

<https://www.acdn.net/spip/spip.php?article336>



# Cardinal Lustiger, the Church in France, and the Atom Bomb

- Homepage - News - News Articles -

Publication date: Tuesday 21 August 2007

---

Copyright © www.acdn.net - All rights reserved

---

**We are all born in a particular time and place, not chosen by us. Despite some imbeciles who boast about where they were born, no one can claim merit from birth, or call others wrongly born. I am not responsible for my *situation*, as Sartre would say, only for what I make of it.**

Aaron Lustiger was born before the war in a Jewish family. As an adolescent, he and others close to him suffered the tragic consequences inflicted on the Jews by the Nazi occupiers and the French government. In the same period, responding to the call of the Christian God, he chose to be baptised as a Roman Catholic. With this *new birth*, which didn't prevent him from owning the earlier one - a point which was perhaps his greatest merit - Jean-Marie Lustiger in a sense chose the destiny which would lead his becoming a cardinal. He is responsible for this *fundamental choice* as he is for what he said and did when he was archbishop of Paris. He is also responsible for the things he failed to say or do but could have said or done as part of his role as spiritual head of the Church of France.

God alone, if he exists, searches our hearts and souls. We will never know why Jean-Marie Aaron Lustiger chose to do nothing, in his own name or that of the church, about nuclear weapons in general or France's nuclear strike force in particular. I wish only to raise the question now, not so much to reproach him (may he rest in peace) as to appeal to his colleagues in Christ, his successors - Monsignor Vingt-trois, for example, to whom goes a copy of this text - and to their followers, in the hope that some or all might reflect hard about an alliance between army and church that has gone to the brink of the unspeakable: *the shameful connivence and complicity of the Church in France with French strategists and political leaders who, in all good conscience, and in the name of national independence, have been preparing a crime against humanity beside which the Holocaust will appear a pale precedent.*

At the inception of the nuclear strike force, the French bishops did touch on the subject, but only to make a judgement worthy of Pontius Pilate. Logically, Monsignor Lustiger and the Church in France should have revisited it and adopted an anti-nuclear position, since the popes, including John Paul II who made him archbishop of Paris and then cardinal, have all condemned nuclear weapons and called for their elimination. I can attest that he had the chance. I personally begged him to do so. How and on what grounds? Let me here evoke some events that belong more to the inner life and the private sphere. I do so since these are the circumstances under which I crossed paths with Jean-Marie Lustiger.

Since I spoke of his situation at birth, I will touch on my own. I bear the same Christian name (Jean-Marie) not by choice: my family, Catholics in occupied Paris, had me baptised at birth. In childhood, adolescence and as a young man I made Catholicism my faith, with an intensity that made me envisage entering the same destiny as that entered by Father Lustiger. I later renounced this idea, but it put me in contact with him. And before him with a « left-wing priest » to whom I am still indebted - at the end of my secondary schooling, and on top of Bible study, he introduced me to Freud and Marx, to the unconscious and capitalism and the working class, to injustice and the horrors of state massacres. Like the day, 17 October 1961, when hundreds of Muslims, unarmed demonstrators, were massacred on the Champs-Élysées, on the grand boulevards, or in the courtyard of the Paris Prefecture (then headed by one Maurice Papon), and their bodies were then thrown into the Seine. This priest subscribed to the weekly *Témoignage Chrétien*, which had the motto « *Truth and Justice, whatever the cost* ». He circulated the issue that had photos of this unheard-of repression, after it was banned and seized from the news-stands.

The Algerian War was then at its height. It was still not over when I began my studies of philosophy. At the Sorbonne, Father Jean-Marie Lustiger led the « student parish ». That's how I got to know him. In the Latin Quarter I frequented the Catholic Richelieu Centre (and the cinemas also). More than once I served the mass that Lustiger celebrated daily. For a time he was my confessor. I was even one of the « twelve apostles » whose feet he washed one Good Friday. Of his sermons, however, I retain no imperishable memory. They testified to his faith, certainly, but one had to

already share it to find him persuasive. In any case his Augustinianism « Believe and you will understand » was not enough to save me from the doubts and criticisms that philosophical thought was sowing in me - doubts increased by the image that a certain catholicism gave of itself and of God, a catholicism I didn't like.

Along with other « mass-goers » I kept practising the rites intended to sway the soul, following Pascal's recipe : « kneel and pray and you will believe ». There was the pilgrimage to Chartres Cathedral, master-minded by Father Lustiger: special trains dropped a crowd of students in the wheatfields of the Beauce and we walked to the town, guided by the cathedral spires, singing hymns and reciting the rosary. There was another more important pilgrimage organised by Lustiger at Easter 1963 : a trainful of students headed for Rome via Assisi, Pisa, Florence and Venice.

On Easter Saturday, John XXIII received us in the Sistine Chapel. Photos were forbidden, cameras banned, but I took a photo, almost at point-blank range since my black box lacked flash or zoom, just as the Pope was passing me while leaving the chapel. I then knelt hurriedly to receive his blessing. John XXIII had seen my disobedience when my camera emerged from the robe I was wearing like others. But far from rebuking me, he threw a roguish glance at me (which the lens captured), smiled and blessed me. I'll never forget that smile. It proves that he was a human before he was a pontiff. So, he was the first pope, perhaps the only one, to visit the inmates of a Roman prison. He was also, of course, the initiator of Vatican II. If he had lived longer, if he had encountered less resistance or reticence from some churchmen who probably included Father Lustiger (a modernist in church government and communication but a conservative on fundamentals), then the renewal of the church would probably have proceeded faster. The world would be better off now. There would surely be fewer AIDS victims, and fewer mouths to feed. Fewer wars, perhaps ? Fewer weapons ?

That photo of John XXIII became a bookmark in my Jerusalem Bible, which I used even after I lost my faith. Once, it became a kind of « open sesame » to me: years later I made a duplicate photo which I sent to Jean-Marie Lustiger, then Bishop of Paris, to stir his memory of shared experiences, to remind him of me after three or four decades, and especially - that was the explicit point of the letter - to beg him to do something for nuclear disarmament. What, for example ? For example, signing the *Appeal for a referendum on weapons of mass destruction*. I wrote (quoting from memory, since I don't have a copy of my letter) to stress that this matter was an extremely serious one ; that the Gospel which condemns the use of the sword could not fail to condemn nuclear arms and other weapons of collective annihilation ; that the heads of the Church of Rome were calling for nuclear abolition ; that France, as the « first daughter of the Church » could not but endorse this demand ; and that he would assist this goal by using his office in this direction. I secretly hoped that the sight of « good Pope John » would inspire him more than my own arguments. Nothing came of it. What on earth is God doing ?

Monsignor Lustiger did not answer in person, only through his personal secretary. He thanked me cordially for the photo of John XXIII, he congratulated me on my activism and encouraged me to continue. But not a word about my specific request. In short, he kicked for touch. So do all the French prelates, they prefer to be silent on nuclear issues. To this day only one has signed appeals from ACDN France: Monsignor Jacques Gaillot - the black sheep, who for his words and commitments was demoted to being the pastor of an African diocese that has not existed for centuries.

Some years later, I tried Lustiger again, but only on a point involving neither his pastoral duties nor his public image - would he intervene discreetly on behalf of a man whose fundamental rights were being trampled and who, by a curious coincidence, was also a Jew converted to christianity : Mordecai Vanunu.

Below is the letter that I sent to Lustiger on 12 Novembre 2004. I faxed it to him since it was urgent: Vanunu had completed 18 years in prison for making public in 1986 the proof that Israel had secretly made nuclear weapons, he had been arrested again and threatened with prison for having spoken to foreign journalists. Nevertheless, the intervention had to be discreet. That's why I marked my fax CONFIDENTIAL. I spoke to nobody, not even to Vanunu,

## Cardinal Lustiger, the Church in France, and the Atom Bomb

---

especially not to him, since I would have had to use email or phone, and the very charges he faced proved that these methods were no secret to the Israeli secret services.

Today I think that publishing this letter (or the one faxed the previous day to President Chirac, the PM and the Foreign Minister) can only serve Vanunu's cause. I do not know whether the Archbishop of Paris or the French Government intervened with the Israeli government: if they did, no one told me. But at least three things are certain: nothing happened with Vanunu's request for French nationality ; he still may not leave Israel, or communicate or move freely inside Israel ; and now after various judicial manoeuvres he has been condemned to six months prison for the things he was accused on in November 2004. Discreet intercession is a hopeless path. It has obviously failed, either because it didn't happen (the most likely hypothesis) or because it met with inflexibility from the Israeli rulers. Under those circumstances, it is right to make public the arguments for mobilising to win Vanunu's freedom, including the religious arguments since there are people who listen to them. Perhaps our new President and government, with their talk of « new starts » and « openness » will finally hear and heed, especially since many of their voters are christians.

So, until more information emerges, we might conclude thus : Monsignor Lustiger did a lot for rapprochement between Jews and christians through the way he owned his double inheritance. However, he did nothing to urge the Catholic Church in France to take up positions for nuclear disarmament, something that could have helped to change France's military policies and thus reduce the danger of a new holocaust, either in the Middle East or on a world scale. Nor did he (unless it was a total secret) intervene for the christian Jew Mordecai Vanunu, who is still today a victim of his struggle against nuclear weapons.

In the post-Lustiger era, the Church in France (however gallican it be) must reconsider its position on this issue. One is moved to ask (however uncatholic one may be): since the survival of humanity is at stake, when will you act on the Gospel word which is that of the Universal Church, as Pope Benedict XVI has recently reminded us, when will you implement it as a moral and political position?

Jean-Marie Matagne, 16 August 2007

---

LETTER FAXED to Mgr Lustiger Archbishop of Paris, 16 November 2004

**Subject:** request for intercession in favour of Vanunu  
CONFIDENTIAL

**Attached:**

- ▶ Letter to President Chirac (11.11.04)
- ▶ Letter from M. Vanunu (16.10.04)

Monseigneur,

Perhaps you remember me, either from when you were chaplain at the Centre Richelieu, or because some years ago I sent you a photo of John XXIII in the Sistine Chapel.

I write to you because you insist on the duty of the Church and its members to defend human rights wherever they are threatened, in order to ask of you a humanitarian gesture.

A man's life and freedom are at stake - those of Mordecai Vanunu, an Israeli Jew converted to Christianity. Formerly

## Cardinal Lustiger, the Church in France, and the Atom Bomb

---

a technician at the Dimona nuclear facility, he has as you doubtless know completed 18 years of imprisonment, two thirds of that in isolation. All he did was obey his conscience by revealing in 1986 the existence of Israel's nuclear weapons.

Released last April 21 after an incredible 18 years of resistance, Vanunu is continuing his struggle without bending to the restrictions on speech which the Israeli government claims to impose on him in breach of his fundamental rights. He has given interviews to foreign journalists, like the correspondent of the « Figaro ». More recently, on 29 October 2004, he spoke at length by phone to the participants at the Rally for International Disarmament which was taking place in Saintes. Antoine Fouchet, a journalist from « La Croix », was in the hall and thus heard Vanunu, as did other journalists.

For speaking thus, Vanunu was arrested again yesterday, under unacceptable conditions which Monsignor Riah has denounced. This was a mere pretext, since the Israeli authorities had let him infringe their bans for over 6 months. Vanunu was to be judged today, but the vigorous reactions provoked by his arrest seem to have won him a reprieve. Confined to his residence yesterday, he remains subject to the same unacceptable conditions and under threat of new imprisonment at any time, for an indeterminate duration.

In the name of human rights, freedom of conscience, respect for holy places, the right of asylum, the process of peace and in a word the Gospel, I beg you, Monseigneur, to intercede urgently with the Israeli government asking that Vanunu be authorised to leave Israel as he has not ceased requesting. The intercessions of representatives of other confessions and notably of the Great Rabbi of France will also carry some weight.

I would be grateful also if you also approached the French government asking it too to intercede for Vanunu and in due course to accept his request for French nationality, a request which he asked me on 16 October to pass on to the President of the Republic. I would be grateful also if you could inform me of what you are able to do in these matters.

« *Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called the children of God* » (Matt. V, 9).

Jean-Marie Matagne, President of ACDN -----