

Are The Leaders Insane?

Dorothy Day

The Catholic Worker, April 1954, 1, 6.

Summary: Passionate condemnation of the hydrogen bomb tests and industrial preparation of nerve gas for war. Upholds the supremacy of conscience and challenges each person to resist as they are able. Quotes spiritual writers in an effort to strengthen her faith and reduce fear. (DDLW #664).

When the Lord washed the feet of his apostles on Holy Thursday, St. Peter, head of the Church, questioned Him, “Lord, is it for Thee to wash my feet?” That question is always being asked. He knew how hard it was for us to understand it. “Do you understand what it is I have done to you? You hail me as master and indeed I am. . . if I have washed your feet, I who am the Master and the Lord, you in your turn ought to wash each other’s feet.”

City of God

St. Augustine in his **City of God** says that God never intended man to dominate his fellows. He was to dominate the beasts of the field, the fowls of the air, what crawled upon the earth, but men were not to dominate each other. He preferred shepherds to kings. It was man himself who insisted on having a worldly king though he was warned what would happen to him. God allowed the prophets to anoint the kings and once men had accepted their kings they were supposed to show them respect, to obey the authority they had set up. To obey, that is, in all that did not go against their conscience. St. Peter was ordered by lawful authority not to preach in the name of Jesus, and he said he had to obey God rather than man, and he left prison to go out again to the market place and preach the Gospel. Over and over again, men had to disobey lawful authority to follow the voice of their conscience.

This obedience to God and disobedience to the State has over and over again happened through history.

It is time again to cry out against our “leaders,” to question whether or not, since it is not for us to say that they are evil men, they are sane men.

On Laetare Sunday, a day of rejoicing in the midst of a season of penance, three stories in The New York Times caught my eye. On the first page of the news of

the week in review, there is an account of the “new alarm” throughout the world over the setting off of another hydrogen bomb in the Pacific. The President said of this latest test:

Quite Clear

“It was quite clear that this time something must have happened that we had never experienced before, and must have surprised and astonished the scientists.”

It is decided that we must learn more about it, so a film will be released on April 7th which will show the tests being made. Russia, too, is releasing data about her hydrogen bombs. She has given detailed reports and compared the force of the explosion to the million ton meteor that blasted more than a hundred square miles of forest in Siberia in 1908.

Both Russia and America warn that the use of these weapons will wipe out civilization. Those who are caught in the middle, all those lands on which we have placed our air bases, including England, look upon this arms race with horror. Russia’s foothold in Guatemala is one base of a sort, compared to the innumerable bases we have around the world.

Television, radio and press have given accounts of the poor fishermen who were showered with dust from the last atomic explosion and are now suffering the consequences.

There is “an ebbing of hopes for the long standing problem of the Suez,” there is “furore over Scorpion Pass,” there is the terrible war in Indo-China for which we are paying from 60 to 80 per cent of the costs. There is bitterness in France towards us for paying with money, while they pay with human lives for their last outpost of empire.

On the last page of the first section of the Times, there is a column-long story of Denver’s place in our war preparations, with the heading, Denver Calmed on War Gas Fear.

Deadly Gas

The description of the manufacture of this deadly gas and how it kills in four minutes of frightful agony is told in detail. “The arsenal produces this weapon 24 hours a day, seven days a week.” I wonder how many are working in this plant, and have been working in it in the last fourteen years. Until this GB, as it is called, was declassified by the army last week, most workers did not know what they were making. Will we be forgiven for our ignorance?

Increase Production

Some projects include the filling of mustard gas shells, an assembly line for incendiary bombs that make World War II napalm obsolete. The army plans to

increase the arsenal production from sixty million to ninety million beginning June first. The arsenal was built in 1942 and produced the jellied gasoline incendiary bombs that "burned out the heart of the Japanese industrial area long before the atomic bomb explosion." On March 10, 1945, Guam-based B 29's dropped 1,500 tons of Denver made incendiary bombs on Tokyo. About 83,000 persons were killed and an estimated 41,000 injured. More than half of Tokyo was destroyed in that raid with more than a million made homeless." Besides Tokyo 69 other enemy cities were attacked with these bombs.

Are we frightening ourselves to death?

Lewis Mumford in a column long letter on the editorial page of the Times strongly condemns the leaders of the country for their secrecy in regard to these horrible weapons, with the faith that once known, the people themselves will revolt against this madness. He is afraid that at a given moment our self-induced fears will pull the trigger that will start the destruction of civilization around the world.

Are there not enough Americans still possessed of sanity, he asks, who will call a stop to the irrational decisions which are automatically bringing us close to total catastrophe? And he points out: "There are many alternative courses to the policy to which we have committed ourselves practically without debate. The worst of all these alternatives, submission to Communist totalitarianism, would still be far wiser than the final destruction of civilization.

"As for the best of these alternatives, a policy of working firmly for justice and cooperation, and free intercourse with all other peoples, in the faith that love begets love as surely as hatred begets hatred, would in all probability, be the one instrument capable of piercing the strong political armor of our present enemies.

Mass Suicide

"Once the facts of our policy of total extermination are publicly canvassed, and the final outcome, mass suicide is faced, I believe that the American people are still sane enough to come to a wiser decision than our government has yet made. They will realize that retaliation is no protection; that total extermination of both sides is not victory; that a constant state of morbid fear, suspicion and hatred is not security; that in short what seems like unlimited power has become impotence."

Let us deal with our own massive sins, he cries out and he concludes that if as a nation we have become mad, it is time for the world to take note of that madness, and he asks that the voice of the sane be heard again in the land.

Prosperity

And yet how can that voice be heard when the Denver story listing all the defense plants which are bringing prosperity to Colorado, says “the uneasiness of some in the Denver area about the nerve gas does not affect Colorado’s enthusiasm for the part it can play in what President Eisenhower has called”the ‘the new look.’ ”

How Rejoice?

And yet in the face of these accounts we are told by St. Paul to rejoice and to rejoice always. Fr. Henri de Lubac, the great French Jesuit, wrote in his **Drama of Atheist Humanism**, “So long as we talk and argue and busy ourselves on the plane of this world, evil seems to be stronger. More than that, whether evil distresses us or whether we exalt it, it alone seems real. The thing to do is to enter upon another plane, to find that fourth dimension which represents the kingdom of the spirit. Then freedom is queen, then God triumphs and man with him.”

Worst Happened

My favorite quotation from Juliana of Norwich is her reassurance that the worst has already happened and has been remedied—that is the Fall of man, and his redemption by Christ. Looked at in the light of eternity we have nothing to fear.

But it is not so easy to separate the city of God and the city of this world. It is not so easy for a mother and father of a young and growing family to face them around the supper table and contemplate only fear and suffering for them in the time to come. It is all very well to say we must go to the source of all strength, to drink at the living fountain of Christ, but can we go from that fount of Love to a factory where nerve gas and incendiary bombs are manufactured?

When we have talked of a general strike it is of such work and of such evil that we are thinking; when we talk of non-payment of taxes it is of the money which is going to Indo-China in the form of these incendiary bombs and the planes to drop them that we are thinking. It is not thus that we can love God and our brother; it is not in this way that we can love our enemy.

People Need Disturbing

When it is said that we disturb people too much by the words pacifism and anarchism, I can only think that people need to be disturbed, that their consciences need to be aroused, that they do indeed need to look into their work, and study new techniques of love and poverty and suffering for each other. Of

course the remedies are drastic, but then too the evil is a terrible one and we are all involved, we are all guilty, and most certainly we are all going to suffer. The fact that we have “the faith,” that we go to the sacraments, is not enough. “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” with napalm, nerve gas, our hydrogen bomb, our “new look.”

Each one of us must make our decisions as to what he should do, each one must examine his conscience and beg God for strength. Should one register for the draft? Should one accept conscientious objector status in the army or out of it, taking advantage of the exceptions allowed, but accepting the fact of the draft? Should one pay tax which supports this gigantic program?

I realize how difficult this is to decide. If one is unmarried and strong physically, it is easier to make a decision to do only day labor or work without pay. But there are many whose mental and physical strength is not equal to this decision and there is a withholding tax taken from even the smallest salary. Sometimes one can only make a gesture of protest. It is not for any one to judge his fellow man on how far he can go in resisting participation in preparation for war. In the very works of mercy which we are performing, we at the Catholic Worker are being aided by those who earn what they do only because they pay income tax for war. Oh yes, the editors of **The Catholic Worker** know only too well how far we too are involved in the city of this world. Perhaps Bob Ludlow, who left us much against our will, felt that he was being more honest in permitting a withholding tax to be taken from his meager wage as hospital attendant that working for nothing for the Catholic Worker. Who knows the heart of another? The temptation is always there to go out on one's own, to walk the lone path of a St. Francis rather than the community way of a St. Benedict.

All Involved

I write thus frankly to let our readers know that we realize that we are all involved, that we are not trying to place on the shoulders of others the heavy burdens of knowledge and responsibility and are not bearing them ourselves. This is the greatest of problems today, this problem of war and peace, and involves every man, woman and child in the country. It is a bigger problem by far than Senator McCarthy, than Guatemala, than Puerto Rico and the recession. We are one world and all men are brothers. We must pray to learn to love, to have faith in love.

Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief; take away my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh; in thee have I hoped, let me never be confounded.