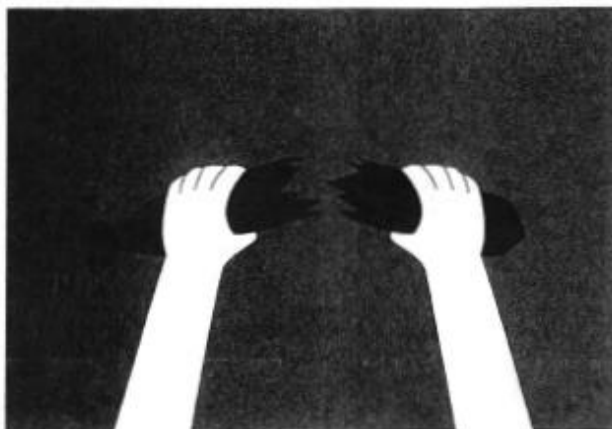


COMMENTARY

BY JOHN C. WESTER



A GATEWAY TO NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

Three things you can do to make a nuclear-free world.

In November, a stray missile from the Russia-Ukraine war landed in Poland, killing two men in their 60s who worked at a grain warehouse. It took several emergency meetings with NATO officials to determine whether Russia had intentionally escalated the war into the region of the Western military alliance. All parties deemed it an "accident." (The missile came from Ukraine.)

What if that stray missile had a nuclear warhead?

Russian President Vladimir Putin's threat to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine must be firmly condemned, as well as his cruel and illegal war with its continued escalation. But accidents happen. Even a limited or regional use of nuclear weapons could have planetary effects, blocking the sun enough to cause a global temperature drop, collapsing crop production, and resulting in massive starvation, according to a report by the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

As the Poland example shows, today we are facing the most serious nuclear threats since the Cuban missile crisis 60 years ago, which then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara said we survived only by luck.

Nuclear weapons raise biblical issues. The continuing survival of God's creation and the human race cannot rely on just "luck" but instead needs providential intervention. A few weeks before the November missile crisis in Poland, Pope Francis said, "Today, in fact, something we dreaded and hoped never to hear of again is threatened outright: the use of atomic weapons, which even after Hiroshima and Nagasaki continued wrongly to be produced and tested."

FROM SANTA FE
TO HIROSHIMA

I speak as the lead pastor for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Santa Fe, N.M. More money is spent in my diocese on nuclear weapons than in any other diocese in the United States because we are home to the Los Alamos and Sandia national laboratories, key research and development sites for nuclear weapons.

My home parish is the historic Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, named for that tireless 13th-century promoter of peace. But less than 100 footsteps away from the cathedral entrance is 109 East Palace, the gateway to the secret World War II-era Los Alamos lab. It was here that the U.S. made the atomic bombs that destroyed the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan in 1945, killing more than 200,000 people. My mission as archbishop for this whole community and region is to sanctify the Cathedral of St. Francis in a new way: to make it a gateway to global nuclear disarmament.

We are now in a new nuclear arms race, arguably more dangerous than the first. New cyber and hypersonic weapons, artificial intelligence, and multiple nuclear adversaries increase the grave risks, while climate change and growing economic inequality destabilize the status quo.

Pope Francis has led the Catholic church away from a position that conditionally supported "nuclear deterrence" to one that denounces deterrence as "morally unacceptable" and calls for the complete abolition of nuclear weapons. His moral and spiritual leadership invites all people to examine the immorality of possessing nuclear weapons.

However, the U.S. and the USSR (now Russia) never possessed their huge nuclear stockpiles for the sole purpose of deterrence. Instead, these nuclear weapons policies were always a hybrid of deterrence and preparation for fighting a nuclear war. That is why we have thousands of nuclear weapons instead of just the few hundred needed for deterrence alone.

Since 2015, the two review conferences of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons have failed to make any progress whatsoever toward the global nuclear disarmament pledged by signatories

“WE MUST BE THE PEOPLE TO MAKE SURE NUCLEAR WEAPONS ARE NEVER USED AGAIN.”

more than a half-century ago. Instead, the nuclear weapons powers are engaged in massive “modernization” programs designed to keep nuclear weapons forever. Further, the U.S. is actively designing *new* nuclear weapons that currently can’t be tested because of the international testing moratorium put in place in 1985. The inability to test new nuclear weapons could erode confidence in stockpile reliability. This may prompt the U.S. to break the moratorium and resume testing, which would have severe international nonproliferation consequences. And, as some say, “you can’t eat a nuclear weapon.” The massive costs of these modernization programs rob resources necessary to meet the needs of people who are poor and most vulnerable.

AN EXISTENTIAL PRO-LIFE ISSUE

Nuclear weapons disarmament is, by definition, an existential pro-life issue. A 300-kiloton intercontinental ballistic missile warhead targeting New York City would cause a 3-mile radius blast wave that would destroy almost all houses and skyscrapers, spread lethal gamma rays and neutron radiation within a 1-mile radius, initiate mass fires within a 3-mile radius, cause radioactive fallout to drift thousands of square miles downwind, and kill more than 1 million people and injure twice as many in the first 24 hours. An all-out nuclear war between the United States and Russia could lead to at least 360 million “quick deaths,” according to the Bulletin of the

Atomic Scientists. Next would come the collapse of international economic systems, a medical infrastructure incapable of addressing the scale of suffering, and starvation for more than 5 billion people due to crop failure during a nuclear winter.

In 2019, Pope Francis visited Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima. From that sacred ground, he declared, “We must never grow weary of working to support the principal international legal instruments of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation, including the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.” Healing past victims of nuclear weapons and protecting those who might be future victims requires eradicating nuclear weapons from the face of the earth. It is the duty of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, the birthplace of nuclear weapons, to support the new international nuclear weapons ban treaty while working toward universal, verifiable nuclear disarmament.

There are three things you can do to make a nuclear-free world. First, ask your congressional representatives what they are doing to secure a multilateral, verifiable nuclear disarmament. Second, I invite all people, whether Catholic or not, to reflect on Pope Francis’ recent statements, such as “Laudato Si” and “Fratelli Tutti,” which engage questions of climate change, war, and who we want to be as people and societies in the future. These are gifts for the entire world, not only for Catholics. Third, take what you’ve learned into courageous conversations with family, co-workers, your pastor, and church members. Ask difficult questions about nuclear disarmament.

In my 2022 pastoral letter, “Living in the Light of Christ’s Peace: A Conversation Toward Nuclear Disarmament,” I reflected on our beautiful city of Santa Fe—the city of the “holy faith” of Francis of Assisi. I was disturbed by our history, the long legacy of building the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. In that letter I wrote, “We are the people who designed and built these weapons of mass destruction. We were the first to use them. We must be the people to dismantle them and make sure they are never used again.” Now I invite you to pray daily for the abolition of nuclear weapons in New Mexico and everywhere on earth. ☪

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