

Nuclear Weapons and Moral Questions: The Path to Zero

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It is an honor and pleasure for me to offer some modest reflections on “Nuclear Weapons and Moral Questions: The Path to Zero.” I am grateful to General Kevin Chilton and the U.S. Strategic Command for hosting this first annual Deterrence Symposium and for inviting me to be part of this impressive gathering.

I have been asked to speak at the end of what has been a long day for many of you. Believing in a merciful God, I will try to keep my reflections to a merciful length.

Since this is a dinner speech, starting with a joke is a basic expectation, but I should warn you that archbishops are rarely funny. But here goes.

A soldier, a marine, a sailor and an airman went on a hike. The path wound higher and higher up a mountain. From time to time they stopped to admire the view from the ledge of one of the many sheer cliffs along the way.

As the day wore on toward evening, they got into dispute about which of the armed services best served God and country. The argument got so heated that the four of them got into a brawl and their fight carried them over a cliff to their deaths.

The four servicemen found themselves in front of St. Peter at the pearly gates of Heaven. With their dispute still unresolved, they asked St. Peter: “Which service branch best serves our country?”

St. Peter replied, “I can’t answer that.” But just then a dove landed on St. Peter’s shoulder with a note in its beak. St. Peter opened the note and read it to the four service men:

“Gentlemen: All the branches of the military services are honorable and courageous.

Each serves your country well. Be proud of that.

Signed: GOD

P.S. *Semper Fi.*”

My apologies to the Army, the Navy and the Air Force.

One of the great joys of my years as a priest has been my ministry with the U.S. military. Shortly after my ordination in the mid-sixties, I served as a civilian chaplain at West Point. In the early seventies, I was an Army Chaplain and did a tour in Vietnam. For a decade, I had the honor of serving both the Church and the entire military family as the Archbishop for the Military Services before Pope Benedict XVI appointed me to serve as the Archbishop of Baltimore two years ago.

My service as a chaplain has enriched my life and ministry. I have personally witnessed the skill, courage, and dedication of so many who serve our nation in all branches of the military. Theirs is a noble calling—to protect our nation and to defend peace. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Those who are sworn to serve their country in the armed forces are servants of the security and freedom of nations. If they carry out their duty honorably, they truly contribute to the common good of the nation and the maintenance of peace.”

I wish to recognize and thank the military leaders in this room tonight. You have sworn an oath to uphold the Constitution and to carry out the military policies of our nation, including the awesome responsibilities that come with nuclear weapons. Your participation in this Symposium is a sign of your commitment to explore and assess the broader dimensions and moral implications of these policies, and to place your experience at the service of policy makers and analysts as they work to evaluate and improve nuclear weapons policy. It is good to have this opportunity to meet with you face to face as we work through complex questions of nuclear policy.

My task tonight is to reflect on the moral questions that face our nation and world as we seek to build lasting peace in the shadow of nuclear weapons with all their massive destructive potential. I have been asked to offer more challenge than comfort. This is not an easy role for me. Within our Bishops’ Conference I am often a defender of the proper role of military action and a skeptic of easy and naïve hopes. I

know our world remains a dangerous place. I have been on battlefields. I know the moral struggles that come with battlefield decisions. But I also have great respect for military institutions and for the men and women who serve in them. In this talk I will offer hard questions and directions, not easy answers. I bring the voice of a pastor and teacher, not an expert analyst or policy maker.

My reflections come out of the Catholic moral tradition, but many of the values and concerns that grow out of our faith tradition are shared by people of many religions and no religion at all. As the late Pope John Paul II stated when he addressed the United Nations on nuclear weapons over twenty-five years ago, the Catholic Church strives to echo the “moral conscience of humanity, a conscience illumined and guided by Christian faith, ...but which is ... nonetheless profoundly human” and “shared by all men and women of sincerity and good will.”

Basic Principles

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the fifth commandment could not be more clear: “You shall not kill.” In Catholic teaching human life is sacred because every human being is created in the image and likeness of God. For this reason, our Church works consistently and persistently to defend the life and dignity of all: the unborn, the poor at home and abroad, the immigrant, and persons in every age and condition of life. Our *Catechism* teaches: “God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being.”

In order to protect human life and dignity and to set moral limits on the use of force, a tradition of teaching on what is a “just war” has developed and continues to evolve in the Catholic Church. It is a teaching whose principles are widely discussed, debated and employed and which reverberates in other religious and moral traditions.

It must be said at the outset that our Church supports building international agreements and structures that will make war ever less likely as a means of resolving disputes between nations and peoples. Ultimately we must work for a world without war. In the powerful and haunting words of Pope Paul VI to the United Nations that were repeated often by Pope John Paul II, “No more war, war never

again!” The international community must seek ways to make war a relic of humanity’s past if humanity is to have a future worthy of human dignity. As Pope Benedict XVI has taught: “War always represents a failure for the international community and a grave loss for humanity.”

But in this fallen and often dangerous world, at this point in human history, the traditional principles that guide the just use of force can, and should, inform moral assessments of all aspects of war, especially policies on nuclear weapons and deterrence. Of the principles that apply to war of any kind, some that are most directly applicable to questions of nuclear policy are:

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