

In the Heartland With Bishop Pates

Pursuing Peace

In the middle of last year, Dr. John Steinbruner, Professor of Public Policy at the University of Maryland and a consultant to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Committee on International Justice and Peace, related through an Iranian graduate student that certain religious leaders in Iran had an interest in meeting with counterparts in the United States.

The idea was pursued and eventuated in plans for a visit to Qom which is the center for Shia Islam studies in Iran. Two of the representatives from the United States were Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, Archbishop Emeritus of Washington, DC, and Bishop Denis Madden, Auxiliary Bishop of Baltimore and Chairman of the USCCB Committee on Ecumenism and Interreligious Affairs. In my role as Chairman of the USCCB Committee on International Justice and Peace and Dr. Stephen Colecchi who serves as Executive Director of that Committee were also a part of the delegation. The final members were Dr. John Steinbruner and Ebrahim Moshani, the Iranian student at the University of Maryland.

When I shared with friends and interested parties that I was going to Iran, their universal reaction was, wasn't I concerned about my safety and security? To be honest, I was somewhat apprehensive. However, from the moment our group arrived in Iran our concerns evaporated. We were guests of the government and the religious leaders. They were most gracious and provided generous hospitality throughout our stay.

It was a discovery to learn that Iran has a bustling economy. The infrastructure is well established. The roads and supply of electricity and energy are comparable to western

countries. 90% of the population is literate with the majority of these being women. Since the revolution in the late 1970's, the practice of religious freedom is evolving. There are several Catholic bishops and a new, expansive Cathedral is under construction in Tehran.

The American delegation spent the greatest portion of our time in Qom in dialogue with the religious leaders of Shia Islam – including some of the most influential in the country.

Through our conversations, we learned a great deal about the development of the Islam tradition and its various branches today. Shia Islam is highly sophisticated and embraces an ongoing theological tradition. As with most religions, we shared common insights and a mutual understanding of the nature of the human person.

One particular issue that was a center of our discussion was that of the use of nuclear weapons. The possible development of such an offensive weapon in Iran has been at the forefront of concern among countries of the Middle East region and of the world.

In light of the above, our discussions focused on a Fatwa that is attributed to the current supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. A fatwa is a teaching of a religious leader and its authoritative interpretation is based on the prestige or recognition of the leader issuing the fatwa. The message can be written or oral. It usually addresses a moral or theological question which enjoys prominence at a particular time.

A fatwa can take the form of a logical syllogism where two propositions are stated and then a conclusion reached. In the present case, the issue is whether or not it is moral (sinful) to use nuclear weapons.

The first proposition of the fatwa under consideration is similar to this: All human persons trace their origin to a beneficent, creating God. Thus, each person has a divine character that requires respect and reverence. In our Christian tradition we equivalently

hold that all are created in the image and likeness of God and therefore are entitled to the same respect and reverence.

The second proposition raises the question of morality in the following situation. Two communities are at war. One party lives upstream on a common river to the enemy downstream. Is it moral to poison the river downstream thus destroying the enemy? The response is that it is immoral because this action would harm the innocent and non-combatants and thus violate their dignity insofar as they are created by the divine.

In response to the question as to the morality of the use of nuclear weapons, the answer is that their employment is immoral. The reason is the indiscriminate nature of these weapons with destruction likely to be widespread, deforming and irreversible. Thus, the deployment of these weapons would inevitably harm innocent lives of non-combatants who are entitled to dignity because of their relationship to the divine.

One of the purposes proposed by the religious leaders of Iran in inviting Catholic American leaders to dialogue is the surfacing of that which we share in common in relationship to truth, justice and peace. It was hoped that advocacy of these timeless classical values might have some influence on our respective political leaders and those who form opinion in both countries.

Coming to a common understanding of the non-use of nuclear weapons eventually could be of benefit not only to the United States but to the world. If one could move to the situation where no country would have nuclear capability all the countries of the world would be much safer. It is obvious that you cannot use what you do not have. In such a world all of its citizens would be more secure from catastrophic destruction.

The Catholic Church has advocated the eradication of nuclear weapons much in line with the rationale of Shia Islam. A bi-partisan group of distinguished American leaders – Former Secretaries of State Kissinger and Schultz, Former Secretary of Defense Perry

and Senator Sam Nunn have promoted this cause and are strongly committed to achieving a world free of nuclear weapons.

All of our voices in this movement are enormously important. This chorus can be very influential in shaping a national policy that moves to a world free from the ominous threat of nuclear devastation and takes another step in making peace a permanent reality.