

Vatican: Nuclear Disarmament Remains Key Goal for Humanity

As long as any state has nuclear weapons, other states will want them too.

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VATICAN CITY — Sen. Douglas Roche is deeply troubled.

After many years advising Pope John Paul II and now Pope Benedict XVI on nuclear disarmament, the Canadian lawmaker is visibly shaken by what he sees as indifference towards ridding the world of nuclear weapons.

Like many others for whom nuclear weapons are intrinsically immoral, he believes the world is living in a “second nuclear age” that represents the “single biggest moral issue in the world.”

The central problem, Roche said in a Nov. 17 interview with the Register, is that nuclear arsenals are becoming permanent instruments of military policy, regarded as weapons to be actually used in battle rather than just as a deterrent to prevent others from attacking.

Non-Proliferation Treaty

The 1970 Non-Proliferation Treaty, which was supposed to lead nuclear weapons states towards disarmament, has largely been ignored by the world’s nuclear-armed states since 2000.

The accord’s five-yearly review conference ended in failure in 2005 and none of the major nuclear states that are signatories to the treaty — the United States, Russia, France, Britain, and China) is currently engaged in disarmament negotiations, despite being compelled to do so under the terms of the treaty.

Instead, they are all in the process of renewing their arsenals.

The U.S. government is estimated to be spending more than \$27 billion a year on nuclear deterrence and another \$11 billion for nuclear development and tests.

The Bush administration maintains that it is fulfilling its obligations to disarm by committing itself to reduce its strategic nuclear weapon arsenal to 2,200 by the year 2010. However, that number does not include thousands of U.S. tactical weapons, and the United States has been forging ahead with development of its “bunker busting” nuclear weapons.

Britain, meanwhile, is planning to update its Trident submarine arsenal at a cost of \$40 billion over 30 years.

Elsewhere, other nations are scrambling to join the nuclear club: North Korea has successfully tested its first nuclear weapon and Iran is moving headlong with a suspected nuclear weapons program. Further insecurity stems from a black market in nuclear technology in Russia.

In light of these developments, the Holy See and the U.N. have become increasingly alarmed. Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Holy See's Permanent Observer to the United Nations, and U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan both recently warned that the world is "sleepwalking" toward further nuclear proliferation.

And in strong words at his World Day of Peace Message earlier this year, Pope Benedict XVI warned governments that have based their security on nuclear weapons that they are pursuing a policy that is "not only baneful but also completely fallacious." The resources involved, the Pope added, could better be used to help the poor.

Weapon Worship

Roche, in Rome to take part in a Nobel laureates' peace conference hosted by former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, is convinced that as long as any state has nuclear weapons other states will want them too.

"Those who worship at the altar of nuclear weapons should not be surprised when others want to join the sect," he said.

Roche said a tacit acceptance of the current status quo is undermining international law.

Said Roche, "Nuclear weapons are immoral, illegal and (in the face of terrorism) militarily useless."

The Holy See's position, delineated in an address given by Pope John Paul II in 1982 — and backed a year later by the U.S. bishops — is that the moral acceptability of deterrence depends on continued progress toward nuclear disarmament. But now that willingness to disarm has largely evaporated among the nuclear powers (due in large part to the war on terror and an increase in so-called "rogue states" acquiring nuclear capabilities) the disarmament-based rationale for retaining their nuclear arsenals is losing force.

Addressing the five-year Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference last year, Archbishop Migliore emphasized the "Holy See has never countenanced nuclear deterrence as a permanent measure." It is evident, he added, that "nuclear deterrence drives the development of ever newer nuclear arms, thus preventing genuine nuclear disarmament."

Not all Catholics agree with that assessment. Some argue that with the increasing nuclear threat from North Korea and terrorist states, imprudent disarmament poses greater risks than maintenance of the status quo.

“National security is a moral issue, it’s not just about realpolitik,” said Kishore Jayabalan of the Rome office of the Michigan-based Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty. “Government leaders have a moral obligation and responsibility to protect their citizens.”

Jayabalan characterized as “absolutist” Roche’s argument that mere possession of nuclear weapons is automatically immoral, and this approach conflicts with the more “nuanced” position of the Holy See.

Jayabalan, who was previously an official at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, believes disarmament campaigners put too much stock in the disarmament process.

“You need states to be able to trust each other — if countries feel threatened they’ll build up their defenses, and the threats come from ideologies, not because certain states have nuclear weapons,” he said.

Citing the collapse of the Soviet Union after a crippling arms race, Jayabalan argued that disarmament is the consequence of peace, rather than the reverse.

But whatever the morality surrounding nuclear disarmament, few dispute that it’s receiving relatively little attention right now.

“We’re not really focused on it systematically as it’s unlikely we’ll be able to effect a change of policy on either side — the positions are pretty entrenched,” said one foreign diplomat speaking on condition of anonymity. Another diplomat insisted disarmament was an “internal matter” for nations and therefore essentially not the Vatican’s business.

Roche lamented that even non-governmental organizations seem largely uninterested in the issue these days, and he insisted the Church retains a key role in the debate.

“The voice of religion, the Church, which emphasizes the immorality of the continued possession of nuclear weapons, is essential,” he said. “The argument, or the feeling, that nuclear weapons are here to stay is to set back the moral course of the world.”

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writes from Rome.

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