

Bombing Mary

Conscience in a Time of War

August 3, 2005

*"What are the roots that clutch
what branches grow out of this stony rubbish? Son of Man.
You cannot say, or guess,
for you know only a heap of broken images . . ."*

T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*

Date: August 3, 2005

To: Innocent Smith

From: Roberto Rivera

RE: *Notes From the Wasteland*

This Saturday marks the sixtieth anniversary of the detonation of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima, an act that, along with the destruction of Nagasaki three days later, haunts the modern imagination for mostly the wrong reasons. The latest issue of *Time*, with its "Eyewitnesses to Hiroshima" cover story, is typical of what we can expect over the next few days. We'll hear from the *Hibakusha*, the survivors of August 6, 1945, and nod piously as they recount their experiences. Then we'll quickly change the subject to what really matters: us. Political leaders will, with all due solemnity, vow to build a world where such a thing can never happen again. There will be the obligatory stories about the nuclear threat posed by North Korea, Iran, and Fredonia. We may even hear about the need to erect a shield to make nuclear weapons obsolete even though, by my reckoning, it will be at least 175 years until the Federation perfects that technology.

While this emphasis on the physics of the explosions helps to sort out their historical and political significance, it does little for our understanding of their moral significance. This distinction is summed up by Stanford's David M. Kennedy in his *Time* essay, "Crossing the Moral Threshold": "The weapons that incinerated these two unfortunate cities represented a technological innovation with fearsome consequences for the future of humanity. But the U.S. had already crossed a terrifying moral threshold when it accepted the targeting of civilians as a legitimate instrument of warfare. That was a deliberate decision, indeed, and it's where the moral argument should rightly focus."

Not to be indelicate, but the approximately 150,000 killed by the atomic bombs were no more dead than the hundreds of thousands of other Japanese and German civilians who had been killed by our old friend napalm and other incendiary devices. After his transfer to the Pacific Theater in 1944, General Curtis LeMay, commander of the Twentieth Bomber Command, made disruption of the Japanese economy through what he called "permanent worker absenteeism" his strategic goal. After we bombed the factories and made workers afraid to go to work, we then made the "permanent absenteeism" more, well, permanent by targeting the workers themselves. More people—an estimated 100,000—died on March 9 and 10, 1945, in Tokyo than in either Hiroshima or Nagasaki. The people of Nagoya, Osaka, and Kobe suffered similar fates. (The suffering of the people in Kobe is depicted in what Roger Ebert rightly calls one of the greatest films ever made about war: Isao Takahata's [Grave of the Fireflies](#). Anyone in the D.C. area interested in seeing it has a standing invitation to view it at my home.) This "deliberate decision" made the debate about whether to use—"drop" makes it sound like an accident—the atomic bomb disturbingly simple for our leaders.

War is by its nature filled with savage ironies, and in World War II, few stories are as savagely ironic as that of the principal victims of the Nagasaki bomb: Japan's Christians. Christianity came to Japan with the Portuguese traders in the late sixteenth century. Starting from the Portuguese base of operations in Nagasaki, Christianity spread to the rest of Kyushu and then to parts of western Honshu. Hatred of their faith, and suspicion towards the Japanese who had adopted it, went hand-in-hand with resentment and loathing of the *gaijin*. Sporadic but intense persecution eventually turned into the expulsion of foreign missionaries and severe restrictions on Christians. (Japanese authorities replaced the Portuguese with the Dutch who were content to just make money and not bother with that whole "saving souls" thingy.)

In the two centuries between the edicts of "National Seclusion" and the arrival of Commodore Perry, Japanese Christians were subject to intense scrutiny, at best, and, at worst, forced relocation and even death. Yet, they survived, built churches, ordained clergy and religious, and kept the faith. Then, on August 9, the second atomic

bomb detonated over Nagasaki's Urakami district, home to most of the region's Christians. In a few minutes, the Bomber Command succeeded where the Tokugawa Shogunate had failed. Among the wreckage was the blackened head of a statue of Mary that had once stood on the altar of a church in the Urakami district. She was, fittingly enough, found by a returning Japanese soldier who was also a Trappist Monk. (There's a campaign to include [The Madonna of Nagasaki](#) in UNESCO's World Heritage Site list.)

"Every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and man, which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation. A danger of modern warfare is that it provides the opportunity to those who possess modern scientific weapons -- especially atomic, biological, or chemical weapons—to commit such crimes" (Gaudium et spes, as quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church 2314).

While relatively few Americans can bring themselves to say that the deliberate targeting of non-combatants during World War II, regardless of the physics involved, was immoral, our commitment to *jus in bello* has grown to make the avoidance of "collateral damage" official policy. At least until another hard, less asymmetrical, case comes along. Then it's likely that the same utilitarian calculus used to justify Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Tokyo, Kobe, Nagoya, and Osaka don't seem to require any justification) will be difficult to resist.

This is neither critical nor cynical. It's a reminder of what Scripture and Sacred Tradition teaches: while we may reside and even thrive in the Earthly City, our citizenship is elsewhere. The two cities aren't identical, and their requirements won't always coincide. As Augustine famously put it, "Two cities, then, have been created by two loves: that is, the earthly by love of self extending even to contempt of God, and the heavenly by love of God extending to contempt of self." For citizens of the City of God, suffering injustice rather than risk committing one is part of "contempt of self." The other city can't begin to imagine such a trade-off. Not because it's contemptuous of God—although it is—but out of simple self-preservation. (If this sounds a bit theoretical, recall that just the other day, a congressman suggested bombing Mecca in response to a terrorist attack. If this idea made sense to you, welcome to the City of Man.) Love of self and its emphasis on self-preservation is why utilitarianism is the City of Man's default position, in war as in peace.

So, while we are not exempt from the "obligations necessary for national defense," those obligations aren't open-ended. The "evaluation" of whether the criteria of the Just War doctrine have been met may belong "to the prudential judgment of those who have responsibility for the common good," but that doesn't mean that they're always right or that, once they've spoken, we must shut up. If that happens, then something a lot more important than workers will be absent from our society: its conscience.

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