

Catholic Bishops in the United Kingdom and United States Speak on War against Iraq

Statement on Iraq by Catholic Bishop's Conference of England and Wales 14th November 2002

1. War is a route from which there is no return. The need to avoid war is a cornerstone of Christian teaching. The UK and the USA are currently preparing to send their armed forces into war. If there is war, as well as military casualties on both sides thousands of Iraqi civilians will die. It is our moral responsibility to avoid this war unless, in the face of a grave and imminent threat, there is no other possible means to achieve the just end of disarming Iraq.

2. Military action can only be a last resort. We recognise United Nations Security Council Resolution 1441 as the legitimate expression of the international community collective determination to disarm Iraq. At the same time we strongly urge the international community to pursue alternatives to war before it is too late.

3. Sanctions have not worked. They have imposed a decade of misery on ordinary people whilst allowing an exploitative regime to sustain itself in power. It is time to find a policy that offers Iraq a positive incentive to comply with the demands of the Security Council. In return for genuine disarmament, monitored and verified by the United Nations, the lifting of comprehensive sanctions, and the reintegration of Iraq into the international community, is the route which must now be explored.

4. Grief for those killed and wounded in war will be the more agonising if their loss results from an armed conflict that could have been avoided without compromise to the common good. We pray that both sides step back from the brink of war. Along with our fellow bishops in other countries we ask our Catholic community and all people of faith to join us in this prayer.

WASHINGTON, Nov. 13 — Roman Catholic bishops in the United States issued a statement today saying that they cannot now find a moral justification for a pre-emptive war against Iraq because there is no adequate evidence that Iraq is about to attack.

The bishops, gathered here on the third day of their annual fall meeting, urged the United States government and the world to "continue to pursue actively alternatives to war." They said that an attack on Iraq did not meet the Catholic tradition's criteria for a "just war," in part because such a war could create more "evils and disorders" than it would eliminate.

They said that a war against Iraq could cause more suffering to Iraqi civilians, provoke wider conflict and instability in the region and detract from the effort to stabilize Afghanistan and prevent terrorism elsewhere.

"We continue to find it difficult to justify the resort to war against Iraq, lacking clear and adequate evidence of an imminent attack of a grave nature," the bishops' statement says. "With the Holy See and bishops from the Middle East and around the world, we fear that resort to war, under present circumstances and in light of current public information, would not meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching for overriding the strong presumption against the use of military force."

In introducing the statement for the bishops' consideration today, Cardinal Bernard F. Law of Boston, chairman of the bishops' international affairs committee, said that the statement "does not ignore Iraq's dangerous behavior, intentions and threats."

"We call on the government of Iraq to comply with the world's legitimate demands," Cardinal Law said.

The bishops debated an amendment from Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit pledging the "prayerful support" of the bishops to military personnel who "conscientiously dissent from a choice for war."

Bishop John J. Kaising, an Auxiliary Bishop of the military services who is also a veteran, objected to Bishop Gumbleton's amendment, saying: "If we pass this, does that mean that those who do not object and who go because their units are going and their commanders say they've got to go, does that mean they're wrong? I don't think we can do that to a soldier, sailor or marine who follows his commander in chief."

The final statement included a compromise in which the bishops said: "We support those who risk their lives in the service of their nation. We also support those who seek to exercise their right to conscientious objection."

The bishops' statement praises the United States for winning the unanimous support of the United Nations' Security Council for a resolution calling on Iraq to disarm.

The bishops said they would pray that the United Nations action "will not simply be a prelude to war but a way to avoid it."

*Full text from Pax Christi or
www.nccbuscc.org/bishops/iraq.htm*

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Homily of Rt Rev Thomas Burns, Bishop of the Armed Forces
Remembrance Sunday - Aldershot 10th November 2002

On this Remembrance Sunday, when we pray for peace, it is ironic that we seem to be preparing again for war. Here I talk of a pre-emptive strike, but this will demand a moral justification that will be difficult to find. Certainly, unilateral action is not to be preferred. But, the imminence of any threat has still to be verified. We have to be careful that taking military action does not trigger the very instability in the Middle East that everyone is trying to avoid. Although it may satisfy legitimacy, a UN resolution could still have immoral implications. For, the objective appears changeable (e.g. *regime change* has been replaced by disarming Iraq). Genuine purpose (e.g. removing a serious *threat*) can become compromised by self-interest (e.g. *securing oil supplies*). The question has to be asked: What benefits will hostilities bring that will improve the current situation?

Moving against Iraq brings no guarantee that terrorist incidents or suicide bombings will be reduced or eliminated. Some might say, on the contrary, that the risk of further terrorism is increased. There is a danger that a war that is seen as winnable may become a useful diversion from helplessness in the face of bombers and terrorist, because world leaders will feel satisfied that they have done something. No comment has been made on the destruction caused by trade embargoes and thousands of missiles that already are ranged against Iraq. If they have achieved some good because of evil avoided, then for how much longer must this go on? Have negotiations reached the point of last resort? What is there about going to war that will achieve something that has not been achieved already?

Ethical theories about war speak of the *jus ad bellum* and the *jus in bello*. The *jus ad bellum* is the right to go to war for some just cause. The *jus in bello* is the right way to fight such a war. Where the *jus ad bellum* remains in doubt, or is at least blurred, then the conduct of a war might create an evil of enormous gravity or bring consequences that are *out of all proportion* to the good and proper things that are being sought or defended. This could have links back to considering the validity of the *jus ad bellum*. It could bring into question the very right to go to war in the first place.

The families, friends, and loved ones of those killed and wounded will grieve all the more if the losses they face result from a non-credible cause. Service people want to know that they are decent people, carrying out decent orders, given to them by decent superiors. The prospect of British troops arriving home from war in body-bags is never acceptable, though sadly it is often inevitable. The burden may be easier to carry if they have died in a just cause, in pursuit of something believed in, in defence of a widely embraced principle. When a bereaved family ask me if their loved one died in a just cause, I want to be able to reply unequivocally: YES. When they say: *Was it worth it?* I want to be able to look them in the eye and say without hesitation: *Yes, it surely was.* War diminishes countries on both sides, for a peaceful solution has not been found, and it is the innocent and helpless who suffer. Can this situation be avoided? It has to be.