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WHENCE COME WARS?

The first in a series of five addresses on PEACE, THE FRUIT OF JUSTICE, delivered in the Catholic Hour on January 7, 1940, by the Right Reverend Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen of the Catholic University of America.

It is a joy to be back with you again, though I am sorry it comes at this time when the world is at war. But God be thanked that the air of our land can be filled with messages of peace rather than with engines of death. As we look back on the last two decades one wonders if what we called the last World War ever ended—what we call 'Peace' may have been only an interlude between wars, and what we labelled an 'Armistice' may have been just a temporary cessation of hostilities, a kind of lull in mass suicide.

Why is it that human beings who love peace so much should be denied it? Why should those who hate war so much be marched into its bloody fields? In other words, why are there wars? This is the question we shall discuss in this initial broadcast.

From God's point of view (and this is our concern, rather than the political or the economic point of view) there are two reasons for wars: War may be either something to be waged in the *name* of God, or something to be undergone at the *hands* of God. War may be either a vindication *of* Divine Justice or a chastisement *from* Divine Justice. War may be either a crusade or a curse; either a token of man's love of God, or the fruit of man's godlessness; either a sign that men are *with* God, or a token that they are *against* Him.

Among the first kind of wars, the crusades, may be mentioned the one Michael waged in heaven as he flashed his archangelic sword against Lucifer in defense of the rights of God; or the wars on earth when nations, like Michael, unfurl the banners of the Lord of Hosts amid the battle cry 'Who is like

unto God', against those who would banish His memory from the earth He has made.

But there are other wars which are not for a vindication of God's honor, but are a chastisement for man's dishonor. St. James in his epistle suggests that this is a far more general cause of wars: "From whence are wars and contentions among you? Are they not hence, from your concupiscences, which war in your members" (*James* 4:1)? It is worth noting that St. James here completely ignores the economic causes of wars and places the blame not on ideologies, but on men; not on politics, but on concupiscence; not on trade balances, but on sin. War is first in man, then among men. The conflict on battlefields is but the extension of the conflict within man. Man revolting against God is the miniature of the war of man revolting against his fellowman.

How often we find this cause of war written across the pages of Scripture. Turn over the pages of the Old Testament. War is often pictured as a scourge upon Israel, a chastisement for their injustices and a judgment upon their wickedness. As the Babylonians, Egyptians, Medes, Persians, Philistines, and Assyrians invade Israel to devour it with an open mouth, the prophets, like James later on, blame the wars on their forgetfulness of God: ". . . my people have done two evils. They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and have digged to themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (*Jeremias* 2:13). Then, as if writing for our times, when nations which boast they are defending religion seek to enter into pacts with anti-religious governments because their guns are many and their tanks are strong, the prophets thunder: "Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help, trusting in horses, and putting their confidence in chariots, because they are many: and in horse-

men, because they are very strong: and have not trusted in the Holy One of Israel, and have not sought after the Lord . . . Egypt is man, and not God: and their horses, flesh, and not spirit: and the Lord shall put down his hand, and the helper shall fall, and he that is helped shall fall, and they shall all be confounded together" (*Isaias* 31:1, 3).

Nor does the New Testament indicate any change in the punitive function of war. Our Divine Lord describes a war that will come in the life time of His hearers when Titus would encompass Jerusalem with an army in the year 70. Entering into the details of modern warfare He added: "And thy enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and straighten thee on every side, and beat thee flat to the ground, and thy children who are in thee, and they shall not leave in thee a stone upon a stone" (*Luke* 19: 43, 44).

If there ever seemed a time when men might be rallied together in defense of a nation, it was then; if there was ever a moment when the cry "resist the aggressor" might find response in the soul of a people, it was then; if ever patriotism might rightfully enkindle hearts to turn back the invading armies, it seemed to be then. And yet when that moment would come, what did Our Lord tell His people to do? To take up arms? No! To flee! Flee not as before into the walled cities, but "to the mountains" (*Matt.* 24:16). Flee into the cold mountains without a mantle: "for these are the days of vengeance" (*Luke* 21:22). Then in one masterly stroke He gives the clue to the disaster: "Thou hast not known the time of thy visitation . . . [or] the things that are to thy peace: but now they are hidden from thy eyes" (*Luke* 19: 44, 42).

War is an evil like a disease. A disease may be due either to external causes such as the attack of a germ from the outside, or to internal causes, such as

lack of rest or nourishment, or excesses in eating or drinking. It would be quite wrong to think that war is due wholly and exclusively to external causes such as the unleashing of red and brown barbarians bent on destroying the culture of the world. It is due to that, but it may be also of our own making. As the drunkard disturbs his equilibrium and vision by violating the law of nature, so too do nations by violating the laws of nature's God, produce out of their own bosom that disturbance of international equilibrium we call war.

What we sow, that also do we reap. If we pluck out our eyes, we become blind; if we disobey the laws of music, we produce discord; what a headache is to a man who violates the laws of health, that war may be to men who violate the laws of God—the self-inflicted chastisement of our sins. Abraham Lincoln looked upon the Civil War that way when he wrote: "The awful calamity of a civil war which now desolates our land may be but a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins, to our needful reformation as a whole people . . . We have forgotten the gracious hand that preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior virtue and wisdom of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God who made us."

Later on in his Proclamation of July 7, 1864, he added: "It behooves us then to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins and to pray for clemency and forgiveness."

If wars may be generated out of the social order by injustice and forgetfulness of God, does it not behoove us to examine our national conscience? Are

we really so righteous, so just, as to be immune from the self-inflicted punishment of war? First of all, do we really believe in God? Certainly the vast majority of people in America do profess a belief in God. But is that belief only a mental affirmation or does it involve an act of will and service? Do we realize that the failure to live up to the full implications of any truth is the factual repudiation of that truth? Could St. Paul apply to us what he said to the Romans, that professing to believe in God, they did nothing about it, never glorified Him and never gave thanks. "Wherefore God gave them up to the desires of their heart" (*Rom. 1:24*) . . . "for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and injustice" (*Rom. 1:18*).

Do we in America, who are so much scandalized at the godlessness of Russia and Germany, realize that 60% of the children of the United States are today growing into manhood and womanhood without any formal religious or moral education? Suppose one day this godless generation chose to live out its godlessness? Would we not then move into Russian tyranny and slavery without ever leaving our shores? How many universities in our land founded as religious institutions for the propagation of a particular Christian creed, today adhere to the creeds they were founded to propagate?

Even when we do speak of returning to God, do not too many of us say we will accept Him on our conditions, not His? Do not most of us want only a "United Front God" into whose funnel one can pour our contradictions, unethical ethics, and diluted gospels? Do we not want a religion loose enough to permit moral holidays—one that will let us be good a little later on, but not now? While envying those who are happy in the love of all Christ's commandments, do we not prefer to pick and choose among those commandments, so that we may judge our vir-

tues by the vices from which we abstain? Do we not want the Sermon on the Mount, but without the text "Take up your cross"? Do not most of us desire a God of our own making, a God who flatters our godlessness, who smiles on our sins, who blesses our scepticism, who ignores our violation of His laws, who curses our enemies, who helps us make money, but not a God of Justice and Charity whose way to peace is the humility of the Crib and the abnegation of the Cross?

Let us admit the fact: Before picking up stones to cast at the adulteresses abroad, we ought to turn the searchlight into our own consciences. How many of us who protest against the destruction of churches and synagogues abroad ever go into a church or a synagogue? What is the use of the world overthrowing a Hitler or a Stalin if it keeps the spirit that breeds them? To oppose a nation justly as the enemy of God we must believe in God; we may not smash its idols and keep our own. We cannot ignore God in our national life and expect Him to be with us in our international relations; we cannot revolt against God in our consciences and expect Peace in our country.

I am profoundly convinced that the majority of Americans realize this truth now as they never have in the past. The effects of irreligion and the abandonment of the Justice and Charity of God were in previous decades veneered over with a kind of humaneness which concealed their awful state. A false economic security helped also to create the illusion that we could be prosperous without being God-fearing. But in the last year the masks have been torn away. What we see before us now are not mere political upheavals or economic depression, but the bold stark fact of *evil*. We laughed at the idea of sin when we were prosperous; but now we are humbled as the full implication of godlessness possesses one

fifth of the earth's surface. We are just waking up to the old historical truth that the loss of God is the beginning of tyranny.

As the Holy Father expressed it: "Perhaps—God grant it—one may hope that this hour of direst need may bring a change of outlook and sentiment to those many, who, till now, have walked with blind faith along the path of popular modern errors unconscious of the treacherous and insecure ground on which they trod" (*Summi Pontificatus*, NCWC, p.11).

To reduce the plea for a return to God to the concrete and to avert war as a chastisement and to bring down upon our land the blessings of the Almighty, we submit to our fellow countrymen this suggestion: A rebirth of the spirit of prayer. There was once a time in our national life when the family prayed before and after meals; when men stopped in their fields and lifted their souls to God; when doctors before performing an operation, or lawyers before opening a case, invoked the Holy Spirit; when children knelt at their bedside morning and night to commend themselves to Him who became a Child that we might not glory in our greatness. This atmosphere of prayer must be revived in our country, not that we might *get* something but that we might *become* something; not that we might sugarcoat our living with a veneer of piety, but that we might abandon our natural selfish way of thinking and living and put on the mind and spirit of Christ.

To help my radio audience I have prepared a tiny pocket prayerbook which I will send free to anyone, Protestant, Catholic, or Jew, who writes in and asks for it: you need not even send return postage. In it you will find short morning and evening prayers, prayers for special intentions such as a prayer for Peace, a prayer for Truth, prayers for

our country, and spiritual thoughts suitable for meditation.

I make this offer because of a profound belief that the time has come for us to decide: we will gather or we will scatter; we will be either with God or against Him. What proves it better than this question: Why is it that every person in the United States who defends Russia's invasion of Finland is either anti-religious or non-religious? It is because having lost God they have lost all sense of Justice, Charity, and Mercy which are rooted in Him. You cannot expect a rose to bloom in ashes.

On the contrary, have you also noticed that every person who condemns the barbarities of Russia either believes in God, or has a spark of religion in his soul? To those in particular we offer this prayerbook, that by a renewed spirit of prayer and dependence upon Almighty God, all of us—Jews, Protestants, and Catholics—may see our country turned from the catastrophe of war, and made to dwell in brotherly love under the Fatherhood of God.

If you say these short prayers morning and night, meditate but a minute a day upon the Divine truths expressed therein, I will not guarantee you great prosperity or worldly influence, but I will guarantee you inner happiness, the mending of your broken hearts, the joy of a good conscience, the thrill of a life grounded in its Source, and the peace which surpasses all understanding; for if God is with you, who can be against you?

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