

Pope breaks ground in seeking abolition of nuclear weapons

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PEACEMAKING TODAY



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Pope Francis, who has already broken new ground in his outreach to a suffering humanity, has put the weight of the Catholic Church behind a new humanitarian movement to rid the world of nuclear weapons.

The pope sent a message to the recent conference in Vienna, attended by more than 150 governments, to advance public understanding of what is now called the "catastrophic humanitarian consequences" of any use of the 16,300 nuclear weapons possessed by nine countries.

In his message, delivered by Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, a leading Holy See diplomat, Pope Francis stripped away any lingering moral acceptance of the military doctrine of nuclear deterrence: "Nuclear deterrence and the threat of mutually assured destruction cannot be the basis for an ethics of fraternity and peaceful coexistence."

He called for a worldwide dialogue, including both the nuclear and non-nuclear states and the burgeoning organizations that make up civil society, "to ensure that nuclear weapons are banned once and for all to the benefit of our common home."

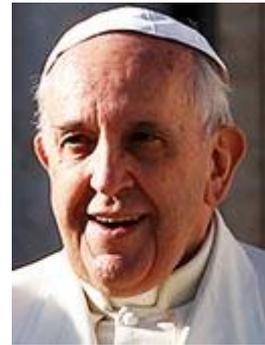
Pope Francis has now put his firm stamp on the Church's rejection of nuclear weapons, to the enormous satisfaction of the delegates crowding the Vienna conference. No longer can the major powers, still defending their right to keep possessing nuclear weapons, claim the slightest shred of morality for their actions.

The pope's stand was supported by a remarkable Vatican document, Nuclear Disarmament: Time for Abolition, also put before the Vienna conference. The document did not mince words: "Now is the time to affirm not only the immorality of the use of nuclear weapons, but the immorality of their possession, thereby clearing the road to abolition."

The Church has now put behind it the limited acceptance of nuclear deterrence it gave at the height of the Cold War. That acceptance was given only on the condition that nuclear deterrence lead progressively to disarmament.

Washington, London and Paris, the three Western nuclear capitals where the Church's words influence, to some degree, government policy, used this limited acceptance to justify their continued nuclear buildup.

When the Cold War ended, they continued modernizing their arsenals and refused demands, reiterated at the UN many times, to join in comprehensive negotiations with Moscow and Beijing.



Pope Francis

PERMANENT DOCTRINE

When the Church saw that nuclear deterrence was indeed becoming a permanent military doctrine, Holy See spokespersons began speaking out in opposition to the continuing reliance on nuclear weapons. At the 2005 review conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, permanent representative of the Holy See at the UN, stated:

"The Holy See has never countenanced nuclear deterrence as a permanent measure, nor does it today when it is evident that nuclear deterrence drives the development of ever newer nuclear arms, thus preventing genuine nuclear disarmament."

The Holy See has repeatedly called for the abolition of nuclear weapons, but the public and even Church leaders around the world paid little attention.

Now the powerful personality of Pope Francis has put a world spotlight on the Church's rejection of not only the use of nuclear weapons but their very possession. He scorned the technocratic defence of nuclear weapons: "It is moral reason that recognizes deterrence as an obstacle to peace, and leads us to seek alternative paths to a peaceful world."

The pope gave full support to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Five-Point Plan for Nuclear Disarmament, starting with a nuclear weapons convention or a legal framework to eliminate the weapons. And he repeated the Holy See's call for a worldwide conference to start negotiations.

Pope Francis' document is a direct attack on the military-industrial complex, which keeps trying to justify nuclear weapons as an aid to peace: "The human family will have to become united in order to overcome powerful institutionalized interests that are invested in nuclear armaments."

MISALLOCATION OF RESOURCES

He called for a global ethic of solidarity to stop the misallocation of resources "which would be far better invested in the areas of integral human development, education, health, and the fight against extreme poverty."

The amount of money – \$1 trillion – the major powers will spend on their nuclear arsenals over the next 10 years is a scandal of immense proportions. The United States alone will spend \$355 billion.

Pope Francis' document challenges hierarchies everywhere to act to change governments' immoral policies of nuclear deterrence. The pressure will be felt intensely by the American bishops, who know their country is in the driver's seat for the abolition of nuclear weapons.