

INTRODUCTION TO TEXTS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH REGARDING NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

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The Catholic Church has always condemned the use of nuclear weapons and advocated for disarmament, but its opinion on the possession of these weapons for the sake of deterrence has changed over time. Roughly two periods can be distinguished in the texts and interventions of the Catholic Church since the beginning of the nuclear age. A first period may be seen as culminating with John-Paul II's address to the UN in 1982. It shows a progressive but strictly conditioned acceptance of nuclear deterrence by the Church. The address clearly states that nuclear deterrence is but a provisional measure. The moral ambiguity of deterrence was recognized by the pope, who nevertheless viewed it as a realistic way to further disarmament. The second period, from 1993 on, is marked by a progressive shift away from the doctrine of nuclear deterrence, now seen as a hindrance to disarmament. A new position thereby emerges which deems any possession of nuclear weapons to be morally illegitimate. Nowadays, the Holy See advocates for the abolition of nuclear weapons, driven by the official failure of nuclear disarmament processes, the global proliferation of nuclear weapons, and a growing concern for the disproportionate and unnecessary suffering that would be inflicted by any use of these weapons of mass destruction.

This introduction is restricted to the Catholic Church's texts dealing explicitly with the question of nuclear deterrence. It aims to show the pace and the reasoning that underpin the shift in positions between the two periods. However, we don't seek to correlate this shift with changes that have occurred on the world nuclear stage during the same period. Let it simply be noted that the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT-1970) and the Conference on Disarmament (CD-1979) paved the way to the conditional acceptance of nuclear deterrence in 1982. It has nonetheless become increasingly apparent that confidence in the supposed benefits of nuclear deterrence has become an obstacle on the way to nuclear disarmament.

The first period : From *Pacem in Terris* to John Paul II's Address to the United Nation General Assembly

1. Pacem in Terris (1963) and Gaudium et Spes (1965)

Pope John XXIII dedicates several paragraphs of *Pacem in Terris* (§109-113) to the then very explosive question of the armament race: “There is a common belief that under modern conditions peace cannot be assured except on the basis of an equal balance of armaments (...). And if one country is equipped with atomic weapons, others consider themselves justified in producing such weapons themselves, equal in destructive force.” (§110). This is a dangerous fallacy based on fear and instilling fear, says the Pope. Against it “Justice, right reason, and the recognition of man’s dignity cry out insistently for a cessation to the arms race. The stock-piles of armaments which have been built up in various countries must be reduced all round and simultaneously by the parties concerned. Nuclear weapons must be banned.” (§112). Pope John XXIII thus sets the corner stones of the Catholic position: inanity of a peace based on an ever inflating equilibrium of destructive force; the necessity of a simultaneous and consensual disarmament process; the need to aim for a ban of all nuclear weapons.

But amid this very strong condemnation of nuclear weapons by *Pacem in Terris*, twice comes an incidental recognition of the deterrence capability brought by the equilibrium of terror: “Their object is not aggression... but to deter others from aggression” (§128; Cf. §111). Accordingly Pope John XXIII recognizes here that deterrence might actually work and that a difference in intentionality may arise between possession of nuclear weapons for deterrence and possession for use. But too much should not be made out of the quote. It touches the question only incidentally.

Gaudium et Spes (1965) upholds *Pacem in Terris* but openly addresses deterrence: “To be sure scientific weapons are not amassed solely for use in war. Since the defensive strength of any nation is considered to be dependent upon its capacity for immediate retaliation, this accumulation of arms, which increases each year, likewise serves, in a way heretofore unknown, as a deterrent to possible enemy attack. Many regard this procedure as the most effective way by which peace of a sort can be maintained between nations at the present time” (§81). The paradox is clearly stated but is intentionally not further discussed. However, the conviction *Gaudium et Spes* wants to convey that the “peace of a sort” provided by deterrence is not a true path to peace, as paragraph 82 clearly states. The destabilizing effects of the armaments race and the increasing arsenals bring the world to an ever closer possibility of nuclear war, hence the need for a true and balanced nuclear disarmament.

2. *The 1982 address of John Paul II at the United Nations*

Pope John Paul II took the Catholic conditional approval of deterrence to its apex in his famous address to the UN Second Special Session on Disarmament (1982): “In current conditions ‘deterrence’ based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself, but as a step on the way toward a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable. Nonetheless, in order to ensure peace, it is indispensable not to be satisfied with this minimum which is always susceptible to the real danger of explosion.”¹ But paragraph eight, much quoted as it is, needs to be read in the light of the previous ones (§2-3). They draft an opposition between two parties: the one seeing confrontation as inevitable and therefore trying to prevent, or at least delay it by way of containment and deterrence and the one that believes peace is possible and seeks a true and progressive disarmament. The logic of deterrence belongs to both parties, but is morally legitimate only if the second option is sought (peace and disarmament).

John Paul II believes however, that the logic of deterrence is twisted toward the first position. Its very logic leads to a continual increase of armaments, since out of the fear to be left at a disadvantage, each party not only tries to reach equilibrium, but seeks to ensure a certain margin of superiority. “Thus in practice the temptation is easy (...) to see the search for balance turned into a search for superiority of a type that sets off the arms race in an even more dangerous way.” (§3). This is not the road the Conference on Disarmament and the Pope have chosen to follow. If deterrence is to be morally acceptable it must be a temporary measure linked to an effective process of disarmament.

In other words – and gathering elements from the entire text – the Pope sets two conditions under which deterrence may be morally acceptable: (1) A renunciation of the arms race and any search for a clear technical and quantitative superiority by the nuclear powers (i.e. abiding to the existing equilibrium); (2) A commitment to a disarmament process, i.e. concrete measures that would implement a progressive disarmament while maintaining the balance of powers. The Pope also insists that both conditions are based on two important presuppositions, namely non-aggressive foreign policies and a commitment to dialogue. Nuclear disarmament depends indeed primarily on the commitment to international cooperation, without which, discussions and negotiations would remain empty and demagogic. Accordingly, to be legitimate deterrence has to be strictly tied to concrete measures of disarmament. Deterrence is but a mean to disarmament and to a long-lasting peace. It was never envisioned to be a permanent policy.

3. *The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)*

The most detailed Church’s document on nuclear deterrence is the 1983 USCCB pastoral letter “*The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and our Response*”². Fully dedicated to addressing nuclear

war and peace, it analyzes at some length the question of deterrence (§162-199). While following and embracing John Paul II's address to the UN, it consistently elaborates a detailed position of the conditions needed for deterrence to be morally legitimate. The US bishops do so, however, voicing their "profound skepticism" about the moral legitimacy of any actual use of nuclear weapons (§193).

Deterrence is broadly defined in the document as meaning "dissuasion of a potential adversary from initiating an attack or conflict, (...) by the threat of unacceptable retaliatory damage" (§163). Furthermore deterrence must be credible to be stable; the threat must be real to effectively and steadily deter the adversary; it must be constant so as to allow no window of opportunity to attack without consequences. It requires maintaining an effective capability to strike back after an attack but without appearing to have first strike ability. The credibility of deterrence also demands that the adversary does indeed have knowledge of the retaliatory capability and of the nuclear weapons' policy of use.

An important distinction therefore must be made between declamatory policy and action policy. The first expresses "the public explanation of our strategic intentions and capabilities", while the second encompasses the "actual planning and targeting policies to be followed in a nuclear attack" (§164). A judgment on the moral legitimacy of deterrence must therefore not be limited to the declamatory policy, but should also take into consideration the contingencies of military strategy.

One specific issue was of particular concern to the US bishops: The kind of targets and strategic plans employed, namely the use of nuclear deterrence in declamatory and actual policy (§177).

Two principles are used to discuss the retaliatory strategies and the deterrence targets, namely discrimination (immunity of civilians) and proportionality (which requires any collateral damage of a strike not to exceed the advantage it may bring). In the summary of the letter, the US bishops make clear that "No use of nuclear weapons which would violate the principles of discrimination or proportionality may be intended in a strategy of deterrence." (Summary, Cf. §178; §179).

Consequently, the US bishops view any strategic targeting of cities or urban centres as illegitimate. The targeting of retaliatory strikes on military facilities that lay in or around cities is also deemed as illegitimate. As a matter of fact, direct or indirect massive civilian casualties of deterrent strikes violate the immunity of non-combatants and thus must be considered morally illegitimate (§180).

Interestingly, the much discussed distinction between intended targets and unintended victims (the double-effect doctrine) is said not to be applicable here. The intention to strike a military target can't be distinguished from the resulting causation of harm to civilians (collateral damage). For once nuclear strikes are launched their long-lasting consequences escape

military control and indiscriminately will affect both civilians and soldiers. “Even with attacks limited to ‘military’ targets, the number of deaths in a substantial exchange would be almost indistinguishable from what might occur if civilian centres had been deliberately and directly struck” (§180). Thus, massive incidental death of civilians can’t be said to be wholly unintentional. In any case, such casualties would violate the principle of proportionality and therefore could not be deemed as morally legitimate (§182). This is to be understood with regard to the strong doubts voiced by the bishops about so called “flexible response”. They think any retaliatory strike would not remain limited and would escalate into a full and indiscriminate use of nuclear weapons. The nature of the destruction brought on by these weapons and the limited control we have on their long-lasting consequences make it very difficult for each side to not resist the logic of escalation.

From targeting questions, the US bishops then move to discuss deterrence strategy. Three criteria must be met if a deterrence strategy is to be morally legitimate:

- First: “If nuclear deterrence exists only to prevent the use of nuclear weapons by others, then proposals to go beyond this to planning for prolonged periods of repeated nuclear strikes and counterstrike, or ‘prevailing’ in nuclear war, are not acceptable. (...) Rather, we must continually say ‘no’ to the idea of nuclear war.”
- Secondly, “if nuclear deterrence is our goal, ‘sufficiency’ to deter is an adequate strategy; the quest for nuclear superiority must be rejected.
- Thirdly, “nuclear deterrence should be used as a step on the way toward progressive disarmament.” (§188)

Deterrence – *not prevalence*; Sufficiency – *not superiority*; Progressive disarmament – *not status quo*. Together, these three conditions will ensure that deterrence functions to prevent nuclear war. In light of these criteria the US bishops make six specific policy recommendations:

- “Support for immediate, bilateral, verifiable agreements to halt the testing, production, and deployment of new nuclear weapons systems”.
- “Support for negotiated bilateral deep cuts in the arsenals of both superpowers, particularly those weapons systems which have destabilizing characteristics; (...)”
- “Support for early and successful conclusion of negotiations of a comprehensive test ban treaty.”
- “Removal by all parties of short-range nuclear weapons which multiply dangers disproportionate to their deterrent value.
- “Removal by all parties of nuclear weapons from areas where they are likely to be overrun in the early stages of war, thus forcing rapid and uncontrollable decisions on their use.”
- “Strengthening of command and control over nuclear weapons to prevent inadvertent and unauthorized use.” (§191).

A second document issued in 1993, briefly tackles the question of deter-

rence under the new circumstances brought by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The document, called “*The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*”³, assesses the changes that the end of the Cold War brought to the 1983 conditional acceptance of nuclear deterrence. Basically the text maintains that the criteria and conditions set in 1983 were still “a useful guide for evaluating the continued moral status of nuclear weapons in a post-Cold War world” (II.E.1). Yet the importance of a strategic shift is not overlooked. The collapse of the Soviet Union means that nuclear weapons, while remaining part of security policies, are not essential to them anymore, thus opening new opportunities for disarmament. Likewise the demise of the former Warsaw Pact is responsible for a shift in priority from global nuclear war toward the prevention of global nuclear proliferation.

More interesting however, is the document’s avowal of divided opinion among the US bishops regarding deterrence. While a majority still hold that “a conditional moral acceptance” to be legitimate, a minority maintain that the time has come to abandon this stance. Interestingly enough, some of the arguments that would come to the forefront later are mentioned here for the first time. For instance, “the apparent unwillingness of the nuclear powers side to accept the need to eliminate nuclear weapons” (II.E.1) is advanced to introduce the perspective of the non-nuclear countries (a perspective that was totally absent from the 1983 document). Hence the bishops ask: “What is the moral basis for asking other nations to forego nuclear weapons if we continue to judge our own deterrent to be morally necessary?” (II.E.1).

4. The German Conference of Catholic Bishops

Similar to the Americans, the German Catholic Bishops Conference addressed the issue of nuclear deterrence in several pastoral letters. The first “*Gerechtigkeit schafft Frieden*” (1983), is an extensive document on war and peace that also discussed nuclear deterrence at some length⁴. Even more restrictive than the 1983 US Bishops’ document, it asserts from the beginning that nuclear deterrence is not a reliable instrument for preventing war.

But then, on a more practical stance, the text goes on to show some support for the Allied policy of a “flexible response” (the possibility to gradually increase retaliatory strikes), holding that nuclear weapons might be needed to halt an overwhelming conventional attack (p.51). “The intention of preventing war with all one’s strength must become credible by virtue of the choice of the whole range of arms” (p.52). But the “methods chosen to pursue one’s security policy should be measured in terms of the goal of preventing war.” (p.53). In a convergence with John Paul II’s 1982 address to the UN, deterrence is hinted to be eventually legitimate: if its goal is to allow time for disarma-

ment; if it is a provisional means, if it stays at the minimum sufficient level for deterrence and does not actually increase the possibility of war.

However, in the event that deterrence fails and a conflict begins, the German bishops consider these weapons “made to threaten and to prevent war” as useless for any military engagement unless the unthinkable occurs and nuclear escalation brings about the destruction of Europe (p.55). The use of weapons of mass destruction is held never to be legitimate. The whole tension between possession of arms for the sake of deterrence and the use of nuclear weapons comes back to the forefront. How can deterrence remain credible if their use is not absolutely certain in the event of a first strike? But how can we not acknowledge the validity of the bishops’ position that should a first strike hit Germany, retaliation would be of no use to the dead and other victims. For at the very moment they are used, these weapons, made to deter, prove that they have failed to do so, and their use is therefore now morally illegitimate.

A second document titled “*Gerechter Friede*” (2000)⁵, shows the German bishops taking some distance with their previous statement, rather than trying to explain why they supported deterrence. They argue “that the strategy of nuclear deterrence was ethically tolerable only as a temporary response bound to the obligation ‘to strive with their whole strength towards finding alternatives to the threat of mass destruction’ (JP II, 1982)”. They also remind us that their overall assessment of nuclear threats “has lost none of its validity since the major powers still have comprehensive arsenals of nuclear weapons at their disposal.” (§2).

The second period : Deterrence as a Hindrance to Peace and Disarmament

1. The last decade of the XX Century

The publication of the *Catechism* of the Catholic Church in 1992, 30 years after Vatican II, recalls the enduring validity of the moral principles that apply to all armed conflicts: “The mere fact that a war has broken out does not mean that everything becomes licit between the warring parties”. The *Catechism* reiterates the condemnation of atomic biological and chemical war as a “crime against God and man himself” (GS 8). It also draws attention to the necessity of “rigorous consideration” when alleging self-defense: “the use of arms must not produce evils or disorders greater than the threat to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition” (§2309). The *Catechism* also refers to the possession of nuclear arsenals and the notion of deterrence, by adding “strong moral reservation” to it: “The accumulation of arms strikes many as a paradoxically suitable way of deterring potential adversaries from war. They see it as the most effective means of ensuring peace among nations. This method of deterrence gives

rise to strong moral reservations” (§2315). Finally, any use of weapons of mass destruction against cities is condemned as a crime against God and man himself (§2314).

The nineties are indeed characterized by a growing skepticism toward deterrence as it became evident that the nuclear states were not taking serious steps towards full nuclear disarmament.

Archbishop Renato Martino, who was the Holy See’s Permanent Observer at the United Nations in New York, made a statement in 1997 that demonstrated, in a sense, the symptomatic renewed stress that was being put on making a nuclear free peace the goal to be pursued:

“Nuclear weapons are incompatible with the peace we seek for the 21st Century. They cannot be justified. They deserve condemnation. The preservation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty requires an unequivocal commitment to their abolition. (...) This is a moral challenge, a legal challenge, and a political challenge. This multiple challenge has to start from the care for our humanity.”⁶ Some years later, in 2001, Archbishop Martino made a little known but decisive statement at the UN saying that nuclear deterrence actually prevents genuine nuclear disarmament. “Among all the assumptions that the Cold War brought into the new era, the more dangerous is the belief that the strategy of nuclear deterrence is essential to national security. Adopting nuclear deterrence in the twenty-first century will not help, but hinder peace. Nuclear deterrence prevents genuine nuclear disarmament. It maintains unacceptable hegemony on the non-nuclear development of half of the poorest countries of the world. It is a fundamental obstacle to the achievement of a new era of global security”.⁷ Deterrence here is not only rejected as a transitory solution toward nuclear disarmament, but it has become an element preventing real nuclear disarmament.

Another text symptomatic of the departure from the position of tolerance is the common declaration issued in 2000 by 75 US Catholic bishops and military representatives of the US Army. It states that the official US nuclear policy was actually sidetracking the ethical logic of nuclear deterrence. Both the bishops and the military – painfully aware that many US politicians still believe the possession of nuclear weapons to be vital to national security – declared: “We are convinced, however, that is not so. On the contrary, they make the world a more dangerous place. (...) Nuclear deterrence as a national policy must be condemned as morally repugnant because it is the excuse and justification for possession and further development of these horrific weapons.”⁸

2. The XXI century

In 2005, during the Conference of the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons the Holy See issued its ‘new’ position, clarifying that earlier arguments concerning nuclear deterrence should be revised and were never considered to be a permanent fixture of its teaching on nuclear

weapons: “It is time to find solutions other than the ‘balance of terror’, it is time to review the whole strategy of nuclear deterrence. When the Holy See expressed its limited acceptance of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War, this was done with the condition that deterrence was only a step on the way towards progressive nuclear disarmament. The Holy See has never approved nuclear deterrence as a permanent measure and it doesn’t even today, when it is clear that nuclear deterrence leads to the development of more and more sophisticated nuclear weapons, thus preventing a real nuclear disarmament. The Holy See stresses once again that the peace we seek in the 21st century cannot be achieved by relying on nuclear weapons”.⁹

The question was retaken by the Pope a year later. In his message for the World Day of Peace 2006, Benedict XVI asks countries to have the courage to change the course of history by renouncing the power of nuclear weapons: “(...) What about those governments that count on nuclear arms to ensure the security of their countries? Along with numerous persons of good will, one can state that this point of view is not only baleful, but also completely fallacious. In a nuclear war there wouldn’t be any victors, but only victims. The truth of peace requires that all – both governments which openly or secretly possess nuclear arms and those planning to acquire them – agree to change the course of history by taking clear and firm decisions and strive for a progressive and concerted nuclear disarmament”.¹⁰

In 2009, Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Secretary for Relations with States of the Holy See, urges all people to abandon the practice of nuclear dissuasion: “Nuclear weapons threaten life on the planet, the planet itself and therefore its developmental process. Nuclear weapons are, by their nature, not only harmful, but also misleading. Considering that nuclear deterrence belongs to the period of the Cold War and is no longer justifiable in our days, the Holy See urges states to review those military doctrines which rely on nuclear weapons as instruments of security and defense or even power, and which have shown to be among the main causes preventing disarmament and non-proliferation (...)”.¹¹

At last, Pope Francis’ message to the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons (2014)¹², settled the Church’s position as being grounded on two pillars: a) It is never morally legitimate to possess nuclear weapons; b) The Church advocates for the abolition of all nuclear weapons. The Holy Father highlighted the need for a new form of global ethos in order to reduce the nuclear threat and work toward concrete disarmament. Now more than ever, the technological, social, and political interdependence of the world demands an urgent ethic of solidarity, that encourages people to work together towards a safer world and a common future based on moral values and responsibility at a global level. “Nuclear deterrence and the threat of mutually assured destruction cannot be the basis for an ethic of fraternity and peaceful coexistence among peoples and states. The youth of today and tomorrow deserve far

more. They deserve a peaceful world order based on the unity of the human family, grounded on respect, cooperation, solidarity and compassion. Now is the time to counter the logic of fear with the ethic of responsibility, and so foster a climate of trust and sincere dialogue. (...)”¹³ The Pope further states that more attention should be paid to the “unnecessary suffering” caused by the possible or accidental use of these weapons. The laws of war and international humanitarian law have long prohibited the undue and unnecessary suffering inflicted on civilians. “Why should there be an exception for nuclear weapons?” says the Pope, pointing out the suffering undergone by the the “Hibakusha” (the people of Hiroshima).

As pointed out by Mgr. Silvano M. Tomasi, Permanent Observer at the United Nations in Geneva during the same conference, the new position of the Church seeks the total elimination of nuclear arsenals. A problem which concerns not only the possessor states, but also the other signatories to the NPT: “The humanitarian initiative is a new hope to take decisive steps towards a world without nuclear weapons. The collaboration between States, civil society, the ICRC, international organizations and the United Nations is a further guarantee of inclusion, cooperation, and solidarity. This is not an action that is imposed by the circumstances. It is a fundamental change that responds to the deep research of many peoples of the world, who would be the first victims of a nuclear event”.¹⁴

In conclusion, it clearly emerges that for the past 20 years the Catholic Church’s opposition to nuclear weapons and its rejection of the doctrine of nuclear deterrence has become adamant. The possession of nuclear weapons, even if only for deterrence, is no longer deemed as morally legitimate. The doctrine of nuclear deterrence is contrary to the ethical principles and values that should be pursued by the international community.

NOTES

1. John PAUL II, *Message to the UN Second Special Session on Global Disarmament*, 11 June 1982.
2. UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and our Response*, Washington, 1983.
3. UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, Washington Dc, 1993.
4. GERMAN BISHOPS CONFERENCE, *Gerechtigkeit Schafft Frieden*, Bonn, 1983, pp.50-55.
5. GERMAN BISHOPS CONFERENCE, *A Just Peace*, Bonn, 2000.
6. H.E. Mgr. Renato MARTINO, *Nuclear Weapons Cannot be Justified and Deserve Condemnation*, 15 October 1997.
7. The actual document of the delegation could not be found, but is quoted by H.E. Mgr. Celestino Migliore as made by H.E. Mgr. Renato Martino, then head of the Holy See Delegation at the 2001 Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) Conference.
8. *Joint Nuclear Reduction/Disarmament Statement Signed by Military Professionals and Religious Leaders*, Washington D.C., 2000.
9. H.E. Mgr. Celestino MIGLIORE, *Statement at the Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)*, New York, 2005.
10. POPE BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the World Day of Peace*, January 1st 2006.
11. H. E., Mgr. Dominique MAMBERTI, *Address to the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly*, Septembre 26 2013.
12. POPE FRANCIS, *Message on the Occasion of the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons*, December 9 2014.
13. *ibidem*.
14. H.E. Mgr. Silvano M. TOMASI, *Intervention of the Holy See at the Conference of Vienna over Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons*, December 9 2014.