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Flashpoint THOUGHTFUL REFLECTIONS AND WISDOM ABOUT TRENDING TOPICS

Living in the Light of Christ's Peace

An Archbishop's Call for Nuclear Disarmament

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When I was installed as the twelfth archbishop of Santa Fe, I never imagined I would publish a pastoral letter on nuclear disarmament. I had not thought about nuclear weapons since the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, when I was twelve years old. Since then, I was like most Americans, lulled into a false sense of complacency and believing the arms race ended when the Cold War did. If I were to write a pastoral letter, it would be about a social justice or spiritual issue. Nonetheless, in January 2022, I issued *Living in the Light of Christ's Peace: A Conversation Toward Nuclear Disarmament*. It occurs to me now that this letter is indeed about social justice and is quite spiritual—it is about the sanctity of human life, accepting responsibility as stewards of God's creation, and protecting the common good in a most fundamental way.

Of course, there will always be debate about this topic, but the subject of my pastoral letter seemed providential. In 2017, I traveled to Japan with two brother bishops. During our trip, we visited the Hiroshima and Nagasaki memorials and museums, which depicted the horror and tragedy of the nuclear bombs dropped on those two cities on August 6 and 9, 1945, respectively. I was stunned by the suffering of the people—a suffering so great that the living envied the dead.

In Today's Climate, Another Bombing Is Far Too Possible

Shortly thereafter in Santa Fe, I toured the New Mexico History Museum. One exhibit gave an extensive account of the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos. Having recently witnessed the depth of their impact on Japanese civilians, it was eerie to see the development process of the first atomic bombs. I reflected on such tragedies happening again and came to the conclusion that, yes, it could occur again—and with a ferocity and magnitude much greater than that of Little Boy and Fat Man.

Since the release of the movie *Oppenheimer* in July 2023, many people are familiar with the Manhattan Project. They watched the poignant scenes in which J. Robert Oppenheimer struggles with his conscience as he

comes to understand the suffering that his research will bring to humanity. The movie certainly generated dialogue about the Manhattan Project and nuclear weapons, and this is precisely what I hope my pastoral letter will do: namely, start and sustain a conversation about nuclear disarmament.

Given the second nuclear arms race we are now engaged in and the catastrophic power of nuclear weapons; the prospect of human error, miscommunication, and terrorist activity; and the introduction of hypersonic delivery systems and artificial intelligence, this is an urgent conversation. I admit that sometimes I feel like Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*—"I'll think about it tomorrow." However, I am convinced that tomorrow is here and that we must start thinking today!

There are many reasons why citizens of all nations should be conversing about the danger that nuclear weapons pose to civilization and to our planet, our common home. The first of these is enlightened self-interest. The number of nuclear weapons today and their immense power present an unthinkable scenario, should they ever be used. Whether these weapons are launched in war, through miscommunication, or by a rogue government, the result would be catastrophic.

Our Common Home Would Be Obliterated

The two bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were approximately equal to 16 and 21 kilotons of dynamite. Today's weapons are far more powerful, equal to at least 100 kilotons. If dropped on New York City, around 583,000 people would die instantly.

A nuclear explosion releases vast amounts of blast, heat, and radiation energy, and it takes about ten seconds for the fireball to reach its maximum size. The enormous shock wave reaches speeds of hundreds of kilometers per hour. The blast kills people near ground zero and causes lung injuries, ear damage, and internal bleeding farther away. People sustain injuries from collapsing buildings and flying objects.

Thermal radiation is so intense that everything close to ground zero is vaporized. The extreme heat causes severe burns and ignites fires over a large area, which coalesce into a giant firestorm. Even people in underground shelters face death due to a lack of oxygen and carbon monoxide poisoning. According to researchers cited in *Live Science*, in an all-out war between the United States and Russia, temperatures on earth's surface would drop by as much as 29 degrees Fahrenheit (more than three times the temperature difference between today



A MAN AT A RALLY CAMPAIGNING FOR NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT, IN SUPPORT OF THE UKRAINIAN PEOPLE AT WAR. ROBERTO BARCELLONA/SHUTTERSTOCK

and the last Ice Age) and five billion people would perish.

While more can be said about the destructive power of nuclear weapons, the foregoing suffices. This is why, at the Geneva Summit in 1985, a statement was issued that said, “A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” As Catholics, we have many reasons that a conversation leading to verifiable, multilateral nuclear disarmament must be initiated in earnest.

Only complete, verifiable, and multilateral disarmament can assure that we will not destroy our world.

First, we have committed blasphemy by assuming power that can destroy God’s beautiful creation in mere hours. As Hunter Thompson, American journalist and author, once said, “Human beings are the only creatures on Earth that claim a God and the only thing that behaves like it hasn’t got one.” Pope Francis, in his encyclical letter *On Care for Our Common Home (Laudato Si’)*, reminds us of “the urgent challenge to protect our common home.” As stewards of God’s creation, we should be passionate about ending the untenable threat that nuclear weapons pose to our world.

Nuclear Weapons Do Not Keep the Peace

A second reason to seek nuclear disarmament is found in the Scriptures. Throughout the Bible, we see the compelling theme of right relationships. Repeatedly, God creates a covenant with us, one that culminates in Jesus Christ. God wants us to be one with him and each other. How fitting that nuclear weapons exist in silos! They are the antithesis to covenant relationships, to right relationships.

The late Fr. Walter Burghardt, SJ, sums up right relationships well in *Preaching the Just Word*: “Those who read in the sacred text a sheerly

personal, individualistic morality have not understood the Torah, have not sung the Psalms, have not been burned by the prophets, have not perceived the implications and the very burden of Jesus’ message, and must inevitably play fast and loose with St. Paul.... Our incredibly imaginative God did not have in mind isolated units, autonomous entities.... God had in mind a people, a human family, a community of persons, a body genuinely one.” Nuclear weapons are, without a doubt, one of the largest threats to right relationships.

Right relationships are the result of peace, a peace that only Christ can give us. To ignore this scriptural theme is to ignore Christ himself. Many times, Jesus referred to peace in his teachings: “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9); “Peace I leave with you” (John 14:27); “Love your enemies” (Luke 6:27); “Have peace with one another” (Mark 9:50). There are those who say nuclear weapons are “peacekeepers,” a deterrent to war, but this is a false narrative.

If deterrence is truly the reason for nuclear weapons, we would not need thousands of them, but only a few hundred worldwide. Even then, peace is not maintained by nuclear weapons; only complete, verifiable, and multilateral disarmament can assure that we will not destroy our world. As Jesus said, “All who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52).

The End of the Just War Theory

Another moral imperative to engage in a conversation toward nuclear disarmament relates to the end of the Just War Theory. Traditionally, Christian teaching allows for war in specific circumstances (attributed to St. Augustine and later refined by St. Thomas Aquinas). It teaches that war must be waged by a legitimate authority, have a just cause, and have the right intentions. It also maintains that a just war must have a probability of success,

Glossary

Fat Man: Plutonium-fueled, this atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, on August 9, 1945. It exploded by firing detonators on the plutonium center, creating immense inward pressure that caused a nuclear explosion.

Just War Theory: Developed out of Christian tradition in the Middle Ages and modified after World War II, these basic conditions must be met to justify war (not all conditions are listed here): just cause, just intentions, aim to establish just peace, reasonable chance of success, force used as last resort, and expected benefits outweigh the anticipated costs.

Little Boy: Uranium-fueled, this atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945. It exploded by firing one mass of uranium into another, creating a self-sustaining nuclear explosion.

Manhattan Project: A top secret US government program established to develop atomic weapons ahead of Nazi Germany during World War II. With three main centers of operation, hundreds of thousands of people—leading scientists and blue-collar workers alike—contributed to the development of the atomic bomb, with few knowing the exact nature of their work. The program was dismantled in 1947.

Oppenheimer, J. Robert: Considered the “father of the atomic bomb,” a prominent theoretical physicist of his time, and one of the leading figures of the Manhattan Project, Oppenheimer was appointed director of the Los Alamos site in New Mexico, where the atomic bombs were designed and tested. After the war, he advocated for international control of atomic weapons.



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be proportional, and avoid civilian casualties.

These last three components are impossible with nuclear weapons. There are no winners in a nuclear war. Nuclear weapons are far too powerful to be proportional, and civilian casualties are guaranteed. As if to confirm this, Pope Francis, while speaking in Hiroshima at the Peace Memorial in 2019, stated, “The use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possessing of nuclear weapons is immoral... We will be judged on this.”

One final moral argument for nuclear disarmament concerns the poor of our world. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the projected cost of US nuclear forces will total around \$756 billion over the next ten years. We could feed the hungry, house the homeless, and provide medical care for the needy with that amount of money. In his *Chance for Peace* speech, President Eisenhower had this to say: “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists,

the hopes of its children.... This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.”

A Critical Moment; A Critical Conversation

There are more arguments to be made about nuclear disarmament: the sanctity of human life, the common good (see Catholic social teaching), and the deleterious effects of nuclear bomb manufacturing (for example, the Tularosa Basin Downwinders in New Mexico). These persuasive motivations led Archbishop Paul Etienne of Seattle and me to form a partnership with Bishop Alexis Shirahama of Hiroshima and Archbishop Peter Nakamura of Nagasaki. We are seeking to raise awareness of the imperative for multilateral, verifiable nuclear disarmament by working together to make the case for this critical movement and conversation.

It is fitting that our partnership has been formed during our National Eucharistic Revival here in the United States. The Eucharist is the ultimate expression of peace because it renews Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection every time it is celebrated. It is a sacrament of peace and reconciliation

that illustrates Christ’s promise when he said, “And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself” (John 12:32). As we receive Christ Jesus in holy Communion, St. Augustine tells us that we are to become what we receive, the Body of Christ. We are to become, as St. Francis reminds us, instruments of peace.

I urge all people of faith and goodwill to pray to the Prince of Peace—the one who died in weakness and was raised in glory—that our conversation toward nuclear disarmament will gain momentum as it leads our world to the peace that only Christ can give us. Pray that all nuclear powers of the world will sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, first signed by the Vatican. This would be an important milestone in ridding our world of nuclear weapons.

As General Omar Bradley remarked on Armistice Day in 1948, “Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount.”

The world is now in a nuclear arms race far more treacherous than the first. Now is the time to assume this vital cause. Unlike Scarlett O’Hara, we cannot wait until tomorrow. We must think and worry about the current nuclear arms race today. Let the conversation begin!



Archbishop John C. Wester is originally from San Francisco, where he served until 2007. He then served as bishop of Salt Lake City until 2015, when he was named archbishop of the archdiocese of Santa Fe, New Mexico. He earned a Master of Divinity degree from St. Patrick Seminary in Menlo Park, California; a master’s degree in spirituality from the University of San Francisco; and a master’s degree in pastoral counseling from Holy Names University in Oakland.



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