

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 18, 2012 at 11:57am

Bishop says war kills religion, freedom, conscience

ATLANTA -- In a discussion on religious freedom, Bishop John Michael Botean made an impassioned plea against war at the U.S. bishops' national meeting in Atlanta.

"War is a killer," he said. "It kills conscience, and religion is the conscience of a people."

Botean, bishop of the Romanian Catholic Eparchy of St. George's in Canton, Ohio, drew a parallel between the violation of religious freedom entailed in paying insurance premiums for immoral medical procedures and the involvement of providing tax support for a war that provokes interreligious conflict and loss of religious freedom.

He made his intervention June 13 near the end of an afternoon session devoted chiefly to questions of religious freedom in the United States and around the world.

One of the main speakers in the session on global religious freedom had been Iraqi Bishop Shlemon Warduni, auxiliary bishop of the Chaldean Catholic Patriarchate of Babylon and president of Caritas Iraq. Warduni had just detailed the massive persecution and loss of religious freedom suffered by Iraqi Christians that began with the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and continues today.

Botean initiated his plea by quoting part of what Warduni said near the end of his talk: "The peace of Jesus is love. This love guides us to unity, because love works miracles and builds justice and peace. This can be realized when all the church works together in one heart and one thought. ...

"We want to cry out to you: we want peace, justice, stability, freedom of religion. No more war, no more death, no more explosions, no more injustice. Please help us talk to everybody. Push the cause of peace"

Botean said:

"Bishop Warduni drew the direct and very bright line, I think, between our capacity and our

willingness to buy and pay for and engage in, if not bless, this or any other country's war-making desires, at the loss of religious freedom in any given country.

"It's only natural. War is a killer. It kills conscience, and religion is the conscience of a people.

"If we want to keep conscience, I think we have to do exactly what Bishop Warduni suggests and examine the connection which we might be experiencing in our own country between the state of permanent warfare -- the growing state of permanent warfare and conflict -- and the diminishing [of the] religious freedom that we enjoy here, and the loss of religious freedom that we have bought and paid for, not with insurance premiums, but with our tax dollars."

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In the lead-up to the 2003 war in Iraq, Pope John Paul II went to extraordinary lengths to warn against it in public statements and to advocate against it through extensive Vatican diplomatic activity, even sending a special envoy to the White House to plead with the Bush administration not to go to war.

In November 2002, the U.S. bishops as a body publicly expressed "serious questions about the moral legitimacy of any preemptive, unilateral use of military force to overthrow the government of Iraq," and the bishops' conference and many bishops individually argued against a premature rush to war.

But when U.S. and coalition forces invaded Iraq in the spring of 2003, Botean was the only U.S. bishop to condemn the new war outright. In a March 7, 2003, pastoral letter to his people at the start of Lent, he bluntly called the pre-emptive invasion immoral.

"Any direct participation and support of this war against the people of Iraq is objectively grave evil, a matter of mortal sin," he wrote. "Beyond a reasonable doubt this war is morally incompatible with the Person and Way of Jesus Christ. With moral certainty I say to you it does not meet even the minimal standards of the Catholic just war theory."

[Jerry Filteau, *NCR*'s Washington correspondent, was in Atlanta for the bishops' June 13-14 spring meeting.]

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