When the World Went to the Brink

Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of Pope John XXIII's Encyclical, Peace on Earth

Fifty years ago, the world breathed a sigh of relief, believing it had escaped nuclear holocaust by the skin of our teeth. After 15 years of Cold War, in October 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union stirred the flames of conflict over the presence of Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba. President John F. Kennedy ordered a naval blockade of Cuba to halt Soviet ships from carrying missiles to the island and threatened to destroy the established missile sites if the weapons were not removed. Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev refused to comply and ordered Russian ships carrying more missiles to sail for Cuba. The nightmare of nuclear weapons being used for the first time since World War II became a terrible possibility. For almost two weeks that October the world feared the worst, and then, almost as quickly as the threat arose, it came to an end. The confrontation and subsequent drawdown between the American and Soviet leaders is a sobering lesson for all of us to study and learn from. Once, in the not too distant past, the world went to the brink. How did we get there and how did we come to step back from the unthinkable?

One of the least known episodes in that drama was the role played by Pope John XXIII. A man of immense warmth and humanitarianism, Pope John, having lived through two world wars, knew firsthand the terrible toll the human race paid in those conflicts. With the prior agreement of both the Soviet and American governments, Pope John addressed the world and the leaders of the two nuclear powers, calling on them to step back from the abyss of nuclear war. He called upon “all men of good will” to “heed the cry of distress arising to Heaven from all corners of the world, from innocent children and the aged, from individuals and from all mankind: ‘Peace, Peace.’” Broadcast by Vatican radio and reported widely in the world press, notably in Pravda, the official newspaper of the Soviet Communist Party, the Pope’s plea offered both sides the breathing room they needed to realize the consequences of their present path and begin the serious negotiations that eventually resolved the crisis.

By December of 1962, just weeks after the resolution of the crisis, the world learned that Pope John was terminally ill with cancer. In his last months of life, he was determined to put in writing a last will and testament for the world. Pacem in Terris, (Peace on Earth), was John XXIII’s final message to the world. The encyclical was published on April 11, 1963, just weeks before his death in June.

The letter begins by insisting that the foundation of world peace is belief in the dignity of every human being created in the image of God and entitled to a quality of life befitting that dignity. Every person, wrote John, had the “right to bodily integrity and the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest ... and the necessary social services” needed to insure them. Moreover, as a moral being, every human person had the right to be respected, their freedom of conscience protected, and their cultural heritage preserved. Covering a wide range of communal rights and responsibilities, Pope John argued that a community of nations focused on doing full justice for all people was the only true path to creating a world of peace. He believed that if the nations wanted peace, they should work for justice within their own borders and among themselves.

John XXIII left us a powerful vision for creating a just and peaceful world. During the week of April 11, the 50th anniversary of the encyclical’s publication, we at St. Mary’s will have the opportunity in class discussion and reflection to return to that vision, to measure it against the needs of our world and against our own commitment to peace. Please join us.

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