

War: Reversing the Works of Mercy¹

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Hope surged through the hearts of many millions of human beings as the world entered the last decade of the Twentieth Century on January 1, 1990. Peace had broken out as a seemingly impregnable barrier slashing through the European continent was dismantled by innumerable acts of nonviolence. The stockpiles of weapons directed from West to East and East to West, weapons that threatened humankind, had lost their justification.

Yet by January 16, 1991, the world was at war. The United States, the remaining super-power, led the fateful move to utilize high technology warfare to dislodge the Iraqi army from its occupation of Kuwait. “It is a just war,” the President of the United States told the Convention of Religious Broadcasters on January 28, 1991. He spoke as the bombing of Iraq was at its height.

Citing Ambrose, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas, President George Bush told the broadcasters that the war in the Persian Gulf was more than just; it was noble. It was a last resort, and had as its aim “keeping casualties to the minimum.” While the war was not concerned with religion “per se,” the president asserted, “It has everything to do with what religion embodies—good vs evil, right vs. wrong, human dignity, and freedom vs. tyranny and oppression.” An ovation greeted the president’s speech. By contrast, Pope John Paul II opposed the Gulf war in dozens of public statements, calling it “a decline for all humanity.”

The admonition of the U.S. bishops in the peace pastoral of 1983 called for Catholics to view war “with an entirely new attitude.” This new attitude must take into account that the protection of noncombatants in wartime has been shown for the fiction that it is. It must take into account that when just war criteria are co-opted by political leaders to serve their war purposes, Christians need to live by criteria more ancient than those of the just war in judging the morality of participation in bloodshed.

In the early centuries of Christianity, the followers of Jesus had no just war criteria, only the message of Jesus regarding love. This was a new form of love, unconditional and one that reached out not only to neighbor but to the one called “enemy.” The command to love demands expression

in actions, in meeting the needs of fellow human creatures, feeding the hungry among them, giving drink to the thirsty, sheltering the shelterless, serving and consoling the sick, and visiting those imprisoned. These works of mercy are the means by which the followers of Jesus are united with him, but he must be recognized in the identity he chose. "I am the hungry one," he made clear in the parable of the Last Judgment, "I am thirsty one; I am the shelterless, suffering one, the one in prison." Mercy, as love under the aspect of need, cannot be withheld from Jesus in his most "distressing disguise," that of the enemy.

In past wars, the works of mercy were interrupted. For example, the hungry across an enemy border would not be fed for the duration. In modern war the works of mercy are obscenely reversed, thus hurting non-combatants and putting at risk their future welfare and even survival. The Gulf War brought home even more intensely this reality of modern warfare, highlighting what happens to those children of God who happen to be on the opposing side in a war called "just," a war utilizing "all necessary means" towards a "new world order."

I was hungry

Food rationing came to the people of Iraq in September 1990, a month after the invasion of Kuwait. Sanctions brought grave shortages to a people dependent on imports for 70% of food needs. The six-week bombardment disrupted the rationing system. Not only were food stocks depleted but with almost all railroad and other bridges destroyed, supplies could not be brought to distribution centers. The U.N. survey team found that basic supplies of flour, rice, and vegetable oil were at critically low levels, or in some areas, exhausted. When a baby milk factory was destroyed in a bombing raid, the military defended the action by claiming that it was a disguised chemical warfare plant. That it was an infant formula plant was attested to by the French company which constructed it.

Mothers were forced to obtain a doctor's prescription to draw on the drastically limited supply of baby formula. Interviews with physicians at hospitals and health care centers by the Harvard study, "Iraq Faces Public Health Catastrophe," revealed that malnutrition was so widespread that an estimated 55,000 children had perished by early May 1991. In the coming year, they estimated that at least 170,000 children would succumb to the delayed effects of the Gulf war, effects related directly to refusal by the coalition partners to lift the trade embargo on Iraq. The United States

attached an extra condition to the lifting of the embargo, namely that Saddam Hussein be deposed. Meanwhile, shriveled infants and children were the victims.

Should conditions continue without substantial change, the Harvard study predicted famine conditions among the eighteen million Iraqi people as a whole. On Impact assailed the “air of total indifference (that) exists on the part of the U.S. government to respond to questions about the human and environmental destruction.” News from post-war Iraq focused not on hunger, however, but on the investigation into Iraq’s nuclear potential. While the goal of a nuclear-free Middle East is of the utmost importance to a peaceful world, the survival of war-afflicted civilians is also deserving of media attention.

I was thirsty

The most horrendous act of war inflicted on the Iraqi people was the contamination of the drinking water. The Harvard study concluded that the “key to the public health disaster was the destruction of the electrical system by U.S. and allied bombing.” Water pumping and filtering plants ceased functioning, as did sewage disposal plants. Untreated sewage had to be dumped into the Tigris River, a source of the water supply. Attempts to purify the polluted water by boiling were made difficult by lack of fuel.

In some areas the population was reduced to drawing its water from polluted streams or trenches. As a stopgap, the International Red Cross imported a few tons of chlorine to purify the water supply of Baghdad. Fifty tons of chlorine a day were needed to make some impact on the water contamination disaster of the country as a whole.

The eventual restoration of the water system depends on reconstruction of the power generating system. While at the end of the Gulf war, only two of Iraq’s twenty generating plants were in operation, a few of the incapacitated power stations were being restored to partial function through cannibalization of equipment from other power plants. “Many generating facilities were destroyed beyond repair,” the Harvard study reports. Only the lifting of the embargo on trade to permit massive imports of spare parts and construction materials for Iraq’s electrical power system will make it possible for the people of Iraq to satisfy their thirst without imperiling their health. No one ventured to predict when this most basic of human needs would be met.

I was sick and suffering

“Bomb now—Die later,” accurately described the fate of the Iraqi people stalked by cholera and typhoid and served by a devastated medical system. Iraq’s health care network, according to the Harvard study, was a comprehensive one, reaching more than 90% of the population. It comprised close to a thousand hospitals and community health centers. Iraqi doctors, accustomed to the latest medical facilities—many of them trained in the West—spoke of their despair at trying to save lives in hospitals without electricity. The most urgent operations had to be performed by the light of kerosene lanterns. “Can you imagine doing a Caesarian section in this situation?” a gynecologist asked.

One of the Kuwaiti atrocity tales recounted as a reason for war was the removal of premature infants from incubators by the Iraqis. Post-war investigation proved that this had not happened. What did happen was that when electricity failed in a Baghdad pediatric hospital after the bombardment, large numbers of premature infants died in their incubators.

How much could doctors accomplish in surroundings such as those reported by the Harvard team? “In Baghdad, Basra, and Kirkuk, the study team observed neighborhood streets filled with foul-smelling unsanitary sewage and other wastes. Children walked and played in stagnant, waste-contaminated pools of water. Garbage collection also ceased due to a shortage of fuel for trucks, and consequently streets are littered with rubbish.”

“Sanctions were never designed to make people suffer the way they are suffering now,” were the words of Sadruddin Aga Khan after assessing the humanitarian needs of Iraq. The mission he headed pointed to unmet medical needs, reminding the U.N. Security Council charged with lifting or retaining sanctions, that Iraq had normally spent \$500 million a year on importing medical supplies. Without access to foreign exchange, hospitals were shutting down operating rooms. X-ray and other urgently needed equipment could not function without replenishment.

I was homeless

According to the U.N. survey, relatively few Iraqis were made homeless by the war action itself—an estimated 72,000 people. However, the tragedy of homelessness that eventually arose from the Gulf War reached monumental proportions, affecting over five million human beings.

After the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and the massing of a half-million U.S. soldiers with alarming war potential in Saudi Arabia, foreign workers in Iraq and Kuwait took flight. Among

them were 700,000 Egyptians and nearly a million Asians, including Indians, Bangladeshi, and Filipinos, along with a quarter of a million Jordanians and Palestinians. Saudi Arabia, whose border the U.S. troops were shielding, expelled 900,000 Yemeni workers into their poor homeland. Some of the Yemenis had expressed pro-Iraq sentiments; others were suspected of harboring them. There was no judicial procedure, simply a mass expulsion. It attracted little attention, the decision having been taken by Saudi authority—an allied state which followed a one-man, one-vote policy—that of King Fahd.

The personal misery of those in the tidal wave of refugees was compounded by the misery of their families whose very lives depended on the remittances they sent home. Liberated Kuwait added to Mideast homelessness by expelling its Palestinian population, many of them Kuwaiti-born.

Iraqi homelessness reached a crescendo that horrified the world when in the wake of the war, the Kurds and Shiites rose up against Saddam Hussein. Would not the rhetoric of the U.S. president embolden any dissident segment of the population to take up arms? The unfortunates, numbering as many as two million were then forced to take refuge in inhospitable mountain areas of Iraq, in Turkey or in Iran.

Repentance

While millions of Americans in communities throughout the U.S. exulted in victory celebrations, there were others who chose to take part in services of repentance. After the great victory parade along Wall Street on June 10, 1991, members of Pax Christi Metro New York trod the same route to reclaim it for a spirit of peace. Their march ended with prayers of repentance at the Catholic Chapel of New York University on Washington Square. Those who stressed the need for repentance were no less grateful for the safe return of the warriors from the Gulf than those who rejoiced in victory. They had not wished that the soldiers' lives be put at risk in the first place.

Some would ask, Why we should repent? Did not Iraq, in addition to the invasion of Kuwait, commit "emotional terrorism"? The Greenpeace report counters with a question, "Is it acceptable to destroy a modern society's way of life through the destruction of electricity production, water purification, and fuel distribution, yet unacceptable to destroy oil wells?" Its reply, given in the conclusion of *On Impact*, is one that should make supporters of the just war pause. "People who live in cities, in modern societies, are dependent for their lives, not just for their comfort, on such

support systems. Thus, their destruction is as much de facto terror bombing as destruction of oil wells is environmental terrorism.”

Since all morality is unilateral, we must take responsibility for the actions done in our name and with our taxes, and repent for them even as we deplore the actions of the other side. Surely we should repent for the long drawn out deprivation visited on the noncombatants in Iraq. Should we not also repent for the grisly death inflicted on some tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers, most of them young foot-soldiers—not elite guards or officers—in the short ground war? Deprived of communication by the electrical blackout, many did not know there was a ceasefire. Those who emerged hungry and shoeless from their bunkers were suffocated and charred beyond recognition by fire bombs. Those who did not know that they were to surrender without their tanks and weaponry were incinerated from above on the “highway of death” leading north from Kuwait.

Their slaughter was such an easy matter that it evoked one of the unforgettable phrases of the Gulf War, a phrase describing the killing of those unable to escape: “It was a turkey shoot.” It was six months after the end of the war that a leaked story forced the U.S. army to confirm one of the unspeakable horrors of the ground war—that Iraqi soldiers were buried alive in their trenches by tanks and armored combat earthmovers.

Should we not see these casually killed soldiers, and all drafted soldiers, as hapless victims? The United States, justifiably proud of the low death rate of its service personnel (148 soldiers dead, 48 by “friendly fire”) has not issued even a reliable estimate of Iraqis killed in the ground war.

For all this mercilessness, we, as followers of Jesus, need to repent. We do not need sack cloth and ashes like the people of Nineveh, but we must find actions more relevant for our time.

Reject “Just War”

The first act of repentance (not forgetting prayer and fasting), would be to publicly reject the just war tradition. More Catholics must be reminded, if they ever knew, that Ambrose and Augustine grafted it on to Christian thinking from Roman philosophy. They found it in the work of the great Cicero. Aquinas and others built on their formulations, abstract formulations that have no application to technological methods of destruction undreamed of in the Fifth or Thirteenth Centuries. As Adolfo Perez Esquivel, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, stated, “There are plenty

of just causes for war; what we lack are just means.” Just war thinking has become in our time the great myth that we kill by.

Dorothy Day, testifying in 1976, America’s bicentennial year, at a hearing on “Liberty and Justice for All,” emphasized one word, “Repent.” She asked members of the Church to repent for “all the wars we have lived through.” The Catholic Worker, led by Dorothy, lived by “the daily practice of the works of mercy,” and did not accept that war should interrupt or reverse them in dealing with the “enemy.” She urged Christians to imitate Jesus’s method of reconciliation and expunging evil, the acceptance of suffering rather than the infliction of it on others.

After resistance by word and deed to the U.S.-engineered descent into the Gulf war, Pax Christi USA raised questions of supreme urgency. It is to be hoped that large numbers of Catholics, in particular, citizens of the most powerful military nation on earth, will face the question, “Has modern warfare made the just war theory obsolete?” The Pax Christi statement, “Aftermath of War: Unanswered Questions,” asserts that “the just war criteria provided no clear moral guidance during the Persian Gulf War.”

Pointing to the fact that such just war criteria as proportionality, probability of success, and right intention can never be assessed before a war starts, Pax Christi poses the crucial question, “Doesn’t the Persian Gulf War show that the just war theory is only good for historical analysis?”

Many have realized that only after corpses are smoldering or vaporized, only after villages and cities have been ruined or the life supports of a people destroyed can there be a decision as to the justice of a given war. Sometimes it takes generations for war-making powers to admit that just war criteria were not met; more often, the question is left open for historians to argue over.

Such evidence for the Gulf War was not long in coming. The claim made by the U.S. president that bloodshed was a last resort was disproved within days of the war’s ending. On March 2, 1991, a headline in the *New York Times* announced, “From the First, U.S. Resolved to Fight.” Readers learned that while administration officials were insisting from August 1990 that U.S. troops were simply a Desert Shield for Saudi Arabia against Iraq, the offensive military campaign of Desert Storm was being planned. The war was not a last resort, as the president claimed, but a first resort, a crucial fact not revealed to the American people.

Such revelations are moving many Christians to relinquish their trust in just war criteria and the uses to which they can be put by war-making governments.

The relinquishing of the power that just war thinking has held over the minds of Catholics, and in fact over most Christian bodies except for the “historic peace churches,” may allow the real evil of war to show its face. It is war that effectively displaces love, and its expression in the works of mercy, from its centrality in Christian conduct. It is only when this love, including love of the one called “enemy” is displaced, that opponents can be dehumanized, depersonalized, as the first step to their destruction. Totally obscured is the vision of the human person as the image of the Creator, as kin to the Son of Man who out of love took on our flesh and blood and bone.

It is only when we recover the vision of each person as one for whom a Person died that we can glimpse the infinite inviolable sacredness of each human creature. With this vision, we may see that when we refuse to love those called “enemies,” doing to them, or allowing to be done to them, all possible harm, we cannot claim to love the Creator. Without this vision, we and they may indeed perish.

Where can we turn if this vision moves us to refuse to harm or kill any child of God, and if we resist governmental preparations for such evils? We can turn to the already-mentioned pre-just war period of the early Church. We can turn to the teachings of the bishops, priests, theologians, and lay Christians who spoke for a truly historic peace church. Hewing close to the gospel, they saw peace as the central core of the message of Jesus. St. Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, told the faithful, “Bear in mind that Christ is Peace. We shall prove that we are rightly called Christians, then, if our life bears witness to Christ through the peace that is in us. [...] Let us reconcile not only those who oppose us from without, but also those which cause inner disturbance in us: flesh and spirit.”

Such teachings strengthened the soldier-martyrs like Maximilian, who chose death rather than to take life in warfare, and Martin of Tours, who braved death by refusing in the midst of war to kill the enemy. The works of Cyprian, Lactantius, and many others helped transform the Christians of their times into the “new creature” called for by the gospel of Jesus.

The contemplation of the lives and teachings of such ancestors in the faith provide the nourishment necessary for the transformation from reliance on violence to trust in the power of God. Such transformation, as all spiritual change, can only be fed from the springs of contemplation.

Note

1. Published originally in *Pax Christi USA* Winter 1991, 4–7, 37. Eileen Egan, co-founder of Pax Christi USA and long-time member of the Catholic Worker, was one of those who vigiled in prayer and fasting during Vatican II in Rome urging the bishops to condemn war as immoral.