

The Catholic Church in Sydney & the Vietnam Conflict

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This article discusses and attempts to account for the rise of opposition to the Viet Nam war within the Catholic Church in Sydney in the years 1966 to 1972. In order to illustrate this, I will describe the development and growth of the group "Catholics for Peace" in Sydney during these years, and my own involvement with this group as a Catholic priest of the Archdiocese of Sydney. Vital to any consideration of the development of this organisation "Catholics for Peace", is the attitude of the then Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal Sir Normal Gilroy. But before proceeding with my consideration of this period, I will examine at some length attitudes prevalent in the Catholic Church to Viet Nam in the decade prior to this period, and the attitudes and associations of Cardinal Gilroy in particular, who was, in many ways, the key figure in the whole affair.

One of my first personal recollections of Cardinal Gilroy, after I had entered the seminary to study for the priesthood in 1958, was of his return from a visit to Europe in 1959. He came to St. Columba's College, Springwood, and described, in an address he made to us, how satisfying his visit to Spain and Portugal had been, and how he regarded Franco and Salazar as the greatest living examples of Christian leadership in the

world in their defence of the Church against Communism.

Ignorant as I then was of international politics, and having been thoroughly conditioned in cold-war attitudes to communism, I remember being somewhat taken aback by the effusiveness of his praise of these, to say the least, controversial national leaders. I realise now that this powerful and autocratic man was politically to the extreme right. To him, democracy was an irrelevant consideration in his evaluation of world leaders — the touchstone was their attitude to communism. The more opposed to communism, the more acceptable they were, regardless of any merely humanitarian considerations. Similarly mentioned by Gilroy at this time as models of Christian leadership in the South-East Asian area were Marcos of the Philippines and Ngo Dinh Diem of Viet Nam.

Cardinal Gilroy's relationship with the Ngo family and with Ngo Dinh Diem was closer than with the others because he had studied for the priesthood in Rome with Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Thuc, who later became Archbishop of Hue. Their relationship was so close in fact, that Thuc visited Sydney several times, and prominent in Cardinal Gilroy's study in his palace at

Manly was a large autographed photograph of Diem, Thuc and Gilroy together.

I will now go into some detail about the relationship of Archbishop Thuc and the Catholic Church to the Diem regime, for I feel that this is important background to understanding the attitude of Cardinal Gilroy and the Catholic Church in Australia to the Viet Nam war, and to the opposition to it that arose in the years following the downfall of this regime.

After Ngo Dinh Diem came to power in Viet Nam in 1954, Archbishop Thuc assumed the role of his close adviser along with another brother, Nhu, whose wife was the famous "Dragon Lady", Madame Nhu.

Thuc made at least three visits to Australia, and his last known visit was in April 1963, the last year of power for the Ngo family in Viet Nam. This visit was announced in the journal of the Archdiocese of Sydney, *The Catholic Weekly* in two consecutive issues, those of April 11 and 18 of that year. The first issue announced that "Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc will visit Australia and New Zealand this month" (1), describing him as "a classmate and friend of several archbishops and bishops of Australia and New Zealand at Propaganda College in Rome". The second issue notes that "the Archbishop went to Propaganda College in Rome in 1919" (2) the year that Cardinal Gilroy began his studies there. The strange silence which follows these two announcements is explained by the fact that Thuc was not here in his propaganda role, but on private family business, as Denis Warner notes in an article which appeared in *The Reporter* in October 1963, "In April of this year Thuc made a private visit to Australia, and invested heavily in real-estate there." (3)

Thuc was quickly back in Hue after his last Australian visit, and that May 1963 was to be the turning point both of his own fortunes and those of his brother Diem, for that was the month of the Hue massacre, and of the beginning of the Buddhist revolt against Diem. Denis Warner has this to say about Thuc in *The Last Confucian*:

"Thuc, the Archbishop, had a reputation once for being jolly and relaxed. Though he was widely regarded as corrupt because of his real-estate holdings, and closely identified in Hue

with the brutal and bloody Can (his brother Ngo Dinh Can, the provincial governor), he did not really become widely unpopular until the beginning of the Buddhist affair in May 1963." (4)

The Buddhist rebellion erupted in early May at Hue, where nine Buddhists were shot and killed in consequence of an argument over the right of Buddhists to fly their flags, hold mass meetings, and make radio broadcasts during the commemoration of the Buddha's birth. The celebration overlapped with a Catholic one commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Archbishop Thuc's consecration as bishop. When the Buddhist leader refused to send Thuc a congratulatory telegram, the government gave orders for strict enforcement of a five-year-old ban against flying religious flags, despite the fact that, during Thuc's celebration the Vatican flag was displayed along with the national flag and Thuc's pictures were all over Hue. On the morning of May 8, Buddhist crowds which had gathered at the Hue radio station were ordered to disperse at Thuc's behest (5), but fire hoses, blank shells and tear gas failed to move them. The Catholic deputy provincial chief then ordered his troops to use live ammunition and grenades, and the killings took place.

Thuc's involvement and part responsibility for this massacre can no longer be questioned. Denis Warner makes Can responsible for the order to shoot, but says that this final instruction was "issued apparently with the knowledge and approval of Archbishop Thuc". (6)

The first Buddhist self-immolation quickly followed on June 11, 1963, and world-wide public sympathy was quickly aroused for the plight of the Buddhists of South Viet Nam. Archbishop Thuc, however, was seemingly unperturbed by these happenings. While in Rome attending the 2nd Vatican Council in September of that year, during an interview about these happenings with a reporter from the *Sydney Catholic Weekly* he explained that those killed in Hue in May had not been killed by Vietnamese police but by a Viet Cong bomb (7). Even more remarkable is his description, in the same interview, of the first Buddhist immolation of June 11. Concerning this the Archbishop had this to say:

"The monk, stupefied by drugs, was taken by car to the gates of the Cambodian Embassy, where he was doused with gasoline by the driver who set him on fire." (8)

The reporter then goes on to note that "the Archbishop considered this not a case of suicide, but of premeditated homicide". (9) In the same issue of the *Catholic Weekly* it is noted that:

"Archbishop Thuc later told reporters in Rome that the Vatican had ordered him to keep silent about his activities and the affairs of his country while he was outside Vietnam." (10)

The Archbishop was obviously not taking this admonition very seriously. Thuc happened to be in Rome on November 2, 1963, and thus escaped the violent death which befell the remaining Ngo brothers who were in Viet Nam at the time of the coup, Diem, Nhu and Can. Thuc never returned to Viet Nam, and I should imagine has been living since on his overseas investments, including those which he arranged during his visit to Australia in April 1963.

To understand fully the extent of the anti-communist mania of the Catholic Church in Sydney in the years prior to 1965 is difficult for a non-Catholic who has not been subjected to the Catholic school system, or to the constant diatribe against communism which issued from the pulpit or from the Catholic press of that period. Suffice it to say for the sake of this article that the quality and consistency of the anti-communist attacks far outshone the excesses of the McCarthyist cold-war period in the U.S.A. of the 1950s, and survived much longer. Its history is closely intertwined with that of the industrial groups, the split in the Labor Party and the bitterness and recriminations which followed that event.

There is the opinion abroad that Cardinal Gilroy was more moderate in his attitude to communism than was Archbishop Mannix of Melbourne, because he refused to allow the National Civic Council to function in Sydney. This is not so. A priest, who had been Gilroy's secretary in the 'fifties said to me in a conversation recently that, if anything, Gilroy was more fanatically anti-communist. His only objection to the N.C.C. was that it was lay-controlled and had its headquarters in Melbourne. Money that the N.C.C. and the Movement raised in Sydney.

considerable in that period, went to Santamaria and the Melbourne headquarters, and out of his hands, and Gilroy would not stand for this.

It was with this as a background that three ladies from Sydney's North Shore sent a letter to Cardinal Gilroy in 1966.

Catholics for Peace

In June 1966, three Sydney Catholic women concerned about the possibility of the conscription of their teenage sons to the Viet Nam war, decided to send a circular letter to all the Catholic bishops of Australia, pointing out to them the growing divergence between Vatican and Papal pronouncements on war and the war in Viet Nam, and the attitudes of bishops and clergy here in Australia regarding the war. This letter, signed by Noreen McDonald, Jeanne Ashbolt and Mary Garnsey, said in part that:

"The war in Vietnam has caught the conscience of Catholics all over the world. We, the undersigned Catholic women, have tried to find proper spiritual guidance on the problem. We are especially disturbed at the various public expressions about Vietnam made by our own clergy in Australia, since these statements seem to us to be in conflict with recent significant Papal pronouncements." (11)

Cardinal Gilroy replied very promptly to them on July 8 with what is a very remarkable letter, for it is the only occasion in his dealings with what was to become the Catholics for Peace group that he reveals his true feelings on this issue in writing. I feel that in this letter, as he felt that he was only dealing with three uninformed housewives, he allows his truly virulent hatred of communism to come through. I quote in part from his reply:

"People whose 'conscience is caught' by the war in Vietnam have reason to be gravely concerned — as indeed have all people who cherish freedom. This dreadful war, by which international Communism seeks to dominate South Vietnam, as it dominates North Vietnam, is a tremendous threat to world peace. The importance attached to this campaign by the leaders of Communism is evident from world wide propaganda favouring the Communist viewpoint. What is particularly sad is that many decent people are completely deceived by this clever



• *Charlie Bowers, then chaplain at Lidcombe hospital, addressing a Viet Nam Mobilisation rally in Sydney Town Hall, April 27, 1968*

propaganda If you are Catholics I suggest to you to pray for peace and for the conversion of Communists. Never forget that the one permanent, immovable object of Communism is to dominate the world and that includes Australia. Victory in South Vietnam would be another step towards achieving that plan." (12)

Cardinal Gilroy was already very much out of step with previous pronouncements of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI in the sentiments that he expresses in this letter, particularly his last sentence calling for victory in South Viet Nam. Contrast this with the following excerpt from an encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI, issued on September 15, 1966, where, referring to war raging in South-East Asia, he says:

" let all those responsible strive to bring about those necessary conditions which will lead men to lay down their arms at last, before it becomes too late to do so, owing to the mounting pressure of events We cry to them in God's name to stop." (13)

This very clear appeal from the Pope was included in a "Statement on Peace" promulgated by the Australian Bishops'

Conference which met in Sydney in April 1967 (14). In response to this more moderate statement made by the Australian Bishops' Conference (where the more moderate elements, led by Archbishop Guilford Young of Hobart, sometimes prevailed over the hawks led by Gilroy) a meeting was held on 15.4.67 at the house of Mrs Noreen McDonald in Longueville, to form "Catholics for Peace", with Colin McDonald as its first president. A letter announcing the formation of the group was forwarded to Cardinal Gilroy with 25 signatures attached, four of them being priests of the archdiocese of Sydney (Roger Pryke, Ed Campion, Dick Synott and myself). At this meeting it was decided to hold a seminar on peace at St. John's College. This seminar was held on June 18, 1967, there being addresses by three priests, Roger Pryke, Denis Kenny and Dr. John Burnheim, who was at that time rector of St. John's College. Colin McDonald opened the seminar with the following statement, in which he outlined the aims of "Catholics for Peace":

"The recent statement by the Catholic Bishops on peace said that as well as supporting and urging all reasonable

initiatives for the restoring of peace, all citizens must share the responsibility of reviewing constantly the moral issues involved in the conduct of the war. In the light of this statement, and the teachings of the several thousand bishops who were responsible for the decisions of the 2nd Vatican Council, the individual efforts of a number of Catholic clergy, laymen and women were fused into the organisation known as 'Catholics for Peace'. In broad outline, the objects of Catholics for Peace are for the purposes of

- (i) Education on matters of peace and non-violence
- (ii) Self-education to become peaceful persons and
- (iii) Influencing others to the same ends. (15)

Things moved forward quickly for "Catholics for Peace" after this seminar, with its resultant publicity. With close on one hundred active members in Sydney, groups were set up to advise and give legal aid to Catholic conscientious objectors. The first conscientious objector member of Catholics for Peace came before the court in July of that year, with Dr. John Burnheim giving evidence on his behalf. The *Sydney Morning Herald* of August 23 noted in a feature article on Catholics for Peace that:

"Recently, Mr. Rogers S.M., used to having Catholic clergy appearing for the Crown in conscientious objector cases, heard the Rector of St. John's, Dr. Burnheim, give evidence for the applicant.... At one stage it seemed that the Commonwealth Court would be the venue for theological debate between Dr. Burnheim and (the Catholic Church spokesman in Sydney) Dr. W. Murray, whom the Crown wanted to call." (16)

Dr. Murray, who had publicly criticised the pacifist and non-violent attitudes of Catholics opposed to conscription, was not available for the hearing.

During the next few months, the number of Catholics for Peace increased, with more clergy becoming openly sympathetic to its aims. At the same time the lines of confrontation were drawn, and on a number of occasions members of Catholics for Peace received rough treatment as they tried to distribute copies of the Popes' statements on war and Viet Nam outside Catholic churches after Sunday Mass. I remember one occasion when members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, a charitable organisation of

Catholic men, tore leaflets out of the hands of a woman member of Catholics for Peace on the front steps of Concord Catholic Church while the priest-administrator to Bishop Freeman looked on. Her arm was twisted behind her back and badly bruised in the process. During this period groups from Catholics for Peace marched in demonstrations under a Catholics for Peace banner and in such demonstrations as the march to Holdsworthy army camp to protest against the imprisonment of Simon Townsend.

In April 1968 a protest meeting against the war was held at Sydney Town Hall, where I was one of the speakers, along with Charmian Clift, Alex Carey, Ken Thomas of T.N.T. and several others, none of whom were members of the Communist Party. During my speech at the Town Hall I said:

"On Easter Sunday morning, when expressing his hopes that the peace moves in Vietnam might be successful, he (Pope Paul VI) emphasised his absolute neutrality Any notion that the allies are waging a kind of Holy War against Communism is obviously not subscribed to by the Holy Father, even though some Catholics would seem to hold this view."

During this speech I also said that I was "disillusioned by the Christian Church's complacency in the face of this killing, and in particular with the complacency of my own Church, the Catholic Church in Australia ..."

The only newspaper which reported my speech in detail was the *Tribune* (17); and of course some well-meaning Catholic sent a copy to Cardinal Gilroy. I was called in to see him, and in this interview he warned me that I had spoken at the Town Hall alongside known communists. He said that I was being "used" by communists, and when I suggested to him that just because an issue is supported by communists this does not necessarily make it wrong, he came out with the remarkable reply that "everything that communists do is evil". It was then that I realised that I was not dealing with a reasonable man. During the remainder of that year Catholics for Peace groups continued to march under their banner at moratorium demonstrations. To avoid further confrontation with Cardinal Gilroy, I had agreed not to speak at public meetings

on the Viet Nam issue without first consulting him, but matters came to a head in August of that year when it was announced in the press that I would speak on the same platform as Dr. Spock at a Town Hall meeting. I immediately made an appointment to see the Cardinal to discuss this with him, thinking that such a well known figure as Dr. Spock could hardly be classed as a communist. In the meantime, I heard that it had been publicly announced at a meeting of the D.L.P. in Sydney that the Cardinal was about to stop me from speaking at the Spock meeting and to suspend me from priestly duties. Knowing the direct link between the Cardinal's staff and the D.L.P., I took this seriously, being concerned at that stage to be able to continue working as a priest. So I began seeking overseas for a more sympathetic bishop under whom to work as a priest.

Meanwhile, Catholics for Peace was still making itself felt. The Bishops' Conference of April 1969, in a move by the moderate faction, led by Archbishop Guilford Young of Hobart, did at last appeal to the government to provide some form of alternative service for conscientious objectors, and to recognise objection to a particular war. (18) Several members of Catholics for Peace had made statements in defiance of the National Service Act, and several priests had stated publicly that they would advise young men not to register for the draft until the provisions of the act were changed to allow for selective conscientious objection, thus leaving themselves open to a charge of treason.

One last all-out effort was launched by the Church in Sydney to stem public opinion in opposition to the war just prior to the May 1970 moratorium demonstration. Receiving much publicity in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Cardinal Gilroy, through his spokesman Dr. W.E. Murray announced that:

"A demonstration in support of the kind of peace that would only mean the withdrawal of all opposition to the things against which the people of South Vietnam, supported by their Allies, have been fighting now for many years, is hardly worthy of Christian participation." (19)

But the people voted with their feet, and over 30,000 massed in front of the Sydney Town

Hall to hear the speakers. The crowd included a large contingent of Catholics, led by the redoubtable Colin McDonald, under the Catholics for Peace banner. The Melbourne moratorium, after a similar attack from Dr. Knox, Archbishop of Melbourne, drew 100,000 people. The battle in many ways had been won.

Conclusion

In the two years following, until the withdrawal of Australian troops from Viet Nam, the Church hierarchy in Sydney fought a losing battle on the Viet Nam issue. I even remember meeting a group of sixth form students in school uniform from Aloysius' College, one of the more conservative Jesuit colleges, at an anti-war meeting outside Sydney Town Hall in September 1971. General public opinion slowly turned against the war, culminating in the election of the Whitlam government in November 1972.

Cardinal Gilroy stepped down from his position as Archbishop of Sydney in the same year and it was the end of an era. The *Catholic Weekly* ceased commenting on the international political scene, confining itself to reporting nuns' and priests' jubilees, with the occasional mention of the State Aid issue. On the surface all appeared to be normal, but underneath the Church in Sydney was suffering a massive haemorrhage of membership. I believe that this was due among other things to loss of confidence in the Church because of its inability to take a moral stand on the Viet Nam issue. Of the group of 24 priests with whom I was ordained in 1965, thirteen only remained at last count. It is hard for me to think of one person who was active in the Church in the late 'sixties, including those in Catholics for Peace, who still remain active in the Church. All around the world, the Church has suffered great setbacks in recent years, but none greater than in Sydney where Catholics saw their leaders, bishops and priests, first backing a corrupt regime in South Viet Nam, and then supporting to "final victory" a cruel, unjust war which was eventually condemned as hopeless and unwinnable by the majority of the Australian community.

Colin McDonald, as president of Catholics for Peace, received many letters of appreciation from ordinary Catholics. I will

conclude by quoting from one which I feel summarises the feelings of many Catholics about the Church's attitude to the Viet Nam war at that time. It refers to a paid advertisement placed by Catholics for Peace, presenting Papal statements referring to the Viet Nam war:

"One day, perhaps, it will not require an advertisement to bring such views regularly before readers of the *Catholic Weekly*. But, while awaiting the proprietors' conversion to Christianity, I enclose a donation towards the cost of publicising a Christian point of view." (20).

The hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Sydney, because of their behaviour over the Viet Nam issue and on many other moral issues, has been rejected by these former Catholics as unChristian in any acceptable meaning of that term.

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5. cf. R. Shalpen, *The Lost Revolution*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1966, p. 193.
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■ Cardinal Gilroy (left) ordaining the author, Charlie Bowers (right), in St Mary's Cathedral in 1965.

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APPENDIX: THE STRANGE STORY OF NGO DINH THUC

In 1950, four years before Diem came to power in Viet Nam, Thuc accompanied his brother Diem on a visit to the USA. Here Thuc introduced Diem to Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York, and fellow-student in Rome in the '20s with both Thuc and Gilroy. Bernard Fall, in *The Two Vietnams*, says that on this first visit to the USA:

"... the Vietnamese nationalist leader was given a polite brush-off. His brother, Monsignor Thuc, was more successful, however, with the Catholic hierarchy. Francis Cardinal Spellman became interested in the far-away country with its small but fiercely militant Catholic community and became a strong advocate of American support for Diem over the following years." (p.242)

Fall continues:

"Shepherded by Cardinal Spellman, Diem made trip after trip to Washington to harangue Congressmen and Government officials in the cause of Vietnamese independence." (p.243)

Gettleman includes in his collected sources on Viet Nam an article by Robert Scheer in which he says of Spellman that:

"... the Cardinal became one of Diem's most influential backers in the United States, and there is no doubt that this support was crucial, for among other things, it certified Diem as an important anti-Communist — no small matter during the McCarthy period." (p.247)

I feel that in order to fully understand the extreme anti-communist mentality of men such as Cardinal Gilroy it is of value to note Spellman's attitude to communism. Robert Scheer quotes in the same article an address given by Spellman in 1954 in which he advocates US intervention in Indochina

"... else we shall risk bartering our liberties for lunacies, betraying the sacred trust of our forefathers, becoming serfs and slaves to Red rulers' godless goons." (p.249)

He goes on to warn that:

"Americans must not be lulled into sleep by indifference nor be beguiled by the prospect of peaceful co-existence with Communists. How can there be peaceful co-existence between two parties if one of them is continually clawing at the throat of the other....?" (p.249)

After Diem came to power in 1954, Thuc assumed the role of close adviser to Diem, along with another brother Nhu, whose wife was the famous "Dragon Lady", Madame Nhu. Joseph Bottinger, who acted as a US adviser to Diem in Saigon for some time, describes Thuc's position in the following excerpt from his work *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*:

".... Thuc, who held no official post, acted as unofficial advisor to the President, as leader of the Catholic clergy, and occasionally as one of the regime's propagandists abroad. Opponents of the regime said that he not only forced local administrators to make available public funds for Church projects but accused him also of participation in lucrative business transactions, for the good of the Church as well as himself." (p.954)

Referring to rumours circulating about corruption in the Ngo family in 1957, Bernard Fall comments that:

"Similar charges have been levelled against Monsignor Ngo Dinh Thuc, who was said to have acquired large real estate and business holdings for both the Church and his family...." (p.252).

Archbishop Thuc was subsequently excommunicated from the Catholic Church for the unauthorised consecration of five men as bishops, among other "irregularities". This happened in the Seville diocese in Spain in 1976, where Thuc was living at the time.

