

Justice, Peace and Dominicans 1216–1999: IX — STOP WAR PLEASE Dominicans and the Christian Peace Movement in England

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Enablers was how, in last month's *New Blackfriars*, Brian Wicker described the Dominicans who provided a forum—whether at Spode House or in the pages of *New Blackfriars*—where radical Christian debate could flourish. *Companions* is the word I would add to describe the role of Dominicans as they have accompanied Christian peace activists in the second half of the twentieth century. On that journey Dominicans have helped fellow pilgrims with their theological map-reading, and literally walked the same road, to Vézelay, Canterbury, Porton Down and Greenham Common.

PAX began in 1936 with the aim of 'resistance to modern warfare on grounds of traditional morality and principle'. Its founders had come to the conclusion that modern methods of warfare, with air attacks on civilians, violated the conditions for a 'just war' and that Catholics had the right, and even the duty, to refuse participation in future wars. This immediately set PAX on a path to confrontation with the hierarchy, whose attitude 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."¹

As a result PAX could only continue its work by calling itself a society 'of Catholics and others' rather than a Catholic society.

Loneliness was a common experience for Catholic COs of the 1930s and 1940s. They often formed their convictions in isolation and thought they were the only Catholics who held them. Franz Jägerstätter in Berlin

felt his burden of self-doubt lifted when he heard that the Pallotine, Fr Reinisch, had refused military service and suffered the death penalty before him. Gordon Zahn in the USA thought he was the *only* Catholic CO until he discovered the Catholic Worker and its civilian service camps. In England conscientious objectors were fortunate to discover Dominicans. Those who joined PAX often mentioned the German Dominican, Franziskus Stratmann, whose book *The Church and War* (1928) had reassured them that their attitude to war was morally valid. Gerald Vann had, from the outset, offered his support to PAX.² He wrote articles and pamphlets and addressed meetings. In 1937, no doubt having observed the problems encountered by PAX, he created the Union of Prayer for Peace as an orthodox Catholic association involving a promise to pray daily for peace which was taken up round the world, particularly in the schools run by Dominican sisters.

Gerald Vann's *Morality and War* (1939) became a bible for young men preparing for military tribunals. Manchester university student, John Heathcote, was one of them. With Vann's guidance and that provided by a *Catholic Herald* article³ in which Victor White set out the limits to moral participation in the war, Heathcote was among the first to argue his case entirely on 'just war' principles—and to win noncombatant status. The absence of Catholic clergy appearing as witnesses at tribunals was noted by one judge in Leeds.⁴ Through PAX Catholic COs found the few priests, including Vann, who would give evidence on their behalf. A PAX leaflet offering to put enquirers in touch with priests who could advise them was criticised by the Westminster diocesan censor:

'It may well be that the "priests" referred to are Dominicans, though to my knowledge they have not openly sponsored the movement under this name... I have recently had to refuse a nihil obstat to a book on war by Fr Vann OP which is vastly more moderate than Pax. The Provincial was annoyed since it had passed two Dominican censors...'⁵

In this difficult climate Dominicans helped COs to see their protest as a positive, and not just a negative contribution to society. In *Blackfriars* Vann wrote that in wartime society needed dissidents as well as conformists. The dissidents' way of serving their country was precisely *not* to participate: to create a new future by maintaining clear judgement, free of hatred, with the objective of a just peace always in view.⁶ Conrad Pepler reflected further on 'The Part of a Pacifist' by suggesting that their task was to resist actively, concentrating on the positive work of charity which would heal the spiritual wounds of war.

Theirs was a job of sowing rather than ploughing.⁷

In their thinking about social reform many PAX members were influenced by Distributism. Its most prominent advocate among them was Eric Gill, chairman of PAX in the last year of his life. They saw the roots of war in materialism and the profiteering of industrial capitalism. Pius XII was frequently quoted: 'In this age of mechanisation the human person becomes merely a more perfect tool in industrial production and... a perfected tool for mechanised warfare'.⁸ With Gill they believed that the solution lay in ordinary men and women embracing the things that made for peace, including poverty, and in creating 'a cell of good living in the chaos of our world'. A practical incentive was the need of COs to find alternative work on the land and many joined farming communities like the one established by Catholic families near the Dominicans at Laxton.

Others felt that PAX was being diverted by an unrealistic search for a rural utopia. Its eccentric approach to modern life, contempt for industry and the state, and stormy relationship with the hierarchy, prevented PAX from attracting Catholics who might otherwise be sympathetic to its aims. What was needed was a respectable Catholic peace organisation backed by the Church. Gerald Vann was briefly involved, in 1944, with a new 'Society of the Peace of Christ', short-lived because it was no more successful than PAX in gaining episcopal support.⁹

However, in the last winter of the war a teacher in France called Marthe Dortel-Claudot started a prayer group which was soon endorsed by the Archbishop of Toulouse as the 'Pax Christi crusade of prayer for Germany' (later for 'all nations'). In 1946 Dortel-Claudot wrote to Cardinal Griffin. Pax Christi and the Benedictines were preparing a peace pilgrimage to Vézelay. Who might bring a cross from England? The Dominicans responded, and a band of thirty, mostly ex-servicemen, set out from St Dominic's Priory, London, in June 1946, on a gruelling three-week walk. The pilgrims prayed at wayside war memorials, shared the rations of local people, and their youthful chaplains, Simon Blake and Columba Ryan, sometimes preached six sermons a day.¹⁰

Two years after the Vézelay march some of its veterans organised a peace pilgrimage to Walsingham. But post-war peace activity was at a low ebb since people had returned to their studies and their jobs. A handful of committed PAX members kept the flame of peace concern alight in a cold war Church. They kept in touch with friends abroad: Fr Stratmann, back in Germany, the Catholic Worker in the US, Pax Christi in France. They diligently wrote to the Catholic press in every debate about the hydrogen bomb, the need to deter communism, and the

Pope's opinions on both.

In 1954 a new partnership began with the Dominicans when Spode House was renovated as a conference centre and the warden, Conrad Pepler, arranged a weekend on 'Christian Peace and the Pacifist'. The PAX annual conference at Spode became a training ground for the formation of a new generation of Catholic peace activists. The agenda was now dominated by the nuclear issue and once again Dominicans furnished speakers (Laurence Bright, Columba Ryan, Henry St John, Anthony Ross among them) and tools for theological analysis. In 1956, at the invitation of the National Peace Council, Illtud Evans (a founder of PAX) took the part of moderator in a medieval disputation which was broadcast by BBC Radio. Ian Hislop and Laurence Bright debated the morality of nuclear war, concluding that A and H bombs were immoral because they were uncontrollably destructive and indiscriminate in their effects. After the broadcast Brocard Sewell, the Carmelite, challenged Cardinal Griffin to declare whether these conclusions were heretical. If they were not, it meant that it had been publicly admitted that Catholics might indeed hold such opinions as those advocated by PAX. Sewell was rebuked for this 'impudent' letter.¹¹

The wave of public concern about nuclear weapons which produced CND brought fresh support from Catholics and, in 1960, the new Catholic Nuclear Disarmament Group took its banner (in papal colours) to Aldermaston. Someone noticed that among the religious organisations the Catholics modestly brought up the rear, 'possibly with a subconscious sense of caution as an acknowledgement that *Rome has not yet spoken*'.¹²

Even Dominicans were rather cautious. When PAX drew up a list of sponsors Henry St John would only allow his name to be included if Archbishop Roberts also agreed.¹³ Safety in numbers. Illtud Evans declined because the Provincial thought 'one OP is probably enough... A pity if an impression were given that Peace were a Dominican monopoly—or peculiarity!' He explained that:

'our primary work at this juncture must be informal, helping individuals or groups, as at Spode, to formulate their views and inform their consciences... Granted the extremely difficult situation vis à vis the Bishops, it is very important that nothing should be done *unnecessarily* to aggravate that situation'.¹⁴

Various episodes illustrated the problem. In 1961 Laurence Bright was to conduct a day's retreat for Catholic peace activists. Hardly had they assembled at the Sion Convent in London when a telegram arrived from Archbishop's House forbidding any discussion of peace and war!

Official opposition added a frisson of risk and excitement for young participants such as Angela and Adrian Cunningham who met at this retreat.

More serious pressure was brought to bear on Archbishop Roberts who was delated to Rome for associating with PAX. At Spode he had discussed the contents of his letter to Cardinal Tardini, Vatican Secretary of State, expressing his hope that the forthcoming Vatican Council would give priority to the morality of war and the rights of conscience. The PAX conference wrote to Rome supporting his proposals, with copies to Jesuit and Dominican leaders. Dissatisfied with the non-committal reply from the Master-General, Henry St John (who had chaired the conference) wrote personally, indicating his own concern and adding that he had refused permission to some Dominicans to lend support to anti-nuclear organisations which made a condition of membership the belief that nuclear weapons had rendered *any* future war immoral. Even if that was their personal belief, as it was his, this went beyond the official position of the English hierarchy and of the Vatican. He had advised them that what they *could* do was to offer guidance to individuals in the formation of their consciences.¹⁵

Spode stimulated the *international* community of those lobbying—with eventual success—for a declaration about nuclear weapons and conscientious objection from the Vatican Council. Speakers in these years included Eileen Egan, who had started an American branch of PAX, Dorothy Day, and, from India, Bede Griffiths. There was a memorable weekend with Fr Pie Régamey, a French Dominican whose work on nonviolence brought Gandhian ideas to a Christian audience. In *Nonviolence and the Christian Conscience* (1966) Régamey suggested that Christians should start preparing themselves for ‘possible acts of disobedience’ in relation to war. In 1962 he was campaigning for a Statute for conscientious objectors in France. At Spode his lecture was translated by Simon Blake who was himself becoming more involved in a new Christian grouping within CND.

Christian CND was a pioneer in purposeful ecumenism, organising religious services during CND’s Easter events. Simon Blake strode at the head of a pilgrimage from Southwark to Canterbury in 1965. He gathered clergy support for protests against the Vietnam war, and, in the late-1960s, took the lead in a series of vigils at Porton Down which helped to put British development of chemical and biological weapons under scrutiny. On one of these marches Blake revealed his recipe for blisterless feet: he had learned on the Vézelay expedition to put a lump of lard into each boot, thus fusing foot, sock and boot into one friction-free machine.

By 1970 PAX was collaborating in all its projects with the small Pax Christi group which had become established in England: a monthly Mass for peace, retreats and study days, and promotion of Pope Paul's 'Peace Sunday'. The two bodies merged in 1971, the older PAX members gracefully and willingly handing over responsibility to the more energetic and younger Pax Christi people. In 1974, at the invitation of the Prior, Peter Edgar, Pax Christi moved into the former parish club next to St Dominic's Priory in London. The luxurious (for the peace movement) premises enabled Pax Christi to expand its activities and host diverse events. Blackfriars Hall gave birth to the Campaign Against the Arms Trade and became a factory for 25,000 placards when CND needed extra space because its 1981 demonstration looked like being a big one. After Simon Blake's sadly premature death, Pax Christi's main support within the priory came from Alan Cheales, and outside it from some prominent graffiti on the church wall: 'Stop War Please'. This was unfortunately removed later, although the footpath it graced is now called 'Alan Cheales Way'.

With the deployment of cruise missiles and the commissioning of Trident submarines, public concern about nuclear weapons mounted once again in the 1980s. Dominicans continued their by now traditional companionship to the Christian peace movements. This was especially true of Oxford, from where Roger Ruston in particular played a crucial part in the theological debate over the church and the bomb. A member of the Bishops' Commission for International Justice and Peace, his pamphlet *Nuclear Deterrence: Right or Wrong?* (1981) applied 'just war' criteria to modern nuclear deterrence and brought up to date the arguments of Walter Stein's influential study *Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience* published twenty years earlier. The Peace Preaching course, created in the 1980s, deepened the scriptural and theological foundations of those involved in 'justice and peace'.

From Blackfriars in Oxford and elsewhere Dominicans lent their support to many initiatives: a liturgy at Greenham Common on the day in 1982 when 30,000 women surrounded the missile base; a monthly women's all-night vigil of prayers and psalms at Greenham's Blue Gate; regular recitation of the rosary at Upper Heyford and dialogue with chaplains and congregation at the base chapel there; tracking cruise missile convoys and holding up white crosses in the darkness as they passed; delegations to Downing Street and a vigil during President Reagan's economic summit in London. 'God's people need bread not bombs' read the placards. Two decades after Fr Régamey proposed nonviolent 'acts of disobedience', a number of Dominicans felt called to civil disobedience as a radical gesture of opposition to policies of

calculated mass murder which nuclear weapons represent. Defending his brethren in court, Timothy Radcliffe told the magistrate: 'Preventing genocide is a right and proper thing for a Christian priest to do'.¹⁶

On these occasions the presence of Dominican men and women, visible and photogenic in their habits, has been a sign of solidarity for the secular peace movement, a challenge to fellow Christians who would prefer to keep prayer and politics apart, and a surprise for the British public led to believe that peace campaigners were all communist traitors.

It is now ten years since the Berlin Wall came down. Superpower confrontation has given way to more complex and fragmented international dynamics. All the more need, in the Catholic Worker phrase, for 'clarification of thought'. No satisfactory substitute has yet been found for the 'just war' framework which, after Christian peace activists gave it such exposure during the 1991 Gulf War, has become almost common coinage amongst politicians. For more than six decades Dominicans have helped the peace movements in England to develop Christian thinking on conscientious objection, nuclear deterrence, and nonviolence. Long may this companionship flourish in their joint effort to 'Stop War Please'.

- 1 Letter from Valentine Elwes, Archbishop Hinsley's Private Secretary, to Hon. Secretary of PAX, 12.10.36. PAX archives, London
- 2 Letter from Gerald Vann to E.I. Watkin, 23.9.36
- 3 *Catholic Herald*, 12.5.39
- 4 *Yorkshire Evening News*, 13.6.41
- 5 Note from Canon E.J. Mahoney to Cardinal Hinsley, 20.7.39. Westminster Diocesan Archives.
- 6 Gerald Vann, 'Patriotism and the Life of the State', *Blackfriars* vol.XXI no.238 January 1940 pp.16-32
- 7 Conrad Pepler, 'The Part of a Pacifist', *Blackfriars* vol.XXV no.296 November 1944 pp.401-405
- 8 Pius XII, Address to the International Congress of Catholic Women's Leagues, April 1939
- 9 Correspondence between Vann and Bishop Parker of Northampton, January-February 1944. Westminster Diocesan Archives.
- 10 *Pilgrim Cross: an illustrated account of the Vézelay Peace Pilgrimage 1946* (Oxford, Blackfriars Publications, c.1946)
- 11 Brocard Sewell, 'The Habit of a Lifetime', unpublished autobiography, c.1980.
- 12 *PAX Bulletin* no.83 May 1960
- 13 Letter from Henry St John to Charles Thompson, 25.4.59
- 14 Iltud Evans to Charles Thompson, 15.11.60
- 15 Henry St John to Charles Thompson, 13.12.59
- 16 As reported in the *Catholic Herald*, 30.5.86