Opinion
News
Guest Voices



Nuclear war protesters demonstrate outside the White House in Washington Aug. 9. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



by Art Laffin

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

December 14, 2017

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

On Nov. 10, at a special Vatican conference on "Prospects for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament," Pope Francis issued the most forceful condemnation of nuclear weapons of any pope to date. While previous popes have called for the elimination of nuclear weapons, Francis condemned the "possession" of nuclear weapons, something no pope has ever done.

Francis' declaration is a major departure from the church's prior acceptance of nuclear deterrence, which was judged as "morally acceptable" as "a step on the way toward a progressive disarmament." Francis' courageous and prophetic call marks a new moment for our church and our world.

The Vatican conference, hosted by the new Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, was the first major international gathering on disarmament since 122 countries signed a new U.N. treaty in July that calls for the complete prohibition of nuclear weapons. The Vatican is one of 53 signatories that have already ratified the agreement. To date, neither the U.S., its NATO allies, nor any of the other nuclear powers have signed on to the treaty.

Francis told conference participants — which included the U.N. high representative for disarmament affairs, NATO's deputy secretary general, 11 Nobel Peace Prize laureates, and diplomats from the U.S., Russia, South Korea and Iran — that humanity cannot fail "to be genuinely concerned by the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental effects of any employment of nuclear devices."

The pope further declared:

> If we also take into account the risk of an accidental detonation as a result of error of any kind, the threat of their use, as well as their very possession, is to be firmly condemned. ... International relations cannot be held captive to military force, mutual intimidation, and the parading of stockpiles of arms. Weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons, create nothing but a false sense of security. They cannot constitute the basis for peaceful coexistence between members of the human family.



Pope Francis greets attendees at a conference on building a world free of nuclear weapons, at the Vatican Nov. 10. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)

Francis' condemnation of nuclear weapons and rejection of nuclear deterrence did not happen in a vacuum. Seventy-two years ago, at the dawn of the nuclear age, another powerful declaration was made. Immediately after the U.S. nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, Catholic Worker co-founder Dorothy Day, the renowned disciple of Gospel nonviolence and social justice, was practically a solitary religious voice in publicly condemning this unprecedented atrocity.

Day prayed and labored untiringly for the abolition of nuclear weapons. So did other Catholic peacemakers who are now among the holy cloud of witnesses, including Thomas Merton, Daniel and Philip Berrigan, Jesuit Fr. Richard McSorley, Sacred Heart Sr. Anne Montgomery, Dominican Sr. Jackie Hudson, Jesuit Fr. Bill Bichsel, and Franciscan Fr. Jerry Zawada, to name but a few. Their steadfast nonviolent witness helped paved the way for this most recent papal proclamation, as well as the new Catholic Nonviolence Initiative that resulted from the Just Peace Conference held at

the Vatican in April 2016, which calls for the replacement of the just war theory with a theology of "just peace."

Day's commitment to nuclear abolition was unwavering.

Along with Ammon Hennacy and other peace activists, she was arrested numerous times in the 1950s for protesting compulsory civil defense drills that were conducted to prepare the public for a possible nuclear attack. Day believed it was better to risk arrest and jail calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons rather than to cooperate with legally sanctioned nuclear war preparations.

In 1965, she joined 20 women and several men from different countries in a 10-day water fast in Rome during the Second Vatican Council, to pray that the church would issue a clear condemnation of the means of modern war. The fast was organized by the Catholic peacemaker Lanza del Vasto and his wife, Chanterelle, co-founders of the Community of the Ark in France.

The world stands at the nuclear brink, as evidenced by heightened tensions between the U.S. and North Korea, and deteriorating U.S. relations with Iran and Russia.

The present U.S. administration is committed to a 30-year plan to upgrade the U.S. nuclear arsenal at a price tag of more than $1 trillion.

And we now have an unpredictable president who could unilaterally order a nuclear attack at any moment.

Thus, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has set its "Doomsday Clock" to two-and-a-half minutes to midnight.

Related: Pope condemns possession of nuclear weapons in shift from church's acceptance of deterrence

With the very future of human survival and our planet's existence at stake, Francis' new exhortation for disarmament offers a concrete way to avert global catastrophe. But how can we make this call for disarmament real for our time?

First and foremost, we must have the faith, courage and will to believe that total nuclear disarmament can occur.

If we are to take seriously the magnitude of the nuclear threat and the admonition of Francis, we must risk taking action that is commensurate with the colossal threat we face. Therefore, if it is wrong to possess nuclear weapons, then it is equally wrong to build and modernize them. And if it is wrong to build and modernize them, then one cannot participate in the chain of command to ever use them.

Consequently, if there is unanimous consent to refuse to build, upgrade and use these weapons of mass destruction, then we can systematically begin to permanently dismantle these weapons.

Living in a nation that has legalized sanctioned nuclear weapons and relies on them for its ultimate security, what would Jesus have us do? Clearly, Jesus teaches that you cannot serve both God and mammon and that we must place our trust in God for our true security. He calls us to disarm our hearts of fear, hate and greed. He instructs us to forever put away the sword. He calls us to love even our enemies, and never to kill.

With respect to making nuclear weapons and being involved with their use, can followers of Jesus be employed in such weapons-related work?

Christians who work in such jobs are faced with a serious faith and moral dilemma.

The following insights from extraordinary Catholic peacemakers serve to counsel us on this matter.

In *On Pilgrimage*, Day declared:

> All our talks about peace and the weapons of the spirit are meaningless unless we try in every way to embrace voluntary poverty and not work in any position, any job that contributes to war, not take any job whose pay comes from the fear of war, of the atom bomb.

Advertisement

McSorley stated in *New Testament Basis of Peacemaking*:

> We cannot seriously imagine Jesus pushing the button to launch a nuclear bomb, or registering for the draft, or wearing the uniform of any national state, or paying taxes for nuclear weapons, or working in a plant that manufactures weapons of death.

And Pope Paul VI, in a speech to the diplomatic corps on Feb. 10, 1972, made this pronouncement:

> The conversion of military manufacturing plants and military markets for civilian purposes is equally possible, if trouble is taken to plan ahead. It is all the more feasible in that it would create jobs by making it possible to undertake the large-scale projects which prove necessary for the protection of the environment and the satisfaction of human needs.

Refusal to undertake this conversion is completely incompatible with the spirit of humanity and still more with the spirit of Christianity because "it is unthinkable that no other work can be found for hundreds of thousands of workers than the production of instruments of death," Paul VI said.

We also need to consider the example of the late Bishop Leroy Matthiesen, who told the Catholics in his diocese who worked at the Pantex nuclear weapons plant in Amarillo, Texas: "In the name of the God of peace, quit your jobs." In making this appeal, he said he would try to offer financial assistance to any defense worker that would quit.

And then there is the witness of people such as former defense worker Bob Aldridge, a Catholic and father of 10 children. He worked as an aerospace engineer for 16 years at Lockheed, where he designed nuclear missiles, but then resigned because of conscience reasons.

The most significant voices that we need to hear and learn from in the struggle to abolish nuclear weapons are those of the atomic bomb survivors, known as *hibakusha*, one of whom, representing an organization from Japan made up exclusively of atomic bomb survivors, was present at the recent Vatican conference.



Masako Wada, who survived the 1945 atomic bombing of Nagasaki, Japan, attends a conference on building a world free of nuclear weapons, at the Vatican Nov. 10. (CNS/Paul Haring)

The *hibakusha* have been relentless in the pursuit to forever rid the world of nuclear weapons. Their message: Humanity cannot co-exist with nuclear weapons! Their presence is a constant living reminder of our need as a nation to repent for the development and use of nuclear weapons and to eliminate them.

In recognizing the vital importance of the *hibakusha*, Francis stated at the disarmament conference: "Essential ... is the witness given by the *hibakusha*, the survivors of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, together with other victims of nuclear arms testing. May their prophetic voice serve as a warning, above all for coming generations!"

I personally owe the *hibakusha* a deep debt of gratitude for inspiring me in my journey of peacemaking when I met them during the first United Nations Special

Session on Disarmament in 1978. At that time, they called upon the nuclear powers of the world to abolish nuclear weapons.

Ultimately, if true disarmament is to occur, we must repent of the nuclear sin. Such acts of repentance have already taken place. There have been delegations of U.S. Catholic peacemakers who have gone to Japan to personally apologize and ask forgiveness for the U.S. atomic bombings of the Japanese.

And on Aug. 6, 2016, the anniversary date of the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima, members of the Catholic Worker, Pax Christi and other peace groups held a prayer service of repentance in front of the White House. During the service, we presented an "apology petition" to a *hibakusha* who was present. Signed by more than 700 people, the petition called on the U.S. to join the signatories in apologizing to the people of Japan for using the bomb against them and pledging to work for the total nuclear abolition.

Yes, the nuclear challenge before us is great, but not insurmountable, for with God, and people acting on their faith convictions, all things are possible. History bears out this truth. Slavery was abolished. Legal segregation ended in the United States. Apartheid ended in South Africa. The Berlin Wall came down.

Drawing on the rich biblical tradition of nonviolence and the many examples of nonviolent resistance in human history, Plowshares activists have been inspired to carry out more than 100 disarmament actions since 1980, whereby the nuclear swords of our time have symbolically been beaten into plowshares (Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3).

And there have been countless vigils, fasts and other nonviolent resistance actions for disarmament and ending war. I have been blessed to be part of many such actions, including two Plowshares actions directed at the first-strike Trident nuclear submarine.

On Sept. 4, 1989, six peacemakers and I carried out the Thames River Plowshares action in New London, Connecticut. We were able to swim and canoe to the docked USS Pennsylvania, the 10th Trident, and hammered and poured blood on the hull. Three of us were able to climb on top of the submarine where we prayed for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

From aboard this most destructive weapon, I believed then, and I believe now, that if human beings have the faith to believe that disarmament is possible, and act on that faith, it can occur. I, along with other Plowshares activists and many other peacemakers, know this can happen because we were able to begin the process of true disarmament.

Related: Gumbleton on nuclear deterrence: US bishops should reassess peace pastoral

The Catholic Church and all churches have a crucial role to play in implementing Francis' declaration to bring about a disarmed world.

What if the church could take the lead in calling for the conversion of arms industries to non-military production while advocating for full and just protection of workers' rights during the transition process? What if the church would provide material resources for those quit their jobs for reasons of conscience? What if the pope's statement was proclaimed in every diocese, at every parish, and in every Catholic school, college and seminary?

And what if the U.S. bishops and all Catholics in this country demanded that the U.S. government sign the historic U.N. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons that has deemed nuclear weapons to be illegal? These efforts would go a long way to help create the climate necessary to bring about real disarmament.

Now is the time to act. Now is the time to enflesh God's dream of beating all the swords of our time into plowshares.

[Art Laffin is a member of the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker in Washington, D.C. He is coeditor of *Swords Into Plowshares*.]