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Global Justice Overcoming Poverty

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS

In the years since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, there has been much less concern about nuclear war than there was for decades previously. A few recent events have reversed this trend a bit—the release of the *Oppenheimer* movie, Putin's hints of possible nuclear attacks against Ukraine and North Korea's development of nuclear continental ballistic missiles, for example. And the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has, for the past two years, set the Doomsday Clock, its symbol of imminent nuclear and climate catastrophe, at ninety seconds to midnight, the closest it's been since the clock's inception in 1947.

Another institution that has been speaking out against nuclear weapons is the Catholic Church, though the odds that the average Catholic parish member has heard anything about this from the pulpit is low indeed. One galvanizing Catholic statement about the need for nuclear disarmament is the 2022 pastoral letter by John Wester, Archbishop of Santa Fe, New Mexico, *Living in the Light of Christ's Peace: A Conversation Toward Nuclear Disarmament* [1]The stimulus for Wester's letter was his 2017 visit to the Japanese cities bombed with nuclear weapons by the USA in 1945, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a visit he found devastating.

Wester's experience of the impact on those cities of the only nuclear attacks in human history became even more devastating when he returned home. There he realized that the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were developed at national laboratories within his own Archdiocese of Santa Fe and that thousands of nuclear weapons have continued to be produced there. Drawing on all of this and further extensive research, the Archbishop uses his pastoral letter to challenge the people of his archdiocese and all American Catholics to undertake a conversation aimed at the abolition of nuclear weapons because of the dangers they pose to God's creation.

Papal teachings for decades

The Archbishop lays out in his letter the massive threat to all of life posed by the scale and extent of nuclear armaments today. But before he does so, he explains clearly that Catholic teaching has for decades condemned nuclear weapons. He begins with another trip to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that of Pope Francis himself, in 2019, when the Holy Father met with atomic bomb survivors and prayed for nuclear disarmament.

The Pope's call for disarmament is a sobering one for all US Catholics currently paying federal taxes: 'The use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possession of nuclear weapons is immoral'. The year after the Pope's statement, the Vatican was the first to sign on to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the

[1] Archbishop John Wester, "*Living in the Light of Christ's Peace: A Conversation Toward Nuclear Disarmament*, 2022.https://files.ecatholic.com/17613/documents/2022/1/220111_ABW_Pastoral_Letter_LivingintheLightofChristsPeace_Official_Reduced.pdf?t=1641922875000

legally binding international agreement to prohibit signatory states from developing, testing, using or threatening to use nuclear weapons. The USA has never signed on to this treaty.

Archbishop Wester also outlines the opposition to nuclear weapons and warfare from previous popes, beginning with John XXIII's call for a ban on nuclear weapons in *Pacem in Terris,* his 1963 encyclical following the Cuban missile crisis. Wester also cites calls for nuclear disarmament in the Vatican II *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, as well as by popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. He then zeroes in on Pope Francis's 2017 World Day of Peace declaration that Jesus's model of non-violence and forgiveness must be the foundation for our discussions about nuclear weapons.

Disarmament is existential

In the second part of his letter, Archbishop Wester shifts to the reasons why we must abolish nuclear weapons, first by disproving the popular argument that nuclear weapons are justified because of their deterrence capacity. Nukes are, and have been, possessed to maintain primary power over adversaries, and the possession of the huge numbers of such weapons, far beyond those needed for deterrence, demonstrates that. Wester likewise shows that nuclear weapons do not save lives, since the idea that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were necessary to end World War II is now disputed by most historians.

Disarmament is also essential because the nuclear nations are now engaged in massive 'modernization' of their already-bloated nuclear arsenals. The sheer life-threatening number of these weapons has been exacerbated by US presidents pulling out of essential international nuclear agreements recently. In addition to the danger posed by 13,000 nuclear weapons worldwide, some of them a hundred times more powerful than the bombs dropped in Japan, deaths from the mining of uranium for nuclear weapons, cancers in weapons workers caused by chemicals and radiation, 900,000 cubic yards of hazardous and radioactive waste from nuclear research and production contaminating groundwater, and between 1.2 and 2.4 million deaths from nuclear fallout near testing sites are all included in the costs of not disarming from nuclear weapons.

Another concern detailed by Archbishop Wester is the number of near-disastrous mistakes and miscalculations between 1957 and 1995, when individuals or technical devices at the last minute only just prevented the launch of nuclear weapons. Other profound concerns include the fact that more and more countries are investing in these weapons, the growing possibility that terrorist groups may capture some of them and that the invention of new cyber-warfare techniques, high-speed delivery platforms, and AI introduce new uncertainties into the nuclear scenario.

In the face of all this, Archbishop Wester proclaims unambiguously, in the third section of 'Living in the Light of Christ's Peace,', that the only alternative to the problems he has detailed is nuclear disarmament. After reviewing the stress in the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) on the harm to indigenous people by the production of nuclear weapons and the need for reparations to such groups, the Archbishop reviews the pivotal role, current as well as past, of the Los Alamos National Laboratory in the south-western US state of New Mexico, in the production of nukes and the enormous harm this production has done to the people there and the environment.

Wester then stresses, as popes before him have long done, the enormous harm inflicted on the poor from our massive nuclear investments over the years and and still now. He agrees ' …with Pope Francis …that the time has come to commit ourselves globally to the complete abolition of nuclear weapons. We should end all the massive financial investments (in) weapons of mass destruction…which make only a few enormously wealthy—and instead invest in… education, healthcare, environmental cleanup…' and the end of 'poverty and hunger'.

A way forward

In the final section of his letter, Archbishop Wester offers "a way forward": a range of suggestions for prayer, study, dialogue, and action leading toward nuclear disarmament. As an example of possibilities for prayer, he mentions the New Mexico ecumenical / interfaith Prayer Pilgrimage for Peace to Los Alamos, beginning in the 1980s. He also writes about the annual vigil at Los Alamos on August 6th, the anniversary of Hiroshima, with participants wearing sackcloth and ashes like the people of Nineveh in the book of Jonah. And as an example of dialogue, the Santa Fe Archdiocesan conversations among clergy, parishioners, Los Alamos employees and military personnel, using scripture and Catholic social teaching to reflect on nuclear production.

Moving on to action, the Archbishop calls for massive cleanups of the Los Alamos laboratory and a shift there from manufacturing nukes to developing technologies which will monitor, dismantle and dispose of existing weapons. Another action is to demand a shift of resources from nuclear weapons to renewable energy research and implementation. Also necessary is the investment of funds in conflict resolution and peacemaking programs around the world, as well as the development of new economic opportunities. Finally, we must call on our elected officials to demand that the USA sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the most essential step toward nuclear disarmament.

The implementation of these changes will be extremely challenging. But the Church teaches that the very possession of nuclear weapons is immoral. Where and how will we begin the work to abolish them?

DISCUSSION – SOME SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever discussed with family or others the current enormous threat of nuclear weapons?
2. If you attend a Catholic Church, have you ever heard a preacher or religious educator mention Pope Francis's declaration that the very possession, never mind the use, of nuclear weapons is immoral?
3. Have you ever heard nuclear weapons mentioned from a pulpit, in a Catholic or other church? If so, what impact did those words have on you?
4. Which, among the dire threats created by nuclear weapons as listed by Archbishop Wester, concerns you the most? Why?
5. If you live in one of the nine nuclear armed countries in the world, which of the actions proposed by Archbishop Wester might you undertake?

6. What does Archbishop Wester's demonstration that nuclear weapons do not in any way deter nuclear attacks say to you about the traditional teaching that there can be a 'just war' in this nuclear era?
7. And if you are blessed to live in one of the ninety-seven states, including many in Africa and Latin America, that have signed or ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, how might you pray, study or act to call the rest of the world into this essential treaty?

Source: Marian Ronan, 'EqualwRites', Newsletter March – June 2024 Southeastern Pennsylvania Women's Ordination Conference. Marian is former Research Professor in Catholic Studies, New York Theological Seminary. A Grail member since 1965, she co-authored with Mary O'Brien, 'Women of Vision: Sixteen Founders of the International Grail' (2017).

WEAPON

The will to power destroys the power to will.
The weapon made, we cannot help but use it;
it drags us with its own momentum still.

The power to kill compounds the need to kill.
Grown out of hand, the heart cannot refuse it;
The will to power undoes the power to will.

Though as we strike, we cry 'I did not choose it',
It drags us with its own momentum still.
In the one stroke we win the world and lose it.
The will to power destroys the power to will.

(From *Judith Wright Collected Poems 1942-*
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