

Blessing the Bombs

As an Air Force chaplain I blessed the men who dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. All I can say today is that I was wrong.

By George Zabelka

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17 COMMENTS Father George Zabelka, a Catholic chaplain with the U.S. Air Force, served as a priest for the airmen who dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, and gave them his blessing. Days later he counseled an airman who had flown a low-level reconnaissance flight over the city of Nagasaki shortly after the detonation of “Fat Man.” The man described how thousands of scorched, twisted bodies writhed on the ground in the final throes of death, while those still on their feet wandered aimlessly in shock – flesh seared, melted, and falling off. The crewman’s description raised a stifled cry from the depths of Zabelka’s soul: “My God, what have we done?” Over the next twenty years, he gradually came to believe that he had been terribly wrong, that he had denied the very foundations of his faith by lending moral and religious support to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Zabelka died in 1992, but his message, in this speech given on the 40th anniversary of the bombings, must never be forgotten.

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 could 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 and tens of thousands of children and civilians – and I said nothing.

I never preached a single sermon against killing civilians to the men who were doing it. I was brainwashed! It never entered my mind to protest publicly the consequences of these massive air raids. I was told it was 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 is a stamp of approval.)

I worked with Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Civil Rights struggle in Flint, Michigan. His example and his words of nonviolent action, choosing love instead of hate, truth instead of lies, and nonviolence instead of violence stirred me deeply. This brought me face to face with pacifism – active nonviolent resistance to evil. I recall his words after he was jailed in Montgomery, and this blew my mind. He said, “Blood may flow in the streets of Montgomery before we gain our freedom, but it must be our blood that flows, and not that of the white man. We must not harm a single hair on the head of our white brothers.”

I struggled. I argued. But yes, there it was in the Sermon on the Mount, very clear: “Love your enemies. Return good for evil.” I went through a crisis of faith. Either accept what Christ said, as unpassable and silly as it may seem, or deny him completely.

For the last 1700 years the church has not only been making war respectable: it has been inducing people to believe it is an honorable profession, an honorable Christian profession. This is not true. We have been brainwashed. This is a lie.

War is now, always has been, and always will be bad, bad news. I was there. I saw real war. Those who have seen real war will bear me out. I assure you, it is not of Christ. It is not Christ's way. There is no way to conduct real war in conformity with the teachings of Jesus. There is no way to train people for real war in conformity with the teachings of Jesus.

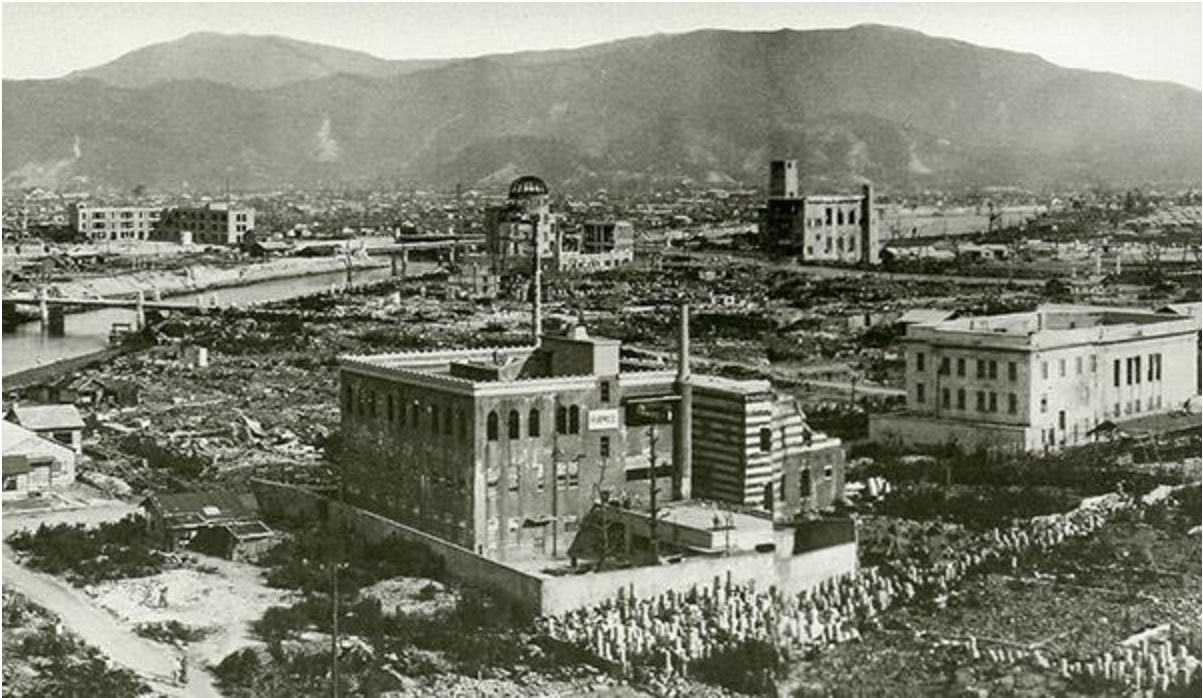
The morality of the balance of terrorism is a morality that Christ never taught. The ethics of mass butchery cannot be found in the teachings of Jesus. In Just War ethics, Jesus Christ, who is supposed to be all in the Christian life, is irrelevant. He might as well never have existed. In Just War ethics, no appeal is made to him or his teaching, because no appeal can be made to him or his teaching, for neither he nor his teaching gives standards for Christians to follow in order to determine what level of slaughter is acceptable.

SO THE WORLD IS WATCHING TODAY. Ethical hairsplitting over the morality of various types of instruments and structures of mass slaughter is not what the world needs from the church, although it is what the world has come to expect from the followers of Christ. What the world needs is a grouping of Christians that will stand up and pay up with Jesus Christ. What the world needs is Christians who, in language that the simplest soul could understand, will proclaim: the follower of Christ cannot participate in mass slaughter. He or she must love as Christ loved, live as Christ lived and, if necessary, die as Christ died, loving ones enemies.

For the 300 years immediately following Jesus' resurrection, the church universally saw Christ and his teaching as nonviolent. Remember that the church taught this ethic in the face of at least three serious attempts by the state to liquidate her. It was subject to horrendous and ongoing torture and death. If ever there was an occasion for justified retaliation and defensive slaughter, whether in form of a just war or a just revolution, this was it. The economic and political elite of the Roman state and their military had turned the citizens of the state against Christians and were embarked on a murderous public policy of exterminating the Christian community.

Yet the church, in the face of the heinous crimes committed against her members, insisted without reservation that when Christ disarmed Peter he disarmed all Christians. Christians continued to believe that Christ was, to use the words of an ancient liturgy, their fortress, their refuge, and their strength, and that if Christ was all they needed for security and defense, then Christ was all they should have. Indeed, this was a new security ethic.

Christians understood that if they would only follow Christ and his teaching, they couldn't fail. When opportunities were given for Christians to appease the state by joining the fighting Roman army, these opportunities were rejected, because the early church saw a complete and an obvious incompatibility between loving as Christ loved and killing. It was Christ, not Mars, who gave security and peace.



Hiroshima, Japan, 1945, Atomic Bomb Aftermath Up North Memories. Don Harrison

Today the world is on the brink of ruin because the church refuses to be the church, because we Christians have been deceiving ourselves and the non-Christian world about the truth of Christ. There is no way to follow Christ, to love as Christ loved, and simultaneously to kill other people. It is a lie to say that the spirit that moves the trigger of a flamethrower is the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. It is a lie to say that learning to kill is learning to be Christ-like. It is a lie to say that learning to drive a bayonet into the heart of another is motivated from having put on the mind of Christ. Militarized Christianity is a lie. It is radically out of conformity with the teaching, life, and spirit of Jesus.

Now, brothers and sisters, on the anniversary of this terrible atrocity carried out by Christians, I must be the first to say that I made a terrible mistake. I was had by the father of lies. I participated in the big ecumenical lie of the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches. I wore the uniform. I was part of the system. When I said Mass over there I put on those beautiful vestments over my uniform. (When Father Dave Becker left the Trident submarine base in 1982 and resigned as Catholic chaplain there, he said, “Every time I went to Mass in my uniform and put the vestments on over my uniform, I couldn’t help but think of the words of Christ applying to me: Beware of wolves in sheep’s clothing.”)

As an Air Force chaplain I painted a machine gun in the loving hands of the nonviolent Jesus, and then handed this perverse picture to the world as truth. I sang “Praise the Lord” and passed the ammunition. As Catholic chaplain for the 509th Composite Group, I was the final channel that communicated this fraudulent image of Christ to the crews of the Enola Gay and the Boxcar.

All I can say today is that I was wrong. Christ would not be the instrument to unleash such horror on his people. Therefore no follower of Christ can legitimately unleash the horror of war on God’s people. Excuses and self-justifying explanations are without merit. All I can say is: I was wrong! But, if this is all I can say, this I must do, feeble as it is. For to do otherwise would be to bypass the first and absolutely essential step in the process of repentance and reconciliation: admission of error, admission of guilt.

I was there, and I was wrong. Yes, war is hell, and Christ did not come to justify the creation of hell on earth by his disciples. The justification of war may be compatible with some religions and philosophies, but it is not compatible with the nonviolent teaching of Jesus. I was wrong. And to those of whatever nationality or religion who have been hurt because I fell under the influence of the father of lies, I say with my whole heart and soul I am sorry. I beg forgiveness.

I asked forgiveness from the Hibakushas (the Japanese survivors of the atomic bombings) in Japan last year, in a pilgrimage that I made with a group from Tokyo to Hiroshima. I fell on my face there at the peace shrine after offering flowers, and I prayed for forgiveness – for myself, for my country, for my church. Both Nagasaki and Hiroshima. This year in Toronto, I again asked forgiveness from the Hibakushas present. I asked forgiveness, and they asked forgiveness for Pearl Harbor and some of the horrible deeds of the Japanese military, and there were some, and I knew of them. We embraced. We cried. Tears flowed. That is the first step of reconciliation – admission of guilt and forgiveness. Pray to God that others will find this way to peace.

All religions have taught brotherhood. All people want peace. It is only the governments and war departments that promote war and slaughter. So today again I call upon people to make their voices heard. We can no longer just leave this to our leaders, both political and religious. They will move when we make them move. They represent us. Let us tell them that they must think and act for the safety and security of all the people in our world, not just for the safety and security of one country. All countries are inter-dependent. We all need one another. It is no longer possible for individual countries to think only of themselves. We can all live together as brothers and sisters or we are doomed to die together as fools in a world holocaust.

Each one of us becomes responsible for the crime of war by cooperating in its preparation and in its execution. This includes the military. This includes the making of weapons. And it includes paying for the weapons. There's no question about that. We've got to realize we all become responsible. Silence, doing nothing, can be one of the greatest sins.

The bombing of Nagasaki means even more to me than the bombing of Hiroshima. By August 9, 1945, we knew what that bomb would do, but we still dropped it. We knew that agonies and sufferings would ensue, and we also knew – at least our leaders knew – that it was not necessary. The Japanese were already defeated. They were already suing for peace. But we insisted on unconditional surrender, and this is even against the Just War theory. Once the enemy is defeated, once the enemy is not able to hurt you, you must make peace.

As a Catholic chaplain I watched as the Boxcar, piloted by a good Irish Catholic pilot, dropped the bomb on Urakami Cathedral in Nagasaki, the center of Catholicism in Japan. I knew that St. Francis Xavier, centuries before, had brought the Catholic faith to Japan. I knew that schools, churches, and religious orders were annihilated. And yet I said nothing.

Thank God that I'm able to stand here today and speak out against war, all war. The prophets of the Old Testament spoke out against all false gods of gold, silver, and metal. Today we are worshipping the gods of metal, the bomb. We are putting our trust in physical power, militarism, and nationalism. The bomb, not God, is our security and our strength. The prophets of the Old Testament said simply: Do not put your trust in chariots and weapons, but put your trust in God. Their message was simple, and so is mine.

We must all become prophets. I really mean that. We must all do something for peace. We must stop this insanity of worshipping the gods of metal. We must take a stand against evil and idolatry. This is our destiny at the most critical time of human history. But it's also the greatest opportunity ever offered to any group of people in the history of our world – to save our world from complete annihilation.

This article is excerpted from a speech George Zabelka gave at a Pax Christi conference in August 1985 (tape of speech obtained from Notre Dame University Archives). The first two paragraphs are from an interview with Zabelka published in Sojourners magazine, August 1980.