

FAITH AND DISARMAMENT*
A Speech by Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen
June 12, 1981

On June 12, 1981 Seattle's Catholic Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen spoke to a gathering at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, and gave what has come to be known as the "Faith and Disarmament" speech. Frank Fromherz, who wrote "A Disarming Spirit: the Life of Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen," called Hunthausen's message that day, "a prayerful invitation to examine personal and collective conscience on great moral questions regarding nuclear arms." In his speech, Hunthausen referred to the Trident nuclear weapon system at the Bangor naval base just 20 miles west of Seattle as "the Auschwitz of Puget Sound."

In reflecting back on why he used the reference to Auschwitz, Hunthausen said that, "God calls us to name the evil our society has embraced so wholeheartedly in our nuclear arms, and to do so clearly. Trident is the Auschwitz of Puget Sound because of the massive cooperation required in our area -- the enormous sinful complicity that is necessary -- for the eventual incineration of millions of our brother and sister human beings. I say with deep sorrow that our nuclear war preparations are the global crucifixion of Jesus. What we do to the least of these; through our nuclear war planning, we do to Jesus. That is his teaching. We cannot avoid it and we should not try. Our nuclear weapons are the final crucifixion of Jesus, in the extermination of the human family with whom he is one."

Archbishop Hunthausen's speech, which follows, is a clarion call to us now as it was then.

I am grateful for having been invited to speak to you on disarmament because it forces me to a kind of personal disarmament. This is a subject I have thought about and prayed over for many years. I can recall vividly hearing the news of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. I was deeply shocked. I could not then put into words the shock I felt from the news that a city of hundreds of thousands of people had been devastated by a single bomb. Hiroshima challenged my faith as a Christian in a way I am only now beginning to understand. That awful event and its successor at Nagasaki sank into my soul, as they have in fact sunk into the souls of all of us, whether we recognize it or not.

I am sorry to say that I did not speak out against the evil of nuclear weapons until many years later. I was especially challenged on the issue by an article I read in 1976 by Jesuit Father Richard McSorley, titled "It's a Sin to Build a Nuclear Weapon." Father McSorley wrote: "The taproot of violence in our society today is our intention to use nuclear weapons. Once we have agreed to that, all other evil is minor in comparison. Until we squarely face the question of our consent to use nuclear weapons, any hope of large scale improvement of public morality is doomed to failure." I agree. Our willingness to destroy life everywhere on this earth, for the sake of our security as Americans, is at the root of many other terrible events in our country.

I was also challenged to speak out against nuclear armament by the nearby construction of the Trident submarine base and by the first-strike nuclear doctrine which Trident represents. The nuclear warheads fired from one Trident submarine will be able to destroy as many as 408 separate areas, each with a bomb five times more powerful than the one used at Hiroshima. One Trident submarine has the destructive equivalent of 2,040 Hiroshima bombs. Trident and other new weapons systems such as the MX and cruise missile have such extraordinary accuracy and explosive power that they can only be

understood as a build-up to a first-strike capability. First-strike nuclear weapons are immoral and criminal. They benefit only arms corporations and the insane dreams of those who wish to "win" a nuclear holocaust.

I was also moved to speak out against Trident because it is being based here. We must take special responsibility for what is in our own backyard. And when crimes are being prepared in our name, we must speak plainly. I say with a deep consciousness of these words that Trident is the Auschwitz of Puget Sound.

Father McSorley's article and the local basing of Trident are what awakened me to a new sense of the Gospel call to peacemaking in the nuclear age. They brought back the shock of Hiroshima. Since that re-awakening five years ago, I have tried to respond in both a more prayerful and more vocal way than I did in 1945. I feel the need to respond by prayer because our present crisis goes far deeper than politics. I have heard many perceptive political analyses of the nuclear situation, but their common element is despair. It is no wonder. The nuclear arms race can sum up in a few final moments the violence of tens of thousands of years, raised to an almost infinite power – a demonic reversal of the Creator's power of giving life. But politics is itself powerless to overcome the demonic in its midst. It needs another dimension. I am convinced that a way out of this terrible crisis can be discovered by our deepening in faith and prayer so that we learn to rely not on missiles for our security but on the loving care of that One who gives and sustains life. We need to return to the Gospel with open hearts to learn once again what it is to have faith.

We are told there by Our Lord: "Blessed are the peacemakers. They shall be called children of God." The Gospel calls us to be peacemakers, to practice a divine way of reconciliation. But the next beatitude in Matthew's sequence implies that peacemaking may also be blessed because the persecution which it provokes is the further way into the kingdom: "Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of right. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

To understand today the Gospel call to peacemaking, and its consequence, persecution, I want to refer especially to these words of Our Lord in Mark: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let that person renounce self and take up the cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save one's own life will lose it; but anyone who loses one's life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (Mark 8:34-35)

Scripture scholars tell us that these words lie at the very heart of Mark's Gospel, in his watershed passage on the meaning of faith in Christ. The point of Jesus' teaching here is inescapable: As his followers, we cannot avoid the cross given to each one of us. I am sorry to have to remind myself and each one of you that by "the cross" Jesus was referring to the means by which the Roman Empire executed those whom it considered revolutionaries. Jesus' first call in the Gospel is to love of God and one's neighbor. But when He gives flesh to that commandment by the more specific call to the cross, I am afraid that like most of you I prefer to think in abstract terms, not in the specific context in which Our Lord lived and died. Jesus' call to the cross was a call to love God and one's neighbor in so direct a way that the authorities in power could only regard it as subversive and revolutionary "Taking up the cross," "losing one's life," meant being willing to die at the hands of political authorities for the truth of the Gospel, for that love of God in which we are all one.

As followers of Christ, we need to take up our cross in the nuclear age. I believe that one obvious meaning of the cross is unilateral disarmament. Jesus' acceptance of the cross rather than the sword raised in his defense is the Gospel's statement of unilateral disarmament. We are called to follow. Our

security as people of faith lies not in demonic weapons which threaten all life on earth. Our security is in a loving, caring God. We must dismantle our weapons of terror and place our reliance on God.

I am told by some that unilateral disarmament in the face of atheistic communism is insane. I find myself observing that nuclear armament by anyone is itself atheistic, and anything but sane. I am also told that the choice of unilateral disarmament is a political impossibility in this country. If so, perhaps the reason is that we have forgotten what it would be like to act out of faith. But I speak here of that choice not as a political platform – it might not win elections – but as a moral imperative for followers of Christ. A choice has been put before us: anyone who wants to save one's own life by nuclear arms will lose it; but anyone who loses one's life by giving up those arms for Jesus' sake, and for the sake of the Gospel of love, will save it.

To ask one's country to relinquish its security in arms is to encourage risk – a more reasonable risk than constant nuclear escalation, but a risk nevertheless. I am struck by how much more terrified we Americans often are by talk of disarmament than by the march to nuclear war. We whose nuclear arms terrify millions around the globe are terrified by the thought of being without them. The thought of our nation without such power feels naked. Propaganda and a particular way of life have clothed us to death. To relinquish our hold on global destruction feels like risking everything, and it is risking everything – but in a direction opposite to the way in which we now risk everything. Nuclear arms protect privilege and exploitation. Giving them up would mean our having to give up economic power over other peoples. Peace and justice go together. On the path we now follow, our economic policies toward other countries require nuclear weapons. Giving up the weapons would mean giving up more than our means of global terror. It would mean giving up the reason for such terror – our privileged place in the world.

How can such a process, of taking up the cross of nonviolence, happen in a country where our government seems paralyzed by arms corporations? In a country where many of the citizens, perhaps most of the citizens, are numbed into passivity by the very magnitude and complexity of the issue while being horrified by the prospect of nuclear holocaust? Clearly some action is demanded – some form of nonviolent resistance. Some people may choose to write to their elected representatives at the national and state level, others may choose to take part in marches, demonstrations or similar forms of protest. Obviously there are many ways that action can be taken.

I would like to share a vision of still another action that could be taken: simply this – a sizable number of people in the State of Washington, 5,000, 10,000, 1/2 million people refusing to pay 50% of their taxes in nonviolent resistance to nuclear murder and suicide. I think that would be a definite step toward disarmament. Our paralyzed political process needs that catalyst of nonviolent action based on faith. We have to refuse to give incense – in our day, tax dollars – to our nuclear idol. On April 15 we can vote for unilateral disarmament with our lives. Form 1040 is the place where the Pentagon enters all of our lives, and asks our unthinking cooperation with the idol of nuclear destruction. I think the teaching of Jesus tells us to render to a nuclear-armed Caesar what that Caesar deserves – tax resistance. And to begin to render to God alone that complete trust which we now give, through our tax dollars, to a demonic form of power. Some would call what I am urging "civil disobedience." I prefer to see it as obedience to God.

I must say in all honesty that my vision of a sizeable number of tax resisters is not yet one which I have tried to realize in the most obvious way – by becoming one of the number. I have never refused to pay war taxes. And I recognize that there will never be such a number unless there are first a few to give the example. But I share the vision with you as part of my own struggle to realize the implications of the

Gospel of Peace given us by Our Lord. It is not the way of the cross which is in question in the nuclear age but our willingness to follow it.

I fully realize that many will disagree with my position on unilateral disarmament and tax resistance. I also realize that one can argue endlessly about specific tactics, but no matter how we differ on specific tactics, one thing at least is certain. We must demand over and over again that our political leaders make peace and disarmament, and not war and increased armaments, their first priority. We must demand that time and effort and money be placed first of all toward efforts to let everyone know that the United States is NOT primarily interested in being the strongest military nation on earth but in being the strongest peace advocate. We must challenge every politician who talks endlessly about building up our arms and never about efforts for peace. We must ask our people to question their government when it concentrates its efforts on shipping arms to countries which need food, when it accords the military an open checkbook while claiming that the assistance to the poor must be slashed in the name of balancing the budget, when it devotes most of its time and energy and money to developing war strategy and not peace strategy.

Creativity is always in short supply. This means that it must be used for the most valuable purposes. Yet it seems evident that most of our creative efforts are not going into peace but into war. We have too many people who begin with the premise that little can be done to arrange for a decrease in arms spending since the Soviet Union is bent on bankrupting itself on armaments no matter what we do. We have too few people who are willing to explore every possible path to decreasing armaments.

In our Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle, I have recommended to our people that we all turn more intently to the Lord this year in response to the escalation of nuclear arms, and that we do so especially by fasting and prayer on Monday of each week. That is the way, I believe, to depend on a power far greater than the hydrogen bomb. I believe that only by turning our lives around in the most fundamental ways, submitting ourselves to the infinite love of God, will we be given the vision and strength to take up the cross of nonviolence.

The nuclear arms race can be stopped. Nuclear weapons can be abolished. That I believe with all my heart and faith, my sisters and brothers. The key to that nuclear-free world is the cross at the center of the Gospel, and our response to it. The terrible responsibility which you and I have in this nuclear age is that we profess a faith whose God has transformed death into life in the person of Jesus Christ. We must make that faith real. Life itself depends on it. Our faith sees the transformation of death, through the cross of suffering love, as an ongoing process. That process is our way into hope of a new world. Jesus made it clear that the cross and empty tomb didn't end with Him. Thank God they didn't. We are living in a time when new miracles are needed, when a history threatened by overwhelming death needs resurrection by Almighty God. God alone is our salvation, through the acceptance in each of our lives of a nonviolent cross of suffering love. Let us call on the Holy Spirit to move us all into that nonviolent action which will take us to our own cross, and to the new earth beyond.

****"Faith and Disarmament." A speech by Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen, 12 June 1981. Transcribed from the book, "A Disarming Spirit: the life of Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen." The original source is the Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle Archives. Transcribed on April 30, 2019 by Leonard Eiger, Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action (gzcenter.org), email: outreach@gzcenter.org.***