

Comment

Civil disobedience— or shall we call it the gospel?

At the heart of Christianity's objection to nuclear deterrence is its threat to destroy the innocent. British nuclear weapons are already trained on 'enemy' cities, and on command Britain's military personnel will fire them. On Ash Wednesday about two hundred Christians took their objection to Whitehall, writing in ash on the walls of the Ministry of Defence the words 'Repent' and 'Peace', interspersed with crosses. More than sixty were arrested, including several Dominicans. Was this widely-reported law-breaking just a publicity stunt? Why was it necessary to break the law to make this Lenten call? We have asked four of the Dominicans arrested to explain their actions.

Acts of civil disobedience begin where discussion has, for the moment, failed. Since the forties, when Catholic students in Manchester organised the first anti-nuclear demonstration in Britain, there has been a constant endeavour to expound the Church's traditional 'just war' teaching as it applies to modern armaments and defence policies. Forty years after that march in Manchester the British people are, generally speaking, even further than ever from recognising the utter evil constituted by our nuclear deterrent. The best moral arguments have been clearly set out by writers like Anthony Kenny and John Finnis, but their work has gone largely unheeded. It is lost in the overkill of a chaos of voices, images and newsprint which reduces moral dilemma to the level of a human interest story in a colour supplement. Civil disobedience seeks to restore a sense of the urgency and primacy of this moral doctrine.

So far, the media have contrived to trivialise the whole thing, with stories of 'nuns hitching up their skirts' and such like. Some reporters expressed surprise that men and women in religious orders should be so concerned with 'political' matters, or be prepared to go so far as to commit civil disobedience. Almost nowhere has it been possible to find out what the participants thought, or why they had chosen to break the law (and to suffer the consequences) in this way, and on this day. Yet we hope that this action will open up a new opportunity for the Church to make her teaching known.

The view has recently been expressed in the Sunday press that the Dominican vocation lay in 'detached' study of scholastic theology, and that the Order in this country had clearly lost its way. On the contrary, it is precisely the study and acceptance of the scholastic just war teaching that drove us to take this action—an action designed to promote that

very doctrine. We contest the strange assertion printed in *The Universe* that the arrest of one of us was 'a disgrace', that this friar 'would do better with prayer and mortification'. What took place on Ash Wednesday occurred in the context of prayer and fasting, rite and devotion.

Perhaps what has shocked people most has been the sight of Christians, especially priests and religious, *breaking the law*. Why can't the normal means of political persuasion be used? The reason is that there is an intrinsic connection between the States's acceptance of nuclear weaponry and the need to oppose this evangelically by civil disobedience.

The 'nuclear sin', from which the Ash Wednesday service called us to repentance, is one protected by an increasing body of law and political practice. The consequence of this is that the political culture, the Law itself, is vitiated by dressing up nuclear terrorism as civil legality. The Law is brought into disrepute, from the point of view of true civil morality, by its own contempt for the very principles from which it claims to derive its legitimacy. As is pointed out in *Nuclear Deterrence: Morality and Realism* (the excellent book by Finnis, Grisez and Boyle published last year by O.U.P.):

Civil disobedience, therefore, finds its most fundamental justification as *showing* that the wickedness of the laws or policies in question takes them outside the ordinary web of politics and law, and undermines the very legitimacy of the state itself—a legitimacy founded on justice, not on calculations of advantage in which the lives of innocents might be directly sacrificed in the interests of others.

Such an all-pervading corruption of our commonality is a waste of breath. A Dominican Preaching which played by the rules of a public political discourse so radically perverted would reduce us to traders of the fashionable pseudo-religious ideology which legitimates all this in the name of defending Christian democratic values against some 'evil empire'.

What we did on Ash Wednesday was only a beginning. It will have failed if it does not make the traditional teaching of the Church heard above the babble, and if it does not bring us a little closer to the realisation of that teaching.

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