

THE
**STORM THAT
THREATENS**

Joint statement by the bishops
of Ireland on war and peace
in the nuclear age

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1. THE STORM THAT THREATENS

We share the mounting anxiety of people today inside and outside the churches over the growing threat of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons carry with them the possibility, if not the likelihood, of unimaginable loss of life, along with the collapse of all that goes to maintain our societies at a humane level. Nuclear war represents a potentially catastrophic threat to the physical environment on which human life depends.

So great is the destructive power of nuclear explosives that if all warheads now deployed were actually used in war, the continuation of human life itself in any form throughout huge areas of the globe would be questionable in the extreme.

Such weapons are therefore capable of striking at the very root of the Christian doctrines of the sanctity of human life and the goodness of creation. This is why Pope John Paul II and his predecessors have spoken so strongly about the growing threat they pose.

Despite the universal knowledge of the danger inherent in nuclear weapons, their numbers continue to grow at an appalling rate. The drive to develop new weapons is gathering pace; military doctrines now freely envisage their use in a wide variety of conflict situations. Negotiations at the highest level, often extending over many years, have failed to achieve any worthwhile disarmament.

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The arms race itself creates much of the insecurity it claims to guard against.¹ As the Second Vatican Council has said so strongly, 'the arms race is one of the greatest curses on humanity and the harm it inflicts on the poor is more than can be endured'.² Each year it continues to use up increasing amounts of scarce resources of raw materials, energy and human skills and intelligence. It is, as the Holy See has pointed out, an act of aggression which amounts to a crime.

Irish people may well feel that in unemployment, poverty and community conflict at home we have enough troubles of our own. Though this reaction is understandable we cannot turn our back on the arms race and the threat of nuclear war. In the past, man's ability to destroy, though terrible, was, relatively speaking, limited. Nuclear weapons have changed this radically. 'Now', as Pope John Paul II emphasised so urgently at Hiroshima, 'it is the whole planet that has come under threat. Our future on this planet, exposed as it is to nuclear annihilation, depends upon one single factor: humanity must make a moral about-face. At the present moment of history, there must be a general mobilization of all men and women of good will. . . .'³

Catholic responses to this threat must rest on basic principles which have been set out by successive Popes, by the Vatican Council and by different Bishops' conferences. Above all, they call for a new attitude to war on the part of Catholics.

Pope John XIII stated that in an age of atomic power 'it is irrational to think that war is a proper way to obtain justice for violated rights'.⁴ The Vatican Council emphasises 'the unique hazards' of modern war arising from the weapons now available. The moral sanctions against war have taken on 'a qualitatively new character'⁵ in the nuclear era, the U.S. bishops point out. Pope John Paul II draws attention to the 'difference in nature'⁶ between

classical war and nuclear or bacteriological war. Most recently, in Coventry, he has stated that 'the scale and horror of modern warfare, whether nuclear or not, makes it totally unacceptable as a means of settling differences between nations'.⁸ These statements show the mounting conviction by the Church that, although the principle of a just war remains, the conditions which would make it just are much more difficult to satisfy, especially where nuclear weapons might be used.

2. BUILDING THE PEACE

We must now more than ever before concentrate on doing everything to prevent war from breaking out in the first place, that is, we must deal with the underlying causes of fear, insecurity and aggression that lead to war.

Great as the risks might be of building peace, opposing injustice and reaching out to our enemies, they can never approach those involved in allowing the present unstable nuclear balance to continue, a balance in which literally one slip could plunge us all into disaster. To break out of this means action therefore that is **radical** – getting at the roots of military confrontation – and **comprehensive**, that is embracing every level of the life of the Christian and of the community, rather than limited to the political or military area alone. The support of the Church at every point must be thrown behind this effort.

This means:

- (i) Promoting education for peace. The Second Vatican Council stresses that those engaged in the work of education, especially of youth, should regard as their most important task the education of everyone to renewed sentiments of peace.⁹ At every level this calls for a long and patient effort¹⁰ particularly with young people, who would be among the first victims of war, and are the hope of peace.¹¹

- (ii) Encouraging the study and use of methods of non-violent defence and political change, and the spirituality on which active non-violence is truly based. As the U.S. bishops observe, non-violence is not the way of the weak, the cowardly or the impatient. Non-violent means of resistance deserve much more attention than they have received. They can take many forms, and the principles on which they are based must be part of any Christian theology of peace.¹²
- (iii) Unceasing and greater efforts at arms control and disarmament than are presently taking place. The alternative to disarmament is that some day, sooner or later, the world's nuclear arms will be used in war, and that, quite simply, is not an alternative for mankind. Our own country must strengthen its role in season and out of season as an unflinching advocate and spokesman for disarmament. We must, as a small country, keep saying to the great powers and the military blocs that what we have in common as human beings faced with nuclear annihilation is more important than any possible consideration of national interest or international supremacy.
- (iv) Building up justice within and between countries: *'More than ever before, human society is forced to provide itself with the means of consultation and dialogue which it needs in order to survive and therefore with the institutions necessary for building up justice and peace. . . . Peace can develop only where the elementary requirements of justice are safeguarded.'*¹³
- (v) Opposing injustice and oppression, present or threatened, especially where it is a case of oppressive and totalitarian forms of government imposed

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against the will of the people and entailing widespread violations of human rights.

3. RESISTING THE UNJUST AGGRESSOR

The duty of legitimate self-defence and defence of one's community is an integral part of Catholic teaching. Governments, the Second Vatican Council states, cannot be denied the right of such defence as long as the danger of war remains and there is no competent international authority with sufficient forces at its disposal.¹⁴ This is why Christians, as Pope John Paul II said in his 1982 World Day of Peace message, even as they strive to resist and prevent every form of warfare, have no hesitation in recalling that, in the name of an elementary requirement of justice, peoples have the right and even a duty to protect their existence and freedom by proportionate means against an unjust aggressor.¹⁵

It is however implicit in the principles of the just war themselves that there are always limitations on the use of force, and consequently that the right of defence is not and cannot be absolute. *'It is not enough therefore to have to defend oneself against simply any injustice in order to justify resorting to the violent means of war. When the damages caused by war are not comparable to those of "tolerated injustice" one may have a duty to "suffer the injustice".'*¹⁶ In other words, when the damage likely to be caused by exercising our right of legitimate defence is out of proportion to the values being defended, it is better to suffer injustice than to defend ourselves by the means involved in such defence. This lack of proportion is most likely to obtain when the use of nuclear weapons may be involved.

To say this is not to tolerate or encourage a passive acceptance of evil. Even if the use of nuclear weapons were judged to be unjustifiable, we still have the right and

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the duty of active, albeit non-violent resistance to unjust oppression, in the name of human rights and dignity, as the Holy See has pointed out.¹⁷

The role of members of the defence forces is as agents of security and freedom on behalf of the community. As the Second Vatican Council has stated they are making a genuine contribution to peace as long as they are fulfilling this role properly.¹⁸ The Council at the same time expresses its admiration for all those who forego the use of violence to vindicate their rights and resort to other means of defence which are available to weaker parties, provided this can be done without harm to the rights of others and of the community.¹⁹

Everyone has the duty to develop an informed conscience and equally the right not to be coerced to act against their conscience. Catholics therefore must act according to their conscience in defence as in all other areas.

They have a duty to assess any war or any military action in which they are asked to be involved in the light of the principles of the just war, and to refuse to cooperate if they judge that the conditions for a just war are not fulfilled.

Where necessary, the Vatican Council says, the law should provide in appropriate ways for conscientious objection.²⁰

4. USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

The destructive power of modern warfare, with the nuclear threat at its core, faces mankind with an appalling fact—the continuation of the human race can no longer be taken for granted. *'From now on, it is only through a conscious choice and through a deliberate policy that humanity can survive.'*²¹

Such a choice and such a policy must be founded not simply on respect but on reverence for human life.

Whether in regard to the rights of the unborn, the elderly or the handicapped, the destruction of people through hunger and malnutrition, or the threat of annihilation through weapons of mass destruction, such reverence cannot be selective, since human life is all of a piece.

Although no human good can justify wiping out the human species, to do so is now within our grasp. Even if we cannot eliminate war, in today's world it must therefore be subject as never before to limits.

Weapons, tactics, strategies and military doctrines and plans which are intended to bring about mass destruction, are immoral. The use of nuclear weapons, whether singly or in combination, for the purpose of mass destruction, is immoral.

Acts of war aimed at destroying cities or large areas, together with the people in them, are *'a crime against God and man'*, states the Second Vatican Council.²² The pure and simple annihilation of all human life within the radius of action is not permitted for any reason whatsoever.²³

It is possible to envisage a limited use of nuclear weapons, but we have to ask whether in reality, in the heat of battle, there would be the desire or the possibility of exercising the unhurried, careful, and objective judgement and restraint which limited use requires. *'Can we be sure'*, Pope John Paul II asks, *'that the use of nuclear arms, even for purposes of national defence or in limited conflicts, will not lead to an inevitable escalation, leading to a destruction that mankind can never envisage or accept?'*²⁴

The West German Bishops, speaking in the country perhaps most exposed to the threat of nuclear weapons, share the same grave doubts — *'Is not the danger of escalation from their use (i.e. of weapons designed to deter and to prevent war) — however limited — so great that one cannot imagine any situation in which one could accept responsibility after consideration of all factors to*

use atomic weapons?' And they add, 'in the European sphere this question also rises in sharper form in the light of the growing destructive power of conventional weapons'.²⁵

5. DETERRENCE AND DISARMAMENT

According to Catholic moral teaching, the possession of nuclear weapons is tolerable only to deter their use by others, as the lesser of two evils, and only under certain conditions, for instance:

- (i) There must be no intention, under any circumstances whatsoever, to use the weapons comprising the deterrent against cities and centres of population. This condition applies to everyone who is involved at whatever level in the structures of nuclear deterrence.
- (ii) The philosophy underlying the deterrent must be genuinely one of deterrence. This does not require superiority or even equality; it requires only sufficiency to deter, i.e. the ability to inflict unacceptable damage.²⁶ Despite this, the existing stocks of warheads in fact far exceed any rational estimate of what deterrence requires.
- (iii) Possession must be in the context of substantive efforts to bring about disarmament. This is so because a permanent and complacent reliance on deterrence would be insane. Who can imagine the present balance, inherently unstable and constantly escalating in terms of destructive power, enduring for decades or centuries? 'To think that the arms race can go on indefinitely without causing a catastrophe, would be a tragic illusion'.²⁷ To deter means 'taking the risk that sometime, somewhere, somehow, someone can set in motion the terrible mechanism of general destruction'.²⁸

Deterrence, secondly, is based on threat. It therefore operates in direct contradiction to the building of trust which is necessary for peace. Such trust would, however, be consistent with a steady reduction in the stockpiles of both sides.

Thirdly, the present position, which is not a balance at all but a steady escalation, is a scandal in a world where basic human rights, even to food and health care, are being denied not by totalitarian dictatorships alone, but by all those who think it more important to build up their power of overkill than to feed the hungry.

To say that these conditions are necessary for deterrence to be a strategy which is tolerable as the lesser of two evils means that unless we are satisfied that all three are fulfilled, we cannot be satisfied that the strategy is moral.

Disarmament is essential and the longer it is deferred, the more difficult it becomes. There is general agreement that all sides should reduce armaments, preferably on a 'joint and general'²⁹ basis. But does this mean that nothing can or should be done if comprehensive multilateral disarmament does not prove possible for the time being? Clearly not.

Each nuclear power has the responsibility to ensure that its military effort does not go beyond what genuine deterrence requires, and become instead a search for superiority. If elements of a country's nuclear strategy are judged to be immoral – if, for example, there is an intention to strike at cities – then there is a strict moral obligation to take steps, even unilaterally, to remove those elements. Similarly, if the strategy is based on a seeking of superiority, there is an obligation to change the strategy, even unilaterally. Such would be the case when the number of warheads and their explosive power is continually increased beyond any possible deterrent requirement, as is now the situation.

6. THE TASK OF CATHOLICS

An examination of what might happen if nuclear war ever breaks out can lead to one conclusion only—we must do everything possible, as Christians and as human beings, to make sure that it never happens.

We call on all Catholics to reflect, discuss and act in the ways we have mentioned, in order that the threat of nuclear weapons be removed.

It is appropriate at this point to single out and to express our appreciation of and support for the continuing efforts of Irish governments over the past two decades in favour of disarmament. Successive governments, well-served by the Irish diplomatic service, have followed a consistent and enlightened policy. It is a grave obligation on Catholics to give support to the efforts of politicians, statesmen and diplomats in their work for genuine and properly grounded disarmament.

We call particularly for the full use of all the spiritual means on which peace depends—continuous prayer, reparation for sin and conversion of life. We recall the Holy Father's prayer at Fatima:

*'From famine and war, deliver us.
From nuclear war, from incalculable
destruction, from every kind of war,
deliver us.
From sins against the life of man from its
very beginning, deliver us.
From hatred and from the demeaning of the dignity
of the children of God, deliver us.
From every kind of injustice in the life of
society, both nationally and internationally,
deliver us.'*²⁰

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