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Full text of speech by Bishop Gabino Zavala

Bishop Gabino Zavala | Mar. 12, 2009

This is the text of a speech delivered by Auxiliary Bishop Gabino Zavala of Los Angeles March 11 at the University of Great Falls in Great Falls, Mont. Zavala is bishop-president of Pax Christi USA, the Catholic peace organization. The University of Great Falls is a Roman Catholic liberal arts university.

I am so pleased and honored to be with you tonight. I would like to express my gratitude to the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings and the Catholic University of Great Falls for sponsoring tonight?s gathering. And I want to give special thanks to Bishop Warfel for this invitation to come, and also for his leadership in our Church on concerns of justice and peace, for he has served on the International Policy Committee of U.S. Bishops Conference, and as a bishop member of Pax Christi USA.

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I have been asked to share a reflection on the U.S. bishops? landmark pastoral: ?The Challenge of Peace,? written in 1983, by exploring the challenges of peace today, as well as the opportunities for charting new paths for peace for our country and our world.

The peace pastoral was a prophetic document issued at a time of heightened tensions between the nuclear powers. Yet it is very relevant for today, as I believe we are at a new moment for eliminating nuclear weapons from the world?s arsenals. This gives me great hope, and I will share more about how I believe the Church can bring its moral voice to helping our country?s leaders take decisive steps toward nuclear disarmament. It is an opportunity that we must seize upon, and do so with renewed urgency.

A second set of challenges to peace that I will reflect upon comes from the direction our country took following the events of September 11th. Part of the title for tonight?s talk ?Living with Faith and Hope,? is from the name of the pastoral that the bishops issued in November 2001, two months after September 11th. The letter primarily spoke to the grief and vulnerability we were experiencing as a nation, but it also elevated a moral voice at a juncture when our nation?s leaders were crafting parameters for the so-called ?war on terror.?

I believe that the way in which this ?war on terror? has been carried out has, sadly, contributed to a terrible spiral of violence engulfing our world. Most particularly, Iraq is a clear example of how violence begets violence. And as the U.S. is poised to deepen military engagement in Afghanistan, I would hope we could step back from the brink and reflect on the consequences rising from our country?s over-reliance on military strategies to address terrorism and resolve international conflicts.

I am here speaking as the Bishop President of Pax Christi USA, the national Catholic peace movement. Pax Christi?s mission is to live out the gospel call to nonviolence and to promote peacemaking as a priority in our Church, and as leaven for our nation. Since our inception, Pax Christi has raised a moral voice in calling for a nuclear weapons- free world and has tried to work faithfully to build a more just and peace-filled world.

As members of Christ?s body, we are all called upon to help envision new paths for peace for our wounded world, and to do so ?with faith and hope.? And this we must!

First, I would like to draw on Jesus? call to ?read the signs of the times,? by bringing the light of the Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching into dialogue with lived history.

Let me begin by looking at the unique challenge posed by nuclear weapons. The Peace Pastoral was very much a document informed by a deliberate and detailed reading of the signs of the times in the early 1980s. Written at a time when the nuclear standoff between the Cold War enemies of the Soviet Union and the United States literally was based on a MAD policy?Mutual Assured Destruction (or MAD). Deterrence was the mechanism on which the MAD policy relied. Each side was deterred from attacking the other for fear of the other side wreaking total destruction upon it. ?Peace? as it were, was maintained through this precarious balance, always threatening to break down into an unthinkable nuclear war. At the time the Pastoral was being discerned, there were even those in Reagan Administration who were proposing ?limited? and ?winnable? nuclear wars. The nation was building hundreds of weapons each year, and developing new ways of delivering them.

The Peace Pastoral addressed this dangerous direction by reasserting Vatican II?s condemnation of nuclear war and declaring that nuclear weapons could never be used. And on the central question of nuclear deterrence, the Pastoral was guided by Pope John Paul II?s declaration at the United Nations Special Session on Disarmament the previous year that: ?In current conditions "deterrence" based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself but as a step on the way toward a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable. Nonetheless in order to ensure peace, it is indispensable not to be satisfied with this minimum which is always susceptible to the real danger of explosion.?

The Peace Pastoral took His Holiness? position and went on to lay out what the US Bishops called a ?strictly conditioned moral acceptance of nuclear deterrence? based on three criteria: First, a reliance on deterrence could be an interim strategy only. As the Pastoral stated, ?We cannot consider it adequate as a long-term basis for peace.? Second, the purpose of maintaining nuclear weapons in the interim could only be to ?prevent the use of nuclear weapons by others,? and finally, a reliance on deterrence could only be used ?not as an end in itself, but as a step on the way to a progressive disarmament.?

Ten years later, in the Anniversary Statement, The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace, we bishops further specified that ?progressive disarmament? must mean a commitment to eliminating nuclear weapons, not simply as an ideal, but as a concrete policy goal.

Sadly, the strict conditions of the Pastoral remained unmet through the mid 1990?s and so in 1998, Pax Christi USA marked the 15th anniversary of the Peace Pastoral by issuing its own evaluation of the morality of nuclear deterrence. The report, issued by 105 US Catholic Bishop members of Pax Christi USA concluded that the strict conditions for the moral acceptance of nuclear deterrence were not being met. We found that the policy of nuclear deterrence had been institutionalized. It was in no way an interim policy, but rather had become the very ?long-term basis for peace? that we rejected in the 1983 Pastoral.

And we found that the role of nuclear weapons had been expanded in the post-Cold war period well beyond the narrow role of deterring the use of nuclear weapons by others to include a whole range of missions including protecting so-called ?vital interests?. And we concluded that the United States had no intention or policy position of eliminating these weapons. Rather, it was clear to us that these weapons had become fully integrated into US war-planning and strategy documents and that our nation intended to maintain and rely on these weapons indefinitely. We said at that time that nuclear deterrence as a national policy must be condemned as morally abhorrent and urged instead, for the United States to take up the Vatican?s call to outlaw nuclear weapons just as biological and chemical weapons had been outlawed.

Indeed, throughout the post-Cold War period beginning in the 1990?s the Vatican has been among the strongest voices calling for nuclear abolition. And in May of 2005, the Vatican took a dramatic step that signaled a sea change in Catholic moral teaching on nuclear weapons. In his address to the delegates at the Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, Vatican U.N. ambassador, called into question the ongoing morality of nuclear deterrence: ?When the Holy See expressed its limited acceptance of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War, it was with the clearly stated condition that deterrence was only a step on the way toward progressive nuclear disarmament. The Holy See has never countenanced nuclear deterrence as a permanent measure, nor does it today when it is evident that nuclear deterrence drives the development of ever newer nuclear arms, thus preventing genuine nuclear disarmament.? This statement by the Vatican is the first time since the early 1980s that challenged the very morality of deterrence itself.

Today we are in a new moment regarding nuclear disarmament. Last December in Paris, one hundred international political, military, business and civil leaders came together to launch a new initiative called Global Zero, which includes high-level policy work and public outreach to achieve a binding agreement to eliminate all nuclear weapons through phased and verified reduction. In the Wall Street Journal, an op-ed co-authored over a year ago by Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, Sam Nunn and William Perry, endorsed nuclear abolition and advocated for a bi-partisan process with the Senate to achieve ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which would stop all underground testing. President Obama also has spoken out on a goal of eliminating all nuclear weapons as a central element of U.S. nuclear policy. And Russian Prime Minister Putin as well spoke of the new possibilities to ?liberate humanity from nuclear weapons.?

So I stand here today with great hope that a very new moment for dramatic and fundamental changes in U.S. nuclear weapons policies is within our reach. In addition to ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, long-sought goals of taking deployed nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert status, negotiating a fissile materials cut-off treaty, and amending the Moscow Treaty to make its proposed cuts in US and Russian nuclear arsenals real and irreversible?are all possible given the new Administration and Senate. Each of these important and achievable steps will build the momentum needed to move further toward an international treaty to outlaw nuclear weapons once and for all.

It is my deepest hope that the Catholic Church in the United States will embrace this new moment and play an important role in education and advocacy on these critical issues. To honor the Peace Pastoral must mean a commitment to hold our nation accountable to the Pastoral?s strict conditions for the acceptance of nuclear deterrence. Just as I joined my voice with the voices of more than 100 of my fellow bishop members of Pax Christi USA, now more than 10 years ago, I say to you today that nuclear deterrence does not meet these criteria, it must be condemned and one day very soon I am sure, the Catholic Church in the United States will echo the words of the Vatican that ?nuclear weapons are incompatible with the peace we seek for the 21st Century.?

In addition to addressing nuclear weapons, the Peace Pastoral?s power also was in addressing the broader questions of peace in that day. So I would like to briefly name some of the new and complex challenges to peace in our time. In addition to finding ourselves in a world awash in weapons, we find ourselves embroiled in a worldwide economic collapse resulting in part from our extravagant consumerism while billions of God?s people struggle for basic survival. We see rising tensions between faith traditions, and attempts to demonize ?enemy? peoples. We have seen the acceptance of the use of torture, as well a campaign of fear and intimidation waged against immigrants and communities of color.

Next week, March 19th, will mark the 6th anniversary of the start of the war on Iraq. The very launch of a ?war of choice? set a dangerous precedent for our country; and it is important to look with eyes wide open at the magnitude of the resulting suffering and human costs: over 4,000 U.S. service people have been killed, and an

estimated million (plus) Iraqi civilians. Over 4 million Iraqis have become displaced. -- Although launched under the guise of the ?war on terror,? 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 the course of 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 from 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 also 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. ?

In terms of Iraq, when we look just at the hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers suffering from traumatic brain injuries and over a quarter of a million who are estimated to sustain post-traumatic stress disorders that could haunt them the rest of their lives, is this not what is meant by John Paul II?s description of how war ?throws into upheaval the lives of those who do the killing??

And in looking at how war leaves behind ?a trail of resentment and hatred? we need to reflect on Iraq before the U.S. invasion. There was never a civil conflict between Shia and Sunni Iraqis. Intermarriage was common. Al Queda was not present in the country. While the war was launched under the banner of the ?war on terrorism? it has resulted in breeding hatred and fanning ever-expanding extremist violence. Many Iraqi analysts, including many in their parliament, believe that the U.S. occupation has fueled the violence by serving as a ?common enemy? for insurgents.

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 six 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 that 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.

I will conclude this section with another quote from the Compendium that elevates the Vatican?s repeated teaching on the importance of diplomacy and multilateral institutions in addressing conflict, particularly the United Nations.

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 non-violent 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 ?nonviolence? 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, 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.

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* ?Frustration With War, Problems in Daily Life Send Afghans' Support for U.S. Efforts Tumbling?
ABC News/BBC/ARD National Survey of Afghanistan, ANALYSIS by GARY LANGER, Feb. 9, 2009

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