

The presumptions of a pastoral letter

Twenty-five years ago, in early May 1983, the Catholic bishops of the United States approved what many imagined would be a historic public policy statement: The Challenge of Peace (TCOP). The debate during the drafting of TCOP was intense; the publicity generated by that debate put Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, chairman of the drafting committee, on the cover of *Time*; consultations were held in the Vatican and with the Reagan Administration. It was all heady stuff, and seemed to presage a new style of episcopal engagement with the mega-issues of public policy.

It didn't work out that way. In fact, TCOP now seems to have been the high water mark of a certain form of episcopal activism.

The next major pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*, drew far less attention; in any event, it was quickly run over and left on the side of the road by John Paul II's 1991 encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*. A new generation of bishops thought the bishops' conference had better things to do than to conduct lengthy, public debates over fine points of foreign and domestic policy on which the bishops had no particular expertise. Budgetary concerns also played a role: the big pastoral letter business was expensive, and as financial pressures on the conference increased, investing scarcer resources in big-ticket items like TCOP and *Economic Justice for All* seemed a dubious proposition. Today, it's virtually impossible to imagine the bishops' conference taking on a project of the magnitude of TCOP.

So, a quarter-century later, what's left? What has been the enduring impact of a document into which such enormous energies were poured, and which generated such large expectations?

The farther the 1980s recede into the historical rear-view mirror, the less The Challenge of Peace looks like an insightful analysis of the political dynamics of that dramatic decade. It is now clear that disarmament – not the arms control promoted by the bishops’ letter, but real disarmament – only took place after a human rights revolution had brought down the communist regimes of central and eastern Europe. The bishops’ tacit argument that nuclear weapons issues could be factored out of the larger political context of the Cold War turned out to be quite wrong. There was a path to the end of the deterrence system and to genuine nuclear disarmament: it was victory over the Soviet Union. To suggest that TCOP missed this is, to put it gently, an understatement.

The bishops’ pastoral has left certain intellectual residues in the American Catholic mind; but it’s hard to argue that these residues have had a positive effect on Catholic thought about war and peace. Go to most parishes today, listen to the way prayers for peace are framed in the General Intercessions, and you will hear a faithful echo of TCOP’s failure to clarify the distinctions-in-kind among the peace of the Kingdom of God, the peace of a secure personal relationship with the Lord, and the peace of rightly-ordered political community (which is the only peace that politics can produce)

Then there is the pastoral’s claim that just war thinking begins with a “presumption against war” that must be overridden if the use of armed force is to be morally legitimate. Indeed, this “presumption against war” has become the controlling mantra of the bishops’ subsequent commentary on foreign policy issues. The problem is that there is no such “presumption” in either Augustine or Thomas Aquinas, beyond the morally self-evident “presumption” that it is always better to settle political conflicts non-violently when possible.

If Augustine’s just war theory begins with a “presumption,” it is the “presumption” that sovereign authority has the moral obligation to do justice – which includes what

Benedict XVI called at the U.N. the “responsibility to protect.” And as Gregory Reichberg of the Oslo International Peace Research Institute has shown, Aquinas’s just war theory has room within it for initiating war in the defense of violated norms of justice - an important consideration in thinking through “humanitarian intervention” crises like Darfur.

Dubious theology married to a mistaken reading of political reality: there is indeed much to ponder, 25 years after *The Challenge of Peace*.

George Weigel is Distinguished Senior Fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.