

Disarmament, Deterrence, and Preserving Peace

Blessed Pope John XXII (1881-1963), the beloved pontiff who summoned the bishops of the world together for the Second Vatican Council, called for disarmament and the end of the arms race. He did this explicitly on April 11, 1963, in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty), specifically calling for the banning of nuclear weapons.

Pope John was not merely an observer of war. He had personal experience of World War I (the so-called “war to end all wars”) and World War II. During World War I he had been drafted into the Italian army, and he served as stretcher-bearer and a chaplain. During World War II he served as Apostolic Delegate to Turkey and Greece, and he used his office to help the Jewish underground in saving thousands of refugees in Europe.

The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, which put the world on the brink of nuclear war, also provides a background for his encyclical. The United States and the USSR (Russia), the two nuclear superpowers, were in a standoff. Pope John sent a message to the Soviet embassy in Rome to be transmitted to the Kremlin on October 24, 1962. His message appeared in *Pravda*, the official Communist newspaper, on October 26, under the headline, “We beg all rulers not to be deaf to the cry of humanity.” This gave Nikita Khrushchev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party, a way out of nuclear confrontation with the United States. Two days later, he agreed to withdraw the missiles from Cuba and was perceived as a man of peace. A possible nuclear confrontation between the world’s two superpowers had been avoided.

At the Second Vatican Council (October 11, 1962-December 8, 1965), the council fathers--all of whom had memories of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Second World War, and at least some who had memories of the First World War--expressed grave concerns regarding military armaments maintained for “deterrence,” noting that they did not think it “a safe way to preserve a steady peace” (#81, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965).



Photo by Pax Christi DC

The Vatican II bishops viewed the arms race as a “treacherous trap for humanity and one that injures the poor to an intolerable degree” (#81). The bishops did not consider more armaments, especially nuclear weapons, as a solution for guaranteeing peace, noting that with all our weaponry we have no more than a “peace of sort” (#81).

The U.S. bishops took up the issue of disarmament in a lengthy pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response*, in 1983. The “challenge” taken up by the bishops and which continues to confront us today was best expressed by Pope John Paul II when he visited Hiroshima, one of the sites of America’s nuclear bombing of Japan prior to the end of World War II in 1945: “From now on it is only through a conscious choice and through a deliberate policy that humanity can survive” (Address to Scientists and Scholars, #4, Origins 10, 1981).

The 1983 letter was written during the negotiations of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, also known as SALT II, and was published as President Ronald Reagan was proposing his so-called “Strategic Defense Initiative” (SDI), popularly known as “Star Wars.” *The Challenge of Peace* urged a framework built on a “conscious choice” and “deliberate policy” in the

pursuit of securing peace. They provided the following guidelines regarding a Christian approach:

- 1) No Christian can rightfully carry out orders or policies deliberately aimed at killing non-combatants (#148). Nuclear weapons clearly cannot discriminate between combatants and noncombatants.
- 2) No deliberate initiation of nuclear warfare can be justified.
- 3) One of the criteria for “just war” is a reasonable hope of success in bringing about justice and peace. The bishops doubt that there is reasonable hope of doing so once nuclear weapons have been exchanged in a conflict. “The burden of proof remains on those who assert that meaningful limitation is possible” (#’s 157, 159).

Deterrence

In 1982, Pope John Paul II judged the strategy of deterrence, the storing up weapons to deter others from initiating a first attack, to be only *conditionally morally acceptable* during a message to the United Nations. The 1983 pastoral letter followed the lead of the pope on deterrence, noting a “strictly conditioned moral acceptance of deterrence . . . [since deterrence is not] adequate for a long term basis for peace” (# 186).

The conditional moral acceptance, however, was met with opposition by Catholic peace groups in 1983. A Pax Christi Reflection Guide following the publication of *The Challenge of Peace* stated concern with deterrence in the following way: “Deterrence is like the person who fell off the 70th floor of the skyscraper. As he passed the 38th floor, he shouted, ‘I’m doing all right so far.’”

While this limited tolerance for deterrence was reaffirmed in 1993 by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops through their Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, the tide had begun to change. There was a growing recognition that a strategy of deterrence had not stopped proliferation; more and more nations developed or began to develop their own nuclear weapons, making the world more dangerous.

In 2005, a Vatican spokesperson reported that the conditions that allowed for the conditional acceptance of deterrence no longer applied. This stance was

repeated in speeches in March and April of 2010 by Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the then Vatican Representative to the United Nations.

As recently as July of 2011, Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, the current Vatican Representative to the U.N. addressed this issue in a speech to the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph. He reported that:

When the 2010 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty opened, Pope Benedict XVI, who had previously called for “negotiations for a progressive and mutually agreed dismantling of existing nuclear weapons” sent a message asking delegates to “overcome the burdens of history”. He said, “I encourage the initiatives to seek progressive disarmament and the creation of zones free of nuclear weapons, with a view to their complete elimination from the planet”.

The call for disarmament, and the mounting call for an end to a strategy of deterrence, continues as Church leaders and all the members of the body of Christ continue to advocate peace. Armaments not only endanger lives because of their lethal nature but they also deprive the poor and most vulnerable-folks whose needs should be given priority, in light of Catholic Social Teaching--from receiving what is critical for their survival.

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Resources

Pacem in Terris. Pope John XXIII, May 15, 1961

Gaudium et Spes. Vatican Council II, December 7, 1965.

The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, May 3, 1983.

The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace (A Reflection of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on the Tenth Anniversary of The Challenge of Peace). United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 17, 1993.

World Day of Peace Message (Fighting Poverty To Build Peace). Pope Benedict XVI, January 1, 2009.

Social Mission of the U.S. Catholic Church: A Theological Perspective. Charles E. Curran, 2011.

