

Remarks at Global Zero Summit

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As a Catholic bishop and a long-time pastor of the military and their families, it is both an honor and a welcome opportunity to be part of Global Zero and to address those in attendance at this Summit. It is an opportunity because the Catholic Church has longstanding moral teaching on nuclear weapons.

Almost 45 years ago, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, unequivocally condemned “total war” and what we would now call “weapons of mass destruction.” They solemnly declared: “Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.”¹

The Fathers of the Council were also profoundly skeptical of the long-term efficacy of “deterrence” as a basis for peace. They argued that “the arms race ... 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.” They concluded that “the arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which ensnares the poor to an intolerable degree.” The Council called for multilateral, verifiable “disarmament” as a surer path to true peace.²

So the Church’s moral teaching on nuclear weapons is not new. It grows out of a deep and abiding commitment to protect human life that is rooted in the teachings of Jesus, who said, “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.”³ In the Scriptures, the fifth commandment is clear: “You shall not kill.” Our Church works consistently to defend the life and dignity of all: the unborn, the poor, the immigrant, and persons in every age and condition of life. This moral commitment to protecting human life led to the adoption and development of the Church’s just war teaching.

Popes of the modern era have applied this moral tradition to nuclear weapons and deterrence policy for decades. As a Permanent Observer to the United Nations, the Holy See has ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and actively participated in the Treaty’s review conferences over the past four decades.

For our part, the Catholic bishops of the United States examined U.S. nuclear policy in light of our moral tradition, most notably in our pastoral letters of 1983, *The Challenge of Peace*, and 1993, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, as well as in numerous public statements and ongoing dialogue with public officials to this very day.

¹ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 80, 1965.

² Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 81, 1965.

³ John 10:10b

The goals of just war teaching are to reduce recourse to force and to restrain the damage done by war. Some of its principles are particularly applicable to nuclear weapons:

- The use of force must be discriminate. Civilians and civilian facilities may not be the object of direct, intentional attack and care must be taken to avoid and minimize indirect harm to civilians.
- The use of force must be proportionate. The overall destruction must not outweigh the good to be achieved.
- And there must be a probability of success.⁴

The real risks inherent in nuclear war make the probability of success elusive. In his 2006 World Day of Peace message, Pope Benedict XVI wrote: “In a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims.”⁵ Nuclear war-fighting is rejected in Church teaching because it cannot ensure noncombatant immunity and the likely destruction and lingering radiation would violate the principle of proportionality. Even the limited use of so-called “mini-nukes” would likely lower the barrier to future uses and could lead to indiscriminate and disproportionate harm. And the continuing possession of nuclear weapons undermines non-proliferation efforts and contributes to the danger of loose nuclear materials falling into the hands of terrorists.

In Catholic moral teaching, the end does not justify the means, but the end can and should inform the means. The moral end is clear: a world free of the threat of nuclear weapons. This goal should guide our efforts. Every nuclear weapons system and every nuclear weapons policy should be judged by the ultimate goal of protecting human life and dignity and the related goal of ridding the world of these weapons in mutually verifiable ways.⁶

Although we must always keep in sight the horizon of our efforts, a world without nuclear weapons, we must also take stock of where we are and focus on the next steps in front of us. For my own nation, this requires the successful negotiation and ratification of a START follow-on treaty with the Russian Federation, the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and the adoption of a nuclear posture that rejects the first use of nuclear weapons or their use against non-nuclear threats.

It will not be easy. Nuclear weapons can be dismantled, but both the human knowledge and the technical capability to build weapons cannot be erased. A world with zero nuclear weapons will need robust measures to monitor, enforce and verify compliance. The path to zero will be long and treacherous. But humanity must walk this path with both care and courage in order to build a future free of the nuclear threat.

⁴ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, Nos. 2307-2317. U.S. Catholic Bishops, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, 1993, Section I.B.2.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, Message on the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2006.

⁶ Cf. U.S. Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace*, May 3, 1983, No. 188.