

**Nuclear Weapons and Morality:  
An Unequivocal Position**

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**Address to U.S. Catholic Bishops' Panel**

**“Ethics, Policy and the Proliferation of WMD”**

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When the first atomic bombs destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, it could hardly have been imagined that sixty years later more than 30,000 nuclear weapons would be in existence. The Cold War is long over, but half the world population still lives under a government brandishing nuclear weapons. More than \$12 trillion has so far been spent on these instruments of mass murder, which is a theft from the poorest people in the world. The present nuclear weapons crisis has, in fact, led to the opening of the Second Nuclear Age.

First, we must understand the dimensions of the crisis. The long-standing nuclear weapons states -- the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and China -- are making nuclear weapons permanent instruments of their military doctrines. India, Pakistan and Israel have joined the “nuclear club.” North Korea has tried to get into it. Iran is suspected of trying to acquire the capacity to convert nuclear fuels for peaceful purposes into nuclear weapons. NATO is maintaining U.S. nuclear weapons on the soil of six European countries, and the U.S. is preparing “reliable replacement” warheads with new military capabilities.

The U.S. and Russia have put new emphasis on the war-fighting role of nuclear weapons. The nuclear weapons states refuse to give up their nuclear arsenals, and feign surprise that other nations, seeing that nuclear

weapons have become the currency of power in the modern world, are trying to acquire them. So are terrorists. No major city in the world is safe from the threat of a nuclear attack. The risk of accidents is multiplying daily. All these are the characteristics of the Second Nuclear Age.

Thinking that the nuclear weapons problem went away with the end of the Cold War, much of the public is oblivious to the new nuclear dangers. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan is trying to warn governments and the public, but few are listening. In the case of many politicians, they don't even know that they *don't* know about this greatest threat to human security the world has ever faced. They do not recognize the continued existence of enormous stocks of nuclear weapons, most with a destructive power many times greater than the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Nuclear weapons are instruments of pure evil. A nuclear explosion, either by design or accident, would kill massive numbers of people, create international chaos, and cripple the world economy.

Nuclear weapons are devoid of the slightest shred of moral legitimacy. Prominent jurists consider their use illegal in any possible circumstance. The nuclear weapons states are deliberately undermining the rule of law in maintaining them.

It staggers the imagination to consider what the enormous sums spent on nuclear weapons could have done for education, health, and other requisites for the development of peoples everywhere. The United States spends \$110 million *every day* on the maintenance of its nuclear forces and seeking money from Congress for new ones. This is driving world military spending, which exceeded \$1 trillion in 2004, a 20 percent increase in two years.

Governments have thrown democracy out the window in their zeal for armaments. Nowhere have citizens clamoured for nuclear weapons. Rather, governments have either imposed them or manipulated public opinion to get people to quietly accept them. A 2002 poll of citizens in 11 countries, including the U.S. and Canada, showed that 86 percent of people either strongly agree (72 percent) or agree to some extent (14 percent) that all nations should sign a treaty to ban all nuclear weapons. Governments are ignoring this opinion; the public, except for core groups of activists, is not actively demanding that governments move toward such a treaty. Instead, the public is saying, we should cure the worst of poverty and restore the environment.

In this new nuclear age, when public attention is sapped by the repercussions of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, including

terrorist attacks on the mass transit systems of Madrid and London, the entire framework of nuclear disarmament is in danger of being swept away. The month-long 2005 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty ended in deadlock between the nuclear haves and have nots.

This deadlock is so severe that the document issued by world leaders at the Summit marking the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations was shorn of any reference to disarmament and non-proliferation because of the obstinacy of a very small number of States.

Meanwhile, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty is stagnating. Strategic arms reductions between the U.S. and Russia, which together possess 96 percent of all nuclear weapons, is atrophying. The ongoing work of the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva is paralyzed. An effort by some countries at the U.N. Disarmament Committee this fall to kick-start negotiations was scuttled, again by a powerful few.

Time is running out. The Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, which won the 1995 Nobel Peace Prize for its work on nuclear disarmament, has noted:

The difficulties and even the possibility of a collapse of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, the weakening of the taboos in place since 1945 on the use of nuclear weapons, coupled with the dangers of a terrorist group detonating a nuclear explosive device, combine to produce a recipe for unmitigated disaster.

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Though the voice of religion has been raised against nuclear weapons, the volume of that voice needs to be turned up in the light of the developments of the Second Nuclear Age. The religions of the world need to proclaim that nuclear weapons and human security cannot co-exist.

Definitive Catholic teaching on nuclear deterrence is found in Vatican II and subsequent statements by Pope John Paul II. Vatican Council II taught:

Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation. (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, No. 80).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, published in 1992 on the thirtieth anniversary of the opening of the Vatican Council, affirmed the permanent validity of the moral law during armed conflict. It stated, “The mere fact that war has regrettably broken out does not mean that everything becomes licit between the warring parties.” It warns against modern warfare with the opportunity it provides to commit crimes against God and man through the use of atomic, biological and chemical weapons. The *Catechism* also draws attention to “rigorous consideration” that must be given to claims of legitimate defence, stating: “The use of arms must not produce evils and

disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition.”

Though they elaborated their concern that a universal public authority be put in place to outlaw war, the Fathers of Vatican II rather grudgingly accepted the strategy of nuclear deterrence. The accumulation of arms, they said, serves “as a deterrent to possible enemy attack.” Thus “peace of a sort” is maintained, though the balance resulting from the arms race threatens to lead to war, not eliminate it. Pope John Paul II restated the Catholic position on nuclear deterrence in a message to the U.N. Second Special Session on Disarmament in 1982:

In current conditions, “deterrence” based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself but as a step on the way towards a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable. Nonetheless, in order to ensure peace, it is indispensable not to be satisfied with the minimum, which is always susceptible to the real danger of explosion.

In this statement, it is readily seen that deterrence, in order to be acceptable, must lead to disarmament measures. Consequently, deterrence as a single, permanent policy is not acceptable. The American Bishops’ 1983 Pastoral Letter on War and Peace took up this theme. Though the bishops expressed a strong “no” to nuclear war, declaring that a nuclear response to a conventional attack is “morally unjustifiable,” and were skeptical that any nuclear war could avoid the massive killing of civilians,

the bishops gave a “strictly conditioned moral acceptance of nuclear deterrence.”

In a five-year follow-up to their letter, the bishops set out criteria to be met in order to continue this morally justifiable basis for deterrence. For example, the Bishops said that, in order to be acceptable, nuclear deterrence could not be based on the direct targeting of urban populations. Also, the bishops opposed weapons combining size, accuracy and multiple warheads in a credible first-strike posture. A subsequent follow-up in 1993, “The Harvest of Justice Is Sown in Peace,” repeated that “nuclear deterrence may be justified only as a step on the way toward progressive disarmament.” The Bishops held that “security lies in the abolition of nuclear weapons and the strengthening of international law.”

As the 1990s progressed, it became clear that U.S. policy was not moving to nuclear disarmament. Even before the arrival of the Bush Administration in 2001, the U.S. rejected a no-first-use policy and adopted flexible targeting strategies to use nuclear weapons either preemptively or in response to chemical and biological weapon attacks. The Bush administration’s Nuclear Posture Review explicated the maintenance of nuclear weapons for war-fighting strategies.

In 1998, seeing the institutionalization of nuclear deterrence taking place, 75 U.S. Catholic Bishops signed a statement criticizing the U.S. for moving beyond original nuclear deterrence policies “to which we grudgingly gave our moral approval in 1983.” The bishops said they were painfully aware that many policymakers sincerely believe that possessing nuclear weapons is vital for national security. “We are convinced, though, that it is not. Instead, they make the world a more dangerous place.”

We cannot delay any longer. Nuclear deterrence as a national policy must be condemned as morally abhorrent because it is the excuse and justification for the continued possession and further development of these horrendous weapons.

In 1997, the Holy See’s Permanent Representative at the United Nations, Archbishop Renato Martino, was moving in the same direction when he told the U.N. Committee on Disarmament:

Nuclear weapons are incompatible with the peace we seek for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They cannot be justified. They deserve condemnation. The preservation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty demands an unequivocal commitment to their abolition. ... This is a moral challenge, a legal challenge and a political challenge. That multiple-based challenge must be met by the application of our humanity.

In his address the following year, Archbishop Martino said:

The most perilous of all the old Cold War assumptions carried into the new age is the belief that the strategy of nuclear deterrence is essential to a nation’s security. Maintaining nuclear deterrence into the 21<sup>st</sup> century will not

aid but impede peace. Nuclear deterrence prevents genuine nuclear disarmament. It maintains an unacceptable hegemony over non-nuclear development for the poorest half of the world's population. It is a fundamental obstacle to achieving a new age of global security.

The Holy See spokesman again called for “the abolition of nuclear weapons through a universal, non-discriminatory ban with inspection by a universal authority.”

At the 2005 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, the Holy See made it clear that nuclear deterrence, in the modern context, cannot claim any moral legitimacy. Archbishop Celestino Migliore, Permanent Representative of the Holy See at the U.N., stated:

When the Holy See 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, nor does it today when it is evident that nuclear deterrence drives the development of ever newer nuclear arms, thus preventing genuine nuclear disarmament.

Archbishop Migliore warned that the new threat of global terrorism must not be allowed to undermine the precepts of international humanitarian law. In addition, “nuclear weapons, even so-called ‘low-yield’ weapons, endanger the processes of life and can lead to extended conflict.”

Nuclear weapons assault life on the planet, they assault the planet itself, and in so doing they assault the process of the continuing development of the planet. The preservation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty demands an unequivocal commitment to genuine nuclear disarmament.

I interpret all these statements to mean that the Holy See's position on nuclear weapons can now be stated as follows:

**Because the nuclear weapons States have decisively shown that they consider nuclear weapons permanent instruments in their military doctrine, the Holy See has withdrawn the limited acceptance it gave to nuclear weapons during the Cold War. In the eyes of the Catholic Church, nuclear weapons are evil and immoral and must be eliminated as a precondition to obtaining peace.**

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I hope my remarks have answered the question posed to this panel: "What morally responsible approaches should be taken to prevent nuclear proliferation?" My answer, in short, is: the only morally responsible approach is the elimination of all nuclear weapons. How is it possible, in the name of morality, for some States to aggrandize unto themselves the right to maintain nuclear weapons while proscribing their acquisition by others? I do not have time here to discuss the illogic and impracticality of such a proposition. Rather, I am concentrating on the morality of the question. A

two-class world, of nuclear haves and have nots is, in addition to being unsustainable, grossly immoral. I hope the American Catholic Bishops, who have demonstrated great leadership in the past, will soon state this unequivocally.