description of the situation in Britain during World War II was repeated, Merton claims, by Americans in the same war and, as we know, in the bloody conflict which we waged in Vietnam.

By failing to locate the "just war teaching" in either a historical or political context that admitted its dismal failures in the past, the bishops' pastoral overlooks an even more serious moral problem that should have been taken into account. And that is the extent to which just war teaching, in Merton's terms, "implicitly favors the claims of the powerful and self-seeking establishment against the common good of mankind or against the rights of the oppressed" (*NVA*, p. 187). This presumption in favor of

established and superior power is what we witnessed in Grenada, a crisis in which no one has bothered to examine whether the "rigorous conditions" of just war teaching, especially "just cause" and "last resort" were at all fulfilled. This presumption is even more the case in our country's arming tyrants who regularly violate not only the principle of "just war" but the even more basic principles of human rights and get away with it. In the absence of Merton's living voice we have had few with the penetrating insight to help us see ourselves as others, especially the poor, see us.

It has not been my desire to submit the bishops' pastoral to a thoroughgoing critique from the perspective of Merton's writing, but rather to inquire whether his understanding of elements in the Church's tradition would not have helped the bishops go further in their spelling out the challenge of peace. Much more could be said in this regard, but I wish here to draw out one more illustration of the viewpoint Merton developed over the years and that we today sorely miss. By and large, not many of us have a taste for the self-critical, but in such an important matter as an honest confrontation with the crisis we face Merton would have us confront our national self-idolatry more squarely.

In his 1966 Letter to a Southern Churchman entitled "Events and Pseudo-Events" he writes:

My thesis is now clear: in my opinion the root of our trouble is that our habits of thought and the drives that proceed from them are basically idolatrous and mythical. We are all the more inclined to idolatry because we imagine that we are of all generations the most enlightened, the most objective, the most scientific, the most progressive and the most humane. This, in fact, is an "image" of ourselves -- an image that is false and is also the object of a cult. We worship ourselves in this image. . . . In other words, instead of taking care to examine the realities of our political or social problems, we simply bring out the idols in solemn procession: "we are the ones who are right, *they* are the ones who are wrong. We are the good guys, *they* are the bad guys. We are honest, *they* are crooks . . ." If facts seem to conflict with images, then we feel we are being tempted by the devil, and we determine we will be blindly loyal to our images. To debate with the devil would be to yield. Thus in support of realism and objectivity, we simply determine beforehand that we will be swayed by no fact whatever that does not accord perfectly with our preconceived judgment. Objectivity becomes simple dogmatism.

As I say, we can see this mechanism at work in the Communists. We cannot see it in ourselves. ("ESE," p. 13)

By not looking deeply enough into our society's self-deceit, by pretending that we always "defend peace," by ignoring our exportation of violence to countries of the third world, by passing over a deeper understanding of human rights than is provided in the recital of the "range of

political freedoms" the Church enjoys (viz. the right to food, shelter, medical care and a job that so many in our society do *not* enjoy), the bishops run the risk of having their pastoral message seriously co-opted, domesticated and largely patronized into meaninglessness. The bishops should have read more of Merton than they did. My final remarks will center on one final problem I have with the pastoral letter, taking my cue from some passages in George Orwell's *1984*.

#### 4. *Doublethink and Deterrence: Is There a Way Out?*

Truly the most frightening element of the society portrayed in *1984* is the existence of "reality control" or what in Newspeak is called "doublethink." As it is described in the subversive's manual given to Winston Smith as part of the trap into which he falls,

doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them . . . . The process has to be conscious, or it would not be carried out with sufficient precision, but it also has to be unconscious, or it would bring with it a feeling of falsity and hence of guilt . . . .

The result for Oceania, the manual goes on to say is that

In our society those who have the best knowledge of what is happening are also those who are furthest from seeing the world as it is. In general, the greater the understanding, the greater the delusion: the more intelligent, the less sane.<sup>8</sup>

Now, while many might be reluctant to listen to a serious commentary from a work of fiction, there is every reason to agree with Erich Fromm in his "Afterword" to *1984* when he states "'doublethink' is already with us." To me it manifests itself most clearly in the "illogic of deterrence" which is as accurate an example of doublethink as we have produced.

Deterrence requires that we hold two contradictory beliefs simultaneously, i.e., that we produce quantities of offensive weapons and affirm that they are defensive. Deterrence requires both a conscious intention not to fire the weapons along with the unconscious intention to fire them if necessary. Keeping the intention to use these genocidal weapons unconscious is the chief way we avoid facing the falsity and hence guilt involved. This mental game, or what Michael Novak calls "the complex moral intentionality" of deterrence is flawed however, as is demonstrated by the inevitable

---

8. George Orwell, *1984* (New York: New American Library, 1981), pp. 176-177.

attempts to outwit one's opponent in the deterrence game through the development of first-strike weapons. In fact, our military planners today are fulfilling the scenario which Merton foresaw back in the 1960s when he wrote:

All the advantage goes to the force that strikes first, without warning. Hence, the multiplication of "hard" weapon sites, and "deep shelters" becomes provocative and instead of convincing the enemy of our invulnerability, it only invites a heavier preemptive attack by bigger bombs and more of them. (NVA, p. 117)

When the pastoral letter takes up the issue of deterrence, one has to be impressed by its attempt to engage the full range of issues from the factual character of the deterrent, to the historical development of the policy, to its role in the U. S.-Soviet confrontation and, finally, to the moral issues involved. But when all is said and done, the letter comes up with a "strictly conditioned moral acceptance" or, negatively stated, "lack of unequivocal condemnation" of deterrence, i.e., a moral judgment that leaves everyone exactly where they were before the issue was exhaustively examined. The fault is certainly not in the argument or in the intention of the framers but, I would claim along with Merton, in the premises of the argument. The pastoral clearly does not have the wherewithal to dethrone King Deterrence because it has accepted at the beginning an Augustinian model of the world "marked by sin and conflict of various kinds" (CP # 70), not merely as a physical description but as moral premises. Missing from the pastoral letter is the overarching optimism of *Gaudium et Spes* and its declaration:

Insofar as men are sinful, the threat of war hangs over them, and hang over them it will until the return of Christ. But insofar as men vanquish sin by a union of love, they will vanquish violence as well and make these words come true: *they shall beat their swords into ploughshares*, etc. (GS # 78)

In other words, the bishops' pastoral moves from a notion of the inevitability of evil to the more hardened position which Merton refers to as "the irreversibility of evil." This slippage results in the acceptance of the premises of deterrence and, because the letter casuistically moves about within them, it produces a *temporary* acceptance of deterrence with no end-term, nor are there any criteria articulated for the "strictly conditioned moral acceptance" of deterrence to reach a point where the conditions no longer hold. Thus, what the pastoral produced, and argues for masterfully, is a case for a *hypothetical deterrence*, a "clean" notion of deterrence deserving of extended treatment by political scientists and moralists. It does not consider deterrence in the real world, although it notes that there are "strong voices" who point out that deterrence "has not, in fact, set in



motion substantial processes of disarmament" (CP# 197). What the bishops do not deal with is that Deterrence and its fast-growing sibling First-Strike are the prime components of the "utterly treacherous trap for humanity" against which Vatican II called for "new approaches based on new attitudes" (CP # 81) -- a call the bishops only partially heeded.

The warning from George Orwell is this: in a world where social and economic systems are tied to continuous and escalating arms production, freedom and democracy are endangered. Merton, as well, said it clearly:

Those who think that they can preserve their independence, their civic and religious rights by ultimate recourse to the H-bomb do not seem to recognize that the mere shadow of the bomb may end by reducing their religious and democratic beliefs to the level of mere words without meaning, veiling a state of rigid and totalitarian belligerency that will tolerate no opposition. (NVA, p. 111)

Just as the Party in Orwell's 1984 kept the people in a constant state of frenzy and hate through their invocation of the enemy threat, so we are in danger right now of hardening our Christian and human sensitivities to accept a level of governmental control over the fate of the earth that is both unwise and immoral. Yet, the trap has been set and we have been heading towards it, protesting mildly or demurring internally, but towards the trap nonetheless. Is there a way out?

Allow me to share with you some of what I have learned from Merton and what I believe can be applied to the crisis that we face. I wish to sum up some of his observations and draw specific suggestions from them.

The first recognition that is necessary is a renewed affirmation that the evil of the arms race is not irreversible, nor is the current animosity between the United States and the Soviet Union an expression of God's will or some cosmic divine plan. Hence, it too *can* and *must* change. Let us listen to Merton for a bit when he warns us that

modern tyrannies have all explicitly or implicitly in one way or other emphasized the *irreversibility of evil* in order to build their power upon it . . . . It is no accident that Hitler believed firmly in the unforgivableness of sin.<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, Merton draws on Thomas Aquinas to develop a deeper understanding of the mystery of evil: "Evil is not only reversible but it is the proper motive of that mercy by which it is overcome and changed into good." But this requires that we first disarm our own hearts. Merton says, "Only the admission of defect and fallibility in oneself makes it possible for one to become merciful to others" (GNV, pp. 11-12).

---

9. Thomas Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965), pp. 11-12. Hereafter referred to in the text as GNV.

The discovery of a deep "sympathy" for others, responsible like ourselves for the tyrannical and oppressive arms race, is the first step to enacting the transcendent freedom that best corresponds to human dignity. This freedom sets us at liberty from the project of establishing our own righteousness over against those who are sinners. This understanding of our predicament and our liberation from it yields some conclusions that we need to spell out. Once again, Merton advises that

the evils we suffer cannot be eliminated by a violent attack in which one sector of humanity flies at another in destructive fury. Our evils are common and the solution of them can only be common. (*GNV*, p. 16)

If we can come to a new, common understanding of our predicament, it will help to create the climate of sanity which Pope John XXIII tried to restore in addressing *Pacem in Terris* to all people of good will. The brief flirtation with such a political climate in the '70s proved only to be a public relations ploy in a political power game. It had no roots and so withered in the heat of conflict. How, then can we move from where we are to renewed sanity? Allow me to articulate some suggestions, based on Merton's understanding of nonviolent actions which seeks "to change relationships that are evil into others that are good, or at least less bad" (*GNV*, p. 13). The "at least less bad" reminds us that Merton is no doctrinaire pacifist, but an extremely creative thinker whose nonviolence is not pragmatic but is always practical and realistic. If these suggestions possess more than an element of truth, they may demonstrate, beyond the pastoral letter, not merely the "value of nonviolence" but the necessity of it both on a personal and societal level.

My first suggestion is that as citizens we need to change the current climate in which our political leaders can crank out so much hate propaganda against the Soviet Union and its leaders. The insults, often delivered in the name of human rights, are patently hypocritical both because our support of human rights in the other parts of the world is clearly ambiguous and because our denigration of the Soviet Union offends against the dignity of another nation and its peoples no matter how deep the differences are between us.

Secondly, if our initial attempt to restore the climate of sanity requires that we no longer cooperate with the purveyance of self-righteous myths, our next step involves a more direct non-cooperation with the evil of the arms race and the politics that supports it. If the first step is to disarm our hearts, our second is democratically to disarm the mechanism of evil itself -- the testing, production and deployment of new tactical and strategic weapons. In the May 1983 meeting of the National Conference of

Catholic Bishops, Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen proposed that the Church make a "preferential option for noncooperation" which, as the crisis caused by the most recent deployments of missiles in Europe and off our shores demonstrates, cannot be considered a luxury, but increasingly a duty. As it becomes obvious that the current administration does not intend to heed any of the policy recommendations of the bishops, noncooperation with this evil becomes a necessity. Morally speaking, the burden of proof that more and deadlier weapons are required lies with the government and the moguls of the arms industry, not with those who refuse to pay a portion of their taxes to support the murderous spiral of preparation for cosmocide. Our opposition to this spiral must be visible and demonstrable as well as loving. Prayer vigils, fasts, and witnesses at research and production facilities are essential if the good news of peace is going to have a chance to save us.

Thirdly, we must begin to act even beyond the recognition that "objective mutual interests do exist between the superpowers" (CP # 255). While this coldly rational approach is superior to the current setting of official disdain, it cannot bring about the kind of change necessary for disarming the mutual hostility and suspicion that has been built up on both sides. The prevention of a nuclear conflict is the first step on the way to building a just world order, but such a world order is not going to be built merely upon "what justice can provide." It can only result from what Vatican II called "the fruit of love" (GS # 78).

Gustavo Gutierrez reminds us that, although "justice" and "love . . . do not often come up in the language of political science . . . the use of the terms . . . recalls to our minds that we are speaking of real human persons."<sup>10</sup> Rediscovering our own common humanity with people constantly portrayed as our enemy is not a mental trick or spiritual intention devoid of concrete actions. It requires "new approaches" that will strain our present categories to their limit.

And so, finally, I wish to propose two "new approaches" or initiatives for nonviolent actions that can seek to enact justice and love in the face of conflict today. The first is more "at home" than directed as far as the Soviet Union, and it takes into account another "preferential option" -- this one "for the poor" which the Church in Latin America made at Medellin in 1968 and reaffirmed at Puebla in 1978. We North American Christians have a burden of repentance to enact for the generations of exploitation in which

---

10. Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings*; translated from the Spanish by Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979), p. 50.

we have cooperated with the peoples of Central and South America. One concrete way that we can engage in a living witness to our solidarity with the struggle of the poor for dignity and a role in their own social, religious and political development is to support or join in the "Witness for Peace," a grassroots, Christian effort to offer nonviolent resistance to both covert and overt U. S. intervention in Nicaragua. Details can be found in the November 1983 issue of the magazine *Sojourners*.

A second initiative I wish to present to make a first step out of the current impasse is that we encourage a whole range of groups, professional and academic, religious and political to follow the example of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and arrange meetings with their counterparts in the Soviet Union. Overcoming our mutual defensiveness seems unlikely on the governmental level, so we must ask the people to act for themselves and the future. In this way, we can begin to demonstrate how anachronistic purely national governmental institutions are in an age of international relationships. Therefore, against the cultural, historical, political and ideological barriers that separate us we must launch an assault of people of good will from both sides. Why cannot the National Conference of Catholic Bishops request a top level meeting with the Russian Orthodox Church akin to Pax Christi International's consultations to air mutual misunderstanding and build a common hope for peace between Christians, at least? A similar meeting with Soviet and Baptist groups would be of great mutual benefit. And what about university presidents? union leaders? feminists? students?

If we Christians believe that "Christ is our peace who has made the two of us one by breaking down the barrier that kept us apart" (Ephesians 2:14), then we must enact our unity lest the hostility to which we are prone have the last and disastrous say.

Finally, nothing in the current crisis of world conflict will change unless we change. We must rediscover our freedom to act in the face of the enormous evil that confronts us. Once we begin to enact that freedom we will no longer merely be defending the "peace of a sort" that is only another form of oppression, but we can take up the ceaseless process of building up peace (GS # 77), knowing in Merton's words that "love triumphs, at least in this life, not by eliminating evil once and for all but by resisting and overcoming it anew every day" (GNV, p. 13).