

Nuclear Disarmament: Time for Abolition

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Nuclear Weapons and the Moral Compass

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I am grateful to the Holy See Mission and the Global Security Institute for sponsoring today's event, and to the United Religions Initiative, Religions for Peace, and the World Evangelical Alliance for their support. In particular, I want to thank our host Archbishop Auza for his gracious invitation.

My modest contribution to our discussion will be anchored in the Catholic tradition and in the statements of the Holy See and the U.S. bishops. I have entitled my remarks "Nuclear Disarmament: Time for Abolition," borrowing a phrase from the Holy See's contribution to the December 2014 United Nations meeting in Vienna.

Catholic teaching on nuclear weapons is rooted in respect for the life and dignity of the human person. Based on the belief that persons are created in "the divine image" (Genesis 1:26-27), Catholics hold that every human life has value and every human being is worthy of respect. For this reason, we take seriously the command, "You shall not kill" (Deuteronomy 5:17).

The Church's teaching tradition attempts to reconcile the need to avoid killing and the requirement to defend others. This tradition is found in just war teaching. Within the Church's living tradition, the application of this teaching continues to undergo development under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as our world faces new moral questions—and few moral questions are more urgent than those posed by the awesome and unprecedented power of nuclear weapons.

Three principles of the just war tradition are especially applicable to nuclear weapons: discrimination, proportionality, and probability of success.

1. **Discrimination:** For an act of war to be just, it must discriminate between combatants and noncombatants. One cannot intend to slaughter innocent civilians. The moral problem with nuclear weapons is that the incredible devastation that they can wreak cannot discriminate between combatants and noncombatants. And if history is any guide, there is a real risk that the use of nuclear weapons by two adversaries is likely to escalate.
2. **Proportionality:** The death and destruction caused by the use of force cannot be out of proportion to the goal of protecting human life and human rights. The raw destructive capacity and lingering radiation of nuclear weapons make their use morally unthinkable.
3. **Probability of success:** The use of force must have serious prospects of success for it to be justified. What would success look like in a nuclear war? It is impossible to imagine. As Pope Benedict admonished us, in a nuclear war there would be no "victors, only victims" (*2006 World Day of Peace Message*, #13).

More than a half century ago, in 1963, Pope John XXIII called for a global and verifiable ban on nuclear weapons. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council declared, “The horror and perversity of war is immensely magnified by the addition of scientific weapons. For acts of war involving these weapons can inflict massive and indiscriminate destruction, thus going far beyond the bounds of legitimate defense. . . . All these considerations compel us to undertake an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude” (*Gaudium et Spes*, #80). The Council also articulated profound concerns about “deterrence” and the “arms race.” The Council argued it is “not a safe way to preserve a steady peace, nor is the so-called balance resulting from this race a sure and authentic peace” (#81).

At the 2005 NPT Review Conference, the Holy See stated that when the Church:

...expressed its limited acceptance of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War, it was with the clearly stated condition that deterrence was only a step on the way towards progressive nuclear disarmament. The Holy See has never countenanced nuclear deterrence as a permanent measure....

At a UN General Assembly meeting on nuclear disarmament in 2013, the Holy See maintained:

The chief obstacle [to the elimination of nuclear arms] is continued adherence to the doctrine of nuclear deterrence. With the end of the Cold War, the time for the acceptance of this doctrine is long passed. The Holy See does not countenance the continuation of nuclear deterrence, since it is evident it is driving the development of ever newer nuclear arms, thus preventing genuine nuclear disarmament.

Building on this moral skepticism of deterrence, at the 2014 Vienna gathering Pope Francis affirmed:

Nuclear deterrence and the threat of mutually assured destruction cannot be the basis for an ethic of fraternity and peaceful coexistence among peoples and states. The youth of today and tomorrow deserve far more. They deserve a peaceful world order based on the unity of the human family, grounded on respect, cooperation, solidarity and compassion.

Pope Francis was echoing the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that deterrence only brings “peace of a sort” and not “authentic peace.” Real peace is built on encounter, dialogue, trust and relationships, not on a balance of terror.

As the Second Vatican Council taught: “[T]he arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which ensnares the poor to an intolerable degree.” “Rather than being eliminated thereby, the causes of war are in danger of being gradually aggravated. While extravagant sums are being spent for the furnishing of ever new weapons, an adequate remedy cannot be provided for the multiple miseries afflicting the whole modern world.” (#81)

The Holy See in its UN contribution, “Nuclear Disarmament: Time for Abolition,” notes that, with the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a multi-polar world, “nuclear deterrence works less as a stabilizing force and more as an incentive for countries to break out of the non-proliferation regime....” The “peace of a sort” promised by nuclear deterrence has led to “enormous amounts of money” being allocated for modernization of nuclear weapons to the detriment of human development and addressing the underlying causes of war. As Pope Francis

taught in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “Inequality eventually engenders a violence which recourse to arms cannot and never will be able to resolve.” (#60)

Perhaps most significantly, the Holy See employed newer moral arguments related to “the problem of intention” and to “unnecessary suffering.” For deterrence to be credible, one has to intend “mass destruction—with extensive and lasting collateral damage, inhumane suffering, and the risk of escalation” and be involved in a “whole set of acts that are pre-disposed to use.” The conclusion: “the system of nuclear deterrence can no longer be deemed a policy that stands firmly on moral ground.” One cannot intend and prepare for doing what is morally reprehensible.

The Holy See also noted that “scientists and international lawyers are now giving more attention to the ‘unnecessary suffering’ inflicted by the use of nuclear weapons.” Pope Francis, in his Vienna message, greeted the Hibakusha, the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and called for more attention to “unnecessary suffering.” As Pope John Paul II said in Hiroshima in 1981: “To remember Hiroshima is to abhor nuclear war. To remember Hiroshima is to commit oneself to peace.”

The bishops of the United States took up the call of the Second Vatican Council to “evaluate war with a new attitude” in 1983 in the landmark pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace*. Echoing the teaching of Pope John Paul II, they argued: “Deterrence is not an adequate strategy as a long-term basis for peace...” (*The Challenge of Peace*, Summary). Ten years later in the 1993 pastoral, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, the U.S. bishops maintained: “The eventual elimination of nuclear weapons is more than a moral ideal; it should be a policy goal.”

In a 2010 letter to President Obama, Cardinal George, then USCCB President, wrote:

“We are pastors and teachers, not technical experts. We cannot map out the precise route to the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons, but we can offer moral direction and encouragement. The horribly destructive capacity of nuclear arms makes them disproportionate and indiscriminate weapons that endanger human life and dignity like no other armaments. Their use as a weapon of war is rejected in Church teaching based on just war norms. Although we cannot anticipate every step on the path humanity must walk, we can point with moral clarity to a destination that moves beyond deterrence to a world free of the nuclear threat. (April 8, 2010)

To achieve this goal, we must, in the words of Pope Francis, acknowledge that “[n]ow is the time to counter the logic of fear with the ethic of responsibility, and so foster a climate of trust and sincere dialogue.”