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Lent in a warmaking empire

by Art Laffin



(CNS file photo)

Commentary

We live in a warmaking empire, where war is being waged indiscriminately in order to control and acquire resources -- namely oil in Iraq, and natural gas and oil in Afghanistan and the Caspian Sea. The U.S. continues to create mass violence in Afghanistan, bringing death to countless innocent Afghan civilians and nearly 1,000 U.S. soldiers.

The United States has also increased its military intervention in Pakistan and Yemen. According to the Pakistani newspaper, *The News* (Feb. 2, 2010), U.S. drone attacks killed 123 civilians in January 2010.

March 19 marks the eighth year of an immoral and illegal occupation of Iraq, which has claimed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives, and over 4,600 U.S. soldiers.

The U.S. goes on providing military and economic support to Israel for its illegal occupation of Palestine. At the same time, Arab and Muslim men continue to languish at U.S. military prisons in Guantanamo,

Bagram and in Iraq, where they have been grossly mistreated, tortured and denied due process.

As the world's leading nuclear superpower and arms dealer, with over 700 U.S. military bases worldwide, the United States provides a budget for its military that accounts for 48 percent, or almost half, of the world's total military spending. According to the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, U.S. military spending totals more than the next 46 highest spending countries in the world combined. For FY 2011, the Obama Administration is proposing to spend \$708 billion on the military budget, including \$7 billion to upgrade the nuclear arsenal.

Meanwhile, the poor continue to be neglected, and, in many cases, treated as expendable due to corporate greed, political expediency and rampant militarism. War, economic exploitation and global warming claim countless lives daily. The victims cry out for justice. The earth groans in travail.

What would Jesus have us do? Living under the brutal occupation of the Roman empire, Jesus declared: "The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel." (Mk.1:15) Living in the U.S. empire, we need to heed Jesus' proclamation now more than ever. During this holy season of Lent, Christians need to ask what it means to follow Jesus in a warmaking empire. Lent is a time for personal and societal repentance, a time for radical conversion, renewal and transformation. It is a time to examine what we really believe in and how we live and act out our faith.

Would Jesus support the use of drone weapons? Would he advocate a "just war theory," now a central tenet of church teaching? Would Jesus endorse the U.S. war in Afghanistan, referred to by President Obama in his Nobel Peace prize acceptance speech as a "just war"? Would Jesus support the new war budget? Would Jesus support the existence and threatened use of nuclear weapons or any weapon of mass destruction? Would Jesus support any form of military intervention, occupation, torture or killing? From my reading of the scriptures, the answer to all these questions is an emphatic and absolute No! Jesus' commands are clear: Love one another! Love your enemies! Put away the sword! Forgive and you will be forgiven! Take up the cross and follow me!

Other scriptural passages that Christians read this Lent are also instructive.

In Deuteronomy we hear: "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live." (Deuteronomy 30:19) Isaiah the prophet declares, "This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own. (Isaiah 58: 6-7)

It is a tragic reality that the institutional Christian church -- Catholic and Protestant -- has strayed so far from the Gospel that it offers its support for U.S. warmaking. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the U.S. bishops' conference declared: "Our nation's military forces should remain in Iraq only as long as their presence contributes to a responsible transition." In an article "Bishops Back Obama Afghanistan Strategy", (NCR, Jan. 8, 2010) Bishop Howard J. Hubbard, chairman of the U.S. Bishops Committee on International Justice and Peace, stated that President Obama's goals of "responsible transition" in Afghanistan must serve as the overall ethical framework for U.S. actions there.

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I ask: How can the U.S., which has committed war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, ever bring about a

responsible transition in either country? And why would the church be an advocate for U.S. military intervention which has caused the deaths of so many of God's children? Martin Luther King, Jr. made this critical observation about the efficacy of the church when he said: "So often the contemporary church is ineffectual and weak, with an uncertain voice. So often it is an arch defender of the status quo. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the 21st century."

The church should also heed the example of two its martyrs: Franz Jagerstatter and Archbishop Oscar Romero. Regarding the response of the church to the crimes being committed by the Nazis, Franz Jagerstatter, executed Nazi war-resister stated: "If the Church stays silent in the face of what is happening, what difference would it make if no church were ever opened again?" And Archbishop Romero, who was assassinated as he celebrated the Eucharist thirty years ago this March 24, declared to the Salvadoran military a day before his death: "When you hear the words of a man telling you to kill, remember instead the words of God, "Thou shall not kill." God's law must prevail. No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. It is time that you come to your senses and obey your consciences rather than follow out a sinful command...The church... cannot remain silent in the presence of such abominations."

Thus, the church should be a clear and prophetic voice proclaiming the Gospel without equivocation or compromise. Instead of accommodating a warmaking empire, the church should be calling the nation to repentance, to make reparations to all of its victims, and to embrace Jesus' way of nonviolent love. It should declare that no Christian should participate in military service, make weapons, or pay taxes for war and killing.

During the Friday's in Lent, members and friends of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker, Pax Christi, and other peacemakers are conducting a Lenten Witness for Peace and Justice at the White House. We vigil a spirit of repentance and humility, inviting everyone to join with us in saying Yes to life, love, justice and nonviolence, and No to violence, injustice and warmaking.

I pray this Lent that our Church will reclaim its prophetic voice and courageously speak the truth before our warmaking empire. Prophet, priest and peace prisoner, Phil Berrigan, once said: "If enough Christians followed the gospel, they could bring any state to its knees."

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