

Homily: The Third Way Toward Nuclear Weapons Abolition

**The Most Reverend John C. Wester, Archbishop of Santa Fe
Church of Our Savior, New York City, November 29, 2023**

I come to the Church of Our Savior here in New York City, less than a dozen blocks from the United Nations, to celebrate the Second Meeting of the State Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. This is entirely in keeping with the teachings and guidance of our Pope Francis, who declared in Hiroshima on the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombing that “the possessing of nuclear weapons is immoral.” The Pope said it clearly and we need to be so clear. The possession of nuclear weapons by any one is a threat to everyone. The only way to permanently eliminate this immoral threat is to permanently eliminate nuclear weapons.

This past August, my fellow Archbishop Paul Etienne of Seattle and I traveled to Japan to meet with the Archbishop of Nagasaki and the Bishop of Hiroshima. On August 9 we co-celebrated Mass in the rebuilt Urakami Cathedral in Nagasaki that is 300 meters from the bombing hypocenter. Our Mass began with an air raid siren at 11:02 am marking the exact moment of atomic detonation 78 years ago. We offered roses to the bust of the Madonna whose blackened face was seared by the plutonium blast that day.

Following our Mass, we bishops then formally created a partnership between our four dioceses of Santa Fe, Seattle, Hiroshima and Nagasaki to actively work on nuclear disarmament. We released a statement expressing explicit support for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which the Vatican was the first nation-state to sign and ratify. We will meet again in August 2025 for the 80th atomic bombing anniversaries to hold international leaders accountable for progress made or not toward nuclear disarmament.

But here now in New York City, I want to recognize a true Servant of God who used to walk these very streets. She is Dorothy Day. While addressing the US Congress in a 2015 speech, Pope Francis pointed to her as one of four exemplary Americans who “buil[t] a better future.” She is now being considered for possible canonization by the Catholic Church.

In 1965, at the height of the Cold War, Dorothy Day denounced the “idea of arms being used as deterrents, to establish a balance of terror.” She supported the Second Vatican Council when it taught that nuclear warfare was incompatible with the then-Catholic theory of just war. The Second Vatican Council declared, “Every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and man, which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation.”

I repeat, nuclear war is a crime against God, man, woman and all living things. And now Pope Francis has moved us radically even beyond that, declaring that the mere possession of nuclear weapons is deeply immoral.

The Catholic Church has a long history of speaking out against nuclear weapons. Pope Francis has led the Church in a dramatic shift away from conditionally supporting so-called deterrence to calling for their complete abolition. As he declared, “We must never grow weary of working to support the principal international legal instruments of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, including the Treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons.”

I consider it to be the duty of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, the birthplace of nuclear weapons, to support the nuclear weapons ban treaty while working toward universal, verifiable nuclear disarmament.

I have personally come to believe that the possession of nuclear weapons by anyone is a threat to everyone. Nuclear weapons need to be understood as a class of weapons of mass destruction unto themselves. This is because of their scale of lethality and residual effects that can harm generations, including Trinity Test Downwinders in my own archdiocese.

Nuclear weapons are deeply immoral because of their indiscriminate killing of women, children, noncombatants, the old, the newborn and the infirm. In peacetime they rob resources from the needy and the poor. I believe that the Catholic Church, however imperfectly we follow our savior Jesus Christ, should take up nuclear disarmament as a critical pro-life issue. To me that is common sense when one nuclear weapon can kill millions and inflict incalculable suffering upon the living.

How did it go so wrong more than thirty years after the end of the first nuclear arms race? How is it that we are now arguably in an even more dangerous nuclear arms race? The good-ol'-days of the past Cold War look simple now with its Mutually Assured Destruction, which nevertheless like its acronym MAD was actually insane. Things are arguably even more risky today given today's multiple nuclear actors, new cyber threats, new hypersonic weapons and the advent of artificial intelligence. How do we get out of this unprecedented danger?

Former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara said we survived the Cuban Missile Crisis only by luck. I'm in the business of praising God, so I prefer to say that our survival was by providential design. But in any event, continuing to count on good luck is not a sustainable survival strategy. The good Lord wants us to put his teaching on peace into action. So how are we to eradicate the nuclear danger, the one existential threat that can end civilization overnight? I'll get there, but first I digress with a little history.

The very first resolution of the UN General Assembly was the "Establishment of a Commission to Deal with the Problems Raised by the Discovery of Atomic Energy." It was adopted in January 1946, less than three months after the founding of the United Nations and five months after the atomic bombings. It called for "the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction."

In June 1946, Bernard Baruch, the American representative to the United Nations Commission, proposed a plan whereby the United States would destroy its monopoly on atomic weapons. The catch was that in return the U.N. had to impose strict controls on bomb development that would not be subject to UN Security Council veto. The plan was passed by the Commission, but not agreed to by the Soviet Union. As a consequence, the world lost its first opportunity to control nuclear weapons. We were then off to the races, in this case a nuclear arms race in which the US and the USSR each had some 35,000 weapons in gross global overkill.

Fast forward to 1988 when Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev met in Reykjavik to negotiate a nuclear weapons ban treaty. They almost succeeded. However, the sticking point was Reagan's insistence on pursuing a ballistic missile defense prompted by exaggerated claims made by the

Livermore Lab. This was then followed by the failures of the US and the collapsing USSR to deliver any post-Cold War peace dividends to their citizens.

In the U.S., we had the subsequent rise of the Department of Energy's so-called Stockpile Stewardship Plan which showered money on the nuclear weapons labs because of the end of underground full-scale testing. The Labs themselves killed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty through faint praise, prompting the Senate to reject treaty ratification. Nevertheless, the Labs kept the money.

Now it logically follows that we have a \$2 trillion program for so-called "modernization" of the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile, which in reality is a complete makeover of U.S. nuclear forces. It will rebuild existing nuclear weapons with new military capabilities, produce entirely new designs and buy at enormous expense new missiles, subs and bombers to deliver them. It is also building new nuclear weapons production plants that are expected to be operational until around 2080. In short, it is nuclear weapons forever!

All of this is in the name of so-called deterrence. But the US and the USSR, now Russia, have never had just deterrence. Instead, we have had a hybrid of deterrence and nuclear warfighting capabilities that can end civilization overnight. This is why we have thousands of nuclear weapons instead of just the few hundred needed for just deterrence.

What are we to do? I return to the saintly example of Dorothy Day. As editor of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper from 1933 until her death in 1980, she advocated for the Catholic economic theory of distributism, which asserts that the world's wealth should be broadly owned instead of concentrated in just the hands of the few. Dorothy Day was a deeply committed Catholic, and it is no coincidence that the word "Worker" was in the title of her newspaper. That theory of spreading the wealth is itself rooted in Catholic social teaching on human dignity and the common good going back centuries all the way to Thomas Aquinas. Dorothy Day believed that the broad and equitable distribution of wealth was a third way between unfettered capitalism and state socialism.

I want to draw upon her example of a third way. We have long had a world of nuclear weapons haves and have nots. This was codified in the 1970 NonProliferation Treaty, which was a grand bargain in which the then-five existing nuclear powers promised to enter into serious negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament. In exchange, all other countries promised to never acquire nuclear weapons. But those nuclear weapons powers have never honored their part of the bargain pledged to more than a half-century ago. Moreover, the last three NPT Review Conferences at the United Nations have failed to make any progress whatsoever toward nuclear disarmament.

That is the beauty of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. It offers a third way between the have and have nots of nuclear weapons. Arising out of a process examining the humanitarian consequences of nuclear war, the ban treaty focuses on the human security of a future world free of nuclear weapons. It also promotes environmental restoration and advocates for justice for victims of nuclear testing and the nuclear weapons industry.

This ban treaty wants to build a true peace, not as the nuclear weapons powers would have it through mutual terror, but through a peace built upon the complete abolition of nuclear weapons.

It is a third way between the false narrative of so-called deterrence and the acquiescence by the non-weapons states to the nuclear apartheid imposed by the NonProliferation Treaty that the weapons states want.

There are 193 member states of the United Nations. Out of them, 122 countries voted in favor of opening the ban treaty for signatures in July 2017. Since then, 93 countries have signed the ban treaty and 69 have ratified it, with more signing over time. We need only four more countries to sign before we can say that a majority of all nation-states have done so. This is constructive building of a third way to outlaw the deadliest of all weapons of mass destruction. This is something that common sense says should be the international norm since chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction have already been banned for decades.

What should we do to move forward? First, I suggest that faith leaders should begin to take a stronger and more active stance for universal and verifiable nuclear disarmament. We should appeal to a higher morality in order to eliminate this scourge of humanity. Within faith communities, we must build enduring relationships that work on nuclear disarmament. As an example, I go back to the formal partnership that the dioceses of Santa Fe, Seattle, Hiroshima and Nagasaki have established and could expand. Moreover, I suggest that we Catholics should work to institutionalize nuclear disarmament as a critical pro-life issue into our Church, a goal worthy unto itself that could also be an excellent example for other faiths to follow.

We need nuclear arms control, not an escalating nuclear arms race. We need the third way of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons to eradicate the one existential threat that could end civilization overnight.

We must take up the cause of global nuclear disarmament with the urgency that befits the seriousness of this cause and the dangerous threat that looms over all of humanity. I call upon all of us to take up the challenge of nuclear disarmament by engaging in this vital discussion and building of relationships that must lead to concrete action steps toward this noble goal. And to make this real with a timeframe, we must insist on measurable progress toward that end by the 80th anniversaries of the atomic bombings in August 2025. And that time is not that far away, so let's get to work!

Your brother in the Light of Christ's Peace,

Most Reverend John C. Wester, Archbishop of Santa Fe

Recommended reading: Pastoral Letter: *Living in the Light of Christ's Peace: A Conversation Toward Nuclear Disarmament*, Archbishop John C. Wester, January 2022,

<https://archdiosf.org/living-in-the-light-of-christs-peace>

Translations in Japanese, Korean and Spanish are also available at that same link.