

Ever since modern weaponry made the indiscriminate killing of civilians an inevitable corollary of war, some Catholics have argued only non-violent resolution is morally permissible / By VALERIE FLESSATI

Blessed are the peacemakers



ON 8 MAY 1936, four young people met in London and started a society aimed at “resistance to modern warfare on grounds of traditional morality”. They were alarmed at the build-up of international tension, at rearmament proposals, Hitler’s occupation of the Rhineland and Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia. They named the new group “Pax” and called themselves pacifists, believing that modern methods of warfare, particularly indiscriminate air attacks on civilians, were incompatible with the conditions for a just war.

Their support for conscientious objection led Pax into conflict with the hierarchy, whose opposition was conveyed in a letter from the Diocese of Westminster: “The ‘conscientious objector’ has an erroneous conscience ... He is entitled to respect and sympathy such as would be given to any misguided person ... But error remains error ... and no Catholic organisation may make it one of their purposes to support an attitude of conscientious objection which is at variance with Catholic teaching.”

Pax survived by insisting that it was a “society of Catholics and others” rather than a “Catholic society” claiming to speak in the name of the Church. Despite this, some bishops attempted to censor its literature, and on several occasions priests were ordered to resign from membership.

Two approaches emerged in early discussions about the purposes of Pax. Some members advocated political tactics to demand that states observe international treaties and prevent war by “collective security”. They included Barbara Barclay Carter and Don Luigi Sturzo, campaigners against fascism in Italy and Spain, and Christian Lucas, one of the four founders. Her perspec-

tive was shaped by her involvement in the “Peace Ballot” conducted by the League of Nations Union in 1934–35. But those influenced by Distributism, who believed that the roots of war lay in materialism and the profiteering of industrial capitalism, prevailed. They advocated a “personalist and communitarian revolution”, based on decentralisation and practising the works of mercy.

During the Second World War, some conscientious objectors (COs) joined farming communities like the one established by Catholic families at Laxton. By the end of the war Pax had directly helped several hundred COs, putting them in touch with the few priests who would testify for them. In 1941 a judge at the Leeds Tribunal criticised the complete absence of Catholic priests appearing on behalf of any applicant. Pax membership peaked around 1942 with 500 members. After the war it dwindled dramatically. Back-to-the-land members had mostly withdrawn, and this enabled Pax to refocus more strictly on questions of Christianity and militarism.

THROUGH THE 1950s and 1960s Pax slowly gained support, largely through the painstaking work of Charles Thompson, a former CO who had joined Pax after becoming a Catholic. Thompson followed up every expression of sympathy in the Catholic press, and corresponded with Thomas Merton in the US and Bede Griffiths in India. The “Pax Bulletin” documented the development of Catholic thinking on war, peace and non-violence, with contributions from Merton and Griffiths, alongside Archbishop Thomas Roberts SJ and theologians such as Pie Régamey OP, Pierre Lorson SJ and Franziskus Stratmann OP. In partnership with Conrad Pepler OP,

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Christian CND protesters take part in a vigil of prayer for peace in Vietnam, 1970 on the steps of St Martin-in-the-Fields, London

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an annual Pax weekend at Spode House, the Dominican conference centre in Staffordshire, drew a new generation, including young academics like Brian Wicker and Walter Stein.

As the Cold War intensified, development of the British hydrogen bomb provoked national controversy. Pax criticised the position most church leaders took, that possession of nuclear weapons was “tragic but necessary” to deter Communism. A bulletin article headed “An Advocate for Mars” deplored new publications from the Catholic Truth Society – which infuriated the CTS president, Cardinal Griffin. In 1956, BBC Radio broadcast a “medieval disputation” on the morality of war, conducted by three Dominicans. Their verdict was that the use of atomic or hydrogen bombs would be immoral because they were uncontrollably destructive and indiscriminate. The Carmelite priest Brocard Sewell challenged Griffin to condemn these conclusions, because otherwise Catholics would consider themselves free to hold opinions long advocated by Pax. Sewell was rebuked for this “impudent”

letter and Griffin wrote to Bishop Cyril Cowderoy of Southwark, asking him if (“whilst one realises that most of these people are a bit cracked”) he could have a word with Sewell’s prior at Aylesford.

Archbishop Roberts was the next to be castigated. At the 1959 Spode conference he discussed a letter he had sent to Cardinal Tardini, Vatican Secretary of State, expressing his hope that the forthcoming Vatican Council would prioritise the morality of war and rights of conscience. Pax launched a petition endorsing this proposal. Following complaints from bishops, the apostolic delegate, Archbishop O’Hara, told Roberts that he had no alternative but to report his “association with the Pax organisation” to the Holy See. A Catholic Nuclear Disarmament Group joined the Aldermaston marches. In April 1961 Laurence Bright OP was due to conduct a retreat for them, but a telegram arrived from Archbishop’s House, Westminster, forbidding any discussion of peace and war.

By the early 1960s, Pax had a dynamic branch in the US led by Eileen Egan and

Gordon Zahn, with the backing of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. In 1961, Walter Stein’s book *Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience* argued persuasively that there was no justification for nuclear deterrence. Pope John XXIII’s 1963 encyclical *Pacem in terris*, conceived during the Cuban missile crisis, epitomised openness and hope. In Italy, the first Catholics were being imprisoned for refusing conscription, and in the US opposition to the Vietnam war was escalating.

In 1963, Barbara Wall, Christian Lucas’ sister, personally delivered a letter from Pax to Belgian Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens, who was ensuring the Second Vatican Council agenda included urgent social questions. That autumn, there was unprecedented interest in the Spode weekend, with a stellar line-up of Dorothy Day, Eileen Egan and Bede Griffiths as speakers.

PAX SUPPORTERS from both sides of the Atlantic were in Rome for the 1964 and 1965 sessions of the council, lobbying individual bishops and talking to the press. A special issue of the *Catholic Worker*, edited by Eileen Egan, was sent to every council father. The final text of *Gaudium et spes* included the essential points on which Pax had campaigned: the right to conscientious objection and a condemnation of indiscriminate warfare.

After the council, Pax was operating in a very different church climate. Many activities were organised jointly with a small but developing branch of Pax Christi, the international movement founded in postwar France, such as “First Friday” meetings to make known the peace teachings of Vatican II and promote the new “Peace Sunday” initiated by Pope Paul VI. A merger seemed obvious and took effect in 1971, with Brian Wicker as chair of the newly blended Pax Christi.

Why had Pax encountered such hostility for most of its existence? Upholding the primacy of individual conscience in judging war was perceived by many bishops as a threat to the Church’s unity and authority. Furthermore, church leaders considered Pax’s attitude might jeopardise their efforts to shake off historic suspicions about papist treachery and show that Catholics were loyal and patriotic citizens.

Pax kept alive a tradition which goes back to the earliest days of the Church. Ninety years later, its founders’ assessment of war is reinforced by the rubble of Mariupol and Gaza, by every “precision” bomb that “takes out” a suspected enemy’s entire family or a girls’ school. From John XXIII to Leo XIV, the papacy could not, by word, gesture and action, have more persistently pointed the Church towards the path of non-violence. Are Catholics renowned today for their stand against war? Not yet. What’s stopping that now?

Valerie Flessati is a vice president of Pax Christi. Her history of Pax can be accessed here: <https://bradscholars.brad.ac.uk/entities/publication/e44f5bf2-4d23-429f-8c02-1ffb9b8ef283>

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I’m a nonagenarian, and one thing I’ve learnt in life is that argument rarely persuades. In any case, we all talk too much and think too little. My Great Uncle Harry used to say, “It’s easier to learn from books than from men.” Uncle Harry’s wisdom was manifest, and he often quoted from Boswell’s *Life of Doctor Johnson*. But, in our hectic, fast-moving world, people have little time for books. I confess I don’t. That’s partly because I make time every week to read *The Tablet* from cover to cover. I find it provides, for me, a former businessman, a much-needed broadening of the mind. And that’s not only because of the variety of its articles and reviews, but also because of its profound leaders, forged in Catholic thought, and

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John Hartley

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