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**Catholic Bishops &  
Strategic Defense:  
A Case of Moral  
Disarmament**

*by Gary B. Bullert*



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# The Catholic Bishops and Strategic Defense: A Case of Moral Disarmament

by Gary B. Bullert

On June 25, 1988, the United States Catholic Bishops approved a policy statement on nuclear strategy entitled "Building Peace: A Pastoral Reflection on the Response to the 'Challenge of Peace'."<sup>1</sup> Along with numerous other religious denominations, the American Catholic Church continues to participate as an active political player on war and peace issues. The 1983 pastoral letter on nuclear war provided the most detailed analysis and received the most notoriety among the various denominational policy statements. The most recent Catholic document was designed to evaluate progress toward disarmament as well as to establish the proper moral approach to the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Though many predicted that the bishops would repudiate nuclear deterrence completely, the political climate created by the INF Treaty and *glasnost* appeared to arrest temporarily the embrace of unilateral disarmament. In their initial 1983 report, the bishops advocated a "strictly conditional defense of deterrence." Deterrence was deemed to be unacceptable as a long-term solution to the threat of nuclear war but was condoned if vigorous steps were adopted toward progressive disarmament or the development of a viable world government. While some general criteria were provided as a basis to judge evolving strategic policies, no specific morally acceptable rate for dismantling deterrence was announced. But the bishops' pastoral letter was permeated with apocalyptic language about "extreme crisis," a "new moment" in history, and an "imminent threat" of nuclear annihilation. Even though habitual reliance upon such rhetoric can dilute its impact, the bishops reaffirmed the fragility of peace in 1988, stating: "We write this report to remain faithful to our commitment of 1983 and because of the continuing urgency of the situation posed by nuclear weapons."<sup>2</sup> In an era when many Catholic "faith commitments" are abandoned or opened for critical reexamination, the 1983 pastoral letter has attained for some a revered, almost Koranic status.

**Neglecting Critiques.** The bishops' June 1988 report neglected to respond to the many scholarly critiques of the original pastoral letter. A celebrational aura was assumed, which proclaimed the extraordinary public response to the letter as well as the great moral concern and consensus displayed by the bishops themselves. The document declared, "The

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1 Published subsequently as "Building Peace: A Pastoral Reflection on the Response to 'The Challenge of Peace,'" *Origins*, July 21, 1988, pp. 129-148.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 134.

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Challenge of Peace' has strengthened our church, enriched its life and engaged many of our people."<sup>3</sup>

The pastoral letter inspired an "unprecedented process" of preaching, education, and social action. Countless Catholics participated in conferences and workshops. Others were less rhapsodic about its pedagogical potential. In 1983, Catholic scholar Michael Novak of the American Enterprise Institute, warned that the Left would utilize the pastoral letter for a "propaganda blitz."<sup>4</sup> James Dougherty of St. Joseph's College in Philadelphia echoed this concern, stating, "It is probable however, that in the long run, the pacificists, who have had the momentum in recent years, will dominate the instructional process."<sup>5</sup>

**Springboard to Radical Agenda.** The study, *Betraying the Bishops*, by Matthew Murphy of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, documented how the 1983 pastoral letter's full message was being subverted pervasively into a plea for outright pacifism.<sup>6</sup> In some dioceses shepherded by outspoken "peace bishops," the workshops on the pastoral letter utilized it as springboard to a far more radical political agenda. For example, Seattle Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen's diocesan curriculum workbook distinguished "non-violence as a tactic" from "non-violence as a condition of Christian life." He contended, "I believe the Just War Theory is a good example of our failure to maintain a constant commitment to building the Kingdom."<sup>7</sup> Only unilateral nuclear disarmament would meet the moral requirements of being a practicing Christian.

Later entries in the workbook embrace revolutionary wars against "violent institutions" in an apparent attempt to reconcile Hunthausen's Gandhian pacifism with fidelity to the Sandinistas. The pastoral letter stated explicitly that it must be taught "in its entirety, including its complexity as a guide and framework."<sup>8</sup> It warned that those who applied the document to concrete policy issues "must indicate what the legitimate policy options may be."<sup>9</sup> Every diocese was urged "to implement balanced and objective educational programs to help people at all age levels understand better the issues of war and peace."<sup>10</sup> Evidence mounted that, on both the local and the national level, many church officials violated these guidelines.

**Radiating Evangelical Fervor.** Inspiring militant political action supplanted nurturing sober reflection upon a highly complex issue. Despite the fact that John Cardinal O'Connor of New York wrote the Foreword to Murphy's book, which detailed such abuses, the bishops' 1988 report announced that "much has been done to integrate fully the church's teaching in our educational efforts."<sup>11</sup> Cardinal O'Connor was a sitting member of the Ad

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3 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

4 Michael Novak, *Moral Clarity in the Nuclear Age* (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983), p. 124.

5 James Dougherty, *The Bishops and Nuclear Weapons* (Boston: Anchor Books, 1984), p. 200.

6 Matthew Murphy, *Betraying the Bishops* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1987), pp. 124.

7 *Dialogue for Peace with Justice*, Justice and Peace Center, Archdiocese of Seattle, 1984, p. 60. For a description of how the peace movement has gravitated from opposition to war to support for wars of national liberation, see Guenther Lewy, *Peace and Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

8 *The Challenge of Peace* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1983), p. 87.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 "Building Peace," *op. cit.* p. 132.

Hoc Committee on the Moral Evaluation of Deterrence, which drafted the document. Though not acknowledging that any abuses had transpired, the 1988 report did reiterate that the pastoral letter should be taught in its totality. Nonetheless, the new report was not content with mere strategic analysis. It sought to radiate an evangelical fervor that would achieve “a conversion of the heart.”<sup>12</sup> A controversy emerged between providing a balanced, credible account of complex nuclear strategic questions and mobilizing the masses for peace through a ringing call to political action.

## II.

The bishops reminded their audiences that they were teachers, not technicians, and their focus centered upon the moral evaluation of strategic policy. They admitted to a “special awareness of spiritual-religious realities” that could guide the country to act in a morally acceptable manner. It remained ambiguous as to whether this awareness was prophecy or simply knowledge rooted in traditional Church doctrine. Confessing to a lack of technical expertise betrayed the bishops’ dependence upon the United States Catholic Conference’s professional staff for its policy prescriptions. A study by Dinesh D’Souza, of the American Enterprise Institute, suggested that collectively the bishops would flunk an elementary competency test on strategic doctrine.<sup>13</sup> Neither the original pastoral letter nor the recent update could resist the “last temptation” to venture forth into the prudent policy realm. They maintained that their moral conclusions about social policy were contingent inevitably upon empirical data. Erecting a clear wall of separation between various levels of teaching authority became a nearly futile exercise.

**Deterrence by Bluff.** The 1988 report held that SDI proponents struggled to capture the moral high ground by promoting the program’s benign, humanitarian motives. The bishops responded that the morality of the SDI program could not be secured by purity of motive but by an examination of means and consequences. This stance would appear to invert the prohibitions against “consequentialism” voiced in the pastoral letter. The intention of employing nuclear weapons to retaliate against an enemy strike was found to be immoral. Instead, America’s deterrence policy should rest tacitly on a bluff. An enemy could still be deterred by simply possessing such weapons. The enemy would never know with certainty whether these weapons would be fired. But if immoral means were never employed for moral ends, would not lying and deceit brand this “existential deterrence” policy as immoral? Would an enemy be credibly deterred if troops were not trained for a nuclear contingency, when no strategy for the use of nuclear weapons in protracted conflict existed, and nuclear retaliation itself had been declared immoral? SDI advocates, however, probably would not object to a thorough analysis of the consequences of various strategic options, including strategic defense.

The bishops maneuvered themselves into a peculiar dilemma: 1) they insisted that they weren’t strategic experts, and 2) in order to evaluate SDI morally, expert opinion was necessary. What experts did the report cite? The drafting committee did interview some Administration officials. It employed arms control negotiator Paul Nitze as a “canonical reference” for establishing the criteria for SDI deployment. Not everyone, even within the Reagan Administration, would champion Nitze’s ground rules, particularly the requirement for mutual cooperation with the Soviet Union in developing strategic defenses. General

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>13</sup> Dinesh D’Souza, “The Bishops as Pawns,” *Policy Review*, Fall 1985, pp. 50-56.

James Abrahamson, head of the Defense Department's Strategic Defense Initiative Organization, wrote a letter to Chicago's Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, head of the drafting committee, which complained that no technical or firsthand policy information was sought from his organization for the 1988 study. Abrahamson's staff was arguably the most intimately involved and knowledgeable group for the entire program.<sup>14</sup> Bernardin replied with a sharply toned letter, which was distributed to all of the bishops. It stated that the Ad Hoc Committee had spent "most of one day" being briefed by Reagan Administration officials. If the issue of nuclear war incarnates the worldwide historical magnitude that the bishops have ascribed to it (and it does), how could "most of one day" suffice for obtaining pro-SDI input?

**Appealing to Fear.** The bishops selected their own preferred "A" team of experts for the report, which included the American Physical Society, the Aspen Institute Strategy Group, and the Stanford Center for International Security and Arms Control. By openly emphasizing that the SDI controversy was tortuously complex and technical, the bishops may indeed have inhibited the average reader from investigating such an arcane area. They concluded that more doubters than advocates existed in the scientific community.<sup>15</sup> Both the number and the quality of these scientific appraisals cautioned against "precipitous" movement toward SDI.<sup>16</sup> The report then noted that its purpose was not to count or weigh positions but simply to illustrate the nature of the SDI debate. If this had been the bishops' actual intention, they could have: 1) simply published a well-reasoned article pro and con on the issue or 2) listed a balanced and extensive bibliography. Unfortunately, the bishops appear to have appealed to a visceral fear of the unknown. They admitted, curiously, that the old deterrence policy had succeeded in preventing a nuclear holocaust for over forty years. Finally, the 1988 report made reference to the Bernardin-O'Connor proviso that "a program which fails to attract a clear consensus on technological-strategic grounds should not be allowed to command resources at a time when other human needs go unfulfilled."<sup>17</sup> The existence of controversy, in itself, therefore should suffice to kill the SDI program in the cradle.

### III.

The bishops' report in 1988 conceded that SDI appeared to be compatible with the moral principles of Catholic just-war theory. Theoretically, strategic defense would enable the nation to protect its civilian population, escaping the immorality of a deterrence policy grounded upon nuclear retaliation, a mutual suicide pact. SDI would defuse the nuclear hair trigger by directing research toward nonnuclear defensive systems, not massive offensive weapons. Furthermore, strategic defense could be implemented without a prior radical transformation of international relations. It would not require that distrust and hostility evaporate between the U.S. and Soviet Union leading to mutual disarmament similar to relations between the U.S. and Canada. Nor would SDI necessitate the abolition of state sovereignty through a new world order. The bishops insisted that failure to "move forward" on arms control would impede progress in other areas of U.S.-Soviet relations. This analysis inverted the historical experience of the 1970s. The SALT I Treaty did not appear to have induced Soviet foreign policy restraint.

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14 "Building Peace," p. 132.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 143.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 144.

17 *Ibid.*

The report went on to repudiate any diplomatic linkage between Soviet behavior in Afghanistan, for example, and arms control. The U.S. should not raise these issues in the hopes that magnanimous treaties on the strategic level would nurture Soviet amity that would blossom sometime in the future. More faith was placed in the Soviet Union than in a technological solution to the nuclear dilemma. The preferred approach would capitalize upon this supreme moment of crisis to midwife a cathartic moral transformation of mankind.

#### IV.

Strategic defense has been promoted as both an instrument to strengthen deterrence and a means ultimately to transcend mutual assured destruction by protecting the population. The bishops argued in the 1988 "Building Peace," however, that the risks of SDI far outweighed its hypothetical benefits.

**First**, it would create an obstacle to progress on arms control by eroding the framework for negotiations.<sup>18</sup> It would poison arms negotiations presumptively because the Soviets say they fear and dislike SDI - or at least a U.S. SDI program.

**Second**, it would stimulate a new surge of offensive competition in an effort to counteract defensive systems. While strategic defense could stimulate new offensive weapons, it might also lead to deep reductions in current offensive arsenals and strengthen deterrence. A negotiated build-down in offensive systems arguably could ensue, particularly if such weapons appeared to be increasingly obsolete. Those repelled by the horror of a prospective nuclear war ought to empathize with the logical option of promoting defensive systems.

**Third**, the bishops contended that the transition period of deploying SDI would undermine seriously crisis stability and move both parties toward a preemptive strategy. If one agrees that the Soviet Union possesses a first-strike strategy, its calculations would be complicated enormously by the deployment of even a limited defensive system. This would serve to fortify the policy of deterrence, not simply stabilize a balance of terror. Such common response to the bishops' contentions were not cited in the 1988 report. The readers were afforded a tenuous foundation for examining the actual technical debate.<sup>19</sup>

The **fourth** criticism of SDI alleged that it must not absorb a "morally disproportionate percentage of the federal budget."<sup>20</sup> The report attempted to discredit the research program by indicating that, during 1985, 1986, and 1987, budgetary allocations for SDI increased 41 percent, 97 percent, and 16 percent respectively.<sup>21</sup> The spending on this "radical" program had tripled since its inception. What the bishops did not reveal was the percentage of the federal budget used for the \$8 billion thus far allocated for SDI. They did not mention that first phase deployment, if it runs up to \$15 billion annually, would constitute only a little more than one percent of the federal budget. Recent cost estimates for first phase deployment have been reduced from \$115 billion to \$69 billion. The bishops

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18 *Ibid.*

19 See "Basing Deterrence on Strategic Defense," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders*, No. 621, December 2, 1987; "The Strategic Defense Initiative: Myth and Reality," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders*, No. 664, July 26, 1988.

20 "Building Peace," *op. cit.*, p. 144.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

emphasized the economic argument as being laden with particular “moral relevance.” They noted the cruel paradox of an escalating SDI program at a time of “deep cuts” in the social programs for the poor at home and abroad. No evidence was provided to demonstrate that such draconian measures had been taken in the U.S.

**Oversimplified Economics.** A zero-sum game was postulated between defense and social spending. Premising military expenditures upon the moral requirement to preserve peace and freedom as human needs is a missing variable in this type of analysis. What is called “morally disproportionate” military spending considers no operative relationship to Soviet military spending, no threats to America’s vital interests, or even a hypothetical target figure of the gross national product. Arms competition was portrayed as a “structure of sin.”<sup>22</sup> Many economists would describe as somewhat oversimplified the intrinsic regressiveness of the military budget. Social welfare appropriations in the U.S. overwhelmingly exceed the amount spent on defense, not to mention strategic programs, seeming almost to adopt a version of Lenin’s dependency theory whereby rich capitalists are indicted directly for the poverty in underdeveloped areas.

The bishops identified a mandate, emanating from the pastoral letters on peace and the economy: to reduce defense spending. Their agenda was clouded by the fact that conventional forces cost more than a nuclear defense. The report reaffirmed the “no first use” condition, which the French Catholic bishops contended would severely undermine NATO’s capability to deter a Soviet attack.<sup>23</sup> The American bishops hedged on this issue, at least to the extent that they conceded that it “demands further moral examination.” The report did not propose any new conventional arms program but indicated a willingness to “consider” such programs if they actually reduced the danger of nuclear war. However, the bishops’ bottom-line argument against SDI charged that, even if it worked, it would be too expensive when other social needs were neglected.<sup>24</sup>

## V.

The 1988 document’s final policy recommendations epitomized some of the equivocations that may have resulted from the internal politics within the bishops’ drafting committee. It reflected a meeting of many minds that did not quite meet.<sup>25</sup> The report concluded that SDI should be maintained as a research program but not pressed to deployment. The research and development must be conducted within the strict restraints of the ABM Treaty. According to Frank Gaffney of the Center for Security Policy, this stipulation would deliver a deathblow to SDI because the ABM Treaty was designed specifically to guarantee mutual assured destruction by banning defensive systems.

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22 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

23 See James Schall, S.J., ed., with an Introduction, *Winning the Peace* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), pp. 101-124.

24 Keith Payne, *Strategic Defense: “Star Wars” in Perspective* (London: Hamilton Press, 1986), pp. 179-188.

25 See Susan Okin, “Taking the Bishops Seriously” *World Politics* (1984), pp. 527-546. The article detected incoherences in the pastoral letter which seemed to be the result of the committee’s effort to reconcile incompatible positions. Also, Francis X. Winters, “Bishops and Scholars: The Peace Pastoral under Siege,” *The Review of Politics*, Winter 1986, pp. 31-59.



The bishops also held that each new step in the SDI program must be tested for its effects on the offensive-defensive interaction of the arms competition. This stricture could inhibit long-range planning and subject SDI to continual attacks by budgetary-strategic critics. Lastly, "clear criteria" must be established to assess spending for SDI in relationship to legitimate conventional defense expenditures and most notably the basic "human needs" of the poor worldwide.<sup>26</sup> Such reservations, coupled with the moral admonition not to deploy SDI, would not generate much public enthusiasm for even an attenuated research program.

The bishops concluded in "Building Peace" that, "It is our prudential judgment that proposals to press deployment of SDI do not measure up to the moral criteria outlined in this report."<sup>27</sup> The more compelling moral case rested with those who deplored the likely risks of an "aggressive" SDI program. The perils attendant if only the Soviet Union were to develop a strategic defense were not calculated. This would appear currently to be a more probable scenario. The report's original draft held that SDI was "morally deficient," leaving the implication that it was a "sin." After Cardinal O'Connor objected to this confusion, Cardinal Bernardin diluted the rhetoric to not measuring up to "moral criteria."<sup>28</sup> This minor concession seemed to emerge more from embarrassment about the reliance on "sin" as a moral category than an indication that the political balance of power had shifted amongst the bishops.<sup>29</sup>

**Nuclear Weapons As Satanic Idol.** The report did strive to appear as a plausible compromise by juxtaposing radically dissonant positions. While not appearing in the actual text, the version published in *Origins* indicated that Pax Christi U.S.A., a pacifist group that includes over sixty bishops, criticized the document for failing to condemn nuclear deterrence outright and to demand an immediate national policy change. Possessing nuclear weapons was the modern moral equivalent to worshipping satanic idols. Pax Christi also repudiated any funding of strategic defense.<sup>30</sup> Among the "small number" of objections to the report, the bishops mentioned the intervention of Archbishop Joseph T. Ryan of the Archdiocese for the Military Services U.S.A. Archbishop Ryan's full statement constituted a frontal assault on the basic premises of the entire 1988 report.

Archbishop Ryan declares that, if the advice of the 1983 pastoral letter in support of a nuclear freeze had been adopted, the INF Treaty would never have been signed. In lieu of this previous misadventure, Archbishop Ryan proposed that the whole section on strategic defense be rewritten. He contended that this section of the report "rests upon factual data that is highly controverted, supported by an obviously politicized scientific report, and blatantly designed to undermine the declared intention of the government to move beyond the philosophy of MAD. None of the arguments presented in the Report against SDI outweigh the obvious argument favoring it, namely, the vehement and implacable

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26 "Building Peace," *op. cit.*, pp. 145-146.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 144.

28 Michael Schwartz, "Good News at Collegeville," *Crisis*, September 1988, p. 14; Thomas Reese, "Bishops Confer at Collegeville," *America*, July 16, 1988, p.29.

29 See newspaper accounts, "Bishops See Morality Issue on 'Star Wars,'" *The New York Times*, June 26, 1988, p. A18; "Bishops See Moral Flaws in 'Star Wars,'" *The Washington Post*, June 26, 1988, p. A12.

30 "Building Peace," *op. cit.*, p. 134.

opposition to it by the Soviets. The obvious question seems to be, if SDI is so unworkable and impractical, why are the Soviets so anxious to derail it?"<sup>31</sup> The existence of a Soviet strategic defense program surfaced only elliptically in the report through a single footnote.<sup>32</sup> Archbishop Ryan described as "simplistic" the automatic presumption that every expenditure on national defense was at the expense of social programs. His remarks were ruled to be out of order, and none of his criticisms were included in the final report.

**Pushing Total Disarmament.** A second example of contrasting alternatives as a vehicle for consensus involved briefly mentioning proponents of unconditional nuclear pacifism and advocates of limited war. In a recent book, *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality and Realism*, the authors defended the thesis that American policy makers actually plan to obliterate the population of the Soviet Union, regardless of their stated intentions to attack only military targets. Confronting the moral dilemma of opposing Soviet power versus threatening to kill the innocent, the book concluded, "Every reasonable person wishes to escape it [the dilemma]. But the only thing one can escape is the guilt. And one can do that only by ceasing to participate in, defend, support, or approve the nuclear deterrent system."<sup>33</sup> A total, immediate unilateral nuclear disarmament by the U.S. is proposed.

Advocates of limited nuclear war contend that the emerging technology has increased the accuracy and miniaturized nuclear weapons. Such technology can create conditions of discrimination and proportionality that would legitimate the use of nuclear weapons within the Catholic just-war theory. A credible deterrence would require a war-fighting capability and a strategy for protracted conflict. This counterforce doctrine coupled with a strategic defense program is designed to counteract the clear Soviet rejection of mutual assured destruction. The bishops did not cite the book by Joseph Martino, Senior Research Scientist at the University of Dayton, *A Fighting Chance*, which is a detailed presentation of this approach that engaged concerns raised by the 1983 pastoral letter.<sup>34</sup> The report claimed that variants of such positions were rejected at that time. Of course, their original document did not discuss strategic defense or examine Soviet strategic policy beyond the assumption that it supported mutual assured destruction.

**Impossible Conditions.** The bishops still oppose any strategic modernization program. They maintain in predisposition against second-strike retaliation unless there is "moral certainty" that nuclear weapons can be employed within the parameters of discrimination and proportionality. But without a testing program, how could these conditions be met?<sup>35</sup> A discriminate deterrence strategy is dismissed because it cannot "guarantee" that nuclear war is subject to precise rational limits. Protecting the right to life of innocent persons is categorized as "an absolute moral norm." A targeting policy that does not intend to strike civilians and makes the most honest effort to implement that policy was still inadequate morally because it entails some evil or unacceptable consequences. The bishops left the

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31 Archbishop Joseph T. Ryan, "Intervention on Ad Hoc Committee on Nuclear Deterrence," National Conference of Catholic Bishops meeting, June 1988, p. 2.

32 "Building Peace," *op. cit.*, p. 148.

33 J. Finnis, J.M. Boyle, Jr., G. Grisez, *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality and Realism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 160-161.

34 Joseph Martino, *A Fighting Chance* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

35 "Building Peace," *op. cit.*, p. 137.

impression that any loss of civilian lives would suffice to disqualify the policy. No warfare strategy, nuclear or nonnuclear, could satisfy these normal conditions.

Technological improvements in command and control systems were dangerous if they “enhance war-fighting capabilities or feed the illusion of surviving an extended nuclear exchange.”<sup>36</sup> Without a survivable command and control system, the option for launching a successful first strike gains credence. The bishops’ paradox consisted of repudiating a war-fighting capability that is the essential basis for establishing a credible deterrent. If deterrence fails, a defenseless U.S. would suffer the worst possible catastrophe with the prohibition on contingency planning. In saying “no” to the very idea of nuclear war, the bishops’ statements impact asymmetrically to the grave disadvantage of the West. They proclaimed, “there is a moral imperative to avoid nuclear war or anything which could lead toward or increase the possibility of nuclear conflict.”<sup>37</sup>

This survivalist mind-set demoralizes the capacity of democratic nations to defend themselves. In the attempt to undermine SDI, the bishops reverted to a policy that effected a back-handed embrace of mutual assured destruction.

## VI.

Several themes resonate throughout the 1988 report, which would contribute to the moral disarmament of the West.

1) A **moral equivalence** between the U.S. and the Soviet Union is advanced with both superpowers being a threat to world peace.

2) Utilizing **harsh language** regarding the Soviet Union and focusing on its vices undermines the necessary atmosphere for arms control and peace. While chastising the U.S. for violating the terms of the unratified SALT II Treaty, the report did not mention any Soviet strategic violations.

3) By **inspiring a “peace consciousness,”** a visceral public predisposition to oppose American involvement in war and expenditures on weapons can be cultivated. Fear of nuclear annihilation can stimulate such emotions to a fever pitch. Rather than striving to limit nuclear war within the parameters of just-war theory, all nuclear war was deemed to be “unthinkable.” Any use of nuclear weapons would lead inevitably to total escalation.

4) In **assuming a prophetic role,** the bishops situate their pronouncements in a transcendent realm insulated from public debate.

5) A **moral perfectionism** is nurtured, advocating rigid criteria that would collapse the prudential option of possible participation in war as a lesser of evils.

6) The arms race is portrayed as an **automatism beyond human control.** The weapons themselves are evil.

7) The bishops’ pronouncements **disadvantage the West** by fomenting intense public pressure for American negotiators to agree to unilateral concessions and erode support for defense programs. Arms control progress is contingent on our negotiators’ good will and sincerity as peacemakers.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

The report stated that both superpowers faced “sustained international criticism” for not restraining sufficiently their strategic programs. Even Soviet public opinion was considered to be a moral force on its policy makers. While the bishops did recognize that the two political systems differed, they refused to acknowledge that the peace lobby influenced the Western democracies disproportionately.

**Role of Religion.** The bishops’ pastoral letters lend immediacy to the issue of the proper role of religious organizations, like the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, in the public policy making domain. Some champion their full commitment to the political arena. Fr. Richard McBrien of Notre Dame University proclaimed, “The pastoral letter is a model of how religion and politics should, and can, intersect and interact in a pluralistic society like the United States of America, without prejudice to the spiritual integrity of religious bodies and religious leaders, on the one hand, or to constitutional principles, on the other.”<sup>38</sup> Father Theodore Hesburgh of Notre Dame University called the pastoral letter, “the finest document that the American Catholic hierarchy has ever produced.” Many others praised the openness of the drafting process and the sophistication of the final product. In the journal, *This World*, Mark Amstutz, professor at Wheaton College described the pastoral letter as “a major landmark in the application of moral analysis to a major public policy issue.”<sup>39</sup> Others objected to its specific policies, but endeavored to proselytize the bishops into becoming responsible champions of democratic values.<sup>40</sup> Such quiet diplomacy has not demonstrated much tangible success in weaning the bishops away from a hard-line leftist political agenda.

Fr. Avery Dulles of Catholic University maintained recently that these bishops’ conferences usurp their teaching authority as well as infringing upon the proper political role of the laity within the Church. The bishops should avoid crafting specific stands on political issues even if such policies are formally labeled “prudential.”<sup>41</sup>

**A Covert Agenda?** Alexis de Tocqueville remarked that “religions should be most careful to confine themselves to their proper sphere, for if they wish to extend their power beyond spiritual matters they run the risk of not being believed at all.”<sup>42</sup> He noted that the anti-Catholic sentiment in Europe was fueled by the Church’s immersion in politics. Sociologist Peter Berger stated, “This is the final ecclesial implication of the politicization of the Church: wherever a political agenda is seen as constitutive of the Church, all those who dissent from it are excluded from the Church.”<sup>43</sup> Underlying the power drive of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops for doctrinal authority, some suspect a covert agenda that would anoint these pastoral letters with the mantle of divine revelation. The Conference could speak with the prophetic authority of God and bind the consciences of the Catholic laity. One can imagine the political import of this new weapon for an

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38 Richard McBrien, *Caesar’s Coin* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1987), p. 196.

39 Mark Amstutz, “The Challenge of Peace: Did the Bishops Help?” *This World*, Spring/Summer 1985, p. 29; James Finn, “Pacifism, Just War, and the Bishops’ Muddle,” *This World*, Winter 1984, p. 31.

40 See George Weigel, *Tranquillitas Ordinis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

41 “Roles of lay, clergy overlap, but shouldn’t, meeting told,” *The Washington Times*, October 28, 1988, p. F6. See “Bishops’ Panel Rejects Vatican Plan to Curb National Conferences,” *The Washington Post*, November 4, 1988, p. A3.

42 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1969), p. 445.

43 Peter Berger, “Different Gospels: The Social Sources of Apostasy,” *This World*, Spring 1987, p. 15.

American Liberation Theology. Perhaps this constitutes the ultimate issue in the current battle between Rome and the American bishops.

While the Church can engage properly in elaborating general principles of social teaching, prescribing specific policies beyond its realm of expertise should be discouraged. Even praising the bishops politely for raising important public issues becomes counterproductive if it legitimates what has burgeoned into a new cottage industry. The American Catholic laity ought to protest vigorously the political pretensions of this new national clerocracy.

