Opinion
Editorial



A building that recreates the historical security gate for Manhattan Project workers is seen on the grounds of Los Alamos Project Main Gate Park in New Mexico in 2020. During World War II, the Manhattan Project created the world's first atomic bomb. (CNS/Bob Roller)

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> "*We can no longer deny or ignore the dangerous predicament we have created for ourselves. We need to start talking about it with one another, all of us, and figure out concrete steps toward abolishing nuclear weapons and ending the nuclear threat.*"
>
> *—Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, "Living in the Light of Christ's Peace: A Conversation Toward Nuclear Disarmament"*

Wester wrote those words in January 2022, a haunting call with a certain biblical resonance coming as they did from a place that doesn't have a high profile on the ecclesial landscape. It was fitting, then, that a significant step in engaging a public conversation occurred recently at the University of New Mexico — where activists and religious leaders, including Wester and Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego, dared to engage with the unthinkable.

New Mexico, as the locale where the nuclear threat was born and where it continues to grow to dimensions beyond imagination, is at the heart of an existential global threat that poses a searing moral question for both church and state. In each realm we are forced to ask as we develop the means to destroy the world: Who are we?

The government is clear in where it is headed and how we define ourselves. Despite the history of hundreds of thousands of gruesome civilian deaths caused by the first uses of nuclear weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, we have continued unabated in our quest to develop and refine weapons infinitely more destructive than those primitive examples.

The church was less clear, but is changing. Catholic teaching has steadily increased its objections over the decades until it finally, under Pope Francis, now unambiguously condemns even possession of nuclear weapons.



Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, 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. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

In other hot-button areas regarding the issues of life in the Catholic community, such clarity might cause high-alert warnings to go off in chancery offices everywhere. But on this issue, the teaching rests largely undisturbed, certainly unremarked on from the pulpit. The silence, given the time, treasure and human resources devoted to the continued development of nuclear weapons, has been deafening.

It amounts to a chilling complicity of the nation's largest Christian community in a mega-death industry.

Those stark terms are not intended to minimize the complexity of diminishing the importance of — and reducing the reliance on — the instruments of war that the culture has come to see as essential to security. But the consequence of any use of those weapons is, without qualification, catastrophic and potentially world ending.

Given that undisputed reality, a conversation seems a minimal ask.

The recent event in New Mexico, though limited in scope, is evidence that the kind of discussion envisioned by Wester is possible. It was encouraging for several reasons.

First, it managed to avoid the political turbulence and gather serious people — activists and religious leaders holding differing views — for a serious discussion. The event also resulted from previous discussions held away from public view and sponsored by the University of Southern California's Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies, the Endowed Chair of Roman Catholic Studies at the University of New Mexico, and the University of New Mexico's Religious Studies Program. This matter of global life or death should be at the top of the list for religious thinkers.

McElroy, who participated in those private discussions, at the forum noted the change in papal teaching on nuclear weapons from a previous tolerance for deterrence on the path to disarmament to Francis' declaration that possession of nuclear weapons is "firmly condemned."

Acting on that teaching, especially for American Catholics, would require a radically new type and degree of Catholic identity. It would require a confrontation with cultural presumptions and political dogma upon which there is likely wider societal agreement today than on many constitutional principles. It would require a religious and spiritual imagination able to envision an alternative to weapons as security, as well as a conviction able to confront the enormity of the military-industrial complex of today.

In the current climate of a contentious election, it is clear that any attempt to elevate something as complex as the nuclear issue is going to run into the fierce headwinds of partisan anxieties and the ongoing threats to democracy itself.

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And yet the numbers are inescapable: According to the Congressional Budget Office, in the latest budget projections, the Department of Defense and the Department of Energy plan to spend $756 billion over the 2023-30 period on nuclear forces.

"About two-thirds of those costs would be incurred by DoD, mainly for ballistic missile submarines and intercontinental ballistic missiles. DOE's costs would be primarily for nuclear weapons laboratories and supporting activities," according to the report.

According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, "The time is ripe for the United States to reevaluate its status-quo way of doing things. The status quo does not bring us any closer to security and annually diverts billions of taxpayer dollars away from more urgent causes like education, healthcare, and mitigating climate change, the most wide-spread risk threatening humanity and the environment today."

In another report, the organization described the moment as "dire," given the deterioration of relations between Russia and the United States, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the approaching deadline for extending the New START Treaty limiting nuclear weapons.

Wester sees it as a matter of Catholic necessity to address the problem. In his pastoral letter, which should be distributed, read and discussed throughout the U.S. church, he writes:

> I felt disturbed by our history, the long, dark legacy of building the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, and many thousands of nuclear weapons since then. We are the people who designed and built these weapons of mass destruction. We were the first to use them. We must be the people to dismantle them and make sure they are never used again.

While New Mexico may have a place of historic prominence in initiating the nuclear age, the state's boundaries can't contain the responsibility for today's predicament. We all pay for the weapons with our tax dollars, many of us benefit from our investments in those who develop and build them, and we allow the military-industrial complex to stay in an obscure and distant place, out of range of our everyday concerns. We remain silent. Our altars and Eucharists remain undisturbed by the possibility of global annihilation.

Our Earth, our God of peace, our consciences demand much more of us. Again: A conversation, a start, seems the least we can do.

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