

If we don't end nuclear weapons, they will end us

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Viewed from a legal, political, security and most of all -- moral -- perspective, there is no justification today for the continued maintenance of nuclear weapons.

With these words while speaking in Kansas City, Mo., on July 1, Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, the Vatican's ambassador to the United Nations, reaffirmed Catholic teaching on nuclear weapons and deterrence -- teachings seemingly not widely known among Catholics and totally rejected by the nuclear-armed nations, including our own government.

The diplomat's speech was among the clearest enunciations of Catholic teachings on nuclear deterrence, but it was not the first time the Vatican has presented its position.

In 2002, Chullikatt told a U.N. committee working to prepare for the 2005 review conference of the nuclear weapons Non-Proliferation Treaty: "There can be no moral acceptance of military doctrines that embody the permanence of nuclear weapons. ... My delegation wishes to reaffirm its well-known position: Nuclear weapons are incompatible with the peace we seek for the 21st century; they cannot be justified. These weapons are instruments of death and destruction."

In Kansas City, the Vatican diplomat stressed that this is the moment "to begin addressing in a systematic way the legal, political and technical requisites for a nuclear-weapons-free world." Speaking on behalf of the Vatican, he backed a comprehensive new approach to end the nuclear deterrence stalemate, a system essentially based on the threat of terror. Three decades ago, the U.S. bishops begrudgingly granted moral acceptability to this system -- as long as progressive steps were being taken toward total nuclear disarmament.

Thirty years on, we find nuclear deterrence has become a permanent, pernicious part of global life. Out of sight, out of mind -- except among those who plan new weapons and assign others to keep their fingers on the switches that can end life on the planet as we know it.

Yes, the U.S. and Russia have made substantial cuts in their nuclear excesses. But instead of moving dramatically toward nuclear disarmament -- and despite promises by President Obama to work to rid the world of nuclear weapons -- the slow pace of these collective efforts have had an opposite effect, making their presence a permanent, and seemingly acceptable, element of modern warfare.

Defying imagination and reason, the U.S. is moving forward fast, not in ridding ourselves of nuclear weapons, but instead beginning to build a new round of them, driving the nuclear race forward.

Pure and simple, this is immoral policy and demands our strongest condemnation.

Chullikatt's words this month were intended to wake up Catholics and others to the unacceptable horror in which we find ourselves, a horror moral men and women cannot knowingly accept without the strongest of objections.

Remember this: As long as the superpowers maintain their weapons and plunge forward in upgrading current systems -- they call it "maintenance" -- our nation has no moral authority to demand that other nations abandon their own ambitions.

Estimates are that there are more than 22,000 strategic nuclear warheads among the world's countries, with 8,000 of these kept ready to fire at any time.

This is nonsense.

Earlier this year, the U.S. government approved \$80 billion over the next decade to bolster its nuclear weapons systems. Every dollar of the \$80 billion is an assault against humanity; every dollar represents a sinful rejection of life and God's creative plan.

Chullikatt's decision to speak in Kansas City has special meaning. He came to this Midwestern diocese because it is the site of a major new nuclear weapons manufacturing facility, the first to be built in the country in 33 years. The site, viewed from beyond chain-link fences, covers many acres. A sign outside refers to the facility benignly as a "campus," as if, come next year, classes in the arts and humanities are set to begin.

Chullikatt puts it this way: "The thought of pouring hundreds of billions of additional dollars into the world's nuclear arsenals is nothing short of sinful."

The archbishop's speech is yet another iteration of our church's rejection of nuclear war and nuclear weaponry, a singular recognition that the scope and deadliness of nuclear warfare makes it impossible to accept -- or even comprehend.

Consider these statements:

- "The arms race is one of the greatest curses on the human race, and the harm it inflicts upon the poor is more than can be endured" (*Gaudium et Spes*, Second Vatican Council).
- "Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unhesitating condemnation" (*Gaudium et Spes*, Second Vatican Council).
- "The total consequences of full-scale nuclear war are impossible to predict, but even if a mere fraction of the available weapons were to be used, one has to ask when the inevitable escalation can be imagined, and whether the very destruction of humanity is not a real possibility" (Pope John Paul II, Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, 1981).
- "Nuclear deterrence should be used as a step on the way toward progressive disarmament. Each proposed addition to our strategic system or change in strategic doctrine must be assessed precisely in light of whether it will render steps toward "progressive disarmament" more or less likely" (U.S. bishops, "The Challenge of Peace," 1983).

On his deathbed in 2002, Philip Berrigan, who spent much of his life working against nuclear weapons, explained the struggle. Dictating his final words in a statement to loved ones, the peace activist said: "I die with the conviction ... that nuclear weapons are the scourge of the earth: to mine for them, use them, is a curse against God, the human family, and the earth itself."

Nearly a decade after Berrigan's death, the U.S. trudges unheedingly down the nuclear path. Now more than ever, we need to attend to the messages of the often marginalized peacemakers in our midst. We may not have many more chances to heed their warnings: If we don't end nuclear weapons, they will end us.

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