News



From left: Gerard Powers, Mary Ellen O'Connell, San Diego Cardinal Robert McElroy, Robert Latiff and Rashied Omar talk during the event titled "New and Old Wars, New and Old Challenges to Peace," as part of the Notre Dame Forum on March 1 at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. (University of Notre Dame/Barbara Johnston)



by Dennis Sadowski

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Ongoing wars that have caused widespread death, misery and destruction are leading to shifts in Catholic thinking, among them being the "need to fundamentally renew and prioritize the claim of nonviolent action as the central tenet" of church teaching on war and peace, says San Diego Cardinal Robert McElroy.

Drawing on six decades of papal teaching on peace, the cardinal told an audience at the University of Notre Dame on March 1 that Catholics are facing a "new moment" in history, one that requires finding nonviolent alternatives to prevent war.

Among the shifts in Catholic thinking, he said, is that the "atrophying of the just-war framework" in limiting military conflicts invites the church to "redesign its moral framework for permitting war in dire circumstances."

McElroy identified a third shift in Catholic thinking as well: the realization that nuclear deterrence as a step toward eventual nuclear disarmament has failed. He cited the collapse of all but one arms control treaty and the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons in combat as examples of that failure.

The New START pact between the U.S. and Russia is the last remaining agreement limiting the deployment of nuclear weapons. However, it is teetering toward expiration. Russian President Vladimir Putin announced Feb. 21 that he was suspending participation in the treaty, but was not formally withdrawing from it. The treaty is set to expire in 2026.

"The church must engage with the world in this moment in order to contribute the perspective of Catholic faith and tradition in a perilous age," McElroy said. "And the church in the United States must grapple with these foundational questions if we are to be faithful to our lives as citizens and believers."



Cardinal Robert McElroy delivers his speech at the event titled "New and Old Wars, New and Old Challenges to Peace," as part of the Notre Dame Forum in McKenna Hall March 1 at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. (University of Notre Dame/Barbara Johnston)

McElroy's comments, which were also livestreamed, came during a program as part of the annual academic yearlong Notre Dame Forum, which this year is focusing on war and peace. The program, titled "New and Old Wars, New and Old Challenges to Peace," was developed by the Catholic Peacebuilding Network.

Noting that it has been 60 years since Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* ("Peace on Earth") and 40 years since the U.S. bishops issued their pastoral letter "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response," McElroy called for renewed attention to the teachings found in the two documents.

He said Pope Francis has built on the teachings of his predecessors since the promulgation of *Pacem in Terris* to build a framework for a new Catholic tradition on war and peace throughout his papacy. This undertaking "places nonviolence rather

than the just-war ethic as the dominant prism through which to evaluate decisions in situations of deep conflict," he said.

The Christian just-war theory, first addressed by St. Augustine of Hippo in the fifth century, holds that military combat can align with the Gospel as long as warfare protects noncombatants and the armed response is restrained.

In particular, McElroy pointed to the pope's urging to "no longer think of war as a solution" in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* as the foundation for church teaching in the 21st century.

Acknowledging that critics have described proponents of nonviolent action as naive, McElroy countered that authors Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, writing in *Why Civil Resistance Works*, looked at movements worldwide and found that nonviolent resistance in some cases was more effective than armed conflict in protecting human rights and building peace.



Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego speaks at the event titled "New and Old Wars, New and Old Challenges to Peace," as part of the Notre Dame Forum on March 1 at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. (University of Notre Dame/Barbara

Johnston)

Their work "lends tremendous strength to the proposition that the church should place nonviolent resistance at the center of its theology of war and peace," McElroy said.

There are "extreme" cases when armed intervention is necessary, however, he explained, citing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. He called the moral justification for military action in Ukraine "unassailable."

Still, McElroy said, "the overarching strategic framework of the just-war tradition — the *ius ad bellum* [laws governing war] — has become hobbled in its ability to provide effective comprehensive guidance in the modern day."

A problem with the just-war framework, he said, is that it has been used by leaders "inclined to go to war" to justify military intervention.

McElroy also described the just-war tradition as being weak in two areas of moral choice: the first being the requirement to actively seek peace even if it requires making significant concessions, and the second being the lack of attention to moral obligations of other nations in minimizing a military conflict. The result has been "surrogate wars" of the world's powers, he said.

Following the presentation, three Notre Dame faculty members joined McElroy in a discussion on the challenges to peace facing the world.

Rashied Omar, associate professor of Islamic studies and peacebuilding, welcomed the pope's efforts to stress nonviolent action in church teaching and suggested that Catholics could join with people of all faiths to build greater understanding of the practice.

The Christian just-war tradition is the basis for sections of the United Nations charter governing military conflict and military law, but the steps spelled out to avoid war have been bypassed in favor of violence, said Mary Ellen O'Connell, professor of law.

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She said the allure of new weapons systems to maintain security among by governments and policymakers ignore the protocols to limit war that already are in place.

"We often have been told that nonviolence will not work. Yet, it's that very thinking that drove Russia to invade Ukraine, to show they are as strong as the United States. Now China is projecting the same. We have to stop this idea. We need to and we can go back to alternatives to violence," O'Connell said.

The third panelist, Robert Latiff, a retired U.S. Air Force major general who teaches ethics and emerging technologies, said that while he at one time was a proponent of a strong nuclear deterrent he no longer adheres to such thinking.

"I agree we should condemn nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence and have as a goal disarmament and nuclear zero," he told the audience. "But I do think we are naive and utopian to believe that it will ever actually happen."

Echoing the pope, Omar questioned the moral standing of the largest nuclear weapons states such as the U.S., China, France, Russia and the United Kingdom. He said that holding such arsenals for "so-called deterrence purposes is disingenuous and preposterous."

"There's no moral justification for some elite and powerful nations for possessing the weapons that would annihilate humanity," he said.

In response to a question from moderator Gerard Powers, director of Catholic Peacebuilding Studies at the school, McElroy said nonviolent action is becoming more prominent around the world.

"The challenge," he said, "is for Catholics to reinforce that."