

The Pope and the Bomb: New Nuclear Dangers and Moral Dilemmas

by Bishop Oscar Cantú

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I am grateful to the co-sponsors of today's program and to my co-panelists for their time and expertise.

My modest contribution is meant to frame our discussion of "The Pope and the Bomb." Obviously the title was chosen because Pope Francis is visiting the U.S. and the U.N. next week, but a more accurate title would be "The Popes and the Bomb" because since 1963 every pope, beginning with Saint John XXIII, has called for a worldwide ban on nuclear weapons.

Catholic teaching on nuclear weapons is rooted in respect for the life and dignity of the human person, based on the belief that all are created in "the divine image" (Genesis 1:26-27). The Church's teaching attempts to reconcile the need to avoid killing and the requirement to defend the lives of others. This tradition is expressed in just war principles. Three principles of that tradition are especially applicable to nuclear weapons: discrimination, proportionality and probability of success.

1. **Discrimination:** For use of force to be just, it must discriminate between combatants and noncombatants. One cannot intend to slaughter innocent civilians. The moral problem with nuclear weapons is that the devastation they wreak cannot discriminate between combatants and noncombatants.
2. **Proportionality:** The death and destruction caused by the use of force cannot be out of proportion to the goal of protecting human life and human rights. The raw destructive capacity and lingering radiation of nuclear weapons make their use morally unthinkable.
3. **Probability of success:** The use of force must have serious prospects of success for it to be justified. What would success look like in a nuclear war? In 2006, Pope Benedict reminded us that in a nuclear war there would be no "victors, only victims" (*World Day of Peace Message*, #13).

In 1965, the Second Vatican Council declared, "The horror and perversity of war is immensely magnified by the addition of scientific weapons. For acts of war involving these weapons can inflict massive and indiscriminate destruction, thus going far beyond the bounds of legitimate defense. ... All these considerations compel us to undertake an evaluation of war with an entirely new attitude"

(*Gaudium et Spes*, #80). The Council also articulated profound concerns about “deterrence” and the “arms race.” The Council argued it 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” (#81).

At the 2005 NPT Review Conference, the Holy See stated that when the Church:

...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.

At a UN General Assembly meeting on nuclear disarmament in 2013, the Holy See maintained:

The chief obstacle [to the elimination of nuclear arms] is continued adherence to the doctrine of nuclear deterrence. With the end of the Cold War, the time for the acceptance of this doctrine is long passed. The Holy See does not countenance the continuation of nuclear deterrence, since it is evident it is driving the development of ever newer nuclear arms....

Building on this moral skepticism, at the 2014 UN gathering in Vienna, Pope Francis affirmed:

Nuclear deterrence and the threat of mutually assured destruction cannot be the basis for an ethic of fraternity and peaceful coexistence among peoples and states. The youth of today and tomorrow deserve far more.

The Second Vatican Council taught: “[T]he arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which ensnares the poor to an intolerable degree.” “Rather than being eliminated thereby, the causes of war are in danger of being gradually aggravated. While extravagant sums are being spent for the furnishing of ever new weapons, an adequate remedy cannot be provided for the multiple miseries afflicting the whole modern world.” (#81)

The Holy See, in its 2014 UN contribution, “Nuclear Disarmament: Time for Abolition,” notes that, with the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a multi-polar world, “nuclear deterrence works less as a stabilizing force and more as an incentive for countries to break out of the non-proliferation regime....” The “peace of a sort” promised by nuclear deterrence has led to “enormous amounts of money” being allocated for modernization of nuclear weapons to the detriment of human development while ignoring the underlying causes of war.

The Holy See also employed newer moral arguments related to “the problem of intention” and to “unnecessary suffering.” For deterrence to be credible, one has to intend “mass destruction—with extensive and lasting collateral damage, inhumane suffering, and the risk of escalation” and be involved in a “whole set of acts that are pre-disposed to use.” One has to intend to do what is morally reprehensible.

The Holy See also noted that “scientists and international lawyers are now giving more attention to the ‘unnecessary suffering’ inflicted by the use of nuclear weapons.” Pope Francis, in his Vienna message, greeted the ... survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and called for more attention to “unnecessary suffering.”

The bishops of the United States took up the call of the Second Vatican Council to “evaluate war with a new attitude” in their 1983 pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace*. Echoing the teaching of Pope John Paul II, they argued: “Deterrence is not an adequate strategy as a long-term basis for peace....” (*The Challenge of Peace*, Summary). Ten years later in *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, the U.S. bishops maintained: “The eventual elimination of nuclear weapons is more than a moral ideal; it should be a policy goal.”

Ultimately, the moral dilemma of nuclear weapons is not about principles and Church statements. It is about people. In August, I visited Japan for the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was a life changing experience.

Both cities look peaceful today, but their museums contain stark images of destruction – bodies charred and burned, others so quickly incinerated that only their shadows etched on stone remain, and survivors severely disfigured by radiation exposure. I heard the moving testimony of Sr. Lucia who, as a 10-year-old girl, was at school 8 kilometers from the epicenter of the blast. For years she sealed away those horrific memories of death and destruction. But now she decided it was time to share those memories – to convey, as she put it, “the reality of the war.”

I came away humbled by the commitment of Catholic Bishops of Japan and of so many Japanese people, not just the survivors, but young people too, to work for peace and a world without nuclear weapons.

In a 2010 letter to President Obama, Cardinal George, then USCCB President, wrote:

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. The horribly destructive capacity of nuclear arms makes them disproportionate and indiscriminate weapons that endanger human life and dignity like no other armaments. Their use as a weapon of war is rejected in Church teaching based on just war norms. 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. (April 8, 2010)

To achieve this goal we must, in the words of Pope Francis, acknowledge that “[n]ow is the time to counter the logic of fear with the ethic of responsibility, and so foster a climate of trust and sincere dialogue.”