

The Gulf War and the Just-War Theory: View from the Vatican

Robert Dodaro OSA

The Vatican's case against military intervention by the US-led 'coalition' in the Persian Gulf was forcefully argued on the following grounds: 1) the destruction likely to be caused in the war would be entirely disproportionate to the not insignificant evil caused by Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, 2) there was every likelihood that noncombatant death and injury would be enormous, 3) there was from the start every likelihood that Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait could be secured through diplomatic activity and negotiations without resort to the application of military force. The 'just war' case for the Gulf War was therefore not met, as far as the Vatican was concerned, because the case *for* the war failed to meet the criteria of proportionate response, discrimination, and last resort. It is true that, in framing his own objections to the war, Pope John Paul II was chary of referring directly to the so-called 'just-war theory'. But Peter Hebblethwaite's comment that 'John Paul is not much interested in the pros and cons of just-war theology'¹ fails to account for the extent to which the Pope's arguments against the war fell within the traditional criteria.

From the outset, the Vatican's position was shaped by a few principles which, though broadly stated, remained constants in its attitude during the Gulf Crisis. A statement appearing in the Vatican's official daily newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* (9 August) along with the first papal statement on the crisis (26 August) contained the seeds of Vatican policy as it developed over the following months.

- 1) Iraq's 'invasion' constituted a 'grave violation of international law, of the UN Charter, and of social ethics in general'.
- 2) Exacerbation of the crisis by any party threatened a social and economic upheaval which would work to the 'disadvantage of the poorest nations'.
- 3) The crisis should be resolved by solutions which were 'equitable' to all the parties involved. Only 'peaceful' means should be employed to that end. Moreover, the solutions should reach out to the other conflicts in the region, specifically to Lebanon and Palestine.²

'Linkage', as Iraq's reference to other Middle Eastern political problems was dismissively dubbed by Western political leaders, was first referred to just after 12 August when Saddam Hussein offered to withdraw from Kuwait if Syria withdrew from Lebanon and Israel from the Occupied Territories. Long before the Pope seized upon the negotiatory possibilities contained in the Iraqi leader's offer, the *Financial Times* noted that the proposal contained 'a path away from disaster . . . through negotiation'.³ By 26 August, the date of the first papal intervention in the crisis, the Vatican had reached the firm conclusion that meaningful negotiation of Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait was possible without further military confrontation, but that such negotiation would require patience and tact on the part of all the principal parties in the Middle East and all other nations involved in the crisis. With regard to negotiation, the Vatican would have been encouraged by the second Iraqi offer of withdrawal on 23 August. This offer promised withdrawal from Kuwait and release of foreigners held in Iraq in exchange for the lifting of UN sanctions, firm guarantees of Iraqi access to the Gulf, and complete control of the Rumailah oilfield which, as Noam Chomsky points out, extends 'about two miles over a disputed border'.⁴

The Vatican's backing for a negotiated settlement to the crisis would have assumed that Iraqi demands constituted a bargaining position, one which was never so firm as to be non-negotiable. At the same time, the Vatican would not have assumed that Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait could have been secured without some cost to Kuwait, to other Arab states in the region, and even possibly to Western interests in the region. Whilst it too demanded that Iraq withdraw unconditionally from Kuwait, the Vatican would have assumed that the 'diplomatic track' would require some sort of financial or other economic inducement for the Iraqi leader as well as some face-saving measures. In terms of the latter, the much-discussed Middle East peace conference rose to a position of prominence as the crisis continued and approached war. In order to understand Vatican backing for the peace conference proposal as an obvious means of gifting Saddam Hussein with an eleventh hour 'trophy', one must remember that President Bush was also suggesting the convening of a peace conference. Bush saw in the peace conference proposal an inducement to Arab states to remain in the coalition and a way of assuring the American people that the planned war would lead to the establishment of a more just and peaceful political order in the region. So the Middle East peace conference was, for a considerable time during the period preceding the war, the basis of common ground between Iraq and its opponents. The Pope explicitly

called upon 'coalition' nations to agree to a Middle East peace conference in his *Angelus domini* address of 13 January. Such a conference might, he said, 'contribute to resolving all the problems prohibiting peaceful coexistence in the Middle East'.⁵

The political and, to some extent, ethical considerations against negotiation along these lines boiled down to two for the Western and Arab coalition: 1) the lack of a guarantee that Saddam Hussein would negotiate 'in good faith', and 2) the importance not to be seen and not actually to 'reward' the Iraqi aggression and occupation of Kuwait. In supporting what it referred to as 'diplomacy and negotiation', the Vatican was aware of these concerns, but decided to urge this path for two reasons: 1) the ethical issues relevant to the crisis demanded a wider reading of the situation than the one which isolated the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait as the *sole* moral issue of the crisis, and 2) the political and ethical risks involved in reaching a compromise with Saddam Hussein were outdistanced by the risks involved in opting not to pursue a negotiated settlement. Both of these arguments were expressed in the Pope's letter of 4 January, to Jacques Poos who was at the time President of the EC Foreign Ministers' Council.

In effect, we find ourselves in conditions in which international order is unstable, conditions which, unfortunately, do not altogether exclude an imminent armed confrontation, the consequences of which, though unforeseeable, shall without a doubt be disastrous. Certainly the international community does not intend to excuse itself from its obligation to preserve international law and the values which confer upon the community force and authority. But at the same time, it is clear that the principle of equity enjoins that peaceful means such as dialogue and negotiation prevail over recourse to the devastating and terrifying instruments of death.⁶

It is important to be clear about the Vatican's position on the 'principle of equity' which the Pope mentions. In no way would the Vatican wish to suggest that the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait could be morally justified either on the basis of Iraqi historical claims to the territory or as a response to 'economic aggression' in relation to the production and pricing of oil. The Vatican was categorical and emphatic in condemning the invasion as an unjustified 'aggression'. Archbishop (now Cardinal Secretary of State) Angelo Sodano reiterated this judgment when, on behalf of the Holy See, he signed the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe's declaration (2 October 1990) condemning the Iraqi invasion and supporting UN Security Council-imposed sanctions against Iraq.⁷ Saddam Hussein's voluntary

withdrawal from Kuwait would 'mark a victory of international justice'.⁸ However, in the absence of such a withdrawal, the Vatican held that a just resolution of the crisis would have to respect the complex interrelation of economic and political issues which led to the invasion. Negotiation involved more from the Vatican's point-of-view than diplomacy and compromise which tied together seemingly disparate Middle Eastern disputes, more than a *mere* face-saving device designed to induce Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait; it involved a moral principle. While affirming the injustice of Iraq's invasion and continued occupation of Kuwait, the Vatican implicitly rejected the West's application of the Hitler and Munich analogies to the Gulf Crisis.

Closer examination of this 'moral principle' implicit in the Vatican's position is called for. To state it once again as I have isolated it: a just resolution of the crisis required of the allies that the complex interrelation of economic and political issues which led to the invasion be respected. This principle was more evident in Vatican statements as the military option became the more likely to be adopted. On 10 November *L'Osservatore Romano* reported the post-election decision by President Bush to double the number of US forces in the Gulf and to adopt an 'offensive capacity'. *L'Osservatore* commented, 'The announcement appears to be a decisive step in the direction of the military option and signals the passage from that phase in which diplomatic means were explored for a peaceful resolution of the crisis towards the concrete threat of arms and the real possibility of war in the Gulf'.⁹ The Pope began publicly calling for an 'honest and open dialogue'.¹⁰ But 'dialogue' which consists solely in one side delivering an ultimatum to the other is hardly 'honest and open'. The Pope was more explicit in his Christmas Message *urbi et orbi* when he linked peace in the Persian Gulf with the 'whole question' of peace between the Palestinian people and the State of Israel.¹¹ An editorial comment in *L'Osservatore Romano* expressed the official Vatican interpretation of the Pope's address. The Pope, it said, saw analogies between the Gulf Crisis, the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people, the continued and heightened threat to the 'national identity' of Lebanon, and the problems created by unjust economic pressures upon African countries. Curiously, the Vatican newspaper tied the Gulf Crisis into the Pope's reference to 'the chasm separating North and South' as he was discussing the situation in Africa. The same editorial quoted from the Pope's Message his acknowledgement of the need for 'a more equitable reapportionment of the earth, and a new and more just world economic order'.¹² What is it, we are left asking, which provides the continuity between these issues and the crisis in the Gulf? Does the answer lie in

the unjust economic practices which Iraq had cited as components of its rationale for the invasion? Was the Pope trying to indicate some sympathy for Iraq's grievances if not for its aggression?

The Vatican was already on record as dismissing the Iraqi rationale as *justification* for its deeds. However, the parallels which the Pope readily drew between the Gulf Crisis and other Middle Eastern and Third World crises stemming from economic injustice hint strongly in the direction of recognition that Iraq had just grievances and that some effort must be made by the other States involved to redress these inequities as part of a negotiated settlement to the crisis. In order to establish a logical connection between the other regional situations of injustice which the Pope specifically mentions and Iraq's legitimate economic grievances, the latter must be viewed as somehow conforming to a general pattern of North-South political and economic domination. I think that this is the only reading of the Pope's remarks and their interpretation in the Vatican's official newspaper which cogently accounts for the parallels which the Pope drew between seemingly disparate political and economic situations. If there are difficulties in decoding the language of the Pope's Christmas remarks, it may perhaps be explained by the Vatican's hopes at the time to put its 'good offices' to use in the dispute. Cardinal Casaroli's unprecedented New Year's interview with the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* was widely interpreted as a Vatican offer to mediate.¹³ It is regrettable that as a result of the Holy See's engagement in diplomatic initiatives, it becomes difficult for theologians to get as clear a picture of the Pope's ethical analysis of particular situations as is desirable. But, as Bryan Hehir's recent article in *The Tablet* shows, the difficulties involved in reading the tea leaves from the Vatican are no reason for theologians to neglect their responsibility in this regard, thereby leaving it to journalists to disclose the meaning of papal and Vatican statements.

Further evidence that the Pope was thinking about the Gulf Crisis along the lines of the North-South divide was provided by a series of statements beginning with his address to diplomats accredited to the Holy See on 12 January. Without mentioning Iraq by name, the Pope charged once again that 'the most elementary rules of international law' had been violated in a clear 'act of aggression' where the 'law of the stronger' was 'brutally imposed upon the weaker'. But further on in his address, (and Bryan Hehir omits this passage from his analysis) the Pope stressed that defence of international law had to respect certain limits:

States are today rediscovering ... that international law does not constitute a kind of extension of their own unlimited sovereignty, or

a protection of their interests alone or even of their attempts to increase their sphere of power and influence.¹⁴

Apposite reactions from journalists reporting the papal address include Peter Hebblethwaite's observation, 'since only the US and its allies had invoked international law, this warning was clearly addressed to them'.¹⁵ The Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* quipped sarcastically, 'Is there anyone out there among the States fighting this war which feels itself included in this category?'.¹⁶ However, papal opposition to the 'military option' did not meet with universal approval from journalists. The Pope's suggestion that international law was being manipulated as a cover for the extension of another nation's 'sphere of power and influence' fell well within Clifford Longley's denunciation of what he termed 'this gut anti-Americanism', a disorder 'as unpleasant and deplorable as any racism'¹⁷, which he had thought earlier on to have afflicted only certain radical clergy.¹⁸

This North-South dimension to the Pope's opposition to the Gulf War surfaced once again at the 'Vatican Summit' held in Rome on 4–5 March. Speaking about the war after its conclusion, the Pope perhaps felt freer to speak out with greater candour. He reiterated that 'certain issues of primary importance have arisen' as a result of the war, among them 'the solution of problems which have lingered unresolved for decades and which have provided the focal point for ongoing tensions', and 'the regulation of the arms trade'.

Only after these questions have been answered will Iraq and its neighbours: Israel, Lebanon, and the Palestinian and Cypriot peoples be able to live together in peace.

Nor is it possible to continue ignoring problems of an economic order. Inequities exist in this part of the world, and we all recognise that when a lack of economic opportunity coupled with poverty afflicts a people, peace is endangered. The international economic order ought to be directed all the more toward sharing and away from selfish monopolisation and the exploitation of the planet's resources. This economic order ought: to guarantee a just remuneration for raw materials, to provide everyone with the means necessary for livelihood; to arrive at a harmonious transfer of technologies, and to set acceptable conditions for debt repayment by the world's poorest Nations.¹⁹

Taken in its entirety, the papal address is an expansion of the principles enunciated by the Pope in his first public statement on the crisis (26 August). Iraqi aggression was once again denounced as a violation of the 'principles of morality and international law'. But

resolution of the conflict should have been 'peaceful' and 'equitable', and in his judgement it clearly was not. The pointed reference in his address to a just international economic order including a 'just remuneration for natural resources' and 'acceptable conditions for debt repayment' was not simply a statement of the post-war agenda for the Middle East. It was a reminder of the economic issues which led to the invasion of Kuwait. The Pope was pointing out, once again, the *moral requirement* of an honest and open dialogue leading to a negotiated, peaceful Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait, one which, in the Vatican's view, was never sought. One hears in all of this an implicit papal denial that the Gulf War was fought as a 'last resort'. When added to the objections to the war on the grounds of 'proportionate response' and 'discrimination',²⁰ the lack of determined effort to reach a negotiated settlement completes the tripod structure upon which the Vatican's moral case against the war rests. Cardinal Hume's conclusion that there was no gap between his position on the war and the Pope's thus appears ingenuous.²¹ John Paul's analysis of the war seems closer on the whole to the one offered by US dissident Noam Chomsky²² than it does either to that of the Cardinal or of the Catholic Patriarch in Baghdad. Perhaps not everyone would agree with this judgement. Bryan Hehir suggests that the Pope gave the Gulf War a 'negative assessment', but one which 'stopped short of a concise condemnation'.²³ But I fear that Hehir's statement risks creating the impression of more ambiguity in the Pope's position than a *prima facie* reading of the Vatican statements deserves. It is fair to ask how Hehir is using the term 'condemnation' in this context. If he is referring to that narrow juridical category which, much like the doctrinal expression '*anathema sit*', expresses a categorical prohibition *binding* on the consciences of Catholics, then I find myself in agreement with Hehir's statement. The Pope did not intend to impose his judgement of the war as binding teaching, and he certainly would not have wanted to leave any room for an interpretation that he had done so. If, on the other hand, Hehir is suggesting that the Pope's judgement that the war was not 'just' was somehow less than final or unequivocal, I think he undervalues the force of the available and relevant public statements from the Vatican. In any conventional sense of the word, the Pope did indeed *condemn* the war. The repeating refrain from the Vatican 'useless slaughter' (*inutile strage*) in reference to the war leaves little room for a different interpretation.

In conclusion I would draw your attention to another remarkable facet of the Vatican viewpoint on the Gulf War: the media war. The Vatican department charged with media concerns, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, held its annual plenary assembly in Rome

during the first week of March. The Pontifical Council was considering an updating of the 1971 document *Communio et Progressio*, regarded as fundamental to official Church teaching on the mass media. In an address to the assembly, the Pope noted the stress which *Communio et Progressio* placed upon the rôle of the media in providing accurate information in order for society to make morally correct decisions. The Pope then launched into a critique of the rôle which the media played in the Gulf War.

It can well be said that the current conflict has been waged not only with the weapons of war, but also, to some degree, through the media. While the means of social communications have been instrumental in keeping the world informed of the events, we have also seen that where respect for the truth is lacking they can be a powerful force for injustice.²⁴

This is the first time that such a forceful papal judgement against the media in respect to a particular war has ever been rendered. We can only hope that this will not be the final word from the papacy on this matter. The orgy of media censorship and propaganda from all sides leading up to and continuing during the Gulf War played no small part in narrowing the public perception of the available political alternatives to war.²⁵

- 1 Peter Hebblethwaite, 'God's proxy is a peace voter,' *The Guardian*, 4 February 1991, p. 33.
- 2 These three points represent a synthesis of two statements: "Per un'etica internazionale," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 9 August 1991, p. 1; and the Pope's Angelus Domini discourse of 26 August: *L'Osservatore Romano* 27/28 August 1990, p. 1.
- 3 Editorial, *Financial Times*, 13 August 1990, cited by Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 190.
- 4 Chomsky, *Deterring* 192, citing Knut Royce, *Newsday*, 29 August 1990.
- 5 *L'Osservatore Romano*, 14/15 January 1991, p. 1. The Vatican did not, however, endorse any *particular* proposal for such a conference. Thus, Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, Vatican Secretary for Relations with States, in an official communiqué issued 5 March 1991: *La Repubblica*, 6 March 1991, p. 6: 'The Holy See does not intend to comment on the international conference proposed by the PLO and Saddam Hussein. But it regards it as important that one or more negotiating initiatives in this regard be taken up'.
- 6 Letter of Pope John Paul II to Jacques Poos, President of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the European Community and Foreign Minister of Luxembourg, 4 January 1991: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 6 January 1991, p. 1. (Translation mine).
- 7 *L'Osservatore Romano*, 4 October 1990. See *The Tablet*, 13 October 1990, p. 1317.

- For objections to the Vatican position see "The Perils of Linkage," *The Tablet*, 20 October 1990, p. 1327. The term 'aggression' was first applied to the Iraqi invasion by the Vatican in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 8 August 1990, p. 1. See also the Address of Pope John Paul II to Diplomats Accredited to the Holy See, 12 January 1991: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 13 January 1991: "It is fortunate indeed that the United Nations Organisation has been the international instance which quickly took over the management of this grave crisis. Nor should this be surprising, if we recall that the Preamble and the first article of the Charter of San Francisco assigns as a priority the will 'to preserve future generations from the scourge of war' and to 'check every act of aggression'."
- 8 Letter of Pope John Paul II to Saddam Hussein, 15 January 1991: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 17 January 1991, p. 1.
 - 9 *L'Osservatore Romano*, 10 November 1990, p. 1.
 - 10 *L'Osservatore Romano*, 19/20 November 1990, p. 1.
 - 11 *L'Osservatore Romano*, 27/28 December 1990, p. 1.
 - 12 "Acta Diurna," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 30 December 1990, p. 1.
 - 13 Domenico del Rio, "Un mediatore tra Iraq e Usa". Proposta di Casaroli per evitare la guerra," *La Repubblica*, 30/31 December 1990, p. 3. See *The Tablet*, 5 January 1991, p. 22.
 - 14 Address of Pope John Paul II to the Diplomats Accredited to the Holy See, 12 January 1991: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 13 January 1991.
 - 15 Peter Hebblethwaite, "God's proxy is a peace voter," *The Guardian*, 4 February 1991, p. 33.
 - 16 Domenico del Rio, "Libero papa in libero Stato," *La Repubblica* 27/28 January 1991, p. 10.
 - 17 Clifford Longley, "In praise of America," *The Tablet*, 30 March/6 April 1991, p. 392: 'They even include the Pope, it seems'.
 - 18 Clifford Longley, "An elite with no answer," *The Times*, 15 December 1990, p. 12. Longley accused the signatories of the statement 'Just War in the Gulf?' (26 November 1990) of 'a religious-moral snobbery towards anything in uniform, anything military'. He went on, 'in other words, no project involving both the CIA and Mrs Thatcher could possibly be honourable or noble. ... This is a classic *trahison des clercs*'.
 - 19 Discourse of Pope John Paul II to Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops, 4 March 1991: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 6 March 1991. (Translation mine).
 - 20 There are a number of sources for this judgement. See the interview conducted with former Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Agostino Casaroli: *La Repubblica*, 30/31 December 1990, p. 3: 'Once war has broken out, the parties involved will be automatically impelled to multiply their deterrent forces, and even to unleash destructive weaponry, overriding the limits of morality and humanity which must be respected even where a right to war exists'. An abridgement of this interview was reported in *The Tablet*, 5 January 1991, p. 22, from which this translation of the Cardinal's remarks is taken. See also the Letter of Pope John Paul II to President Bush, 15 January 1991: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 17 January 1991, p. 1: 'I wish now to restate my firm belief that war is not likely to bring an adequate solution to international problems and that, even though an unjust situation might be momentarily met, the consequences that would possibly derive from the use of arms, and especially of today's highly sophisticated weaponry, would not give rise, in

addition to suffering and destruction, to new and perhaps worse injustices'. Peter Hebblethwaite, "How to read the Pope," *The Tablet*, 23 February 1991, p. 226, argued that by the use of the word possibly the Pope's letter allows an 'escape hatch' from his judgement. But Bryan Hehir, "Pope's Perspective," p. 726, retorts: '*not likely* could also be highlighted'. See also Pope John Paul II to the Clergy of the Diocese of Rome, 14 February 1991: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 16 February 1991, p. 1: 'It is an even greater worry of ours for the future that as a consequence of this war, people will become yet more polarised, more hostile towards each other, rather than journeying towards understanding and solidarity—even universal. It is possible that people are already now becoming more divided, more opposed and antagonistic with respect to each other. All of the Church's interventions as well as my own particular ministry in this matter, proceed from this principal concern'. Translation mine. The Vatican did not alter its negative views after the war. See the communiqué issued 5 March 1991 by Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, Vatican Secretary for Relations with States, *La Repubblica*, 6 March 1991, p. 6: 'The weapons of destruction employed during more than a month of bombardment and a week of the land campaign cannot but have produced new injustices. This is what the Pope had already written to President Bush. And we do not yet know exactly the full extent of the consequences of this war in human lives and destruction'.

- 21 Clifford Longley, "An anguished Catholic treads a careful line," *The Times*, 21 February 1991, p. 14: "On Sunday [17 February] the Pope had complained at the abuse of his previous remarks on the war, and declared: 'We are not pacifists. We do not want peace at any price, but peace with justice, which takes into account the rights of all the peoples concerned'. His spokesman [*sic*] said that in those rights the Pope meant the rights of sovereign Kuwait as well as of Iraqis, Palestinians and 'all the people of the Middle East'. Cardinal Hume said that in view of this he felt there was no longer a gap between himself and the Pope . . .".
- 22 See Noam Chomsky, "A stand on low moral ground," *The Guardian*, 10 January 1991, p. 21; and *idem*, *Deterring*, p. 179–214: Chapter 6: 'Nefarious Aggression'.
- 23 Bryan Hehir, "The Gulf War in retrospect: The Pope's Perspective," *The Tablet*, 22 June 1991, p. 762.
- 24 Pope John Paul II to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 1 March 1991: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 2 March 1991, p. 4. .
- 25 A strident criticism of the rôle of the media during the war was offered by Sergio Trasatti, "Un documento disatteso?" *L'Osservatore Romano*, 24 February 1991, "*Domenica*," p. 5. For a detailed account of media censorship and propaganda in relation to the war, see the special issue of *Index of Censorship*, 20:4–5 (April/May 1991), devoted to 'Warspeak: the Gulf and the News Media'. In addition see: Robert Fisk, "The Marketing of Armageddon," *The Independent on Sunday Magazine*, 9 December 1990, p. 12; John Pilger, "Myth-makers of the Gulf war," *The Guardian*, 7 January 1991, p. 23; Phillip Knightley, "Lies, damned lies and military briefings," *New Statesman and Society*, 8 February 1991, p. 26–7; Peter Lennon, "Relative values in a time of war," *The Guardian*, 21 February 1991, Alexander Cockburn, "The TV war," *New Statesman and Society*, 8 March 1991, p. 14–5.