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The hope of Easter and Pentecost in a nuclear age

Art Laffin | May. 19, 2010

"The time has come for us as people of faith to open our hearts anew to the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit and the nonviolence of Jesus. It is time to repent of our complicity in the culture of violence, to renounce our obedience to a war-making state."

Commentary

During this Holy Season when we celebrate the Easter triumph of Jesus over the forces of death, and the Holy Spirit being given to the first believing community at Pentecost, a litany of life-threatening problems, caused by our arrogance, greed and disrespect for life, engulf our society and world.

This litany includes the U.S. wars and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan; the illegal U.S.-backed Israeli occupation of the West Bank; an unjust global and domestic economic order that has resulted in countless poor people to sink deeper into dehumanizing poverty and die early deaths; global warming and environmental destruction; and racism and all forms of discrimination.

I believe the ultimate violence in our time is the existence and intent to use nuclear weapons which can destroy all life on earth. As representatives from around the world gather at the United Nations during May to review the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), we need, more than ever, to understand that nuclear weapons continues to imperil humanity, and to call for the immediate abolition of all nuclear weapons.

Independent analysts estimate the total world stockpile of nuclear warheads at between 22,000-27,000. The Federation of American Scientists estimates that nearly 8,000 of those warheads are operational, with about 2,000 U.S. and Russian warheads ready for use on short notice. Estimates of the total U.S. nuclear arsenal range from 9,000 to 10,000 but the Pentagon will not give a precise number. On May 3, the first day of the United Nations sponsored NPT review conference, the Obama Administration revealed that there were 5,113 nuclear warheads in the U.S. stockpile. Analysts also estimate that about another 4,500 nuclear weapons have been retired and await dismantling.

President Obama's vision of a world without nuclear weapons is commendable. However, the reality of present U.S. nuclear policy is to ensure that the United States maintains a sufficient nuclear threat to remain the preeminent military superpower in the world. Although the United States and Russia recently signed a new

START Treaty, reducing the limit of nuclear warheads to 1,550 over seven years, there will still be enough firepower on each side to devastate the world many times over. The Obama Administration's new Nuclear Posture Review asserts that the U.S. defense system requires nuclear weapons as a deterrent to a nuclear attack on the United States or its allies.

The Nuclear Posture Review also states that the United States would not threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states--as long as they are not seen to be developing nuclear weapons. But what if they are? Does this mean we will target them?

The Nuclear Posture Review states: "The U.S. wishes to stress that it would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the U.S. or its allies and partners." This is not a new position but rather a continuation of a long-held U.S. nuclear posture. Meanwhile, the United States continues to militarize space and plans to spend $7 billion over the next year to upgrade existing nuclear weapons in order to provide a "secure and effective nuclear arsenal." This expenditure is only a small part of an Obama administration proposal to Congress to spend $180 billion over the next decade to modernize the nation's nuclear weapons complex, according to a May 14, 2010 article in The Washington Post by Walter Pincus.

Given this example by the United States, is it any surprise that, in addition to the nine countries that now are known to have nuclear weapons, other countries are also seeking to acquire the bomb, thereby increasing the nuclear danger? It is hypocritical for the United States, the leading nuclear superpower and the only country to have ever used nuclear weapons, to tell Iran, North Korea or any other country that it cannot acquire them. Nuclear weapons are inherently genocidal weapons and any country that possesses them are in violation of of God's law and international law.

I agree with the late Jesuit Fr. Richard McSorley that "it is a sin to build a nuclear weapon." I also agree with his assertion that "The taproot of violence in our society today is our intent to use nuclear weapons. Once we have agreed to that, all other evil is minor in comparison. Until we squarely face the questions of our consent to use nuclear weapons, any hope of large scale improvement of public morality is doomed to failure. ?"

Christ has Risen! The gift of the Holy Spirit has been given to us! What do these kairos moments of Easter and Pentecost, when God has so powerfully intervened in human history, mean for us in our violent nuclear age?

I believe Easter and Pentecost are the hallmarks of our faith which should define our lives as individuals and as a church. In the face of all the bad news, we can stake our lives on some good news. Jesus has overcome death and the powers of this world and has shown us a new way to live! The Holy Spirit is present, here and now, inspiring individuals and communities of faith to boldly witness to the Gospel in the same way the first Christians did. Wherever violence, injustice, and war occur in our world, there are also people witnessing to the truth of Easter and Pentecost. The Acts of the Apostles continues throughout the world as sisters and brothers are persecuted, imprisoned and killed for witnessing to the truth.

I submit that active nonviolence, as exemplified by Jesus, is the only way out of our culture of violence and death. Violence, killing and war are incompatible with the commands of Jesus. To kill another human being is to kill what has been made in God's image -- for we humans are all created by the same God. Jesus calls us to love our enemies, not demonize, bomb and kill them! Jesus instructs his followers to practice unconditional love, forgiveness and reconciliation, and to give our lives as He did on the cross, rather than to kill. Jesus said: "I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly." (Jn. 10:10) He declares: "Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." (Jn. 15:12-13). Yet our blindness as individuals and as a church to Jesus' way of nonviolent love has led to the creation of a culture that sanctions violence, killing, and genocide and glorifies war. Through Jesus' cross and resurrection, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we have been liberated from our moral blindness. We have been given new eyes of

faith to see. We need only to believe.

After the Resurrection the apostles are afraid and not sure of themselves. They are tentative in their faith, not knowing what to expect. These are shortcomings that I, and I'm sure most people, can relate to.

Prior to Jesus' ascension into heaven, Jesus promised to the disciples that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. For some forty days the disciples devoted themselves to prayer and building community. "When the day of Pentecost arrived the apostles were all gathered in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire appeared among them...All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:1-4) Thus the disciples, radically transformed, take to the streets boldly proclaiming the good news of Jesus. As the believing community grew, the religious and political powers felt threatened. Hence the persecutions began. Despite the many attempts to crush it, the discipleship community remained faithful and the church flourished.

What would happen if we truly availed ourselves of the transforming power of Easter and Pentecost? What would the church and our world look like if our hearts were burning with the same kind of faith that the apostles experienced on the road to Emmaus, and after Pentecost? The time has come for us as people of faith to open our hearts anew to the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit and the nonviolence of Jesus. It is time to repent of our complicity in the culture of violence, to renounce our obedience to a war-making state, to dismantle and abolish all nuclear weapons and all weapons of war, and to redirect all monies and resources currently allocated for weapons and warmaking to alleviate poverty and meet urgent human needs.

If a real and lasting peace is to ever be attained, we must radically refuse to cooperate with State-sanctioned violence and warmaking. Just think what the result would be if people of all faiths would not participate in the military, would not make weapons, refuse to pay war-taxes, or work in any job that directly or indirectly would contribute to the exploitation or killing of another human being? What if more people of faith engaged in nonviolent acts of resistance at centers of political and economic power, weapons plants, and military installations -- breaking the laws of the Empire which legitimate killing and war?

Since the nuclear age began, examples of nonviolent action for disarmament abound. There have been countless vigils, marches and acts of resistance worldwide, including some 90 plowshares-disarmament actions. Continuing in this rich history of nonviolent action, thousands of people marched [1] in New York City on May 2, including a delegation of *hibakusha* -- atomic bomb survivors from Japan, calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons. (See Fr. John Dear's The archbishop who opposes nuclear weapons [2]

On May, 3, I was honored to be among the 22 people who were arrested during a War Resisters League sponsored-action to declare Grand Central Station a nuclear-free zone and demand that the United States take the lead in creating a nuclear-free world by disarming all of its nuclear weapons. As banners were unfurled stating "Nuclear Weapons=Terrorism," and "Talk Less-Disarm More," people did a symbolic die-in to represent past and potential victims of nuclear weapons.

Violence and war will end when we recognize that we are all sisters and brothers, that under no circumstance can we kill, make and build any weapon, that deterrence is immoral, and that only God has the right to take life. Disarmament and the abolition of weapons -- from handguns to nuclear warheads -- will occur when we disarm our hearts of fear and violence and refuse to make, fund or use weapons. If we as individuals and as a church radically embrace Jesus' way of nonviolent love, God's reign of justice and peace will be established. But it will not come without great sacrifice and a willingness to place our complete trust in God as our true security. Come Holy Spirit, enkindle in us the fire of Your Divine love so that we can become your peacemakers.

[Art Laffin is a member of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker in Washington.]

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