

Moral Reflections on U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy

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It is a distinct pleasure to be here at The Catholic University of America for this timely discussion of the ethics of nuclear weapons policy. I would like to thank Dr. Maryann Cusimano-Love for organizing this afternoon's event and the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies for hosting it.

We are fortunate to have with us Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller, the chief negotiator of the New START Treaty, an important achievement for our nation and world, and Dr. William Barbieri, the Director of the Peace and Justice Studies Program here at Catholic University, an area of study that holds great promise for evaluating "war with [the] entirely new attitude" called for by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council.¹

I am pleased to have this opportunity to participate in a public forum with Dr. Cusimano-Love and General William Burns. They are well known to me from their generous service as consultants to the bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace, of which I am a member. With three of us panelists affiliated with the bishops' International Committee, it almost seems like we have "stacked the deck," but I am sure you will find that we bring distinct perspectives. At least that is what I have always experienced during our lively Committee discussions.

Earlier in my ministry I served as a chaplain to members of the armed forces and then as Archbishop for the Military Services before Pope Benedict XVI appointed me to be the Archbishop of Baltimore almost three years ago. I come here today as a Catholic bishop and a long-time pastor to the military and their families to offer some modest reflections on the moral dimensions of nuclear weapons policy.

Within our Bishops' Conference I am often a defender of the proper role of military action and a skeptic of naïve hopes for peace in a still dangerous world. I have been on battlefields. I know the devastation of war. And I have great respect for our military institutions and for the men and women who serve in them. In this talk I will offer moral directions, not easy answers. I bring the voice of a pastor and teacher, not an expert analyst or policy maker.

Addressing the critical issue of nuclear weapons is not new for the Catholic Church. Almost 45 years ago, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, unequivocally condemned "total war" and

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

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.”²

The Church’s moral teaching on nuclear weapons has a long history. It grows out of a deep and abiding commitment to protect human life that is rooted in the teachings of Jesus, who declared, “I am the way and the truth and the life” and whose mission was that we “might have life and have it more abundantly.”³ It is a teaching rooted in the fifth commandment: “You shall not kill.”⁴

Our Church works consistently to defend the life and dignity of all: unborn children, poor persons, vulnerable immigrants, 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—a teaching that makes war a last resort and places limits on the use of military force. It is a tradition that complements the Gospel’s imperative to peacemaking.⁵

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.⁶

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 continuing public statements and advocacy with public officials.

The aims of just war teaching are to reduce recourse to military 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.

² Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 80, 1965.

³ John 14:6; 10:10b

⁴ Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17.

⁵ Mathew 5:9. Cf. U.S. Catholic Bishops, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, 1993, Section I.B.

⁶ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 81, 1965.

- And there must be a probability of success.⁷

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. The real risks inherent in nuclear war make the probability of success elusive. In his 2006 World Day of Peace message, Pope Benedict XVI declared starkly: “In a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims.”⁸

Even the 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 teaching the ethics of deterrence, disarmament, non-proliferation and peace are profoundly linked. Our nation and world must have the courage and vision to move beyond deterrence to disarmament.⁹ Nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation give impetus to building other structures to preserve peace and defend the tranquility of order. Ultimately, this *tranquillitas ordinis* is peace built on justice and charity.¹⁰ Pope John Paul II used a memorable image: “Like a cathedral, peace has to be constructed, patiently and with unshakeable faith.”¹¹

Disarmament by the nuclear powers reinforces non-proliferation efforts with other nations. Securing, reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons and materials is important for state actors, but it is even more critical that non-state actors be denied access to nuclear materials. Terrorists cannot be deterred though the possession of nuclear weapons. The threat of nuclear terrorism can only be reduced through disarmament and the securing of nuclear materials.

At the 2005 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Vatican made its position on nuclear deterrence clear: “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.”¹²

Nuclear deterrence is too precarious and dangerous as a basis for peace. Deterrence cannot build genuine peace; it can only bring what the Church calls “peace of a sort.”¹³ Real and lasting peace can only be built on the foundations of justice and human rights, on mutual interests and

⁷ 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.

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, Message on the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2006.

⁹ U.S. Catholic Bishops, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, 1993, Section II.E.1.

¹⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, No. 2304.

¹¹ John Paul II, Homily on Pentecost, Coventry, Great Britain, May 30, 1982.

¹² Intervention by the Holy See at the 2005 Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, May 4, 2005.

¹³ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 81, 1965.

concerns. This is the kind of lasting peace that the world needs—the kind of peace that Germany and France, and the United States and Japan, built on the ashes of World War II.

How might we evaluate current U.S. nuclear policy from a moral perspective? It is important to judge each policy action from the perspective of the end we seek. The Greek word for end is *telos*. In the words of Pope John Paul II: “[T]he moral life has an essential ‘teleological’ character....”¹⁴ In Catholic moral teaching, the end does not justify the means, but the end can and should shape the means we employ. When it comes to nuclear weapons policy, the end is the protection of the life and dignity of the human person.

In a moral analysis of nuclear weapons policies and programs, it is important to start with the end and work backwards. 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.¹⁵

Although we must always keep our eyes on the horizon of a world without nuclear weapons, it is equally important to focus on our next steps because the journey is long and dangerous and we must take one step at a time if we are to be successful.

In a recent letter to President Obama, Francis Cardinal George, OMI, the President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, outlined some of the steps along the way to a world free of the nuclear threat. He noted that the United States should work to:

- verifiably reduce nuclear arsenals as the new START Treaty continues to do;
- ratify and bring into force the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty;
- reduce our nation’s reliance on nuclear weapons for security as the new Nuclear Posture Review begins to do;
- secure nuclear materials from terrorists as this month’s Nuclear Security Summit aimed to do;
- adopt a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty to prohibit production of weapons-grade material; and
- strengthen the International Atomic Energy Agency to monitor nonproliferation efforts and ensure access to peaceful uses of nuclear power.

Each of these steps takes us in the direction of a nuclear weapons free world.

Now let me add a few reflections regarding the New START Treaty and the Nuclear Posture Review.

The Conference of Bishops is urging members of the U.S. Senate to come together across party lines to ratify the New START Treaty. As the experts on this panel can tell you in more detail, the New START Treaty: reduces deployed strategic warheads; limits the United States and

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, August 6, 1993, No. 73.

¹⁵ Cf. U.S. Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace*, May 3, 1983, No. 188.

Russia to fewer delivery vehicles; and includes new verification requirements. This arms reduction treaty is a significant, yet modest, step in the right direction, and sets the stage for future reductions.

Likewise the Nuclear Posture Review represents a significant, yet modest, shift toward a world free of nuclear weapons. It does not go as far as the bishops urged and does not declare that the sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is to deter nuclear attack against us or our allies. But the Nuclear Posture Review embraces the goal of a world without nuclear weapons, recognizes the danger of nuclear terrorism, and narrows the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear threats and against non-nuclear states that are party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations. These directions are morally sound, but more progress is needed to meet our moral responsibilities to rid the world of this disproportionate and indiscriminate threat to human life.

As bishops, 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. 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.

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 has a moral obligation to walk this path with both care and courage.