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Nuclear Weapons and Moral Questions: The Path to Zero

Most Reverend Edwin O'Brien | Jul. 30, 2009

The following address was delivered by Baltimore Archbishop Edwin O?Brien July 29 at the 2009 Deterrence Symposium sponsored by the U.S. Strategic Command, Omaha, Nebraska.

It is an honor and pleasure for me to offer some modest reflections on ?Nuclear Weapons and Moral Questions: The Path to Zero.? I am grateful to General Kevin Chilton and the U.S. Strategic Command for hosting this first annual Deterrence Symposium and for inviting me to be part of this impressive gathering.

I have been asked to speak at the end of what has been a long day for many of you. Believing in a merciful God, I will try to keep my reflections to a merciful length.

Since this is a dinner speech, starting with a joke is a basic expectation, but I should warn you that archbishops are rarely funny. But here goes.

A soldier, a marine, a sailor and an airman went on a hike. The path wound higher and higher up a mountain. From time to time they stopped to admire the view from the ledge of one of the many sheer cliffs along the way.

As the day wore on toward evening, they got into dispute about which of the armed services best served God and country. The argument got so heated that the four of them got into a brawl and their fight carried them over a cliff to their deaths.

The four servicemen found themselves in front of St. Peter at the pearly gates of Heaven. With their dispute still unresolved, they asked St. Peter: ?Which service branch best serves our country??

St. Peter replied, ?I can't answer that.? But just then a dove landed on St. Peter's shoulder with a note in its beak. St. Peter opened the note and read it to the four service men:

?Gentlemen: All the branches of the military services are honorable and courageous. Each serves your country well. Be proud of that.
Signed: GOD
P.S. Semper Fi.?

My apologies to the Army, the Navy and the Air Force.

One of the great joys of my years as a priest has been my ministry with the U.S. military. Shortly after my ordination in the mid-sixties, I served as a civilian chaplain at West Point. In the early seventies, I was an Army Chaplain and did a tour in Vietnam. For a decade, I had the honor of serving both the Church and the entire military family as the Archbishop for the Military Services before Pope Benedict XVI appointed me to serve as the Archbishop of Baltimore two years ago.

My service as a chaplain has enriched my life and ministry. I have personally witnessed the skill, courage, and dedication of so many who serve our nation in all branches of the military. Theirs is a noble calling?to protect

our nation and to defend peace. In the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church: ?Those who are sworn to serve their country in the armed forces are servants of the security and freedom of nations. If they carry out their duty honorably, they truly contribute to the common good of the nation and the maintenance of peace.?

I wish to recognize and thank the military leaders in this room tonight. You have sworn an oath to uphold the Constitution and to carry out the military policies of our nation, including the awesome responsibilities that come with nuclear weapons. Your participation in this Symposium is a sign of your commitment to explore and assess the broader dimensions and moral implications of these policies, and to place your experience at the service of policy makers and analysts as they work to evaluate and improve nuclear weapons policy. It is good to have this opportunity to meet with you face to face as we work through complex questions of nuclear policy.

My task tonight is to reflect on the moral questions that face our nation and world as we seek to build lasting peace in the shadow of nuclear weapons with all their massive destructive potential. I have been asked to offer more challenge than comfort. This is not an easy role for me. Within our Bishops? Conference I am often a defender of the proper role of military action and a skeptic of easy and naïve hopes. I know our world remains a dangerous place. I have been on battlefields. I know the moral struggles that come with battlefield decisions. But I also have great respect for military institutions and for the men and women who serve in them. In this talk I will offer hard questions and directions, not easy answers. I bring the voice of a pastor and teacher, not an expert analyst or policy maker.

My reflections come out of the Catholic moral tradition, but many of the values and concerns that grow out of our faith tradition are shared by people of many religions and no religion at all. As the late Pope John Paul II stated when he addressed the United Nations on nuclear weapons over twenty-five years ago, the Catholic Church strives to echo the ?moral conscience of humanity, a conscience illumined and guided by Christian faith, ?but which is ? nonetheless profoundly human? and ?shared by all men and women of sincerity and good will.?

Basic Principles

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the fifth commandment could not be more clear: ?You shall not kill.? In Catholic teaching human life is sacred because every human being is created in the image and likeness of God. For this reason, our Church works consistently and persistently to defend the life and dignity of all: the unborn, the poor at home and abroad, the immigrant, and persons in every age and condition of life. Our Catechism teaches: ?God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being.?

In order to protect human life and dignity and to set moral limits on the use of force, a tradition of teaching on what is a ?just war? has developed and continues to evolve in the Catholic Church. It is a teaching whose principles are widely discussed, debated and employed and which reverberates in other religious and moral traditions.

It must be said at the outset that our Church supports building international agreements and structures that will make war ever less likely as a means of resolving disputes between nations and peoples. Ultimately we must work for a world without war. In the powerful and haunting words of Pope Paul VI to the United Nations that were repeated often by Pope John Paul II, "No more war, war never again!" The international community must seek ways to make war a relic of humanity?s past if humanity is to have a future worthy of human dignity. As Pope Benedict XVI has taught: ?War always represents a failure for the international community and a grave loss for humanity.?

But in this fallen and often dangerous world, at this point in human history, the traditional principles that guide the just use of force can, and should, inform moral assessments of all aspects of war, especially policies on nuclear weapons and deterrence. Of the principles that apply to war of any kind, some that are most directly

applicable to questions of nuclear policy are:

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- The use of force must be a last resort. We have a prior obligation to avoid war if at all possible.
- tThe use of force must be discriminate. Civilians and civilian facilities may not be the object of direct, intentional attack and care must be taken to avoid and minimize indirect harm to civilians.
- tThe use of force must be proportionate. The overall destruction must not outweigh the good to be achieved.
- tAnd there must be a probability of success.

Popes of the modern era have applied this moral tradition to nuclear weapons and deterrence policy for decades in formal teaching and in papal addresses to the United Nations. The Holy See, in its capacity as a Permanent Observer to the United Nations, has addressed these questions in a particular way through ratification of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and active participation in the Treaty?s review conferences over the past four decades.

For our part, the Catholic bishops of the United States have examined U.S. nuclear policy in light of our moral tradition, most notably in our pastoral letters of 1983, The Challenge of Peace, and 1993, The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace, as well as in numerous public statements and ongoing dialogue with public officials to this very day.

Nuclear war-fighting is rejected in Church teaching because it cannot ensure noncombatant immunity and the likely destruction and lingering radiation would violate the principle of proportionality. Even the limited use of so-called ?mini-nukes? would likely lower the barrier to future uses and could lead to indiscriminate and disproportionate harm. And there is the danger of escalation to nuclear exchanges of cataclysmic proportions.

The real risks inherent in nuclear war make the probability of success elusive. In his 2006 World Day of Peace Message, Pope Benedict XVI wrote: ?What can be said ? about those governments which count on nuclear arms as a means of ensuring the security of their countries? Along with countless persons of good will, one can state that this point of view is not only baneful but also completely fallacious. In a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims.?

Both the Holy See and our Bishops? Conference have spoken about the strategy of nuclear deterrence as an interim measure. As the U.S. bishops wrote in 1983: ?Deterrence is not an adequate strategy as a long-term basis for peace; it is a transitional strategy justifiable only in conjunction with resolute determination to pursue arms control and disarmament.?

In Catholic teaching, the task is not to make the world safer through the threat of nuclear weapons, but rather to make the world safer from nuclear weapons through mutual and verifiable nuclear disarmament. This will require both bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

From a moral perspective it is important to judge actions from the perspective of the end. The Greek word for end is telos. In the words of Pope John Paul II: ?[T]he moral life has an essential ?teleological? character, since it consists in the deliberate ordering of human acts to God, the supreme good and ultimate end (telos) of man.?

In Catholic moral teaching, the end does not justify the means, but the end can and should inform the means. The moral end we seek ought to shape the means we use. When it comes to issues of war and peace, and nuclear weapons and deterrence, the end is the protection of the life and dignity of the human person through defending the tranquility of order. Tranquillitas ordinis is peace built on justice and charity.

So in this moral analysis of nuclear weapons and deterrence, let us start with the end and work backwards. The moral end is clear: a world free of the threat of nuclear weapons. This goal should guide our efforts. Every nuclear weapons system and every nuclear weapons policy should be judged by the ultimate goal of protecting human life and dignity and the related goal of ridding the world of these weapons in mutually verifiable ways.

It will not be easy. Nuclear weapons can be dismantled, but both the human knowledge and the technical capability to build weapons cannot be undone. A world with zero nuclear weapons will need robust measures to monitor, enforce and verify compliance. The path to zero will be long and treacherous. But humanity must walk this path with both care and courage in order to build a future free of the nuclear threat.

The goal is not new. For many decades the Catholic Church and numerous other leaders and institutions of goodwill have supported a nuclear-weapons-free world. In 1968 many nations of the world committed themselves to a vision of a world without nuclear weapons and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty came into being. Today only four sovereign states are not parties to the Treaty ? India, Israel, Pakistan and North Korea.

More than two decades ago, President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev called for abolishing all nuclear weapons. In the past two years Secretaries George Shultz, William Perry and Henry Kissinger and Senator Sam Nunn have promoted a nuclear-free world. Abolishing nuclear weapons is not a narrowly partisan or nationalistic issue; it is an issue of fundamental moral values that should unite people across national and ideological boundaries.

It is worth noting that earlier this year President Barack Obama and President Dmitry Medvedev committed ?our two countries to achieving a nuclear free world.? And just this month they signed a Joint Understanding to guide negotiations on reducing strategic warheads and delivery vehicles and extending effective verification measures before the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) expires late this year. This is an important step down the road to nuclear disarmament.

Unlike the four servicemen hiking up the mountain, the nations of the world cannot afford to allow themselves to get caught up in deadly competitions and struggles. Our world and its leaders must stay focused on the destination of a nuclear-weapons-free world and on the concrete steps that lead there. Especially in a world with weapons of mass destruction, and at a time when some nations, including regimes like North Korea and Iran, are reportedly seeking to build such weapons, we must pursue a world in which fewer nuclear states have fewer nuclear weapons. We should carefully assess every nuclear policy proposal in light of its potential to help bring us closer to a world without nuclear weapons.

Seeking a Moral Path to Zero

As we look down a moral path to zero we can see some signposts along the way. But before we do, it is essential to note the limits of the Church?s responsibility and competence. Bishops and other moral teachers are on much firmer ground when they articulate moral principles drawn from faith and reason and less so when applying these principles to particular policy choices. These more concrete judgments involve both political and technical realities that people of goodwill may evaluate differently. It is especially important to recognize the expertise, experience and judgment of leaders like those gathered in this room tonight when moral principles are applied to concrete situations fraught with competing and complex choices.

As the bishops wrote in The Challenge of Peace: ?When making applications of these principles ... prudential judgments are involved based on specific circumstances which can change or which can be interpreted differently by people of good will?. However, the moral judgments that we make in specific cases, while not binding in conscience, are to be given serious attention and consideration by Catholics as they determine whether their moral judgments are consistent with the Gospel.?

The first signpost along the path to zero is the nature and direction of the policy of deterrence itself. The Second Vatican Council addressed the limits of deterrence in 1965. The Council argued that deterrence is only able to produce ?peace of a sort.? Peace is more than the absence of war; it is built painstakingly on the foundation of justice and human rights. Tragically the vast resources devoted to acquiring ?ever new weapons? can rob nations of the resources needed to address the causes of human suffering and conflict. In the words of the Council Fathers, ?The arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which ensnares the poor to an intolerable degree.?

Pope John Paul II spoke about nuclear deterrence at the United Nations in 1982. He said: ?In current conditions ?deterrence? based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself but as a step on the way to progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable.? In other words, deterrence only has moral meaning in light of the goal of deterring the use of nuclear weapons as we work for a world without nuclear weapons.

This moral assessment was applied by the Catholic bishops of our nation to U.S. nuclear policy in 1983. They reiterated that deterrence is not ?an end in itself? and must lead to progressive disarmament. Over twenty-five years ago they wrote: ?What previously had been defined as a safe and stable system of deterrence is today viewed with political and moral skepticism.? In 2009, it is even clearer that nuclear deterrence cannot be ?the long-term basis for peace.?

The weakening of the non-proliferation regime, which has contributed to the spread of nuclear weapons and technology to other nations, and the threat of nuclear terrorism, which cannot be deterred with nuclear weapons, point to the need to move beyond nuclear deterrence as rapidly as possible.

In Catholic moral teaching the only morally legitimate purpose of nuclear deterrence is to deter the use of nuclear weapons by others. This means that ?not all forms of deterrence are morally acceptable.? It is not morally acceptable to aim for nuclear superiority instead of sufficiency. It is not morally legitimate to develop new nuclear weapons for new missions such as to counter non-nuclear threats or to make them smaller and more ?usable? as ?bunker busters.? Why? Because these policies and actions lead us further away from the goal of a world without nuclear weapons. They lead us toward a world more likely to rely on nuclear weapons for security.

In identifying other signposts along the road ahead let me draw from the Holy See?s May 2009 statement to the Preparatory Committee for the 2010 Review Conference on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. There are a number of morally significant signposts for our nation as it walks with the international community along the path to zero.

The Holy See argues that entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty would demonstrate that nations are serious about their commitment to a nuclear-weapons-free world. For us in the United States, this means that public opinion makers, including religious leaders, should help build public dialogue and support for ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. And leaders of both political parties should build a strong bipartisan consensus to support the Treaty as an important step on the road to zero.

The Holy See supports negotiations on a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty to prohibit the further production of weapons-grade uranium and plutonium. The United States should provide robust leadership for negotiations on this Treaty. A world moving to rid itself of nuclear weapons is a world that stops producing weapons-grade materials and secures those stockpiles that exist.

The Vatican also advocated for the revision of the military doctrines of nuclear weapon states. The Congressionally mandated Nuclear Posture Review provides an opportunity for the United States to move toward reducing its reliance on nuclear weapons. To build international confidence in our nation?s commitment

to working for a world without nuclear weapons, our nation should renounce the first use of nuclear weapons, declare that they will not be used against non-nuclear threats, and confine our nation?s nuclear doctrine to deterring the use of nuclear weapons by others. These actions will strengthen the moral credibility of our nation as we seek to persuade other nations to forego development of weapons of mass destruction.

The Holy See supports placing the peaceful use of nuclear energy under the ?strict control of the International Atomic Energy Agency? (IAEA) and strengthening the capacity of the Agency to monitor non-proliferation and develop ?common solutions and international structures for the production of nuclear fuel? to ensure safety, security and fair access for all nations.

Our nation could exercise its global leadership, in partnership with other leading nations, to strengthen the International Atomic Energy Agency, both to enhance adherence to non-proliferation and to ensure a safe, reliable and available source of fuel for peaceful nuclear power in nations throughout the world. It is critically important that the United States work with the international community to prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons by non-nuclear states and to prevent the transfer of weapons and nuclear materials to terrorists and other non-state actors.

The Holy See affirmed both national policies and bilateral agreements to reduce nuclear weapons. With the expiration of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) looming in December of this year, our nation should negotiate a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty that includes deeper, irreversible cuts in nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles, and extends and strengthens verification procedures. The recent discussions between President Obama and President Medvedev are encouraging in this regard.

The United States and the Russian Federation can also use this opportunity to work toward taking weapons off immediately available alert status. Any morally justifiable form of deterrence can be achieved at dramatically lower levels of risk by transforming operational practices as some other nuclear powers have done.

Finally, the United States, responding to the prompting of the Holy See and others, could use its important role in many regions of the world to encourage creation of nuclear-weapons-free zones to build ?trust and confidence? as interim steps on the path to a world without nuclear weapons.

A Difficult, but Hopeful Path

A difficult road lies ahead. It is essential to translate the goal of a world without nuclear weapons from an idealistic dream or pious hope, to a genuine policy objective to be achieved carefully over time, but not postponed indefinitely. The horizon for a nuclear-free world should not recede too far into the future. If it does, the goal risks losing moral urgency and relevance.

Now some will argue that a world without nuclear weapons is a dangerous, utopian dream. They will assert that it can never be. They raise valid questions about the new risks that might arise as the world moves toward zero. Will moving toward zero increase the strategic value of even a small number of nuclear weapons and make it harder to stop proliferation? Will there be an incentive to move to counter-population deterrence, despite moral objections, because there are insufficient numbers for counterforce deterrence? These questions deserve creative and concrete solutions?solutions that can only be crafted by committed policy makers, experts and scientists.

Religious leaders, prominent officials, and other people of goodwill who support a nuclear-weapons-free world are not naïve about the task ahead. They know the path will be difficult and will require determined political leadership, strong public support, and the dedicated skills of many capable leaders and technical experts. But difficult is not impossible.

We take up this task mindful of the fears of nuclear war, but ultimately we are driven by hope for a better future

for humanity. Pope Benedict dedicated his second encyclical to hope. He wrote: ?All serious and upright human conduct is hope in action. ... Only the great certitude of hope that my own life and history in general, despite all failures, are held firm by the indestructible power of Love, and that this gives them their meaning and importance, only this kind of hope can then give the courage to act and to persevere.? And when the stakes are so high and the consequences of failure so great, persevere we must.

And so when we get to the telos of our lives, the ultimate end and purpose of our lives, symbolized in my opening story at the ?pearly gates of heaven,? we will not ask Saint Peter: ?Was our branch of service the best? Was our nation the greatest?? But rather Saint Peter will ask us, ?Did you do all you could to protect the lives and dignity of all of God?s children?? With the help of God and the hard work of those in this room tonight, my hope is that on the question of the threat of nuclear weapons, we will be able to answer, ?Yes.?

Most Reverend Edwin O?Brien is the Archbishop of Baltimore and a Member of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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