

From The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response (May 3, 1983)  
A Pastoral Letter on War and Peace  
by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops

At the center of the Church's teaching on peace and at the center of all Catholic social teaching are the transcendence of God and the dignity of the human person. The human person is the clearest reflection of God's presence in the world; all of the Church's work in pursuit of both justice and peace is designed to protect and promote the dignity of every person. For each person not only reflects God, but is the expression of God's creative work and the meaning of Christ's redemptive ministry. Christians approach the problem of war and peace with fear and reverence. God is the Lord of life, and so each human life is sacred; modern warfare threatens the obliteration of human life on a previously unimaginable scale.

Catholic teaching has always understood peace in positive terms. In the words of Pope John Paul II: "Peace is not just the absence of war.... Like a cathedral, peace must be constructed patiently and with unshakable faith" (Coventry, England, 1982). **In** the words of our Holy Father, we need a "moral about-face." The whole world must summon the moral courage and technical means to say no to nuclear conflict; no to weapons of mass destruction; no to an arms race which robs the poor and the vulnerable; and no to the moral danger of a nuclear age which places before humankind indefensible choices of constant terror or surrender. Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith. We are called to be peacemakers, not by some movement of the moment, but by our Lord Jesus. The content and context of our peacemaking is not set by some political agenda or ideological program, but by the teaching of his Church.

The distinctive contribution of the Church, flows from her religious nature and ministry. The Church is called to be, in a unique way, the instrument of the Kingdom of God in history. Since peace is one of the signs of that Kingdom present in the world, the Church fulfills part of her essential mission by making the peace of the Kingdom more visible in our time.

Because peace, like the Kingdom of God itself, is both a divine gift and a human work, the Church should continually pray for the gift and share in the work. We are called to be a Church at the service of peace, precisely because peace is one manifestation of God's word and work in our midst. Recognition of the Church's responsibility to join with others in the work of peace is a major force behind the call today to develop a theology of peace.