

WE MUST DO NO LESS

Contribution of Bishop Robert W. McElroy to the Conference on Perspectives for a world free from Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament'

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The Church proclaims that the promotion of peace is an integral element of Christ's ministry of redemption in the life of the world. Thus any engagement of the Church in the central issues of nuclear arms which confront us in the current age must ultimately proceed from a commitment to conversion and grace which is equally rooted in the reality of the human condition, the substantive notion of peace which Christ holds out to us, and the dignity and solidarity which all of us share as children on the one God.

Such a search for redemptive action in the world must recognize fully the complex and daunting realities of international conflict, the power and prevalence of nuclear weapons, and the fundamental layers of inequality and historical oppression which underlie the seething animosities that infect the hearts of men and women.

But the work of the Church can never be rooted principally in these realities, any more than the redemptive ministry of Christ himself was rooted in the sinfulness and failing of the human family. The ministry of the Church in the promotion of peace must at its core be one of conversion to new ways of thinking in the hearts of individuals and the international system.

In approaching the issues posed by nuclear weapons in the present moment, the Church must foster three dimensions of conversion in the world: a conversion from the prison of isolated national interests to the perspective of an integrated international common good; a conversion from the illusion of safety in nuclear strength to the reality of nuclear instability and proliferation; and a conversion from the reliance on weapons of war to the construction of weapons of peace. Each of these three conversions must be for the Church both an internal challenge and an external witness.

A Conversion to the International Common Good

We have just returned from a deeply spiritual moment of remembrance and prayer centered on the enormous contributions which Saint John XXIII made to the life of the Church and the world. His monumental encyclical Pacem In Terris was a resonating appeal to the conscience of the world to confront the very question which we struggle with in these days: the specter of nuclear war. But even more fundamentally, Pacem In Terris was a profound call to the international community to recognize the imperatives of a truly universal, or international common good that had emerged in the twentieth century, and to integrate that international common good with the specific common good of each nation. It is this embrace of the international common good which is the first level of conversion that the Church must foster among citizens and nations in order to forge a sustainable solution to the nuclear dilemma.

The starting point for identifying the content of the international common good lies in the pivotal affirmations that God is the Father of the entire human family, that creation is a gift to every woman and man, that social structures must advance justice for all peoples, and that war is a massive failure of the entire human family. The centrality of the international common good in the modern era comes from understanding that many of the most profound human dilemmas that touch upon these affirmations of faith and humanity lie far beyond the ability of any nation or small group of nations to address justly in a globalized society.

The problem of nuclear weapons today is to a great degree a result of limited perspectives of national interests which over the past fifty years have destroyed the original trajectory of the arms control regime that sought to make universal nuclear disarmament feasible. In short, the current nuclear crisis reflects the failure of nations to embrace an ethic of the universal common good in the very issue area where such an ethic was most cogent and most necessary.

Our conversion to the universal common good requires the recognition that the future of our world depends upon the willingness of all nations – especially the most powerful – to view

their own national common good as interwoven in a mutually reinforcing pattern oriented toward the good of humanity as a whole.

Pope Francis spoke to this reality in his Message to the 2014 Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons: “Nuclear weapons are a global problem affecting all nations and impacting future generations and the planet that is our home. A global ethic is needed if we are to reduce the nuclear threat and work towards nuclear disarmament. Now, more than ever, technological, social and political interdependence urgently calls for an ethic of solidarity in the spirit of Pope John Paul II, which encourages people to work together for a more secure world, and a future that is increasingly rooted in moral values and responsibility on a global scale.”

The Chilling Reality of Nuclear Arsenals

If the conversion to an ethic of the universal common good is the first foundation for progress in addressing the specter of nuclear arms, revealing clearly the chilling reality of the nuclear threat in the present moment is the second foundation. The Church must promote a conversion from the illusion that safety lies in the possession of nuclear weapons to the recognition that nuclear weapons constitute an increasingly destabilizing threat to humanity. The Church’s fundamental goal in this transformation is to dispel the complacency that currently subverts and paralyzes international efforts at nuclear arms reductions, a complacency based upon denial and the false assumption that the logic of nuclear deterrence and proliferation has not fundamentally changed in the past fifty years.

The Holy See’s Intervention at the 2014 United Nations Disarmament Conference powerfully unmasked the illusory nature of the current nuclear regime: “Rather than providing security, as the defenders of nuclear deterrence contend, reliance on the strategy of nuclear deterrence has created a less secure world. In a multi-polar world, the concept of nuclear deterrence works less as a stabilizing force and more as an incentive for countries to break out of the non-proliferation regime and develop nuclear arsenals of their own.”

Taken together, the changes in the nuclear world order which have followed the end of the Cold War have systematically destroyed the foundations for an enduring ethic of deterrence. The resistance of the dominant nuclear powers to further substantial reductions in their nuclear arsenals has signaled to the community of nations that the commitment to end nuclear weapons in the world has been effectively abandoned. The toleration of newly emerging nuclear powers, sometimes for geo-political reasons, betrays the commitment to stop proliferation and constitutes a double standard which undermines unity and progress. Major nuclear threats lie in the action of regional powers, and even more chillingly in the actions of terrorists and insurgents with aspirations for global violence.

The Church's role in witnessing to the peril that lies in the current course of nuclear proliferation can be a critical antidote to nationalist and militarist assertions that security and peace in any meaningful sense can be obtained through the possession of nuclear weapons. But for that witness to be effective, it must reach deeply into the Catholic community at its roots, and speak with particular prophetic power and certitude to the great nuclear powers which are on the cusp of modernization programs that will dramatically intensify the trajectory toward proliferation, and ultimately confrontation.

A Conversion from the Logic of War to the Logic of Peace

The final avenue through which the Church can contribute to the solution of the nuclear dilemma in the present moment is by propelling the conversion from the logic of war to the logic of peace. As followers of Jesus Christ we are caught in powerful cross-currents whenever we approach questions of war and peace. We recognize that on the most fundamental level, any recourse to war is incompatible with the Gospel of the Lord who taught us to see in every man and women our sister or brother in Christ. Yet we also know that evil exists in the world, both in the hearts of men and in the structures that human sin have created, and that at times evil cannot be opposed effectively without the recourse to violence.

The Church is in the midst of a fundamental reappraisal of how to balance the Christian obligation to non-violence with the need to resist evil in the world. The traditional norms of

just war, particularly in the ius ad bellum, increasingly appear to be incapable of effectively constraining violence in the modern world. The power of non-violence, once relegated to the category of romantic idealism, has emerged as a potent force for social transformation and the building of lasting peace.

The Church must be a voice in the world constantly pointing humanity toward the path of non-violence and the logic of peace. Too often, we acquiesce in the tolerance of weapons, threats and war, concluding that the logic of war can at least hold evil at bay. But ultimately, it is the logic of war which, once unleashed, invites evil into the core of our world, our nation, our hearts.

As Pope Francis underscored in his 2017 World Day of Peace Message, to be true disciples of Jesus Christ in the present moment includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence. "Jesus himself lived in violent times. Yet he taught that the true battlefield, where violence and peace meet, is the human heart, for 'it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come....Christ's message in this regard offers a radically positive approach."

This radically positive approach demands that we change the default position in our reasoning about war from acquiescence in the patterns and structures of violence to an active and persistent engagement with strategies of peace. Part of that engagement must be a radical dedication by the Church to bring the poor and the marginalized into the very heart of the international debate on war and peace. For it is the poor and the marginalized who suffer most greatly from the theft which the arms trade constitutes, it is they endure the greatest cruelty in the midst of war, and it is they, because of their radical dependence, who may have a unique capacity to convey to us who live in comfort that on the issue of nuclear weapons, we all stand in radical dependence and vulnerability.

In 2008 Pope Benedict, surveying the nuclear landscape in the world, lamented that an ethic of complacency and even a toleration of limited nuclear expansion had become inextricably intertwined with the ethic of deterrence, and that as a result the possession of nuclear weapons was increasingly becoming a sign of great power status, a temptation for newly emerging powers to defend their interests and their peoples, and a spur to modernization.

“In difficult times such as these, Pope Benedict wrote, “it is truly necessary for all persons of good will to come together to reach concrete agreements aimed at an effective demilitarization, especially in the area of nuclear arms. At a time when the process of nuclear non-proliferation is at a standstill, I feel bound to entreat those in authority to resume with greater determination negotiations for a progressive and mutually agreed dismantling of existing nuclear weapons. In renewing this appeal, I know that I am echoing the desire of all those concerned for the future of humanity.”

For the Church to contribute meaningfully to the attainment of such a dismantling, it must help both the Catholic community and the nations of the world to engage in new forms of thinking: a conversion to an ethic of the universal common good, a conversion to the chilling reality that nuclear arsenals undermine rather than secure peace, and a conversion to building strategies of peace in recognition that the strategies of war are bankrupt and destructive. Pacem In Terris was monumentally important because it called the world to new ways of thinking. The Church at this pivotal moment must do no less.