

STATEMENT ON

NUCLEAR WEAPONS



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1. The Catholic Bishops of Canada wish to draw public attention to the increasing dangers to humanity posed by nuclear weapons. The Director of the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research has said that the risks of nuclear war are “higher now than at any time since World War II.”¹ Her observation came shortly after Pope Francis spoke of “a new season of disturbing nuclear confrontation.”² The Secretary-General of the United Nations warns: “We are one mechanical, electronic or human error away from a catastrophe that could eradicate entire cities from the map.”³ The continued existence of 14,465 nuclear weapons held by nine countries is one of the great moral challenges of our time.⁴ On behalf of all the Catholic Bishops of our country, we speak out fully in support of Pope Francis’ strong condemnation of nuclear weapons.

2. The Catholic Church’s opposition to nuclear weapons has a long history. In his 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth), Pope Saint John XXIII called for the banning of nuclear weapons. Subsequent Popes have consistently called for the abolition of these evil instruments of warfare which cause nothing but a false sense of security.

3. More than 50 years ago, the Second Vatican Council declared: “The [nuclear] arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which injures the poor to an intolerable degree.”⁵ Today, the maintenance of nuclear weapons continues to siphon off immense resources which should be devoted to programs for the development of peoples, especially the alleviation of poverty, such as the United Nations © Sustainable Development Goals.

4. During the Cold War, the Holy See gave a limited approval to the military strategy of nuclear deterrence

on the strict condition that it would lead to disarmament measures. But in recent years, the major powers have increased their reliance on nuclear deterrence and begun the modernization of their nuclear arsenals. Pope Francis has made clear there can be no moral acceptance of this nuclear escalation: “Nuclear deterrence and the threat of mutually assured destruction cannot be the basis for an ethics of fraternity and peaceful coexistence.”⁶ Speaking at an international symposium convened in 2017 by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, the Pope added: “Nor can we fail to be genuinely concerned by the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental effects of any employment of nuclear devices. If we also take into account the risk of an accidental detonation as a result of error of any kind, the threat of their use, as well as their very possession, is to be firmly condemned.”⁷

5. The nuclear weapons states have continued to shirk their legal obligation, under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT),⁸ to pursue in good faith negotiations towards the elimination of nuclear weapons. The reductions in nuclear weapons from the high levels seen during the Cold War merely mask the modernization process in which today’s nuclear weapons contain far more explosive power than the atomic bombs which destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

6. It must also be pointed out that nuclear weapons, which were designed to be used against modern nation states, are incapable of responding to the new threats to national and international security that have arisen in the 21st century. Rather than serving as a deterrent to the serious security threats of our day, the possession of nuclear arsenals creates a climate of fear, mistrust, and opposition.



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Artistic rendering of a distant nuclear explosion with a child looking on in the foreground.

Nuclear deterrence and the threat of mutually assured destruction cannot be the basis for an ethics of fraternity and peaceful coexistence.

Pope Francis

7. Expressing great concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the use of even one nuclear weapon, a number of non-nuclear states and civil society groups joined efforts, under the auspices of the United Nations, to produce the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, adopted at the UN in 2017. The treaty prohibits the use, threat of use, development, testing, production, manufacturing and possession of nuclear weapons. Though spurned by the nuclear weapons states, this historic treaty could be a major step towards comprehensive negotiations for the elimination of all nuclear weapons.

8. The Holy See was one of the first states to sign and ratify the treaty. It will enter into force when ratified by 50 states. As the Holy See Permanent Observer to the United Nations, Archbishop Bernardito Auza, has pointed out, by signing the treaty the State signatories affirm “that the achievement and maintenance of international peace and security consist in what supports the common good of all humanity.”⁹

9. We therefore make a special appeal to the Government of Canada to sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Although its policy is to work for nuclear disarmament, the government opposes the treaty on the grounds that the nuclear weapons states reject it and that the treaty counters NATO policy. Unfortunately, NATO continues to rely on nuclear weapons as the “supreme guarantee” of security. This NATO policy¹⁰ undermines the new treaty by which all states make an “unequivocal undertaking” to the elimination of nuclear weapons. The International Court of Justice unanimously ruled that

negotiations for nuclear disarmament must not only be pursued but concluded.¹¹

10. Further, we also call on Canada, through changes in its own policies and practices, to persist in its efforts to bring NATO into conformity with the treaty. This new treaty takes on particular urgency at the present moment as a number of world powers withdraw from previous nuclear arms agreements while regional wars and local armed conflicts continue to cause death and destruction, threatening all the while to escalate into ever larger confrontations.

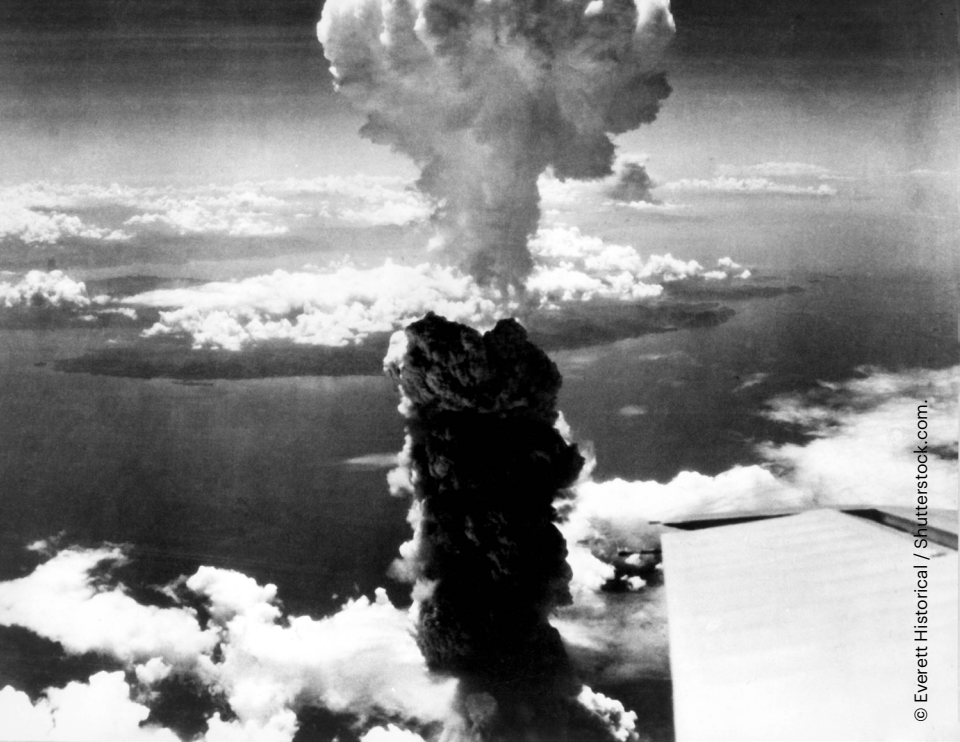
11. Fifteen years ago, Catholic Bishops joined with other religious leaders in our country in calling on the Government of Canada to take a strong and principled stand “to reduce, and ultimately to eliminate, our reliance on the destructive power of nuclear weapons.”¹² This call has been echoed over the years, including in a recent letter from church leaders in Canada asking the Prime Minister and the government “to work with allies and to engage would-be adversaries to formulate security arrangements that do not rely on the threat of nuclear annihilation.”¹³ Today, with so many informed analysts warning against the extreme dangers posed to the world by the new nuclear arms race, and the vigorous condemnation by Pope Francis of nuclear weapons, the time is not only ripe but pressing for action.

12. We join in Pope Francis’ call for a dialogue: “Growing interdependence and globalization mean that any response to the threat of nuclear weapons should be collective and concerted, based on mutual trust. This trust can be built only through dialogue that is truly directed



Ruins of Nagasaki, Japan, after atomic bombing of August 9, 1945 as seen from a hillside opposite the Nagasaki Hospital in October 1945.

to the common good and not to the protection of veiled or particular interests; such dialogue, as far as possible, should include all: nuclear states, countries which do not possess nuclear weapons, the military and private sectors, religious communities, civil societies, and international organizations. And in this endeavor we must avoid those forms of mutual recrimination and polarization which hinder dialogue rather than encourage it.”¹⁴ In this perspective, the Government of Canada and the Canadian people can play a major role “to ensure that nuclear weapons are banned once and for all to the benefit of our common home.”¹⁵ As the Holy Father noted last year, the ashes



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A mushroom cloud rises more than 60,000 feet into the air over Nagasaki, Japan after an atomic bomb was dropped by the US bomber "Enola Gay," August 9, 1945.

of World War I and the centenary of its armistice should teach us that "Future acts of aggression are not deterred by the law of fear, but rather by the power of calm reason that encourages dialogue and mutual understanding as a means of resolving differences."¹⁶

*Issued by the Plenary Assembly on 26 September 2019,
United Nations' International Day for the Total Elimination
of Nuclear Weapons.*

ENDNOTES

1. Renata Dwan, Director, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, cited in [“‘Urgent’: Risk of nuclear war now greater than at any time since 1945, UN warns,”](#) Independent, 22 May 2019.
2. Pope Francis, [Address to participants in the plenary session of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences](#), 2 May 2019.
3. Antonio Guterres, speech to the University of Geneva on the launch of the document [“Securing Our Future: Agenda for Disarmament,”](#) 24 May 2018.
4. [2018 Yearbook of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#): “At the start of 2018 nine states – the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) – possessed approximately 14,465 nuclear weapons, of which 3,750 were deployed with operational forces. Nearly 2,000 of these are kept in a state of high operational alert.”
5. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), 81.
6. Pope Francis, [Message to the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons](#), 7 December 2014.
7. Pope Francis, Address to the Vatican Symposium [“Prospects for a World Free from of Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament,”](#) 10 November 2017.
8. [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#), UN Document A/CONF.229/2017/L.3/Rev.1.
9. Holy See Permanent Observer to the United Nations, Archbishop Bernardito Auza, [“Humanitarian Consequences of Nuclear Weapons and Ethical Imperatives”](#) (Statement given to the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly First Committee), 17 October 2018.
10. NATO’s policy on nuclear weapons, formulated in its Strategic Concept, was most recently expressed in the [Warsaw Summit Communiqué](#), issued by Heads of State and Government, 8-9 July 2016: “As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance. The strategic forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States, are the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies.” (Paragraph 53)
11. Note paragraphs 99 and 100 of the International Court of Justice’s ruling, [“Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons,”](#) 1996. Paragraph 99: “... the Court appreciates the full importance of the recognition by Article VI of

the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons of an obligation to negotiate in good faith a nuclear disarmament. This provision is worded as follows: © Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control. The legal import of that obligation goes beyond that of a mere obligation of conduct; the obligation involved here is an obligation to achieve a precise result – nuclear disarmament in all its aspects – by adopting a particular course of conduct, namely, the pursuit of negotiations on the matter in good faith.” Paragraph 100: “This twofold obligation to pursue and to conclude negotiations formally concerns the States parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, or, in other words, the vast majority of the international community. Virtually the whole of this community appears moreover to have been involved when resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly concerning nuclear disarmament have repeatedly been unanimously adopted. Indeed, any realistic search for general and complete disarmament, especially nuclear disarmament, necessitates the cooperation of all States.”

12. [“Nuclear Disarmament and Ballistic Missiles: A Letter from Canadian Church Leaders to Prime Minister Paul Martin,”](#) 2004.

13. Canadian Council of Churches, [letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,](#) 21 December 2018.

14. Pope Francis, [“Message to the United Nations Conference to Negotiate a Legally Binding Instrument to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons, Leading Towards Their Total Elimination,”](#) 23 March 2017.

15. Pope Francis, [Message to the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons,](#) 7 December 2014. Pope Francis said, inter alia, “I wish to encourage sincere and open dialogue between parties internal to each nuclear state, between various nuclear states, and between nuclear states and non-nuclear states. This dialogue must be inclusive, involving international organizations, religious communities and civil society, and oriented towards the common good and not the protection of vested interests.”

16. Pope Francis, [Address to the members of the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See for the traditional exchange of New Year greetings,](#) 8 January 2018, with reference to Saint Pope John XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris*, 11 April 1963, 90.



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