PAPAL TEACHING

Just War?
Pope Pius XII spoke of the ‘homicidal and suicidal madness’ of the new ABC (Atomic, Biological, Chemical) weapons in his 1956 Easter message. In *Pacem in Terris* (1963) Pope John XXIII questioned the possibility of a just war in the nuclear age: ‘it is contrary to reason to hold that war is now a suitable way to restore rights that have been violated’. And he addressed an appeal to the world, as relevant today as it was forty years ago:

Justice, then, right reason, and humanity urgently demand that the arms race should cease; that the stockpiles which exist in various countries should be reduced equally and simultaneously by the parties concerned; that nuclear weapons should be banned; and that a general agreement should eventually be reached about progressive disarmament and an effect method of control.

In his World Day of Peace message for 1967, John’s successor Pope Paul VI described the use of nuclear weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki as ‘butchery of untold magnitude’ which must never be repeated. ‘Never again one against the other, never, never again!... Never again war, never again war!’ he said in his memorable appeal to the United nations in 1965.

Arms Race and the Just War Theory
Another key theme in recent papal teaching has been the link between the arms race and justice. In *Populorum Progression* (1967) Paul VI linked the arms race with injustice in and towards the Third World. ‘Development is the new name for peace’ was the theme of the encyclical. The arms race was a ‘squandering of wealth’ and ‘an intolerable scandal’. The extension of the arms race to the Third World, which seems one consequence of the new international order, is making things even worse.

In this wider context there has been a considerable rethinking of just war theory. There are those who argue that a biblical understanding of peace simply has no place for the sort of calculation that just war theory, based ultimately on Roman legalism and Greek morality, demands. Others insist that the conditions for justice in war elaborated in modern just war theory are sufficient to outlaw nuclear war, and probably almost any envisageable modern war.

Weapons and Rules of Engagement
A further consideration is the means used to fight the war, the rules for the conduct of war. International agreements have banned many forms of modern warfare: the use of poison gas; the deliberate spread of infectious diseases; intentional harm to innocent people and combatants. However, recent experience, in Iraq for example, has cast doubt on the ability of modern weapons systems to discriminate between civilians and soldiers. Even the most sophisticated systems are dependent on the information led into them by fallible human beings.
Nuclear War

When it comes to nuclear war these issues become more serious. Even so-called strategic or battlefield nuclear weapons have long lasting radiation effects. The suffering still being experienced in Japan from the 1945 nuclear explosions shows how long such effects can last. A mass nuclear exchange might well cause climatic disaster, the well named Nuclear Winter effect. In 1982 the Pontifical Academy of Sciences examined the consequences of nuclear war at the request of the Pope, and together with representatives of various national scientific academies issued a Declaration on the Prevention of Nuclear War. this concluded:

Throughout its history humanity has been confronted with war, but since 1945 the nature of warfare has changed so profoundly that the future of the human race, of generations yet unborn, is imperilled…. For the first time it is possible to cause damage on such a catastrophic scale as to wipe out a large part of civilisation and to endanger its very survival. The large-scale use of such weapons could trigger major and irreversible ecological and genetic changes whose limits cannot be predicted.

All neat distinctions between civilian and military targets become irrelevant in the light of such considerations.

‘Clever Weapons’

The issues of proportinality and discrimination apply to modern conventional weapons as well as nuclear weapons. The Gulf War and Iraq War, and many small scale wars fuelled by the arms industries of the West, have shown in recent times just how destructive automatic rifles, field missibles, electronic sights, etc., can be. Air delivered missiles are even more murderous and indiscriminate in their effects. So called ‘clever weapons’ are only as ‘clever’ as those who program them. Often the intelligence on which the targeting is based has proved wrong. Landmines continue to claim victims, especially women and children, long after the original conflict has ended. Can any such weapons meet just war conditions? Many doubt it.