

Fr. George Zabelka: A Military Chaplain Repents

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In August of 1945 Rev. George B. Zabelka, a Catholic chaplain with the U.S. Army Air Force, was stationed on Tinian Island in the South Pacific. He was assigned to serve the Catholics of the 509th Composite Group. The 509th Composite Group was the Atomic Bomb Group. He served as a priest for those who dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After 22 years as a military chaplain he retired as a Lieutenant Colonel. What follows is an interview with him by Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy. Rev. George B. Zabelka went to meet his God on April 11, 1992.

MCCARTHY: Father Zabelka, what is your relationship to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, 1945?

FR. ZABELKA: During the summer of 1945, July, August and September, I was assigned as Catholic chaplain to the 509th Composite Group on Tinian Island. The 509th was the Atomic Bomb Group.

Q: What were your duties in relationship to these men?

ZABELKA: The usual. I said Mass on Sunday and during the week. Heard confessions. Talked with the boys, etc. Nothing significantly different from what any other chaplain did during the war.

Q: Did you know that the 509th was preparing to drop an atomic bomb?

ZABELKA: No. We knew that they were preparing to drop a bomb substantially different from and more powerful than even the “blockbusters” used over Europe, but we never called it an atomic bomb and never really knew what it was before August 6, 1945. Before that time we just referred to it as the “gimmick” bomb.

Q: So since you did not know that an atomic bomb was going to be dropped you had no reason to counsel the men in private or preach in public about the morality of such a bombing?

ZABELKA: Well, that is true enough; I never did speak against it, nor could I have spoken against it since I, like practically everyone else on Tinian, was ignorant of what was being prepared. And I guess I will go to my God with that as my defense. But on Judgment Day I think I am going to need to seek more mercy than justice in this matter.

Q: Why? God certainly could not have expected you to act on ideas that had never entered your mind.

ZABELKA: As a Catholic priest my task was to keep my people, wherever they were, close to the mind and heart of Christ. As a military chaplain I was to try to see that the boys conducted themselves according to the teachings of the Catholic Church and Christ on war. When I look back I am not sure I did either of these things very well.

Q: Why do you think that?

ZABELKA: What I do not mean to say is that I feel myself to have been remiss in any duties that were expected of me as a chaplain. I saw that the Mass and the sacraments were available as best I could. I even went out and earned paratrooper wings in order to do my job better. Nor did I fail to teach and preach what the Church expected me to teach and preach—and I don't mean by this that I just talked to the boys about their sexual lives. I and most chaplains were quite clear and outspoken on such matters as not killing and torturing prisoners. But there were other areas where things were not said quite so clearly.

Q: For example?

ZABELKA: The destruction of civilians in war was always forbidden by the Church, and if a soldier came to me and asked if he could put a bullet through a child's head, I would have told him absolutely not. That would be mortally sinful. But in 1945 Tinian Island was the largest airfield in the world. Three planes a minute would take off from it around the clock. Many of these planes went to Japan with the express purpose of killing not one child or one civilian but of slaughtering hundreds and thousands of children and civilians—and I said nothing.

Q: Why not? You certainly knew civilians were being destroyed by the thousands in these raids, didn't you?

ZABELKA: Oh, indeed I did know, and I knew with a clarity that few others could have had.

Q: What do you mean?

ZABELKA: As a chaplain I often had to enter the world of the boys who were losing their minds because of something they did in war. I remember one young man who was engaged in the bombings of the cities of Japan. He was in the hospital on Tinian Island on the verge of a complete mental collapse.

He told me that he had been on a low-level bombing mission, flying right down one of the main streets of the city, when straight ahead of him appeared a lit-

tle boy, in the middle of the street, looking up at the plane in a childlike wonder. The man knew that in a few seconds the child would be burned to death by napalm which had already been released.

Yes, I knew civilians were being destroyed, and knew it perhaps in a way others didn't. Yet I never preached a single sermon against killing civilians to men who were doing it.

Q: Again, why not?

ZABELKA: Because I was "brainwashed"! It never entered my mind to publicly protest the consequences of these massive air raids. I was told the raids were necessary; told openly by the military and told implicitly by my Church's leadership. To the best of my knowledge no American cardinals or bishops were opposing these mass air raids. Silence in such matters, especially by a public body like the American bishops, is a stamp of approval.

The whole structure of the secular, religious, and military society told me clearly that it was all right to "let the Japs have it." God was on the side of my country. The Japanese were the enemy, and I was absolutely certain of my country's and Church's teaching about enemies; no erudite theological text was necessary to tell me. The day-in-day-out operation of the state and the Church between 1940 and 1945 spoke more clearly about Christian attitudes towards enemies and war than St. Augustine or St. Thomas Aquinas ever could.

I was certain that this mass destruction was right, certain to the point that the question of its morality never seriously entered my mind. I was "brainwashed" not by force or torture but by my Church's silence and wholehearted cooperation in thousands of little ways with the country's war machine. Why, after I finished chaplaincy school at Harvard I had my military chalice officially blessed by the then Bishop Cushing of Boston. How much more clearly could the message be given? Indeed, I was "brainwashed"!

Q: So you feel that because you did not protest the morality of the bombing of other cities with their civilian populations, that somehow you are morally responsible for the dropping of the atomic bomb?

ZABELKA: The facts are that seventy-five thousand people were burned to death in one evening of fire bombing over Tokyo. Hundreds of thousands were destroyed in Dresden, Hamburg, and Coventry by aerial bombing. The fact that forty-five thousand human beings were killed by one bomb over Nagasaki was new only to the extent that it was one bomb that did it.

To fail to speak to the utter moral corruption of the mass destruction of civilians was to fail as a Christian and a priest as I see it. Hiroshima and Nagasaki happened in and to a world and a Christian Church that had asked for it—that had prepared the moral consciousness of humanity to do and to justify the unthinkable. I am sure there are Church documents around someplace bemoaning civilian deaths in modern war, and I am sure those in power in the church will drag them out to show that it was giving moral leadership during World War II to its membership.

Well, I was there, and I'll tell you that the operational moral atmosphere in the Church in relation to mass bombing of enemy civilians was totally indifferent, silent, and corrupt at best—at worst it was religiously supportive of these activities by blessing those who did them.

I say all this not to pass judgment on others, for I do not know their souls then or now. I say all this as one who was part of the so-called Christian leadership of the time. So you see, that is why I am not going to the day of judgment looking for justice in this matter. Mercy is my salvation.

Q: You said the atomic bombing of Nagasaki happened to a Church that “had asked for it.” What do you mean by that?

ZABELKA: For the first three centuries, the three centuries closest to Christ, the Church was a pacifist Church. With Constantine the church accepted the pagan Roman ethic of a just war and slowly began to involve its membership in mass slaughter, first for the state and later for the faith.

Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants, whatever other differences they may have had on theological esoterica, all agreed that Jesus' clear and unambiguous

teaching on the rejection of violence and on love of enemies was not to be taken seriously. And so each of the major branches of Christianity by different theological methods modified our Lord's teaching in these matters until all three were able to do what Jesus rejected, that is, take an eye for an eye, slaughter, maim, torture.

It seems a “sign” to me that seventeen hundred years of Christian terror and slaughter should arrive at August 9, 1945 when Catholics dropped the A-Bomb on top of the largest and first Catholic city in Japan. One would have thought that I, as a Catholic priest, would have spoken out against the atomic bombing of nuns. ([Members of] three orders of Catholic sisters were destroyed in Nagasaki that day.) One would have thought that I would have suggested that as a minimal standard of Catholic morality, Catholics shouldn't bomb Catholic children. I didn't.

I, like that Catholic pilot of the Nagasaki plane, was heir to a Christianity that had for seventeen hundred years engaged in revenge, murder, torture, the pursuit of power and prerogative and violence, all in the name of our Lord.

I walked through the ruins of Nagasaki right after the war and visited the place where once stood the Urakami Cathedral. I picked up a piece of a censer from the rubble. When I look at it today I pray God forgives us for how we have distorted Christ's teaching and destroyed His world by the distortion of that teaching. I was the Catholic chaplain who was there when this grotesque process begun with Constantine reached its lowest point—so far.

Q: What do you mean by “so far”?

ZABELKA: Briefly, what I mean is that I do not see that the moral climate in relation to war inside or outside the Church has dramatically changed much since 1945. The mainline Christian Churches still teach something that Christ never taught or even hinted at, namely the Just War Theory, a theory that to me has been completely discredited theologically, historically, and psychologically.

So as I see it, until the various churches within Christianity repent and begin to proclaim by word and deed what Jesus proclaimed in relation to violence

and enemies, there is no hope for anything other than ever-escalating violence and destruction.

Until membership in the Church means that a Christian chooses not to engage in violence for any reason and instead chooses to love, pray for, help, and forgive all enemies; until membership in the Church means that Christians may not be members of any military, American, Polish, Russian, English, Irish, et al.; until membership in the Church means that the Christian cannot pay taxes for others to kill others; and until the Church says these things in a fashion which the simplest soul could understand—until that time humanity can only look forward to more dark nights of slaughter on a scale unknown in history. Unless the Church unswervingly and unambiguously teaches what Jesus teaches on this matter it will not be the divine leaven in the human dough that it was meant to be.

“The choice is between nonviolence or nonexistence,” as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, and he was not, and I am not, speaking figuratively. It is about time for the Church and its leadership in all denominations to get down on its knees and repent of this misrepresentation of Christ’s words.

Communion with Christ cannot be established on disobedience to His clearest teachings. Jesus authorized none of His followers to substitute violence for love; not me, not you, not Jimmy Carter, not the pope, not a Vatican council, nor even an ecumenical council.

Q: Father Zabelka, what kinds of immediate steps do you think the church should take in order to become the “divine leaven in the human dough”?

ZABELKA: Step one should be that Christians the world over should be taught that Christ’s teaching to love their enemies is not optional. I’ve been in many parishes in my life, and I have found none where the congregation explicitly is called upon regularly to pray for its enemies. I think this is essential.

I offer you step two at the risk of being considered hopelessly out of touch with reality. I would like to suggest that there is an immediate need to call an ecumenical council for the specific purpose of clearly declaring that war is totally incompatible with Jesus’

teaching and that Christians cannot and will not engage in or pay for it from this point in history on. This would have the effect of putting all nations on this planet on notice that from now on they are going to have to conduct their mutual slaughter without Christian support—physical, financial, or spiritual.

I am sure there are other issues which Catholics or Orthodox or Protestants would like to confront in an ecumenical council instead of facing up to the hard teachings of Christ in relationship to violence and enemies. But it seems to me that issues like the meaning of the primacy of Peter are nowhere near as pressing or as destructive of Church credibility and God’s world as is the problem of continued Christian participation in and justification of violence and slaughter. I think the Church’s continued failure to speak clearly Jesus’ teachings is daily undermining its credibility and authority in all other areas.

Q: Do you think there is the slightest chance that the various branches of Christianity would come together in an ecumenical council for the purpose of declaring war and violence totally unacceptable activities for Christians under all circumstances?

ZABELKA: Remember, I prefaced my suggestion of an ecumenical council by saying that I risked being considered hopelessly out of touch with reality. On the other hand, what is impossible for men and women is quite possible for God if people will only use their freedom to cooperate a little.

Who knows what could happen if the Pope, the Patriarch of Constantinople, and the President of the World Council of Churches called with one voice for such a council? One thing I am sure of is that our Lord would be very happy if His Church were again unequivocally teaching what He unequivocally taught on the subject of violence.

Q: Fr. Zabelka, why after 39 years, did you now decide to return to Japan and join in a peace pilgrimage that will culminate for you in Hiroshima on August 6 and Nagasaki on August 9, 1984?

ZABELKA: I am old now. Soon I will go to meet my God. When the invitation came to join this peace pilgrimage, I felt that God had offered me “a great grace,” as we used to say. So, I accepted.

Q: What do you mean, God has offered you “a great grace” by an invitation to join a peace walk?

ZABELKA: I do not mean to quibble about words but I did not experience the invitation as a request to join a peace walk. The invitation entered into my soul as “pilgrimage” not “walk.” A pilgrimage is a journey one undertakes to holy places for holy reasons.

Q: But what holy places are you going to visit in Japan? My understanding was that you were going to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

ZABELKA: Calvary, the place where Christ suffered and died at the hands of the civil and religious politicians of His day, is the holiest shrine in Christianity. Hiroshima and Nagasaki are Calvaries. For here, Christ in the bodies of the “least” was again tortured and put to death hundreds of thousands of times over by exactly the same dark and deceitful spirit of organized lovelessness that roamed Jerusalem two thousand years ago.

Q: But Calvary is where Christ suffered. He did not suffer in Hiroshima or Nagasaki.

Zabelka: God, Christ, lives in every human being. Our Lord tells us that what is done to the “least” is in fact now done to Him (MT 25). I believe that! That is the only kind of God that I could adore and love, a God who lives in human history and suffers with people. I could only fear a god that sat as a depersonalized king above the anguish of humanity. This is part of what the Incarnation is all about. Christ suffers and dies at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Therefore to condone or support war is to condone or support the call to “Crucify Him.” To kill in war is, in fact, to be a “Christ-killer.” I’m sorry I can say nothing else—if Calvary is a holy place, Hiroshima and Nagasaki are holy places.

Q: You said that a pilgrimage must not only be to a holy place but for holy reasons. What are your reasons?

ZABELKA: Peace! Peace is the fruit of communion with God. It is obvious to me that I, as well as humanity in general, are not in full communion with God, that we need to be reconciled with God. Jesus tells us that the condition now for reconciliation with God is

reconciliation of human beings with each other. The Christian is explicitly called to be an agent of reconciliation. The first step in the reconciliation process is repentance for one’s sins, for what one has done to separate people from each other and thereby separate humanity from God. The reason I am going to Hiroshima and Nagasaki is to repent and to ask the forgiveness of those living and dead whom I have damaged by my failure to love Christically.

Q: But you were not actually on the planes that dropped the atomic bombs on those cities, were you?

ZABELKA: No, but that is irrelevant moral thinking in the 20th century. Modern war and oppression are carried out by a long chain of individuals, each doing his or her job meticulously while simultaneously refusing to look at the end results of his or her work. There is no state or corporate evil that is not the result of personal sinfulness. In August of 1945, I, as a Christian and as a priest, served not as an agent of reconciliation but as an instrument of retaliation, revenge and homicide. My explicit and tacit approval of what was being done on Tinian Island that summer was clearly visible for anyone to see. Beyond this, I was the last possible official spokesman for the Church before the fire of hell was let loose on Hiroshima on the Feast of the Transfiguration 1945—and I said nothing. I was the officially designated Catholic priest who by silence did his priestly patriotic duty and chose nationalism over Catholicism, Caesar over Christ, as the “Bockscar,” manned by Christians in my care, took off to evaporate the oldest and largest Christian community in Japan—Nagasaki. No, the fact that I was not physically on the planes is morally irrelevant. I played an important and necessary role in this sacrilege—and I played it meticulously. I am as responsible as the soldier who stuck the spear in the side of Christ on Calvary. I come to Hiroshima and Nagasaki to repent and to ask forgiveness from the Japanese people, from my faith community at Nagasaki and from God.

Q: Isn’t it a bit of rhetorical exaggeration to say you were a priest that played a role in a sacrilege?

ZABELKA: Not at all. I mean it literally. If someone walks into a church and destroys the altar and statues, etc., it is called a sacrilege. A sacrilege is the

desecration of what is considered holy. But for the Christian, the ultimate place of the holy is the human person. We are the “temples of the Holy Spirit.” Therefore, every act of violence toward a human being is an act of desecration of the temple of God in this world. War for the Christian is always sacrilege. There is no such absurdity as a Christian ethic of justified sacrilege. I am a priest who played a role in a sacrilege and that must be said by me and others like me without equivocation or else the future is a nightmare.

Q: What do you mean that the future is a nightmare unless you and others like you acknowledge your role in the sacrilege of war?

ZABELKA: Look, I am a Catholic priest. In August of 1945, I did not say to the boys on Tinian, “You cannot follow Christ and drop those bombs.” But this same failure on the part of priests, pastors and bishops over the past 1700 years is, I believe, what is significantly responsible for Hiroshima and Nagasaki and for the seemingly unceasing “Christian” bloodletting around the globe. It seems to me that Christians have been slaughtering each other, as well as non-Christians, for the past 1700 years, in large part because their priests, pastors and bishops have simply not told them that violence and homicide are incompatible with the teachings of Jesus. On the contrary, I would say that the average priest, pastor and bishop communicates that violence and homicide can be compatible with Jesus. After all, a machine gun is no more lethal than a broomstick without the will to kill and the fact is that we so-called Christian “leaders” by commission and omission, for 1700 years, have been guilty of supplying a significant piece of the motivational apparatus necessary to execute the mass slaughter of war. Let’s be honest, to justify an evil is to promote an evil. And let’s face it, we priests, pastors and bishops have been justifying the butchery of war in the name of Christ for a long time. I might also add here that where more is required priestly silence is sinful, because silence gives consent and consent motivates toward the evil.

Q: What do you think must be done to begin to address this situation, Father Zabelka?

ZABELKA: Unless the legitimate successors to the apostles proclaim fearlessly what the apostles pro-

claimed fearlessly, that is, that Christ’s teachings are teachings of nonviolent love and mercy—and unless they unequivocally repent of their failure and the failure of their predecessors to explicitly teach this, then a long night of high-tech terror, torture and desolation is assured all humanity—first world, third world, East and West. What has to be done is that we Christian “leaders” have to admit openly that we have been engaged in propagating a bloody moral blunder for the last 1700 years: the Just War Theory.

Q: Specifically, how does your pilgrimage to Japan for this August 6th and 9th in 1984 respond to this need?

ZABELKA: If my priestly silence spoke for the Church in 1945 to the fellows on Tinian, perhaps my priestly request for forgiveness at Hiroshima and Nagasaki can speak for the Church in 1984. You see, I want to expose the lie of “Christian” war. The lie I fell for and blessed. I want to expose the lie of killing as a Christian social method, the lie of disposable people, the lie of Christian liturgy in the service of the homicidal gods of nationalism and militarism, the lie of nuclear security. I want to expose it by looking into the faces of the hibaksha and saying, “Brother, forgive me for bringing you death instead of the fullness of life. Sister, pardon me for bringing you misery instead of mercy. I and my Church have sinned against you and God.” It is hope in the Power of that small moment of truth, repentance and reconciliation that moves me to pilgrimage East by the grace of God.

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