

FACTSHEET

Catholic Morality and Nuclear Abolition

In December 2014, His Holiness Pope Francis sent an [important message](#) to the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons. He wrote in part, “I am convinced that the desire for peace and fraternity planted deep in the human heart will bear fruit in concrete ways to ensure that nuclear weapons are banned once and for all, to the benefit of our common home.”

During the same conference, the Holy See contributed a ground-breaking paper entitled [Nuclear Disarmament: Time for Abolition](#), which presents a compelling argument to move beyond limits set by political realism. “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 nuclear abolition.” And, “The fear that drives the reluctance to disarm must be replaced by a spirit of solidarity that binds humanity to achieve the global common good of which peace is the fullest expression.”

An Important Opportunity

2015 presents an important opportunity to advance the nuclear disarmament agenda, including by launching negotiations on a treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons. This year marks the 70th anniversary of the first use of nuclear weapons in war - in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Also in 2015, from 27 April to 22 May, the Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) will be held in New York to assess whether treaty obligations are being met. The Marshall Islands, in major lawsuits against the nine nuclear weapons possessing states, claims they have failed to honour their NPT obligations to disarm. And non-nuclear weapons states are making clear their deep concern about the global humanitarian and ecological impact of an intentional or accidental nuclear exchange, as well as their impatience with the slow pace of bilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations

Background

There are still over 16,000 nuclear weapons in the world today. A single nuclear bomb detonated over a large city could kill millions of people. Nuclear weapons are unique in their destructive power and the threat they pose to the environment and human survival. They release vast amounts of energy in the form of blast, heat and radiation. No adequate humanitarian response is possible. Even if a nuclear weapon were never again exploded over a city, there are intolerable effects from the production, testing and deployment of nuclear arsenals that are experienced as an ongoing personal and community catastrophe by many people around the globe. Nothing more decisively threatens the fabric of life than nuclear weapons, their proliferation and the grim possibility of their use. Whether such use is by design, miscalculation or madness is irrelevant. The outcome will be the same.

In this, the 70th year since nuclear weapons were first detonated, discussions about them must not be limited solely to concepts of security, but to the broader questions of whether we, as humanity, can legitimately accept the continued existence of weapons designed to be indiscriminate and to cause mass suffering, or whether we reject them completely. The elimination of nuclear weapons is not only a moral imperative; it is the ultimate measure of our worth as a species, as human beings.

Since 2010 the catastrophic humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons has featured prominently in discussions among governments and civil society organizations on ways

to advance nuclear disarmament. This discourse on the harm that nuclear weapons cause to people, societies and the environment underscores the urgency of concerted action for the complete prohibition and elimination of such weapons. Three intergovernmental conferences have been held to elaborate on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons, in Norway, Mexico and Austria. At the third conference, the Austrian government pledged "*to follow the imperative of human security for all and to promote the protection of civilians against risks stemming from nuclear weapons*" and to cooperate with all stakeholders "*to fill the legal gap for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons.*" Other countries are encouraged to join the Austrian pledge.

Nuclear weapons are the only weapons of mass destruction not yet prohibited by an international convention, even though they have the greatest destructive capacity of all weapons. A global ban on nuclear weapons is long overdue and can be achieved in the near future with enough public pressure and political leadership. A ban would not only make it illegal for nations to use or possess nuclear weapons; it would also help pave the way to their complete elimination. Nations committed to reaching the goal of abolition should begin negotiating a ban now.

In the last several years, a growing body of literature has emerged detailing accidents and incidents where nuclear weapons were almost used. Despite this growing recognition and understanding of the risk of a nuclear weapons detonation, nuclear-armed states and those in military alliances with them continue to rely upon and invest billions in nuclear weapons. However, the renewed focus on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons has opened space for action by concerned governments to stigmatise, outlaw and eliminate nuclear weapons.

International law obliges all nations to pursue in good faith and conclude negotiations for nuclear disarmament. However, the nuclear-armed nations have so far failed to present a clear road map to a nuclear-weapon-free world. All are investing heavily in the modernization of their nuclear forces, with the apparent intention of retaining them for many decades to come. Continued failure is not an option.

Nuclear weapons programmes divert public funds from health care, education, disaster relief and other vital services. The nine nuclear-armed nations spend in excess of US\$105 billion each year maintaining and modernizing their nuclear arsenals. Funding allocated to national disarmament efforts is minuscule by comparison, and the principal UN body responsible for advancing nuclear abolition has an annual budget of just over \$10 million. It is time to redirect money towards meeting human needs.

Negotiations on a treaty banning nuclear weapons should be undertaken by committed nations even without the participation of those armed with nuclear weapons. The alternative is to continue allowing the nuclear-armed nations to control the process and perpetuate two-tier systems and treaty regimes that have no power to compel disarmament. A nuclear weapons ban would globalize what nuclear-weapon-free zone treaties have done regionally - in Latin America, Africa, the Pacific, Central and South East Asia. It would allow nations in any part of the world to formalize their rejection of nuclear weapons and help create a clear international legal norm against the possession, use, stockpiling, deployment and assistance with all aspects of nuclear weapons.

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