

## **July 31, 2021 PCUSA Workshop**

### **Breaking the Idols: Nuclear Weapons and Intersectional Justice**

I want to express my deep appreciation to Johnny, Lauren, Edward, Roxana and the entire PCUSA Staff for organizing this national conference. I am honored to be a presenter in this workshop with Vicki Elson and Vincent Intondi and deeply grateful to Nick for moderating it.

**"All things are possible for one who has faith"- Jesus (Mk. 9: 23)**

**"I do believe, help my unbelief"-- (Mark 9:24)**

These two lines from Mark's Gospel account of Jesus healing the possessed boy are key to sustaining our hope as people of faith who are committed to breaking and overcoming the idolatry of nuclear weapons. If we have the faith to believe that miracles can occur and act on that faith, it can happen as evidenced by the healings Jesus performed. But healing is contingent on having the faith to believe that the miracle is possible in the first place. The father of the possessed boy believes Jesus can heal his son, yet he still confesses his unbelief. Jesus recognizes the sincerity of the father and this becomes the catalyst for Jesus to heal his son. How many of us can identify with the father of the boy who says "I do believe, help my unbelief." I know I can.

Regarding the nation's addiction to violence and the Bomb, do we really believe we can break and overcome the nuclear idol? Tragically, we live in a world where violence and killing has become the norm. The "normalization of evil" is what renowned psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton (who coined the term "psychic numbing") defines as "malignant normality," where the abnormal becomes normal. Thank God for the many people and groups, including PCUSA, who have resisted this malignant normality in all its guises.

Jesus instructs us that all things are possible for one who has faith, and that faith in God, who commands us to love and never to kill, is the antidote to overcome the idols, fears, illusions, lies and paralysis that prevent us and our society from establishing God's reign of love, peace and justice. Yet, the powers and so many still choose to embrace the myth of redemptive violence and the nuclear idol. To extricate

ourselves from this evil we must fully confront and unmask it, repent for our own complicity in it and act to resist it.

Nuclear weapons derive from a long history of human sinfulness— from the first-time brother killed brother. The sin of moral blindness wraps itself around the basic death intention obscuring at its heart the ultimate sin nurtured there: the choice of death over life. To be credible, the threat of using nuclear weapons presupposes the intention of using them. It recommends annihilation of total societies, untold casualties, nuclear winter, famine, a cancer pandemic and uninhabitable earth as a solution to the problems of competing ideologies and economic interests. The destructive potential of nuclear war is so vast that we cannot comprehend the extent of the evil we have created. Moreover, nuclear weapons serve to reinforce systems of white supremacy, racism, oppression and military intervention and occupation.

The nation has become morally blind to the evil that has been created and justified in the name of "national security." Any trust that people and the state put in nuclear weapons is trust displaced from God. The bomb is a substitute god, an idol to which godlike authority is assigned. The state surrounds it with an aura of secrecy, reverence, and finality. This dependence on nuclear weapons for our ultimate "security" is known as **nuclearism**. Nuclearism has virtually become a national religion and it constitutes idolatry. (p. 27-34 Risk)

By their very nature the 13,400 nuclear weapons possessed by the nine nuclear nations are genocidal instruments of mass murder. The US and Russia have a combined total of 12,600 nuclear weapons and both countries are modernizing and expanding their nuclear forces. Each side possesses a first-strike capability, with many weapons on "hair-trigger alert." At any moment, these weapons, by direct order or miscalculation, could be used. The US refuses to adopt a "no first-use" policy, despite international treaties that prohibit their use and, now, possession. The nuclear intention rooted in our heart and the worldwide proliferation of murderous weapons it has spawned claim hosts of victims each day. These are the victims of gross neglect, the starving of the world, many of whom are children. They, the unfed, the diseased, the poor, become the holy innocents, living sacrifices before the nuclear idol. I witness firsthand every Thursday, in the Feast on the Street Ministry in D.C., the victims who suffer most because of misplaced priorities--the homeless

poor--there are increasing #'s of homeless and encampments not only in DC but around the country.

On Jan. 1 of this year, Pope Francis, in his World Day of Peace Message, appealed for the creation of an international fund whereby military expenditures would be redirected to alleviate poverty and meet urgent human needs. Tragically, on this same day, Congress passed a \$740 billion military budget. For the FY 2022 budget, the Biden administration is requesting a similar budget, including \$43 billion for nuclear weapons. This is part of the thirty-year \$1.7 trillion nuclear modernization of the US arsenal now underway. These expenditures are a theft from the poor and a sin and crime! In this pandemic time, all current nuclear and military expenditures should now be used as a stimulus package for the world's poor.

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has turned its Doomsday Day Clock to 100 seconds before midnight, due to the existential threats posed by nuclear weapons and the climate crisis. With the future of human survival and our planet's existence at stake, how can we avert global catastrophe and bring about nuclear abolition? First and foremost, we must have the faith and will to believe that it can occur. We must summon the courage to break the national addiction to the nuclear idol by placing our trust in God and renouncing the nuclear sin.

If we are to take seriously the magnitude of the nuclear threat and the admonition of Pope Francis who has declared that the very possession of nuclear weapons is immoral, we must risk taking action that is commensurate with the colossal threat we face. (Risk: p. 110-113) If it is wrong to possess nuclear weapons, then it is equally wrong to use them. Thus, no Catholic or Christian should participate in the chain of command to ever use them.

Can followers of Jesus be employed in nuclear weapons-related work? The following insights from Catholic peacemakers serve to counsel us on this matter. Fr. McSorley, SJ, stated: ***"It's a sin to build a nuclear weapon...We cannot seriously imagine Jesus pushing the button to launch a nuclear bomb, or registering for the draft, or wearing the uniform of any national state, or paying taxes for nuclear weapons, or working in a plant that manufactures weapons of death."*** Dorothy Day, Dan and Phil Berrigan and many other Christian peacemakers have made this same appeal.

The late Bishop Leroy Matthiesen made this appeal to Catholics in his diocese who worked at the Pantex nuclear weapons plant in Amarillo, Texas: ***“In the name of the God of peace, quit your jobs.”*** He said he would try to offer financial assistance to any defense worker who would quit.

And the late Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of the Seattle diocese declared: ***“We need to find our way back to the way of nonviolence...which Jesus calls us to....God calls us to name the evil our society has embraced so wholeheartedly in our nuclear arms, and to do so clearly. Trident is the Auschwitz of Puget Sound...I say with deep sorrow that our nuclear war preparations are the global crucifixion of Jesus....Our nuclear weapons are the final crucifixion of Jesus, in the extermination of the human family with whom he is one.... We have to refuse to give incense—in our day, tax dollars—to our nuclear idol.”***

We also need to heed and act on the plea of the Hibakusha (A-bomb survivors). During the ceremony that awarded the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), Setsuko Thurlow, Hiroshima survivor and ICAN member, spoke these words in her acceptance speech: ***“I speak as a member of the family of hibakusha—those of us who, by some miraculous chance, survived the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For more than seven decades, we have worked for the total abolition of nuclear weapons...We were not content to be victims. We shared our stories of survival. We said: humanity and nuclear weapons cannot coexist. Today, I want you to feel...the presence of all those who perished in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I want you to feel, above and around us, a great cloud of a quarter million souls. Each person had a name. Each person was loved by someone. Let us ensure that their deaths were not in vain...These weapons are not a necessary evil; they are the ultimate evil.”***

Ultimately, if true disarmament is to occur, we must repent of the nuclear sin. Such acts of repentance have already taken place whereby US Christians have apologized to the Japanese for the nuclear atrocities committed against them. I would like to

acknowledge Fr. Bob Cushing who is attending this workshop for leading delegations to Japan to apologize to the Japanese people for the US nuclear bombings.

The nuclear challenge before us is great but not insurmountable for with God all things are possible. Drawing on the rich biblical tradition of nonviolent resistance,

Plowshares activists have been inspired to carry out over 100 disarmament actions since 1980, whereby nuclear swords/idols have symbolically been beaten into plowshares (Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3). The most recent plowshares action, the Kings Bay Plowshares 7, declared in their action statement: ***“Nuclear weapons eviscerate the rule of law, enforce white supremacy, perpetuate endless war and environmental destruction, and ensure impunity for all manner of crimes against humanity. Dr. King said, ‘The ultimate logic of racism is genocide.’ We say, ‘The ultimate logic of Trident is omnicide.’*** In October 2019, they were tried and convicted by a jury of three felonies and a misdemeanor. All seven have served or are now serving prison terms ranging from 8 months to 3 years.

There have also been countless other peace actions which people attending this conference have participated in over the decades. I have been blessed to be part of such actions, including two Plowshares actions directed at the first-strike Trident nuclear submarine. I, along with other peacemakers, believe that if people have the faith to believe that nuclear abolition is possible, and act on that faith, it can occur.

The churches have a crucial role to play in breaking the idolatry of the Bomb and bringing about a disarmed world. What if churches could take the lead in calling for the conversion of arms industries to non-military production? What if the US bishops and all Christians in the US joined with the Don't Bank on the Bomb network and demanded that all banks divest of any nuclear weapon related money they hold, and that the US government ratify the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which now makes nuclear weapons illegal under international law? This would go a long way in creating the climate needed to bring about nuclear abolition.

This August 6-9, which marks the 76th anniversary of the criminal US nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there will be commemoration actions worldwide calling for nuclear abolition. *“In the Presence of All Who Perished: Remembrance in the Age of the Ban Treaty”* is the theme for actions that are being

coordinated by the US Days of Action Working Group. I encourage everyone attending this session to participate in one of these actions in your area. As part of this witness in the DC area, the Dorothy Day CW, members of Pax Christi and other peacemakers will hold vigils at the White House and Pentagon. For more info see:

<https://orepa.org/resources-for-actions-in-the-age-of-the-ban-treaty/>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/336042507972854>

Now is the time to act with people worldwide working for disarmament and nonviolent social transformation. Dr. King exhorts us: *“The choice today is...either nonviolence or nonexistence...Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes-hostile world declaring eternal hostility to poverty, racism and militarism.”* If the human family and Earth are to survive, if the children are to have a future, we need to recapture the hope and revolutionary spirit that Dr. King speaks of. Moreover, we need to commit our lives to the commandment of gospel nonviolence as we join with others seeking to make God’s reign of love, peace, and justice a reality for our world. Breaking the idolatry of the bomb and working for nuclear abolition, racial, social, environmental and economic justice, can and will move us closer to creating the Beloved Community.

## Discussion

Regarding how the Bomb has affected our ways of thinking and our imagination, my imprisoned friend Mark Colville of the KBP7, asserted in a recent interview and article: **“One of the more important critiques to me about nuclearism is that it has killed the imagination. It has so harmed our human nature that we can’t imagine a way out of it.”**

Jim Douglass asserts that ***“A lived faith will stop the Bomb...we need to test the truth by betting our lives on it in the world. If a community can experiment deeply enough in a nonviolent life-force the power of the Pentagon will crumble.”***

Pope Paul VI, in a speech to the diplomatic corps on February 10, 1972, made this pronouncement: ***“The conversion of military manufacturing plants and military markets for civilian purposes is equally possible, if trouble is taken to plan ahead. It is all the more feasible in that it would create jobs by making it possible to undertake large-scale projects which prove necessary for the protection of the environment and the satisfaction of human needs. Refusal to undertake this conversion is completely incompatible with the spirit of humanity and still more with the spirit of Christianity because “it is unthinkable that no other work can be found for hundreds of thousands of workers than the production of instruments of death.”***

There have been delegations of US Catholic peacemakers who have gone to Japan to personally apologize and ask forgiveness for the US atomic bombings of the Japanese. And on August 6, 2016, the anniversary date of the US bombing of Hiroshima, members of the Catholic Worker, Pax Christi, and other peace groups held a prayer service of repentance in front of the White House. During the service an “apology petition” was presented to a hibakusha. Signed by more than 700 people, the petition called on the US government to join the signatories in apologizing to Japan for using the bomb against them and pledging to work for total nuclear abolition.

Pope Paul VI, in his 1976 World Day of Peace Message, described the bombings as ***“a butchery of untold magnitude.”***

During his visit to Hiroshima and Nagasaki in November 2019, Pope Francis declared: ***“The use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possessing of nuclear weapons is immoral...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.”*** (TPNW)

**Breaking the Idols: Nuclear Weapons and Intersectional Justice** – The production, testing and deployment of nuclear weapons impact all of us in many ways. This breakout session will explore the effects of nuclear weapons on our economy, our environment, and on racial justice, and how breaking the idolatry of the bomb can move us closer to building the beloved community. Panelists include Art Laffin, Pax Christi USA Teacher of Peace and long-time Catholic Worker; Vincent Intondi, professor and author of *African Americans Against the Bomb: Nuclear Weapons, Colonialism, and the Black Freedom Movement*; and Vicki Elson, creative director for nuclearban.us; moderated by Nick Mele, Pax Christi USA Working Group on Nuclear Disarmament coordinator.