

I Was Told It Was Necessary

An interview with a military chaplain who served the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bomb squadrons.

by Charles C. McCarthy

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[Edit Article](#) | [PTW Link](#) | [Return to Search Page](#)

In August, 1945, Fr. George Zabelka, a Catholic chaplain with the U.S. Army air force, was stationed on Tinian Island in the South Pacific. He served as priest and pastor for the airmen who dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

He was discharged in 1946. During the next 20 years he gradually began to realize that what he had done and believed during the war was wrong, and that the only way he could be a Christian was to be a pacifist. He was deeply influenced in this process by the civil rights movement and the works of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi.

In 1972 he met Charles C. McCarthy, a theologian, lawyer, and father of 10. McCarthy, who founded the Center for the Study of Nonviolence at the University of Notre Dame, was leading a workshop on nonviolence at Zabelka's church. The two men fell into the first of several conversations about the issues raised by the workshop. Some time later, Zabelka reached the conclusion that the use of violence under any circumstances was incompatible with his understanding of the gospel of Christ.

When this article appeared, Fr. Zabelka was retired, gave workshops on nonviolence and assisted in diocesan work in Lansing, Michigan. The following is a 1980 interview with Zabelka, conducted by McCarthy.

The Editors

Charles McCarthy: Father Zabelka, what is your relationship to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, 1945?

Fr. Zabelka: During the summer of 1945, July, August, and September, I was assigned as Catholic chaplain to the 509th Composite Group on Tinian Island. The 509th was the atomic bomb group.

McCarthy: What were your duties in relationship to these men? **Zabelka:** The usual. I said mass on Sunday and during the week. Heard confessions. Talked with the boys, etc. Nothing significantly different from what any other chaplain did during the war.

McCarthy: Did you know that the 509th was preparing to drop an atomic bomb?

Zabelka: No. We knew that they were preparing to drop a bomb substantially different from and more powerful than even the "blockbusters" used over Europe, but we never called it an atomic bomb and never really knew what it was before August 6, 1945. Before that time we just referred to it as the "gimmick" bomb.

McCarthy: So since you did not know that an atomic bomb was going to be dropped you had no reason to counsel the men in private or preach in public about the morality of such a bombing?

Zabelka: Well, that is true enough; I never did speak against it, nor could I have spoken against it since I, like practically everyone else on Tinian, was ignorant of what was being prepared. And I guess I will go to my God with that as my defense. But on Judgment Day I think I am going to need to seek more mercy than justice in this matter.

McCarthy: Why? God certainly could not have expected you to act on ideas that had never entered your mind.

Zabelka: As a Catholic priest my task was to keep my people, wherever they were, close to the mind and heart of Christ. As a military chaplain I was to try to see that the boys conducted themselves according to the teachings of the Catholic Church and Christ on war. When I look back I am not sure I did either of these things very well.

McCarthy: Why do you think that?

Zabelka: What I do not mean to say is that I feel myself to have been remiss in any duties that were expected of me as a chaplain. I saw that the mass and the sacraments were available as best I could. I even went out and earned paratroop wings in order to do my job better. Nor did I fail to teach and preach what the Church expected me to teach and preach—and I don't mean by this that I just talked to the boys about their sexual lives. I and most chaplains were quite clear and outspoken on such matters as not killing and torturing prisoners. But there were other areas where things were not said quite so clearly.

McCarthy: For example?

Zabelka: 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.

McCarthy: Why not? You certainly knew civilians were being destroyed by the thousands in these raids, didn't you?

Zabelka: Oh, indeed I did know, and I knew with a clarity that few others could have had.

McCarthy: What do you mean?

Zabelka: As a chaplain I often had to enter the world of the boys who were losing their minds because of something they did in war. I remember one young man who was engaged in the bombings of the cities of Japan. He was in the hospital on Tinian Island on the verge of a complete mental collapse.

He told me that he had been on a low-level bombing mission, flying right down one of the main streets of the city, when straight ahead of him appeared a little boy, in the middle of the street, looking up at the plane in childlike wonder. The man knew that in a few seconds this child would be burned to death by napalm which had already been released.

Yes, I knew civilians were being destroyed and knew it perhaps in a way others didn't. Yet I never preached a single sermon against killing civilians to the men who were doing it.

McCarthy: Again, why not?

Zabelka: Because I was "brainwashed"! It never entered my mind to publically protest 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, especially by a public body like the American bishops, is a stamp of approval.

The whole structure of the secular, religious, and military society told me clearly

that it was all right to "let the Japs have it." God was on the side of my country. The Japanese were the enemy, and I was absolutely certain of my country's and Church's teaching about enemies; no erudite theological text was necessary to tell me. The day-in-day-out operation of the state and the Church between 1940 and 1945 spoke more clearly about Christian attitudes toward enemies and war than St. Augustine or St. Thomas Aquinas ever could.

I was certain that this mass destruction was right, certain to the point that the question of its morality never seriously entered my mind. I was "brainwashed" not by force or torture but by my Church's silence and whole-hearted cooperation in thousands of little ways with the country's war machine. Why, after I finished chaplaincy school at Harvard I had my military chalice officially blessed by the then Bishop Cushing of Boston. How much more clearly could the message be given? Indeed, I was "brainwashed"!

McCarthy: So you feel that because you did not protest the morality of the bombing of other cities with their civilian populations, that somehow you are morally responsible for the dropping of the atomic bomb? ?

Zabelka: The facts are that seventy-five thousand people were burned to death in one evening of fire bombing over Tokyo. Hundreds of thousands were destroyed in Dresden, Hamburg, and Coventry by aerial bombing. The fact that forty-five thousand human beings were killed by one bomb over Nagasaki was new only to the extent that it was one bomb that did it.

To fail to speak to the utter moral corruption of the mass destruction of civilians was to fail as a Christian and a priest as I see it. Hiroshima and Nagasaki happened in and to a world and a Christian church that had asked for it—that had prepared the moral consciousness of humanity to do and to justify the unthinkable. I am sure there are church documents around someplace bemoaning civilian deaths in modern war, and I am sure those in power in the church will drag them out to show that it was giving moral leadership during World War II to its membership.

Well, I was there, and I'll tell you that the operational moral atmosphere in the church in relation to mass bombing of enemy civilians was totally indifferent, silent, and corrupt at best—at worst it was religiously supportive of these activities by blessing those who did them.

I say all this not to pass judgment on others, for I do not know their souls then or now. I say all this as one who was part of the so-called Christian leadership of the time. So you see, that is why I am not going to the day of judgment looking for justice in this matter. Mercy is my salvation.

McCarthy: You said the atomic bombing of Nagasaki happened to a church that "had asked for it." What do you mean by that?

Zabelka: For the first three centuries, the three centuries closest to Christ, the church was a pacifist church. With Constantine the church accepted the pagan Roman ethic of a just war and slowly began to involve its membership in mass slaughter, first for the state and later for the faith.

Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants, whatever other differences they may have had on theological esoterica, all agreed that Jesus' clear and unambiguous teaching on the rejection of violence and on love of enemies was not to be taken seriously. And so each of the major branches of Christianity by different theological methods modified our Lord's teaching in these matters until all three were able to do what Jesus rejected, that is, take an eye for an eye, slaughter, maim, torture.

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It seems a "sign" to me that seventeen hundred years of Christian terror and slaughter should arrive at August 9, 1945, when Catholics dropped the A-bomb on top of the largest and first Catholic city in Japan. One would have thought that I, as a Catholic priest, would have spoken out against the atomic bombing of nuns. (Three orders of Catholic sisters were destroyed in Nagasaki that day.) One would have thought that I would have suggested that as a minimal standard of Catholic morality, Catholics shouldn't bomb Catholic children. I didn't.

I, like the Catholic pilot of the Nagasaki plane, "The Great Artiste," was heir to a Christianity that had for seventeen hundred years engaged in revenge, murder, torture, the pursuit of power, and prerogative violence, all in the name of our Lord.

I walked through the ruins of Nagasaki right after the war and visited the place where once stood the Urakami Cathedral. I picked up a piece of a censer from the rubble. When I look at it today I pray God forgives us for how we have distorted Christ's teaching and destroyed his world by the distortion of that teaching. I was the Catholic chaplain who was there when this grotesque process that began with Constantine reached its lowest point— so far.

McCarthy: What do you mean by "so far"?

Zabelka: Briefly, what I mean is that I do not see that the moral climate in relation to war inside or outside the church has dramatically changed much since 1945. The mainline Christian churches still teach something that Christ never taught or even hinted at, namely the just war theory, a theory that to me has been completely discredited theologically, historically, and psychologically.

So as I see it, until the various churches within Christianity repent and begin to proclaim by word and deed what Jesus proclaimed in relation to violence and enemies, there is no hope for anything other than ever-escalating violence and destruction.

Until membership in the church means that a Christian chooses not to engage in violence for any reason and instead chooses to love, pray for, help, and forgive all enemies; until membership in the church means that Christians may not be members of any military—American, Polish, Russian, English, Irish, et al. Until membership in the church means that the Christian cannot pay taxes for others to kill others; and until the church says these things in a fashion which the simplest soul could understand—until that time humanity can only look forward to more dark nights of slaughter on a scale unknown in history. Unless the church unswervingly and unambiguously teaches what Jesus teaches on this matter it will not be the divine leaven in the human dough that it was meant to be.

"The choice is between nonviolence or nonexistence," as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, and he was not, and I am not, speaking figuratively. It is about time for the church and its leadership in all denominations to get down on its knees and repent of this misrepresentation of Christ's words.

Communion with Christ cannot be established on disobedience to his clearest teachings. Jesus authorized none of his followers to substitute violence for love; not me, not you, not Jimmy Carter, not the pope, not a Vatican council, nor even an ecumenical council.

McCarthy: Father Zabelka, what kinds of immediate steps do you think the church should take in order to become the "divine leaven in the human dough"?

Zabelka: Step one should be that Christians the world over should be taught that Christ's teaching to love their enemies is not optional. I've been in many parishes in my life, and I have found none where the congregation explicitly is called upon regularly to pray for its enemies. I think this is essential.

I offer you step two at the risk of being considered hopelessly out of touch with reality. I would like to suggest that there is an immediate need to call an ecumenical council for the specific purpose of clearly declaring that war is totally incompatible with Jesus' teaching and that Christians cannot and will not engage in or pay for it from this point in history on. This would have the effect of putting all nations on this planet on notice that from now on they are going to have to conduct their mutual slaughter without Christian support—physical, financial, or spiritual.

I am sure there are other issues which Catholics or Orthodox or Protestants would like to confront in an ecumenical council instead of the facing up to the hard teachings of Christ in relationship to violence and enemies. But it seems to me that

issues like the meaning of the primacy of Peter are nowhere near as pressing or as destructive of church credibility and God's world as is the problem of continued Christian participation in and justification of violence and slaughter. I think the church's continued failure to speak clearly Jesus' teachings is daily undermining its credibility and authority in all other areas.

McCarthy: Do you think there is the slightest chance that the various branches of Christianity would come together in an ecumenical council for the purpose of declaring war and violence totally unacceptable activities for Christians under all circumstances?

Zabelka: Remember, I prefaced my suggestion of an ecumenical council by saying that I risked being considered hopelessly out of touch with reality. On the other hand, what is impossible for men and women is quite possible for God if people will only use their freedom to cooperate a little.

Who knows what could happen if the pope, the patriarch of Constantinople, and the president of the World Council of Churches called with one voice for such a council? One thing I am sure of is that our Lord would be very happy if his church were again unequivocally teaching what he unequivocally taught on the subject of violence.