

# Straining Every Muscle For Peace

In the months leading up to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, as the drumbeat for war was becoming louder by the day, the late Pope John Paul II was tireless in denouncing this immoral act of aggression. He echoed the convictions of millions of people across the globe, by challenging the deceptive rationale for war, and by calling the international community to its higher vocation as stewards of peace. As he memorably stated, “War is always a failure.” Indeed the past five years of death and bloodshed have tragically shown the truth of his words. The pleas for peace were ignored, leading to the disaster which continues today.

Now, five years later, we hear the drumbeat once again, this time threatening military action against Iran. The fear that Iran, or *any* other nation, will acquire nuclear weapons should be of concern to all. According to a report of the Union of Concerned Scientists, a growing number of international leaders are warning of a “dangerous nuclear era.” They reject a military attack on Iran as the solution to nuclear proliferation. Such an attack would inevitably lead to a region-wide conflagration, with catastrophic consequences for the peoples of the Middle East and for the world. Rather, they are calling for the United States to transparently embrace, and take specific steps toward, the goal of *a world free of nuclear weapons*, and for courageous international efforts to promote disarmament and prevent further proliferation of these horrible weapons.

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*Emmanuel—  
God with us*

**The preferential option  
for peace is not “optional”  
for the followers of Jesus.**

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However, while denouncing Iran’s suspected intentions, the U.S. Department of Defense is proposing a “new generation” of nuclear weapons—the so-called “Reliable Replacement Warhead”—and the rebuilding of the nation’s entire nuclear weapons arsenal. Likewise, the U.S. government has never foresworn the policy of “first use” of these weapons of mass destruction, insisting that “all options are on the table.” This double-standard, by its very nature, invites the acquisition of nuclear weapons by other states or terrorist groups. This situation is morally indefensible. The United States and all other “nuclear powers” are bound to lead *by example*, not through brute force.

The teaching of the church is unequivocal in this matter. The bishops gathered together at the Second Vatican Council (at the height of the first nuclear arms race) declared: "While extravagant sums are being spent for the furnishing of ever new weapons, an adequate remedy cannot be provided for the multiple miseries afflicting the whole modern world. Disagreements between nations are not really and radically healed. On the contrary, other parts of the world are infected with them. The arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity. It is much to be feared *that if this race persists, it will eventually spawn all the lethal ruin whose path it is now making ready*. ... It is our clear duty to strain every muscle as we work for the time when all war can be completely outlawed by international consent."

The bishops continued, "Today, the building of peace demands that world leaders ...put aside national selfishness and ambition to dominate other nations, and that they nourish a profound reverence for the whole of humanity."<sup>1</sup>

Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus*, reinforced the teaching of the Council: "I myself, on the occasion of the recent tragic war in the Persian Gulf [the first Gulf War], repeated the cry, 'Never again war!' No, never again war, which destroys the lives of innocent people, teaches how to kill, throws into upheaval even the lives of those who do the killing, and leaves behind a trail of resentment and hatred, thus making it all the more difficult to find a just solution of the very problems which provoked the war. ... For this reason, another name for peace is *development*. Just as there is a collective responsibility for avoiding war, so too there is a collective responsibility for promoting development."<sup>2</sup>

As citizens of the United States, we must hear these words as directed, first of all, to us and our leaders. We must allow the light of conscience to pierce the darkness of our own nuclear arsenals and policies. "Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their populations is a crime against God and humanity. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation. *The unique hazard of modern warfare consists in this: it provides those who possess modern scientific weapons with a kind of occasion for perpetrating just such abominations*."<sup>3</sup>

Like the preferential option for the poor, the preferential option for peace is not "optional" for the followers of Jesus. Our baptismal commitment *requires* that we *prevent* war, and "strain every muscle" in the work of global reconciliation. As the calls for war against Iran increase, and as the nuclear arms race grows unabated, let our voices echo the pleas of John Paul II

and billions of Earth's peoples. We must not succumb, once again, to the utter moral bankruptcy of war. We must not willingly blind ourselves to war's victims, whose lives are destroyed and then callously dismissed as "collateral damage."

Nothing less than a national conversion is required of us. ☒

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<sup>1</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, paragraphs 80, 81.

<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus*, paragraphs 18, 52.

<sup>3</sup> *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, paragraph 82.

