

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 36: I LOVE HUNTHAUSEN BUTTON

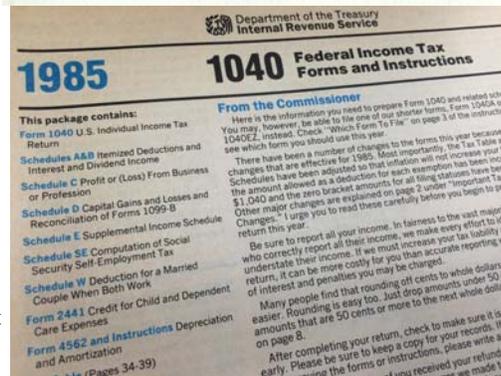
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Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen never forgot where he was on August 6, 1945. He was sitting on the grass outside St. Edward's Seminary in Kenmore, Washington, where he was studying for the priesthood. The sound of the radio wafted through an open window. Suddenly, a news reporter's voice broke through the regular program: the United States had dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima, a city of about 250,000 inhabitants. The bomb ended the war, but at great cost: 140,000 were killed in Hiroshima, another 80,000 three days later in Nagasaki. "From that moment on, I could never accept the bomb," Hunthausen later said. "I could never accept its use again."

But for Hunthausen, who would become one of the most prominent voices against the arms race, it was not an instantaneous conversion. His thinking grew and deepened over time, especially through his experience of the Second Vatican Council, and his years as Bishop of Helena, Montana, and then, in 1975, as Archbishop of Seattle. When he arrived in Seattle, he had no idea that, two years before, the Navy had designated Bangor on Hood Canal the home for the Trident Fleet of nuclear submarines. Slowly but surely, he felt called to respond to the situation, and to join the growing protests against the presence of nuclear weapons in the diocese.

On June 12, 1981, Archbishop Hunthausen was invited to deliver the keynote address for the annual Pacific Northwest Synod of Lutherans at Pacific Lutheran University. The topic was to be "Faith and Disarmament." At first he intended to say what he later described as "the same old things." But after talking with peace activists Jim Douglass and Charlie Meconis, Hunthausen felt he needed to speak out more strongly. His address minced no words: "I say with deep consciousness of these words that Trident is the Auschwitz of Puget Sound." And he suggested that something more was needed than protests and demonstrations. "Our paralyzed political process needs that catalyst of nonviolent action based on faith. We have to refuse to give incense—in our day, tax dollars—to our nuclear idol. On April 15, we can vote for unilateral disarmament with our lives. Form 1040 is the place where the Pentagon enters all of our lives, and asks our unthinking cooperation with the idol of nuclear destruction." Hunthausen suggested that if five or ten thousand, or a quarter of a million Washington State residents withheld a portion of their income, the government would take notice. Never a fiery orator, Hunthausen delivered this stunning message in his usual gentle and soft-spoken manner.

This speech—which Father Michael G. Ryan, the Archbishop's chancellor and vicar general, describes as "the shot heard round the world"—created a sensation. It made front-page news the next



Above: One of the first, handmade buttons supporting Archbishop Hunthausen (1981). From the collection of Joanna Ryan. Below: Archbishop Hunthausen's 1040 pamphlet for 1985, the fourth year he withheld part of his income tax in protest against the arms race. Courtesy of the Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle.

day, and in subsequent weeks more than 800 invitations for Archbishop Hunthausen to speak poured in from around the country and the world.

Responses to the Archbishop were sharply divided. Peace activist Daniel Berrigan described him as "one of the modern visionaries of our history," while Secretary of the Navy John Lehman called his remarks "ignorant and repugnant." The Seattle Times editorial pages were filled with letters. "To believe that Russia can be trusted while we unilaterally disarm our nuclear weapons, as does Rev. Hunthausen, is in itself immoral," said one man in a letter to the editor. "Honest taxpayers have no choice but to demand his arrest and prosecution." Others supported him, even if they did not follow him in withholding their own income taxes: "The 'peace' and 'security' that we maintain with our arsenals are delusions," wrote a Seattle couple. Parishes made "I Love Hunthausen" buttons which were distributed widely (and are still treasured by many!). Other Catholics signed a petition entitled "Catholic Parishioner's Pledge to the I.R.S." in which they promised to pay their taxes, and rejected Hunthausen as the leader of the local Church: "we will respond only to Archbishop Connolly as our Roman Catholic leader."

Archbishop Hunthausen never believed that his actions would create such

a storm of controversy. Reluctant though he was to be dragged into the limelight, he did not back away from his positions. Hunthausen was not naïve—he knew that unilateral disarmament was risky, but he believed that it was no riskier than continued nuclear proliferation. In response to his critics, he insisted that his civil disobedience was not politically motivated. "I am convinced that as Christian people we cannot live with this and profess to be people of Christ... It is not an arbitrary violation of law. It is a calling to recognize that God says something of a higher nature to us."

Long after the newspapers had moved on to other headlines, Archbishop Hunthausen quietly continued his civil disobedience. In a 1986 letter to the IRS, he wrote, "as I have indicated in previous correspondence with your office I cannot in conscience pay the full amount of Income Tax owing. I have enclosed a check in payment of the balance." In an interview, he said, "I can't, I just cannot, identify this arms race or the awesome nature of these weapons with the God I know and love."

—Corinna Laughlin, *Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy*