

Pastoral Letter of GDR Catholic Bishops on Peace

For the past generation the Roman Catholic Church in the GDR, taking its stand on the principle of the separation of Church and State which is guaranteed by the law of the land, has sought to avoid confrontations or even negotiations with the government. The Roman Catholic Church has tried to avoid the degree of involvement with secular society which Protestant leaders describe as "the Church within socialism" or "critical solidarity"; the Catholic fear is that such a situation is not unlike that of an established Church (the historical principle of "Throne and Altar") and could well give some semblance of ecclesiastical recognition to a Marxist-Leninist regime. The result has been that the Roman Catholic leadership has been able to exert very little influence on government policy, apart from an oft-repeated insistence on the rights of conscience, the rights of parents to educate their children in a Catholic manner, and so forth.

The appearance of this explicit Pastoral Letter, therefore, has been something of a surprise. It was issued by the GDR Berlin Bishops' Conference on 1 January and read out in Catholic churches on Sunday 2 January. The translation here is taken from Digest des Ostens No. 1, 1983.

Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,

The annual day of world prayer for peace prompts us to speak to you in a joint pastoral letter about pressing issues relating to the maintenance and safeguarding of peace in the present time. There is no need for a detailed exposition of the fact that today the precious gift of peace is a matter of deepest concern to nations as well as to each individual. With the increasing fear of a possible war, the dreadful consequences of which can scarcely be imagined because of modern weapons, the desire to serve peace actively is growing almost all over the world. This is a sign of hope which cannot be overlooked. Nor can it be overlooked that active concern for peace receives a strong impulse from the Christian faith. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is in its very essence a message of peace, although the peace which Christ can give us is more far-reaching than the political peace about which the world is anxious at the present time.

We hope that our words will help to clarify the standpoint of the Catholic Church for you in the current debate on the

right way to serve peace. But above all we would like to encourage you with our personal letter to hold firm to the conviction that peace is possible and that active support of it is meaningful.

I

What is the basis for this confidence? When Christians talk about peace, they are referring to the fact that peace is ultimately a gift of God in Jesus Christ. This allusion should not be dismissed as religious rhetoric. The knowledge that complete peace is a gift of God's salvation has a two-fold consequence: it repudiates the false hope that a never-ending reign of peace can be established on earth, but at the same time it gives our active involvement for peace both steadfastness and perseverance. As Christians we know that the peace that is being talked about in the discussions of our days is only one facet of what is described in the Bible as "peace" (*shalom*). This peace means the complete reconciliation and unity of man with God, which has been given to us once for all by Jesus's Easter victory and which is to become manifest in us in the new creation at the end of the age. As long as the world submits itself to the power of sin despite the Easter triumph of Jesus, the kingdom of eternal peace will remain a blessing of the future. Yet we may hope that, despite our sin, God will grant times of peace. From a biblical point of view, the contribution of the individual to such peace consists in recognising one's own sin and receiving redemption from it through faith in Jesus Christ; for peace with God is the prerequisite for peace between men. Thus peace between states and power-blocs is not, for the Christian, the highest good. Far more crucial, for him, is peace with God. Whoever closes his eyes to the reality of sin when considering peace is prone to utopian dreams. There are many people who will not like to hear these things, but we believe that they alone provide a sound basis for every endeavour for peace.

But on the other hand, our faith keeps us from any form of resignation or even fear. Jesus Christ gives us the assurance that true life is not just wishful thinking but is already a reality. Therefore the preaching of the Church is upheld with confidence even if we are beset by outside opposition and by many experiences of helplessness. God's

mercy has already been granted to us in Christ. So even in times when world peace is threatened, the Church can proclaim God's peace as good news. Therefore, despite all arguments about the right methods for safeguarding peace, Christian action for peace between individuals, groups and nations has an imperishable basis on which we can always build afresh, even after efforts which have failed, namely: "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1).

II

Our basic conviction, therefore, is that peace is possible and war is not inevitable. Of course the Church cannot put forward a political plan for safeguarding peace. That is not its task. But the Church cannot remain silent when it sees negative developments which can lead to ruin; and moreover the Church knows it is its duty to advocate with all its authority those principles and values on which a just peace is founded. We are therefore presenting you with the following declarations, even though we risk repeating much that is already known.

1. We bishops are adopting the Holy Father's urgent appeal for continuing reciprocal and verifiable disarmament of the two power-blocs. The arms race between East and West is "an intolerable vexation". It makes the balance of power a balance of fear, it destroys trust between peoples and nations and increases the misery of starving people in the Third World. We must manage to break the inherent logic of the arms race, the urge for superiority over the possible enemy.

In accord with the declarations of the Popes, we reject any kind of warfare which is intended — by whatever weapons — to destroy whole towns or areas together with their inhabitants. A war with modern weapons of mass destruction is in any case in itself immoral and therefore to be rejected. The use of nuclear weapons cannot be justified in any war, no matter for what reasons it may be waged. But even conventional weapons are becoming more and more lethal. In the event of conflict, they too threaten the civilian population of a battle area. Thus, in the words of Pope John XXIII, it is no longer possible in our day and age to consider "war as the appropriate means of re-establishing violated rights".

2. It is obvious that modern war techniques lead to a crisis in the conventional concept of "just wars". The teaching of the Church does not in itself advocate absolute pacifism, that is, in certain circumstances it considers the use of force to be permissible, appropriate or even necessary, for example, when the rights of the weak have to be protected. The Church knows that the evil in man can be so deceitful, stubborn and brutal that its devastating effect can be limited only by force. The doctrine of the "just war" did not mean that war in itself is justifiable, but rather that if a war cannot be avoided it must at least be waged justly, that is, for a legitimate reason and with appropriate means.

This principle may be quite acceptable in limited conflicts. But can it also apply in instances where force is used without distinction, as, for example, in a war in which nuclear weapons are employed? Does not the much ridiculed ideal of non-violence, as preached by Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, now acquire a hitherto unforeseen rational strength of testimony? We understand the qualms of conscience of many, especially young people, who are pulled back and forth between the legitimate right of a nation to defence capability and their insight into the hopelessness of a peace which relies on military superiority. There is no easy solution to these qualms of conscience. The threat of using force can be justified only, if at all, when it conclusively defends the right, freedom and security of a nation against obvious malevolence. But it is well known that there is much argument in the world about the very concepts of right and freedom. Here the conscience of the individual will have to seek the inner authenticity and outer veracity of a claim of self-defence. It will also allow itself to be led by the sayings of Scripture and by the spirit of God which is at work in the Church in order to reach its own judgement. The Church should and does wish to give help and support to us in our situation, and in having this obligation and desire the Church is itself learning to understand more deeply the will of God in this respect.

3. We welcome the fact that in the matter of military service, the right to freedom of conscience is expressly recognised in the GDR's national legislation. The "Regu-

lation of the National Defence Council in the GDR for the Establishment of Construction Units . . . of 7 September 1964" legally determines that conscripts who object to armed service for religious or similar reasons may perform alternative unarmed service. This Regulation continues to remain in force since the new law on military service of 25 March 1982. Whoever makes use of this legal possibility should be sure that he will not consequently suffer any disadvantages in the career upon which he has embarked or will embark. It would also be desirable for reservists who have already performed armed military service to be given the subsequent opportunity of unarmed service. We would like to express our respect for those who reject armed military service for religious reasons. We naturally also respect the conviction of those who perform armed military service in the hope that they are thereby serving the cause of peace in the world. Beyond this, we ask that there might be consideration and discussion of other possible forms of alternative service. The longing of young people in our country too for peace should not be met with suspicion but with openness and trust.

4. If we consider all this, and if we furthermore value the fact that there are people who, in obedience to the word of Jesus, decide to take the way of non-violence, we cannot remain silent on the issue of military instruction in schools. The Church Council gives the admonition, "Whoever devotes himself to the task of education, especially of young people, and whoever is responsible for helping to form public opinion, should consider it a serious obligation to waken a new attitude to peace in everyone". We view with concern the extent to which thinking in military categories is becoming ever more a part of the school curriculum and vocational training. It is to be feared that this kind of education will awaken the readiness to resolve conflicts by force and will thus weaken the next generation's attitude to peace. Moreover, freedom of conscience with regard to pre-military training should also be respected in schools and training centres. The Berlin Conference of Bishops expressed its serious misgivings to the government of the GDR about the introduction of military instruction at the time. We would

have liked to have found more attention paid to our anxieties, and we consider that developments to date justify our misgivings.

5. In this connection we are again drawing attention to parents' rights with regard to their children's education, rights which should not be relinquished and which we bishops have publicly supported on numerous occasions. "Parents should not waive their rights to primary responsibility for their children's education, nor should anyone take these rights from them. The State, too, must have regard to parents' wishes when setting its educational goals." This is what we wrote to you in a joint pastoral letter in spring 1981. We would encourage those parents who are doing all they can to see that their children are brought up with a disposition and readiness for peace, non-violence and tolerance. Where there is peacableness on a small scale, we can also have hope for peace in the world.

Dear parents, talk with your children about the things they hear and about the things that affect them. Have the courage to express your views in no uncertain terms. In bringing up your children at home, take care that they do not become accustomed to violence by television or by toys. Awaken in them, above all by your own example, a readiness to break down prejudices and, should conflicts arise, to try negotiation first. Create for your children the experience that true forgiveness builds bridges and can make the heart glad. And above all, introduce your children to Jesus Christ so that they learn from his words and his life how to become true disciples of peace.

6. Finally, we would remind you in this pastoral letter which is devoted to the theme of peace, of the power of prayer which can overcome the world. Earnest intercession for the peace of the world should pervade both your private and public prayers. Prayer in the strength of faith knows that God has the power to grant peace. God can "do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20). Prayer moves the heart of God and thus it affects the world. To pray for peace is thus the Christians' fundamental peace service. It is to be welcomed if we unite in this concern for common prayer with all Christian people, beyond the confines of our own Church.

The common prayer of Christians will thus become in itself a sign of peace. Let us not be dissuaded by the reproach that prayer simply serves as an alibi for people who do not otherwise want to do anything for peace. Out of prayer for peace grows the disposition towards peace, and this will not remain without consequences for our actions.

Dear brothers and sisters, Pope Paul VI declared in 1965 in an address to the UNO that "Peace does not come about only with the help of politics and a balance of power and interests. It comes about with the help of the spirit, ideas and works of peace." Peace between men grows like a fruit from certain spiritual principles. It occurs where truth, justice, love and freedom prevail. The Church can make an important contribution in the preparation of these spiritual founda-

tions for a sustainable peace, and its contribution will be most convincing where it subjects itself completely to the word of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That will not come about unless there is a willingness to take the way of the cross. But where in this world could a Christian or a Church which is guided by the word of Jesus live totally without opposition? It is not the opposition of the world that should make us uneasy, but rather the lack of "works of peace" in our midst. May it be our common concern that God might equip our Church for convincing works of peace. Trusting in the peace of Christ which dwells in our hearts, we ask for you the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Berlin, the day of prayer for world peace,
1 January 1983.

Translated by G. M. Ablitt

"Our True Christianity — Today and Tomorrow"

The text of the lecture below was first published in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung on 23 August 1979. It was prefaced by an introduction which we reproduce here in full.

"In November 1978 Dr Franc Rode, Professor of Theology, gave a lecture entitled 'Our true Christianity [in Slovenia] — today and tomorrow' as part of the traditional theological course for students and young intellectuals at the Catholic theological faculty in Ljubljana, Yugoslavia. A number of professors and lecturers gave presentations on different theological topics. The lectures were published at the beginning of June (1979 — tr.) in a book entitled 'Do not quench the spirit — A collection of lectures taken from the theological course on current topics'. Professor Rode's lecture is the only one omitted from the collection. Theological students were informed by the Republican Conference of the Union of Socialist Youth of Slovenia that Rode had falsified history and was misleading the public and therefore the publication of his lecture had been forbidden.

The President of the Slovene State Commission for relations with religious communities, the former Yugoslav ambassador to the Holy See, Stane Kolman, recently told

*theological students in Maribor, in Slovenia, that it would not be possible to publish an explanation in the collection as to why Rode's lecture had been excluded. There is some speculation that Rode may face trial because of his lecture.**

The Ljubljana party newspaper, Delo of 8 June stated the following:

The lecture given by the Professor of the Ljubljana theological faculty may be seen as an expression of clericalism. The lecturer stated, among other things, that our struggle to liberate people has been a struggle between two opposing views and he criticised the relations in our society because believers are, apparently, second-class citizens. The fact that his lecture was published in Naša luč, the émigré newspaper, hostile to Yugoslavia, gives an indication of the contents of his presentation.

We are publishing Professor Rode's lecture, which deals critically with the Catholic Church in Slovenia as well as the communist authorities, in a shortened form."

*Dr Rode did not in fact face trial. He is currently working in the Secretariat for Non-believers in the Vatican — *Ed.*