

“A new moment” continued...

it served to fan terrorism, as even a CIA report several years back acknowledged, and it provoked the unraveling of an ancient nation.

The claims of success in Iraq based on military surges and temporary drops in internal violence have failed to adequately acknowledge the deep political foundations for achieving long term stability. Instead of military strategies, political and diplomatic surges offer, I believe, the only real hope for long term peace in Iraq, and, I would add, the entire region.

I was pleased to hear President Obama’s announcement on February 27th of a timeline for a pull-out of U.S. troops from Iraq. We should monitor this and continue to urge that the U.S. follows through on its commitment to a definite end to the occupation, and to leave no permanent military bases behind.

Yet, President Obama also announced in mid-February that 17,000 more U.S. troops would be going to Afghanistan. This came just a few days after he called for a two-month comprehensive review of U.S. policy in Afghanistan. While the situation in Afghanistan is very dangerous and complex, it feels very premature to begin a dramatic deployment of troops before the comprehensive review has barely begun. I have to wonder—have we not learned the lessons from Iraq? A public opinion poll in Afghanistan, conducted by ABC News and the BBC in late December and early January, showed a significant drop in the perception that the U.S. has performed well in Afghanistan, dropping from 68% in 2005 to 32% now. Only 18% expressed that the number of US and NATO forces should be increased. Sixty-four percent of Afghans say the government should negotiate a settlement with the Taliban. A separate survey of Afghan civil society leaders warned that the Taliban could use a surge as an opportunity to recruit local people to their causes, stressing instead the need for a diplomatic and development surge. Listening to these voices, it would seem that reducing the U.S. military footprint, instead of increasing it, could have far greater potential for long-term stability.

In conclusion, it seems imperative that we must chart a whole new direction for our country’s policies, one rooted in nonviolence, the pursuit of justice, and a commitment to the well being and dignity of all God’s creation.

For the second part of my talk I want to reflect more deeply on how Catholic social teaching and a vision of Gospel nonviolence can contribute to informing the policy debates and offer guidance for new directions for our nation with regard to war and peace.

From our Catholic social teaching we see that throughout history, and particularly in the last hundred years, the Church has never failed to teach that:

“War is a scourge and is never an appropriate way to resolve problems that arise between nations. It has never been and it will never be because it creates new and still more complicated conflicts.... War is an adventure without return that compromises humanity’s present and threatens its future. Nothing is lost by peace; everything may be lost by war... War is always a defeat for humanity” [*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 497].

That famous phrase, “War is always a defeat for humanity,” was from the World Day of Peace message, January 1, 2000. It was the message that Pope John Paul II chose to usher in the first day of the 21st century.

In the past two decades, the social teaching of the Catholic Church has become increasingly pointed in its condemnation of war as a means to resolving conflict. Wars of aggression are understood as intrinsically immoral; and preventive wars, waged in anticipation of some future threat are regarded as particularly immoral. Again, Pope John Paul II’s powerful renunciation of war, made at the time of the first Persian Gulf War in 1991, was often repeated in later papal statements. In a passage from *Centesimus Annus*, he declared:

“I myself, on the occasion of the recent tragic war in the Persian Gulf, repeated my cry: ‘Never again war! No, never again war, which destroys the lives of innocent people, teaches how to kill, throws into upheaval even the lives of those who do the killing and leaves behind a trail of resentment and hatred, thus making it all the more difficult to find a solution of the very problems which provoked the war... It must never be forgotten that at the root of war there are usually real and serious grievances: injustices suffered, legitimate

aspirations frustrated, poverty and the exploitation of multitudes of desperate people who see no real possibility of improving their lot by peaceful means.”

...So what can be done about the trail of resentment, hatred and woundedness that comes from war?

For Iraq, as I alluded to earlier, a national reconciliation process offers the best hope for beginning to heal the divisions created by 6 years of war and occupation. A regional peace process is also essential to ensuring long-term stability. It would seem that the U.S. should vigorously support these processes but not necessarily be in the lead, as we are not a trusted broker in the region. We do need, however, to accept responsibility for providing economic support for war-displaced refugees, and for Iraqi-led reconstruction.

For Afghanistan, before our country sends in any more troops, I would hope we could draw on what



Catholic social teaching has to say about alternatives to war and an over-reliance on military strategies. It is important that our country lead with diplomacy, including robust engagement with stakeholders in the region: Iran, Pakistan, India and Russia. I was happy to hear U.S. Secretary of State Clinton announce last week that a multilateral meeting on Afghanistan will happen at the end of March, and she particularly mentioned Iran would be expected as a participant.

Multilateral peacekeeping arrangements and security structures, based on needs defined by the people in the region, are far better able than military strategies to diffuse the violence, address border issues, and stop the bloodbath.

The Church teaches that “international law [is] the guarantor of the international order; that is, of coexistence among political communities that seek individually to promote the common good of their citizens, aware that the common good of a nation cannot be separated from the good of the entire human family” [*Compendium* 434].

Strengthening U.S. diplomacy and multilateral engagement in this direction, therefore, is vital to addressing the challenges to peace today. It would also go a long way in repairing the damaged U.S. reputation abroad and demonstrate our willingness to rejoin the community of nations.

For this third and last part of my comments, I’d like to reflect—in light of the urgencies of a world engulfed in poverty, violence and war—on the question: How do we respond? Most importantly, the response is to “live with faith and hope.”

Implied in this is both a grounding in prayer and a posture of action; for we need God and each other to help envision and build new directions for our country and our world so that all God’s people can live, and live in dignity.

We know this is not easy. It breaks the heart to take in the scale of massive suffering around us, to have the courage to look at the agony and pain with eyes wide open. Jesus too wept when he looked upon Jerusalem, and weeps for this broken world of ours, what we have done to our common humanity, torn by hatred, violence and injustice

From Luke’s gospel: “As Jesus drew near and came in sight of the city, he shed tears over it and said ‘If you in your turn had only understood on this day the message of peace!’ (Luke 19:42).

In light of the world’s suffering, we cannot remain silent or indifferent.

When we see these challenges to peace today and begin to measure our humble efforts, it is easy to get discouraged. We may be tempted to give up hope in ever seeing the day when war is finally abolished, when poverty is ended.

If we had to rely on our efforts alone, I would be the first to be discouraged; but we are not alone. The Church, in addition to being the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, is also

the communion of saints. We are surrounded today by a “cloud of witnesses,” those saints and martyrs and prophets who have gone before us, and who continue to encourage and intercede for us in our humble and faithful labors to work for justice and peace.

We are surrounded by each other. Just look around the room for a moment and see the faces of others too struggling to find a way to make a difference. If we lean on God and each other, we can find a way to go forward. We must.

There’s a paragraph that I would like to read from *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, written in 1993 for the 10th anniversary of the peace pastoral that poignantly names the “essential vocation of peacemaking” to which we are each called:

“Part of the legacy of *The Challenge of Peace* is the call to strengthen peacemaking as an essential dimension of our faith, reminding us that Jesus called us to be peacemakers. Our biblical heritage and our body of tradition make the vocation of peacemaking mandatory. Authentic prayer, worship, and sacramental life challenge us to a conversion of our hearts and summon us to the works of peace. These concerns are obviously not ours alone, but are the work of the entire community of faith and of all people of good will... Our letter sought to be a catalyst and resource for the larger national debate on the moral dimensions of war and peace. Today, we hope these reflections may serve as a call to consider the challenges of peacemaking and solidarity in a very different, but still dangerous world.”

Peace is the responsibility of everyone, not just political leaders. Politicians must be held accountable to basic norms of truth and justice, of human dignity and the common good, of solidarity with the poor and a commitment to peace [*Compendium*, 495].

So, to all of us here tonight, I would ask: Can we take up Pope John Paul II’s plea: “War is a defeat for humanity” and let our imaginations embrace that a world without war is possible?

That which our political leaders do not see, or cannot say, we must. It is up to us as people of faith, and to all who hunger and thirst for justice and peace, to give voice to alternatives to war, to elevate a prophetic vision of nonviolence, and to work for it—with urgency.

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. named it well in saying that the choice before us as a nation is one between “nonviolence or non-existence.”

Much is at stake. Nonviolence is a concept that goes deeper than the avoidance of the use of military force. Gospel nonviolence is about right relationship.

Only a nation with inner strength can embrace dialogue and engagement as its central policy. It is weakness when a nation refuses to take responsibility for past actions, and fails to engage in dialogue with adversaries. The rush to military solutions hides such startling weakness under the cloak of false patriotism and the lie that “might makes right.”

History is full of surprises. Who could have predicted that nonviolent movements for democracy in Eastern Europe would usher in the end of the Cold War, or that dialogue between arch-enemies in South Africa would lead to the end of apartheid? Others before us did not lose hope in the long struggle to abolish slavery and torture. Why should the struggle to abolish war be any different? Why not elevate “non-violence” as a strategy in the political discourse?

To each of you in this room working in your respective way to bring about a more just and peace-filled world, I thank you. For those of you looking for ways to become involved or to deepen your commitment, I invite you to join Pax Christi. We have to build a stronger movement in the Catholic Church for peace—and we need you.

If you are already a member, bring in others. We have to build our movement in numbers and breadth.

Another world IS possible. Another path for our country IS possible. It is necessary. We are the leaders we have been waiting for; and if the people lead, let us hope that our leaders follow.

In words God addresses to the people of Israel: “I set before you life and death, a blessing or a curse... choose life that you and your descendants may live” (Deuteronomy).

Let us go forward, living “with faith and hope,” praying and acting—that all may have life.

Bishop Gabino Zavala is the Bishop President of Pax Christi USA. Visit our website for more on Pax Christi USA’s campaigns on Iraq, Afghanistan and nuclear disarmament.