Opinion
Guest Voices
A U.S. military aide in Woodstock, Britain, carries the "football" containing launch codes for nu

A U.S. military aide in Woodstock, Britain, carries the "football" containing launch codes for nuclear weapons into Blenheim Palace July 12, 2018, where former President Donald Trump and first lady Melania Trump were dining. (CNS/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

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On Jan. 24, 2023, the Doomsday Clock moved to a minute and a half before midnight — 90 seconds for the human community to choose life. The response to this news has been predictable. Many aren't even aware of it; others shrug their shoulders. Some feel their anxiety spike, others zone out on social media while some sink deeper into despair. Others, in a bizarre instance of credulity, welcome it as a sign of the coming rapture. And still others — perhaps the majority — say, "Somebody should do something!"

But what if that somebody is "us" — you and I, the communal "we" of the human community? And, for us Catholics, the communal "we" as disciples of the nonviolent Christ.

What if we gave up nuclear weapons for Lent? Is this just an off-the-wall question? Or does it focus our attention on a central issue of our time? What if the human community is waiting for our spiritual traditions to reclaim their moral backbone and demand that the nine nuclear nations begin giving up their weapons, followed by dismantling them for good? For the good of the planet. For the good of humanity.

For the hope of the future.

Whatever our response to the Doomsday Clock, there is little doubt regarding the crisis to which it points. As the Russian army masses for a spring offensive in Ukraine, Putin continues to threaten the use of nuclear weapons, including withdrawing from the new START treaty. On the other side, escalating the war further, NATO and the United States deliver more and better weapons to Ukraine. With spy balloons and displays of military in the Taiwan Strait, China also challenges the global reach of the U.S. And predictably, following the pathological pattern of war, each side blames the other, raising the geopolitical stakes and escalating the conflict toward the brink of World War III.

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Meanwhile, beneath, beyond or amid all this conflict, the quiet river of Catholic seasons flows, once more, into the season of Lent. We hear the usual question, "What are you giving up for Lent?" It may be a familiar question, but I believe it is the wrong question.

To be clear, I don't mean to imply that the individual practice of penance is not important or praiseworthy. Obviously, it remains a legitimate form of self-sacrifice that prepares us for the Easter mysteries. But, at its core, Lent is less about individual penance, and more about communal conversion.

It is the Body of Christ in the world today — the entire people of God — that is called to participate in the dying and rising Christ. This communal journey is, in turn, focused not on individual sinfulness but on systemic sin. Jesus didn't die to assuage God's anger for our personal sins. He was put to death because he named the demons — the systemic evil — in the cultural and religious arrangements of his day: the brutal imperial occupation, the collaboration of religious leaders with Rome in the oppression of the poor, the exclusion of lepers, the lame, the blind and the

ritually "unclean."

The most urgent pro-life issues facing us today are the climate crisis, the nuclear threat and war — what Pope Frances describes as "a third world war fought piecemeal." Unless we confront these threats, any other concerns about human reproduction, gender identity or sexual morality will, in effect, be moot. Last year the U.S. defense budget totaled more than the next nine countries combined. It is a dangerous illusion to speak of this as necessary for international security. It is, on the contrary, heightening the insecurity of the human community. Instead of funding climate change mitigation and other basic human needs, our elected leaders are handing over record profits to weapons manufacturers.

A still image from video, released by the Russian Defense Ministry, shows what it said to be a

A still image from video, released by the Russian Defense Ministry, shows what it said to be a Russian nuclear-powered submarine sailing during the military drills Umka-2022 in the Chukchi Sea, in this still image taken from handout footage released Sept. 16, 2022. (CNS/Russian Defense Ministry via Reuters)

In striking contrast, during his 2019 visit to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Pope Francis reiterated his condemnation of nuclear weapons: "The use of atomic energy for purposes of war is today, more than ever, a crime not only against the dignity of human beings but against any possible future for our common home. The use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possession of atomic weapons is immoral."

Pope Francis' statement highlights another source of tension in the contemporary church. His vision is, to state it gently, out of sync with most of the Catholic community in the United States. Or, to put it more directly, there is a chasm between the official teaching of the church on nuclear weapons and the convictions of most Catholics, including bishops, priests and laity.

If, for example, a priest, deacon or lay woman gave a homily based on the words of Pope Francis, while making refence to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), and quoting from Archbishop John Wester's 2022 pastoral letter ("Living in the Light of Christ's Peace: Toward a Conversation on Nuclear Disarmament"), as these are grounded in the teaching of Christ, the result would, in many parishes, be resistance — whether silent or vocal. A few parishioners would likely walk out.

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Why this chasm and its polarizing fallout? We are, as author and Passionist Fr. Thomas Berry reminds us, "in between stories." The old story of unlimited progress, free market capitalism, systemic racism, economic inequality and pursuing peace through military victory is still in place. But the new story (which is as ancient as the Hebrew prophets and as perennial as the Gospel) is stirring like a seed in spring. This Lent provides a graced opportunity for this vision to find expression in communal metanoia — a radical change in our collective moral mindset: a willingness to leave behind political, cultural and religious assumptions that have become, at their core, unjust and violent.

I take heart in Jesuit Fr. Dan Berrigan's conviction that every nuclear weapon is a blasphemy against the resurrection, which he describes as "the hope that hopes on." With my other sisters and brothers who strive to be, in the image of Pope Francis, " artisans of peace," I choose to walk in this same stubborn hope. If the Spirit that "blows where it will" is able to transform minds and hearts this Lent, it will be another step toward reclaiming the nonviolent path of the crucified and risen Jesus.

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