

"Let every Christian be committed to tireless peace-making and strenuous defense of the dignity of the human person..." Pope Benedict XVI

March 27, 2008

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## <OPINION>

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**Sixty years ago, as a Catholic Air Force chaplain, Father George Zabelka blessed the men who dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Years later, he left this message for the world...**

**By George Zabelka**

*Father George Zabelka, a Catholic chaplain with the U.S. Air Force, served as a priest for the airmen who dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, and gave them his blessing. Days later he counseled an airman who had flown a low-level reconnaissance flight over the city of Nagasaki shortly after the detonation of "Fat Man." The man described how thousands of scorched, twisted bodies writhed on the ground in the final throes of death, while those still on their feet wandered aimlessly in shock-flesh seared, melted, and falling off. The crewman's description raised a stifled cry from the depths of Zabelka's soul: "My God, what have we done?" Over the next twenty years, he gradually came to believe that he had been terribly wrong, that he had denied the very foundations of his faith by lending moral and religious support to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Zabelka who died in 1992, gave this speech on the 40th anniversary of the bombings.*



The destruction of civilians in war was always forbidden by the church, and if a soldier came to me and asked if he could put a bullet through a child's head, I would have told him, absolutely not. That would be mortally sinful. But in 1945 Tinian Island was the largest airfield in the world. Three planes a minute could take off from it around the clock. Many of these planes went to Japan with the express purpose of killing not one child or one civilian but of slaughtering hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands of children and civilians—and I said nothing.

I never preached a single sermon against killing civilians to the men who were doing it. I was brainwashed! It never entered my mind to protest publicly the consequences of these massive air raids. I was told it was necessary—told openly by the military and told implicitly by my church's leadership. (To the best of my knowledge no American cardinals or bishops were opposing these mass air raids. Silence in such matters is a stamp of approval.)

**As a Catholic chaplain I watched as the Boxcar, piloted by a good Irish Catholic pilot, dropped the bomb on Urakami Cathedral in Nagasaki, the center of Catholicism in**



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I worked with Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Civil Rights struggle in Flint, Michigan. His example and his words of nonviolent action, choosing love instead of hate, truth instead of lies, and nonviolence instead of violence stirred me deeply. This brought me face to face with pacifism—active nonviolent resistance to evil. I recall his words after he was jailed in Montgomery, and this blew my mind. He said, "Blood may flow in the streets of Montgomery before we gain our freedom, but it must be our blood that flows, and not that of the white man. We must not harm a single hair on the head of our white brothers."

**Japan.**

I struggled. I argued. But yes, there it was in the Sermon on the Mount, very clear: "Love your enemies. Return good for evil." I went through a crisis of faith. Either accept what Christ said, as unpassable and silly as it may seem, or deny him completely.

For the last 1700 years the church has not only been making war respectable: it has been inducing people to believe it is an honorable profession, an honorable Christian profession. This is not true. We have been brainwashed. This is a lie.

War is now, always has been, and always will be bad, bad news. I was there. I saw real war. Those who have seen real war will bear me out. I assure you, it is not of Christ. It is not Christ's way. There is no way to conduct real war in conformity with the teachings of Jesus. There is no way to train people for real war in conformity with the teachings of Jesus.

The morality of the balance of terrorism is a morality that Christ never taught. The ethics of mass butchery cannot be found in the teachings of Jesus. In Just War ethics, Jesus Christ, who is supposed to be all in the Christian life, is irrelevant. He might as well never have existed. In Just War ethics, no appeal is made to him or his teaching, because no appeal can be made to him or his teaching, for neither he nor his teaching gives standards for Christians to follow in order to determine what level of slaughter is acceptable.

**If a soldier came to me and asked if he could put a bullet through a child's head, I would have told him, absolutely not.**

So the world is watching today. Ethical hairsplitting over the morality of various types of instruments and structures of mass slaughter is not what the world needs from the church, although it is what the world has come to expect from the followers of Christ. What the world needs is a grouping of Christians that will stand up and pay up with Jesus Christ. What the world needs is Christians who, in language that the simplest soul could understand, will proclaim: the follower of Christ cannot participate in mass slaughter. He or she must love as Christ loved, live as Christ lived and, if necessary, die as Christ died, loving ones enemies.

For the 300 years immediately following Jesus' resurrection, the church universally saw Christ and his teaching as nonviolent. Remember that the church taught this ethic in the face of at least three serious attempts by the state to liquidate her. It was subject to horrendous and ongoing torture and death. If ever there was an occasion for justified retaliation and defensive slaughter, whether in form of a just war or a just revolution, this was it. The economic and political elite of the Roman state and their military had turned the citizens of the state against Christians and were embarked on a murderous public policy of exterminating the Christian community.

Yet the church, in the face of the heinous crimes committed against her members, insisted without reservation that when Christ disarmed Peter he disarmed all Christians.

Christians continued to believe that Christ was, to use the words of an ancient liturgy, their fortress, their refuge, and their strength, and that if

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Christ was all they needed for security and defense, then Christ was all they should have. Indeed, this was a new security ethic. Christians understood that if they would only follow Christ and his teaching, they couldn't fail. When opportunities were given for Christians to appease the state by joining the fighting Roman army, these opportunities were rejected, because the early church saw a complete and an obvious incompatibility between loving as Christ loved and killing. It was Christ, not Mars, who gave security and peace.

Today the world is on the brink of ruin because the church refuses to be the church, because we Christians have been deceiving ourselves and the non-Christian world about the truth of Christ. There is no way to follow Christ, to love as Christ loved, and simultaneously to kill other people. It is a lie to say that the spirit that moves the trigger of a flamethrower is the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. It is a lie to say that learning to kill is learning to be Christ-like. It is a lie to say that learning to drive a bayonet into the heart of another is motivated from having put on the mind of Christ. Militarized Christianity is a lie. It is radically out of conformity with the teaching, life, and spirit of Jesus.

**I struggled. I argued.  
But yes, there it was  
in the Sermon on the  
Mount, very clear:  
'Love your enemies.  
Return good for  
evil.'**

Now, brothers and sisters, on the anniversary of this terrible atrocity carried out by Christians, I must be the first to say that I made a terrible mistake. I was had by the father of lies. I participated in the big ecumenical lie of the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches. I wore the uniform. I was part of the system. When I said Mass over there I put on those beautiful vestments over my uniform. (When Father Dave Becker left the Trident submarine base in 1982 and resigned as Catholic chaplain there, he said, "Every time I went to Mass in my uniform and put the vestments on over my uniform, I couldn't help but think of the words of Christ applying to me: Beware of wolves in sheep's clothing.")

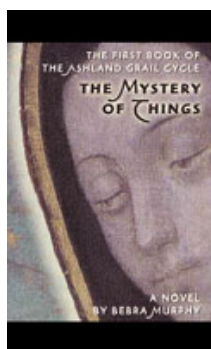
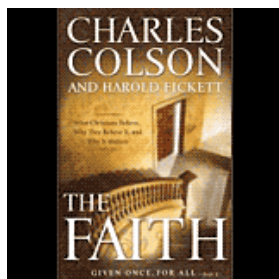
As an Air Force chaplain I painted a machine gun in the loving hands of the nonviolent Jesus, and then handed this perverse picture to the world as truth. I sang "Praise the Lord" and passed the ammunition. As Catholic chaplain for the 509th Composite Group, I was the final channel that communicated this fraudulent image of Christ to the crews of the Enola Gay and the Boxcar.

All I can say today is that I was wrong. Christ would not be the instrument to unleash such horror on his people. Therefore no follower of Christ can legitimately unleash the horror of war on God's people. Excuses and self-justifying explanations are without merit. All I can say is: I was wrong! But, if this is all I can say, this I must do, feeble as it is. For to do otherwise would be to bypass the first and absolutely essential step in the process of repentance and reconciliation: admission of error, admission of guilt.

I was there, and I was wrong. Yes, war is hell, and Christ did not come to justify the creation of hell on earth by his disciples. The justification of war may be compatible with some religions and philosophies, but it is not compatible with the nonviolent teaching of Jesus. I was wrong. And to those of whatever nationality or religion who have been hurt because I fell under the influence of the father of lies, I say with my whole heart and soul I am sorry. I beg forgiveness.

**There is no way to  
conduct real war in  
conformity with the  
teachings of Jesus.**

I asked forgiveness from the Hibakushas (the Japanese survivors of the atomic bombings) in Japan last year, in a pilgrimage that I made with a group from Tokyo to Hiroshima. I fell on my face there at the peace shrine after offering flowers, and I prayed for forgiveness—for myself, for my country, for my church. Both Nagasaki and Hiroshima. This year in Toronto, I again asked forgiveness from the Hibakushas present. I asked forgiveness,



and they asked forgiveness for Pearl Harbor and some of the horrible deeds of the Japanese military, and there were some, and I knew of them. We embraced. We cried. Tears flowed. That is the first step of reconciliation—admission of guilt and forgiveness. Pray to God that others will find this way to peace.

All religions have taught brotherhood. All people want peace. It is only the governments and war departments that promote war and slaughter. So today again I call upon people to make their voices heard. We can no longer just leave this to our leaders, both political and religious. They will move when we make them move. They represent us. Let us tell them that they must think and act for the safety and security of all the people in our world, not just for the safety and security of one country. All countries are inter-dependent. We all need one another. It is no longer possible for individual countries to think only of themselves. We can all live together as brothers and sisters or we are doomed to die together as fools in a world holocaust.

Each one of us becomes responsible for the crime of war by cooperating in its preparation and in its execution. This includes the military. This includes the making of weapons. And it includes paying for the weapons. There's no question about that. We've got to realize we all become responsible. Silence, doing nothing, can be one of the greatest sins.

The bombing of Nagasaki means even more to me than the bombing of Hiroshima. By August 9, 1945, we knew what that bomb would do, but we still dropped it. We knew that agonies and sufferings would ensue, and we also knew—at least our leaders knew—that it was not necessary. The Japanese were already defeated. They were already suing for peace. But we insisted on unconditional surrender, and this is even against the Just War theory. Once the enemy is defeated, once the enemy is not able to hurt you, you must make peace.

As a Catholic chaplain I watched as the Boxcar, piloted by a good Irish Catholic pilot, dropped the bomb on Urakami Cathedral in Nagasaki, the center of Catholicism in Japan. I knew that St. Francis Xavier, centuries before, had brought the Catholic faith to Japan. I knew that schools, churches, and religious orders were annihilated. And yet I said nothing.

**Militarized Christianity is a lie. It is radically out of conformity with the teaching, life, and spirit of Jesus.**

Thank God that I'm able to stand here today and speak out against war, all war. The prophets of the Old Testament spoke out against all false gods of gold, silver, and metal. Today we are worshipping the gods of metal, the bomb. We are putting our trust in physical power, militarism, and nationalism. The bomb, not God, is our security and our strength. The prophets of the Old Testament said simply: Do not put your trust in chariots and weapons, but put your trust in God. Their message was simple, and so is mine.

We must all become prophets. I really mean that. We must all do something for peace. We must stop this insanity of worshipping the gods of metal. We must take a stand against evil and idolatry. This is our destiny at the most critical time of human history. But it's also the greatest opportunity ever offered to any group of people in the history of our world—to save our world from complete annihilation.

August 15, 2005

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This article was originally compiled and published by Bruderhof.com, and is reprinted with their permission. The main text is an excerpt of a speech George Zabelka gave at a Pax Christi conference in August 1985 (tape of speech obtained from Notre Dame University Archives), and the first two paragraphs are from an interview with Zabelka published in Sojourners magazine, August 1980.





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#### READER COMMENTS

##### 09.13.05 ccamm says:

I'm not going to argue about the ethics of dropping the A-Bomb on Japan but neither, it seems, is the author of this article. His true target seems to be war itself and how Jesus allegedly forbade all forms of it. To make his argument, he uses scripture selectively. Sure Jesus taught his disciples to "turn the other cheek" but he also said that "the kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent bear it away." For every scripture quote that a pacifist uses to portray Christ as deploring the use of physical force in all circumstances, another can be found that seems to support the opposite position. And herein lies the problem. This priest ought to recognize that sacred scripture isn't properly interpreted by the individual Christian, but by the teaching authority of the Church. This same authority has made room for a just war doctrine that acknowledges the legitimate use of armed force in certain defined circumstances. No one is denying that war is hell and that dropping an atomic bomb on an entire city is a grave moral wrong (not necessarily sinful). But, to imply that violence is always intrinsically evil is ignoring the Christian imperative to courageously fight evil in all its manifestations - even if this fight sometimes calls for physical violence. This is what just war theory is all about.

##### 08.31.05 thedegu says:

Yeah, yeah yeah...calm down now! The angry superpatriots here are saying this: "they did lots of bad things, and it was just fine to do the same to them so on etc.." No one is denying the Germans and Japanese did evil, OK? The point is- CATHOLIC TRUTH, kiddies- that in any war, the deliberate targeting of civilian populations Text is never justified under any circumstances. You annihilate armies, not civilians! Text. It's called 'just war theory,' for the lesser-catechized out there. The fact that they murdered and killed the innocent does not mean we do the same. America is not God, it can do evil, grave evil. Saying that doesn't make me a commie or Nazi, either.--God bless you, Gerhard, for telling what really happened!

##### 08.18.05 Vesuvius718 says:

You forgot to mention that the American "terrorists" were over in "Nazi" (National Socialist) Germany because Herr Hitler declared war on us. Thank goodness Americans were brave enough to root out the real terrorists, that is, those who butchered Jews by the millions, those who shouted "Seig Heil" at Herr Hitler and his henchmen, and those who claimed to that they were "only obeying orders." America has nothing to be ashamed of. I'll bet you've never truly contemplated what happened in the concentration camps and what Dr. Mengela did to Jewish children. So you got shot at? You lived through your ordeal Millions of Jews did not. That having been said, God bless a real German: Pope Benedict XVI. I am happy about him, I am his loyal servant.

##### 08.18.05 spy1 says:

"You have heard that it was said 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil." Matthew 6:38-39 \*\*"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. " Matthew 6:43-44 \*\*If we disagree with Jesus, we have big problems. Or maybe I should say: most of the world, including most of the Christian world, disagrees with Jesus...so, unsurprisingly, we have big problems. In any case, we should all be able to agree that killing innocent civilians is not justified (how would you like it

if it were you that were labeled "collateral damage"? Or maybe your spouse and children? It could happen one day, if we are bombed here.) War is sad enough, but the argument that these nuclear bombings of Japan were "necessary" is in my opinion a lie to try to defend our consciences against the horror that we inflicted on innocent non-combatants. Indiscriminate bombing like that obviously violates Jesus' teaching...and it also violates the just war theory itself. Personally, many left-wing pacifist arguments grate on me because they don't acknowledge the capacity for evil of terrorists and tyrants...but the idea that anyone in an "enemy" country is fair game is totally revolting. No one can convince me Jesus would go for that...and we all know it!!

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#### **08.18.05 motormouth says:**

It's funny, but I've been thinking just in the past few days about why Jesus was non-violent. We run the risk of drawing the wrong lessons if we take our eyes off the fact that He was, and is, God. All power in heaven and on earth is His anyway, and the breath of His mouth is stronger than His own arm. Anyone who has a power of his own to make Satan go away just by telling him to, or to still the Sea of Galilee just by talking to it, just doesn't have any need personally to use physical violence. And Jesus went unresistingly to His death because He had sovereignly chosen to put Himself in harm's way in order to die for sinners. Christ told Peter to put up his sword, for whoever takes the sword will perish by the sword. That begs the question of who's holding the sword by which he will die. Christ is a God of holiness who has placed the sword in the hands of earthly rulers for the punishment and restraint of evildoers and the protection of the innocent. So whoever does evil that ought to be repressed by the sword is himself responsible for the punishment he will receive, as well as the suffering that the sword brings to the innocent. And if he dies in mortal sin he will face a just Judge who will show him no mercy. Now this does not make the atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki right. Even so, it is remarkable that a nation which worshipped its Emperor as a divine descendant of their sun-goddess Amaterasu should be chastised by bombs that make use of forces similar to those that drive the sun.

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#### **08.18.05 Gerhard says:**

This fine article rings very strong in my life. I have been a victim of Allied and American terrorism many times. I was born in Germany and lived through the bombings by American and English terrorists. This was going on for years every day and night. There were no troops in the cities as they all were at the front fighting the communist hordes. I have known some American bombardiers from that time. They knew that they were targeting women and children. Only one when realizing what he was doing started to miss a lot. This is all he could do without being court-martialed. I was 9 years old when I was shot at by an American P51 pilot. I could see his face – so could he. His orders were to shoot anything that moved. All this is easy to check out for those who care. Now so called Christians are either torturing or killing again people all over the world or are supporting it with their taxes or lack of resistance. I have been in many churches and none is condemning any of this horror. Needed to say I will not support the churches financially or in any other way. As a matter of fact I have stopped visiting these places. If you want to find out about the quality of your fellow Christians, just tell them that you believe in what I wrote here. You will learn quickly first hand about many other things. Like: killing the messenger, lack of first amendment rights, and the lack of Christian values. Gerhard

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#### **08.18.05 Vesuvius718 says:**

How un-utterably sad that this confused priest-chaplain of our heroic airman can so savagely stab them in the back so many years later. Many of these heroes are not even around to defend themselves. I cannot more vehemently disagree with this very confused man. The Japanese chose war! The Japanese waged a Satanic war against Manchuria and the rest of China and much of the rest of Asia. Mao Tse Tung said that if he had had 100 atom bombs he'd have used every one of them against the Japanese. The Japanese murdered thousands of American

POW's. Beheading hundreds of them. The Japanese tortured Chinese and American POW's by vivisection. That is the same as a dissection without anesthesia and or the courtesy of allowing your victim to be dead first. The Japanese sent thousands of Kamikaze planes against our ships. Suicide planes whose pilots were the most demonic and fanatical enemy we've ever fought until Al Qaeda has surpassed them. We had just lost 12,000 Army, Navy, and Marine Corps. killed and 36,000 wounded on Okinawa. IN JUST ONE BATTLE!!! The Japanese soldiers chose to fight to the death! We killed all but a handful of them as they sought to die rather than surrender even well after their situation was hopeless. The Japanese high command after witnessing the horror of one plane and one bomb obliterating Hiroshima refused Pres. Truman's demand that they "surrender immediately, and unconditionally or face destruction from the air." Three days went by and they (The Japs) vowed to fight till the last man, woman, and child. A sort of Japanese version of "Custer's last stand." After three days Pres. Truman approved a second atom bomb and the Japanese still refused to surrender. If it were not for the Emperor himself intervening Japan would have faced even more destruction. President Truman ordered conventional B29 bombing to resume three days after Nagasaki. When Tokyo was blacked out as a result of the B29's passing overhead on their way to northern Japan. The assistants of the Emperor were able to escape the Japanese high command and were able to broadcast a tape of the Emperor's words ordering the military to "cease hostilities" and to lay down their arms. The emperor still did not even use the word "surrender." The atrocity committing Japs got what they deserved! And by the way, Jesus the Son of God, yes the very God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who ordered the Israelites to: "destroy the Amelkites, to utterly destroy them and all that they have, and spare them not, both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass" 1 Samuel 15:3. Jesus himself never once denounced the fiendish Roman military or the unjust death penalty he suffered. He himself having been put to death by Roman soldiers and having suffered unjustly a sentence of death denounced neither. He is God incarnate. God with us! This confused priest would have us believe Jesus himself was not smart enough to denounce such? Just another person who can't get over the 1960's! News flash the 60's are dead and buried as much ancient history as Julius Caesar! War is hell. War is to be hated and avoided. But once an enemy has chosen war be he Japanese or Arab, let us give him plenty of it! More than he can stomach so much war that for 1000 years they will not even think to resort to it. Let us attain victory! There is no substitute for it. He who would be free must strike the blow himself!

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**08.17.05 visionquest says:**

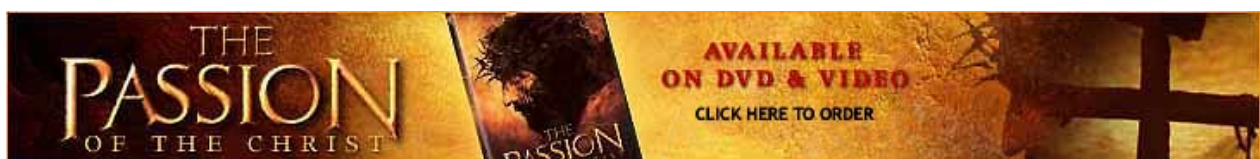
As the chaplain so succinctly put it in his well written article, the Japanese had surrendered and to drop the second bomb, though out of the chaplains control, but to bless the mission after knowing the horrors and aftermath/carnage the first one caused, borders on pure cowardice and playing the sheep, but not in a way GOD or JESUS ever intended-Ignorance and to "look the other way" and cast a blind eye in this circumstance is really hard to fathom and understand-obvious remorse(to not be would be evil) but that pales little to the lives lost and generations of survivors living with radioactive caused diseases and defects-

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**08.15.05 Godspy says:**

Sixty years ago, as a Catholic Air Force chaplain, Father George Zabelka blessed the men who dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Years later, he left this message for the world...

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