

MORAL REFLECTIONS ON
THE PERSIAN GULF CRISIS
By Bishop Walter F. Sullivan
Catholic Diocese of Richmond

I am writing just hours before the January 15 deadline for the withdrawal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait. With you, and quite literally millions of people around the world, I pray fervently for a peaceful resolution of the Persian Gulf crisis. I fear that, by the time you read this, war will be raging. Even then, however, we must constantly reflect on the morality of our support for, our participation in, and our conduct of war.

In recent weeks many people here in Virginia and in other parts of the country, have shared with me their concern about the situation in the Middle East. All are deeply concerned about the women and men of our armed forces stationed in the Gulf region and about their loved ones at home. I've spoken with very few, though, who believe war will lead to a just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

After long reflection and earnest prayer it is my personal conviction that war to expel the Iraqi army from Kuwait is immoral.

As I struggled with this issue I recalled Pope Paul VI's plea in his October 1965 address to the General Assembly of the United Nations:

"Listen to the lucid words of a great man, the late John Kennedy, who proclaimed four years ago: 'Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind.' Many words are not needed to proclaim this loftiest aim of your institution.... No more war, war never again! Peace, it is peace which must guide the destinies of peoples and all mankind."

I also recalled Pope John Paul II's warning at Coventry in 1982:

"Today, the scale and horror of modern warfare -- whether nuclear or not -- makes it totally unacceptable as a means of settling differences between nations. War should belong to the tragic past, to history; it should find no place on humanity's agenda for the future."

My reflections are guided by Catholic teaching on peace, especially by the just war tradition. This teaching originated in the fifth century with Augustine and was subsequently developed by Thomas Aquinas and other distinguished moral theologians. The US bishops offered a contemporary statement of just war teaching in their 1982 pastoral letter, The Challenge of Peace.

Catholic teaching on peace and war begins from a strong presumption against the use of deadly force. Only the most powerful reasons may override this presumption. Just war teaching evolved as an effort to prevent war, and only when war cannot be avoided, to restrict and reduce its horrors.

There must be a just cause for recourse to war to be morally legitimate. War is permissible only to confront real and certain danger to human life,

to protect basic human rights and to promote conditions necessary to decent human existence.

The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq is clearly wrong, and I condemn it unequivocally. However, since the August invasion, the administration has offered a number of explanations for US presence in the Persian Gulf. Not all of them are of the same moral value; not all would constitute just cause for war. The basic rights to which Catholic teaching refers are not necessarily identical with "the vital national interests" of the United States. I believe that the US has not yet clearly established the real objectives we are pursuing in the Persian Gulf, nor determined whether they are just. I do not believe, for example, that we are justified in going to war to guarantee an abundant supply of cheap oil for ourselves and other First World nations. I also find the US response to the Iraqi invasion curiously selective. Why is the Iraqi invasion different from so many other instances of powerful and greedy nations invading weaker neighbors? Why is war the only appropriate response to this situation? I could justify the presence of US military forces to defend Saudi Arabia from invasion, but I cannot justify an offensive action to force Iraq out of Kuwait at this time. War is not our only alternative.

To use the language of moral theology, a just cause is necessary but not sufficient for a just war. Other moral criteria must be considered.

Catholic teaching also emphasizes that war must be the last resort. All alternatives must be exhausted. Have we exhausted all of the alternatives? Economic sanctions are in place, but they must be given sufficient time to work. Nor have diplomatic initiatives been exhausted; there is more to diplomacy than delivering ultimatums. Alternatives cannot be abandoned simply because they are difficult or time-consuming.

I ask myself what so many members of Congress asked in the debate on the authorization-to-go-to-war resolution: Why the hurry to go to war? In forty-five years of tense confrontation with the Soviet Union, a time of many violations of basic human rights, invasions, and much oppression, we never concluded that we were at the point of last resort. Surely the world is a better and safer place because of a firm, patient, peaceful policy of containment.

The just war criterion of proportionality is especially relevant to war in the Persian Gulf. It requires that the costs in human lives and destruction incurred by war be proportionate to the good expected by taking up arms. Both sides are armed with weapons of enormous destructive power. In its eight year war with Iran, Iraq demonstrated its willingness to inflict and sustain enormous casualties.

What hope is there that war can be confined to the desert of Kuwait? And even if it is, will the people of Kuwait emerge from the carnage liberated or destroyed? There is a strong probability that war between the United States and Iraq will quickly engulf the entire Middle East. The long-term consequences of such a conflagration may only compound the Middle East's legacy of hatred.

The just war criterion of discrimination prohibits directly intended attacks on non-combatants and non-military targets. The words of the Second Vatican Council must be heeded here: "Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation." Air attacks on Iraqi installations, many of which are located in densely populated areas, surely will result in large numbers of civilian casualties and will inflict enormous suffering on innocent people. I return to a question raised in The Challenge of Peace: "How many deaths of non-combatants are 'tolerable' as a result of indirect attacks -- attacks directed against combat forces and military targets (on both sides) which nevertheless kill non-combatants at the same time?"

My application of the principles of just war teaching convinces me that a US war to expel Iraq from Kuwait is unjustified and immoral.

I have not reached this conclusion lightly. I love my country, I respect our elected officials, and I want above all to support those brave women and men assigned to duty in the Persian Gulf region. In many respects it would be easier to remain silent, to trust that it will all turn out for the best in the end. But, as Archbishop John Roach testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last December, silence in this situation would be an abandonment of my responsibilities as a pastor, a teacher, and a religious leader.

The responsibility for moral reflection and moral debate falls on all of us -- not only before war begins, but as it continues. Alongside the right to conscientious objection lies an obligation of conscientious decisionmaking. Neither calls to "close ranks" and "rally around our President" nor being "under orders" can release us from these obligations. The women and men of our armed forces rightly expect that we will not send them to fight and die in an unjust war.

I invite you to join me in serious, ongoing reflection and, above all, in continued prayer for peace. I firmly believe that our God's will is for peace.