

And on Earth...Peace

The Catholic Review

During the Advent and Christmas seasons, one of the most frequently cited passages from the Bible comes from the Gospel of Luke. As traditionally stated, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will.” (Luke 2: 14)

The scriptural reference is seemingly everywhere this time of year: greeting cards, Christmas carols and even animated television Christmas specials. Luke uses the phrase to describe the response of people everywhere to the news of Jesus’ birth. That, in itself, makes the passage timely each Christmas. However, it also captures the spirit of the Christmas season, when people of all faiths place a special emphasis on peace in our world.

The topic of peace is a particular focus for the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on International Justice and Peace, a body for which I was recently elected to assume the Chair next November. It is also the goal of the nuclear arms reduction treaty that the United States and Russia signed earlier this year and which awaits ratification by the United States Senate. The New START Treaty (NST) would reduce the nuclear arsenals of both countries by 30 percent. By signing it, both countries sent a strong signal of support for peace. Now each must find the will to implement it.

Nuclear weapons represent a grave threat to the human family and the spread of nuclear arms is an issue of great consequence for the peace and security of our nation and world.

The threat these weapons pose to human life is at the heart of the Church’s teaching

on this issue and the driving force behind a letter sent recently to the U.S. Senate by the current Chair of the Justice & Peace Committee, Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, on behalf of our Bishops' Conference.

“The Church’s concern for nuclear weapons grows out of its commitment to the sanctity of human life,” Bishop Hubbard wrote. “Consistent with Catholic teaching, the Holy See and the U.S. Bishops have long supported reducing the number of nuclear armaments, preventing their spread to other nations, and securing nuclear materials from terrorists...[We] are urging strong bipartisan support for the NST because the Treaty makes our nation and world safer by reducing nuclear weapons in a verifiable way.”

Why does the Catholic Church address this issue? The Church has a long history of applying its moral teaching to the issue of nuclear weapons. The foundation of this teaching, as with any issue that threatens God’s gift of life, is the belief that each person is created in God’s likeness and the dignity of every human life must be respected.

One example of the Church’s application of this teaching is found in its support for the just war theory, which places strict moral limits on recourse to armed force and how force can be used. In other words, an act of war must differentiate between combatants and innocent civilians, and it must be proportionate so that the evil it produces must not outweigh the good to be achieved.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council articulated this position some 45 years ago when it solemnly declared: “Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.”

This is why nuclear war is rejected in Church teaching; the magnitude of the destructive power of nuclear weapons is such that noncombatants cannot be adequately safeguarded and the lingering radiation wields disproportionate harm.

In communicating the Church's position, the Bishops, while well-intentioned, recognize they are not military and technical experts, but pastors and teachers. Thus, they have engaged the counsel of lay experts and are encouraged that military experts and leaders from both sides of the political aisle support the Treaty. These experts have said publicly that it does not constrain U.S. missile defense and that investments in our nation's nuclear weapons infrastructure are sufficient to keeping our nuclear deterrent safe and reliable.

Indeed, in endorsing the NST our Conference is joined with other voices on strong national defense, such as former Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, Secretaries of State George Shultz, William Perry and Henry Kissinger and Senator Sam Nunn.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2006 World Day of Peace message, perhaps summed up the Church's position on nuclear war in one succinct statement when he said, "In a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims."

In Catholic moral teaching, the end does not justify the means, but the end can and should inform the means. The moral end is clear: a world free of the threat of nuclear weapons. This goal should guide our efforts and the safety of our nation and world demands that we move toward nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. The New START Treaty advances us down that road and offers a glimmer of hope for that day when the earthly peace of Luke's writings will be more than a verse read at Christmas, but a reality for people of all nations, for all time.