

BAFFLED

I am baffled, just plain baffled. War is ravaging Iraq. The justifications for the war being pre-emptively started have been proven to be fraudulent. There were no weapons of mass destruction being stockpiled. There was no imminent danger of Iraq attacking the U. S. with such weapons. Beyond this, 100,000 Iraqi civilians are now dead and hundreds of thousands more Iraqis and Americans have been maimed in body and/or mind.

I am baffled as to why the spiritual and moral leadership of my Church (Catholic) and other Churches in the U.S. are not screaming “bloody murder.” The only possible way this war cannot be bloody mass murder is if it meets the standards of the Christian Just War Theory. (It is certainly in direct contradiction to Jesus’ teaching of nonviolent love of friends and enemies which is the only other ethical option available to Christians.) But, it doesn’t come close to meeting Christian Just War standards either in the *jus ad bellum* or the *jus in bello* dimension of the so-called Christian Just War Theory. Beyond any reasonable doubt, it does not! Yet, silence, deadly silence is the stance of the episcopal caste in the U.S. Churches. Is not this chosen silence defiance of the Will of God by those chosen to spiritually and morally protect and nurture Christ’s flock? Is it not gross episcopal moral negligence? How is it not laxism in the strict moral sense of that word?

The Christian Just War Theory has always insisted upon non-combatant immunity from lethal force. The rationale behind this is that if one is not being lethally attacked by another, that other cannot be destroyed. There are 100,000 civilians dead! Yet, silence—dead silence. Baffling in the extreme!

In Christian Just War Theory if a non-combatant runs into the line of fire between two combatants, the one whose side is engaged in a defensive war—only those fighting a defensive war can be justly killing people under Christian Just War Theory—is free from sin if he or she accidentally kills the haphazard interloper. This form of homicide is today euphemistically “spun” as collateral damage—the same terminology that is employed for the inadvertent destruction of a TV tower. But using the designation collateral damage to justify the destruction of 100,000, civilians under the auspices of killing some combatants, is a theological farce. It is phony Christian morality.

The term “collateral damage” has become the catchword by which contemporary Church leaders Novocaine their empathic faculties and varnish over their murder-endorsing silence. Wherever the moral line is drawn between the person who inadvertently gets in the line of fire and the outside limits of collateral damage, that line is crossed long, long before 100,000 civilians are torn to pieces. The slaughter of 100,000 civilians in a population of twenty-five million (the equivalent of killing over one million Americans out of the present U.S. population) is by Christian Just War standards mass murder—and no “fair and balanced” state propaganda machine or “kept” corporate news commentators can change that moral fact of Christian life. Yet, silence is the order of the day for the U.S. Catholic bishops and for most of the top leadership of most of the American Christian Churches (85% of the U.S. population claims Christian affiliation).

Consider the following, although for the moment it may appear to be off the point. The Apostolic Constitution, *Universi Dominici Gregis*, is the document that lays down the absolute, unchangeable rules for the conduct of the conclave at which the next pope will be elected. The rules explicitly included the instructions that each cardinal before entering the conclave must swear an oath. The specific words of the oath are:

We, the Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church, of the Order of Bishops, of Priests and of Deacons, promise, pledge and swear, as a body and individually, to observe exactly and faithfully all the norms contained in the Apostolic Constitution Universi Dominici Gregis of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II, and to maintain rigorous secrecy with regard to all matters in any way related to the election of the Roman Pontiff or those which, by their very nature, during the vacancy of the Apostolic See, call for the same secrecy. And I, N. Cardinal N., so promise, pledge and swear. So help me God and these Holy Gospels which I now touch with my hand.

Yet in his Encyclical on Catholic moral theology, *Veritatis Splendor*, the Pope himself states emphatically, “[T]he negative commandments oblige always and under all circumstances...The Church has always taught that one may never choose kinds of behavior prohibited by the moral commandments expressed in negative form in the Old and New Testaments.” Now, does not Jesus expressly command His followers not to swear oaths?

“Again you have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘Do not take a false oath, but make good to the Lord all that you vow.’ But I say this to you: do not swear at all, either by heaven, since that is God’s throne; or by the earth, since that is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, since that is the city of the great king. Do not swear by your own head either, since you cannot turn a single hair white or black. All you need say is ‘Yes’ if you mean yes, ‘No’ if you mean no; anything more than this comes from the evil one” (MT. 5:33-37).

I am baffled! To elect the next Vicar of Christ one must do what Christ said not to do!

Please someone explain this! Please also explain how 100,000 civilian dead and hundreds of thousand more civilians maimed in body and/or mind is in moral correspondence with the non-combatant immunity standard of the Christian Just War Theory? How does requiring Christians, who wish to vote for the next Pope, to do what Jesus explicitly told them not to do make spiritual sense? How is killing 100,000 civilians in accord with Jesus’ rejection of violence and His love of even lethal enemies? Is any of this proper Christian behavior or witness? I am baffled. What is going on? Is there any other name for what is taking place here other than obstinate defiance—“I will not obey.”?

I suppose I should also be confused as to why the highest ranking group of spiritual leaders in the Church, Cardinals, cannot be trusted to follow Jesus’ teaching and let “their ‘Yes’ be yes and their ‘No’ be no.” Why is it they have to be psychologically and spiritually chained in exactly the manner Jesus overtly repudiates, when they are the ones who are to lead the rest of the Church into freely following Jesus’ Way? These men are the most visible official Catholic Church witnesses to others concerning the Person and Way of Jesus—and they must be bound by a method Jesus says is from the Evil One! I’m baffled. That each and every Cardinal willingly does what Jesus says not to do—“swear an oath”—so he can have the privilege of choosing one among them to be the next infallible Vicar of Christ is as baffling as the existence of the rule itself. That no Cardinal has even publicly expressed having the slightest qualm of conscience with the requirement is a third level of bafflement!

Now, regardless of whether the issue is Jesus’ rejection of oaths or violence or enmity, it is not the absence of clarity on Jesus’ part or on the part of the authors of the Gospels that is the problem. The problem lies somewhere else. Wherever that somewhere else is, it is from *there* that the capacity exists for U.S. Christian leaders, and the average U.S. Christian, to live in silent equanimity as a 100,000 civilians are killed—killed mostly by Christians from Churches in the United States. It is from *there*, that killing national enemies has been morally raised to an operational position in the Church superior to Jesus’ teaching of nonviolent love of friends and enemies. Where is that *there*, from which all this calm defiance comes? Heaven?

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (§1970) tells us that “the entire Law of the Gospel is contained in the *new commandment* of Jesus to ‘love one another as He has loved us.’” It says, while discussing the Lord’s Prayer (§2822), that the *new commandment* “summarizes all the others and expresses the entire will of the Father.” It is one thing to continually and honestly struggle to figure out how to love one another as Christ loves us in given situations, perhaps having in the end to rely on principles of probabiliorism or probabilism to achieve moral certitude. But, it is quite another thing to make a rule that Church leaders must refuse to follow a negative command of Jesus in order to fulfill their function. It is quite another thing to make-believe that Jesus would be silent as His disciples went off and killed 100,000 civilians and brutalized hundreds of thousands more.

I am baffled. But, I know something is profoundly and pervasively out of place in the theory and practice of Catholic moral thinking in particular and in Christian moral thinking in general.

My institutional Church (Catholic) has put a great deal of effort and money into publicly and unambiguously teaching that the use of artificial contraception or the intentional missing of Mass on Sunday are grave moral evils that condemn a person to hell forever if he or she does not repent of them before death. At the same time, it remains silent about 100,000 civilians killed and hundreds of thousands more maimed in a war that is now known to have been justified by blatant lies. This would be Marx Brothers’ bizarre if it were not scandal, false witness and a moral abomination. Most Protestant and Orthodox Churches and their leadership in the U.S. are riding out the waves of homicidal nationalism in similar moral boats. Their scandalous false witness is a spiritual abomination of equal proportions. I’m baffled—baffled not only at Church leaders’ bold and public defiance of Divinity Incarnate but baffled also by the serenity with which they engage in their rebellion against the Will of the “Father of all” (EP. 4:6) as revealed by Jesus.

I’m baffled, but maybe I should not be. Seventeen hundred years of systematically and systemically nurturing tranquil defiance of the most obvious teachings of Jesus must have its destructive consequences in the spiritual and moral life of the Church, e.g., producing a lineage of shepherds who thoroughly believe that Jesus’ teachings on oaths, violence and enmity are utopian, unrealistic, impractical and fanciful standards to adhere to in conducting the life of the Church. Most U.S. Catholic bishops and most U.S. Christian leaders—along with most of their congregations—have been aggressively **hardwired from the cradle** to live in peace with the idea that a faithful follower of Jesus can in good conscience praise the Lord, while passing the ammunition that is meant to dismember, disembowel, decapitate, incinerate or drive mad another human being—another infinitely valued and loved son or daughter of our Father. Indeed, most Christians have been thoroughly brainwashed from infancy to placidly swear an oath to obey the command of another to do what no sane person could ever believe Jesus would do or tell His disciples to do, e.g., split the head of fellow human being in half with the slash of a halberd or a machine gun burst!

It is baffling but not surprising that in the face of 100,000 civilian deaths—in less than 18 months—silence reigns among Bishops. It is baffling but not surprising since not even 2,000,000 civilians deaths in Vietnam, not even 25,000,000 civilians deaths in World War II, could move the Bishops to speak up clearly and pay up personally in order to stop those in their spiritual care from swearing and killing—and from swearing to kill on command! Do they not realize that their silence has had, is having and will continue to have horrifying consequences here in the U.S. and abroad? Evidently not.

Baffling! However, simply because the choices of human beings are baffling does not mean they cannot be recognized as evil, that is, in radical contradiction to the will of God as revealed by the Word (Logos) of God

incarnate—Jesus. “Baffled,” then, is used in this present reflection as a benign locution to gently, yet vigorously, highlight an unfathomably tragic possibility, namely, that the leadership and membership of the Churches—by adamantly insisting that they have the right to teach, as consistent with what Jesus taught, that which is contradictory to what Jesus taught—are short-circuiting the power and the wisdom that the Father desires to release into the human situation through Jesus Christ and through those He chooses to follow Him. When it is remembered *why* the Father wants to release this grace into the human condition, i.e., to conquer evil and death in all their manifestations for all human beings, then harnessing the Churches, to teach by word and deed something as God’s will that Jesus rejected by word and deed as God’s will, approaches Edenic and Golgothian evil—the chosen ones trashing a Divine Gift of infinite and unimaginable worth through obstinate disobedience.

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