Remarks from Most Reverend John C. Wester on receiving the Pax Christi USA 2026 Teacher of Peace award
Trinity Washington University
November 21, 2026

I am very grateful to you for this singular honor. Also, I'm grateful for your publishing of my 2022 pastoral letter: *Living in the Light of Christ's Peace: A Conversation toward Nuclear Disarmament*.

This award tonight is a snapshot (an archaic reference these days!) of what Pax Christi is all about: teaching peace. Anything that I have done that would in some small way qualify me for this honor is simply a reflection of what Pax Christi had been doing for over 50 years: teaching peace.

Although I cannot recall when, I do remember Pope Francis telling us bishops that while we are teachers, a good teacher listens first. Pax Christi, I have been listening to you and your work is reflected in my nuclear disarmament ministry.

You have been a light, leading the way in this important work. The geopolitical landscape today indicates that we are living in critical times when it comes to nuclear weapons. We are in a second arms race, far more dangerous than the first due to heightened tensions between nations, AI, and hypersonic delivery systems. Last Thursday's meeting between Presidents Trump, Putin and Xi Jinping may have been a sliver of hope or at least a nod toward the deadly power they each possess when they agreed that they must cooperate on peace and reduce nuclear risks. But a sliver of hope is tenuous at best given the modernization programs well under way in the world's nuclear arsenals that hope seems quite elusive.

And so, your leadership, your advocacy, and your witness to the Peace of Christ has been a great gift to our Church and to our world. Your strength comes from your name: Pax Christi, the Peace of Christ. You have embraced the mystery of the Gospel, the trajectory of the Scriptures, the purpose of the Incarnation: God became one of us to bring peace, unity, and the restoration of right relationships. When the risen Christ breathed peace into the hearts of the fearful disciples, he was continuing the courageous work of the cross: he was dying once again to self as he forgave those who abandoned him, denied him, and betrayed him.

Breathing peace, living peace, giving witness to peace, is not an easy thing to do: it demands self-sacrifice, commitment, hard work, and courage: moral courage. Mark Twain once said that,

“It is curious that physical courage should be so common in the world, and moral courage so rare.”

On one level, it was harder for Christ to forgive and wish peace to his fearful disciples than it was to carry his cross. I have learned, we all have learned, from you, the members of Pax Christi, what it is to be courageous in the pursuit of peace. This is certainly evidenced in Pax Christi’s relentless pursuit of nuclear disarmament. For decades, Pax Christi has advocated for peace and nuclear disarmament, calling for Cold War arms control and supporting international abolition treaties and the redirection of military funds to human and climate needs, with nuclear disarmament always at the core of your movement. You have questioned the morality of nuclear deterrence and the weapons modernization program we are now in. Along with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), Pax Christi has helped to frame nuclear abolition around humanitarian, environmental, and human security concerns. And on a personal note, in 2022, you helped to publish my pastoral letter: *Living in the Light of Christ’s Peace: A Conversation toward Nuclear Disarmament*. All of this involves true moral courage!

It takes moral courage to call for the end of deterrence, a narrative that has been engrained in us for the last 80+ years. It is not easy to be labeled as naïve, simplistic, and out of touch with reality. I have come to see that today’s biggest obstacle to nuclear deterrence is this narrative. It is deterrence that motivates the current arms race; it is deterrence that is responsible for the 13,000+ nuclear weapons in the world today; it is deterrence that places us one accident, one careless mistake, one miscommunication away from a nuclear holocaust.

At the very core of deterrence is violence: you bomb us, we bomb you. It is a system based on mutual destruction. How can such violence ever lead to true and lasting peace? Jesus said that those who live by the sword, die by the sword. I would paraphrase that and say that those who live by deterrence, die by deterrence.

And it takes moral courage to go up against all those who make billions of dollars by our nuclear weapons modernization programs, in other words, nuclear weapons forever. I find it astonishing that the Department of Energy will spend $12.4 billion in New Mexico in 2027, a full billion dollars more than my state government’s entire operating budget of $11.1 billion.

It takes moral courage to support the late Pope Francis’s bold statement in Hiroshima in 2019 that even the possession of nuclear weapons is immoral, thus removing from the United States Bishops’s 1983 pastoral letter the reluctant concession that deterrence is acceptable, as long as it states are moving toward disarmament.

It takes moral courage to declare that with nuclear weapons, a just war is simply not possible: no way to have a reasonable chance of success, no way to avoid killing innocent civilians, no way to achieve proportionality.

It takes moral courage to speak out for all those who have been sickened by radiation poisoning due to nuclear weapons development and uranium mining.

It takes moral courage to support the Partnership for a World without Nuclear Weapons, a partnership of the dioceses of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Seattle, and Santa Fe. This partnership engages in education, advocacy, and prayer, all directed toward the end of nuclear weapons in our world.

And so I wish to accept this Teacher of the Year award on behalf of all of us who have learned from Pax Christi what it is to be instruments of peace. My cathedral and archdiocese are named after the Holy Faith of St. Francis of Assisi. It is our holy faith that teaches us to be instruments of peace, to breathe the gift of Christ's peace into our troubled and war-torn world.

Cardinal Robert McElroy, Archbishop of Washington DC, who is here tonight, responded clearly to Pope Francis's challenge of nuclear disarmament when he spoke at an interfaith gathering in Hiroshima in 2025. He said, "If our gathering here today is to mean anything, it must mean that in fidelity to all those lives destroyed or savagely damaged... [that] we refuse to live in such a world of nuclear proliferation and risk-taking. We will resist, we will organize, we will pray, we will not cease, until the world's nuclear arsenals have been destroyed."

That nicely sums up Pax Christi USA's witness these past 54 years: resisting, organizing, and praying for an end to nuclear weapons. Let me close with another quote, not from a clergyman but from a five star general, Omar Bradley. During a speech on what was then called Armistice Day on November 10,1948, he said, *"We have men of science, too few men of God. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The world has achieved brilliance without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living. If we continue to develop our technology without wisdom or prudence, our servant my prove to be our executioner."*

God bless Pax Christi! You have grasped the message of the Sermon on the Mount. You have breathed the Peace of Christ into our hearts, our country, and our world. May that same peace be yours as you continue to teach us and as you resist, as you organize, and as you pray! Thank you very much.