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Archbishop John C. Wester of Santa Fe, N.M., offers a reflection on the urgent need for nuclear disarmament during a prayer service for United Nations diplomats at the Church of the Holy Family in New York City Sept. 12, 2022. The service, hosted by the Vatican's permanent observer mission to the U.N., was held on the eve of the opening of the 77th session of the U.N. General Assembly. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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Archbishop John C. Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, brought his summons to begin meaningful conversations to achieve full nuclear disarmament to the annual United Nations prayer service.

Addressing U.N. delegates and staff as well as representatives of nongovernmental organizations at the Church of the Holy Family Sept. 12, Wester reiterated his urgent invitation first made in a pastoral letter he issued in January.

The event, coordinated by the Vatican's permanent observer mission to the U.N., was held on the eve of the opening of the 77th session of the U.N. General Assembly.

As he did in the letter, "Living in the Light of Christ's Peace: A Conversation Toward Nuclear Disarmament," the archbishop called for dialogue about the threat nuclear

weapons pose to the planet and outlined necessary steps to dismantle the world's nuclear arsenal in order to uphold the biblical "ideal of right relationships."

Illustrating his point, Wester recalled the mosaic "Golden Rule" at the U.N. headquarters located blocks from the church. He said the artwork describes the U.N. mission to bring together people of various races, creeds, nationalities and ethnic backgrounds for "peaceful and productive dialogue."

Developing right relationships with God, other people and the planet, the archbishop said, is the central theme of his pastoral letter.

"It highlights the urgent need to begin, rejuvenate and sustain a conversation that leads to right relationships and to peace in our world," he said, because nuclear weapons "pose the ultimate, and indeed, permanent destruction of any kind of relationships at all, not to mention right relationships."

Wester recalled his 2017 visit to the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where the only use of nuclear weapons in war occurred in August 1945. Returning to New Mexico, he toured the New Mexico History Museum with friends and saw "a different exhibit with a different story" about the development of nuclear bombs.

That's when he said he came to realize that billions of people could be killed instantly if nuclear weapons were ever used again.

"If we care about humanity, if we care about our planet, if we care about the God of peace and human conscience, then we must start a public conversation on these urgent questions and find a new path toward nuclear disarmament," Wester told the congregation.

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He identified the U.N. as "a model for all countries, organizations, communities and individuals who seek to live in harmony and in right relationship with each other."

"The U.N. demonstrates that the first step to productive conversation is to listen," he continued, explaining how Pope Francis has repeatedly told bishops that while they are teachers, "a good teacher listens first."

He urged the U.N. and NGO representatives to listen to the voices of people suffering through poverty, famine, drought, war and persecution as they work to build a better world.

"When we genuinely listen to these voices, to the cry of the poor, the destitute and persecuted, we are taking the first steps in a constructive conversation that will find answers and create true change in our world," the archbishop said.

He said Jesus offers the light of peace to the world over "the darkness of violence and in the shadow of the threat or nuclear war."

"In this light, we can see a new future for the world, where everyone can live in peace without the threat of nuclear war. In this new world, we spend our resources ending hunger and poverty, improving our schools and health care, securing life-giving employment and teaching everyone the life of peace and nonviolence."

Wester also cited Francis' repeated statements regarding the immorality of possessing nuclear weapons and stressed that the pope has invited people to converse with each other and with God to build a world based on respect and peace rather than weapons of war.

"I am convinced that this dialogue that Pope Francis speaks of is what is needed in our world today," he said. "The solution to our divisions and controversies is not violence and war but the honest and sincere efforts of human beings to encounter one another in fruitful conversations that lead to peace.

"And a dialogue about nuclear disarmament," he added, "is an essential part of this conversation."