

Living with faith and hope: A new moment for nuclear disarmament

By Bishop Gabino Zavala

ED. NOTE: The following address was given at the University of Great Falls on March 11, 2009 at the invitation of the university and the Diocese of Billings-Great Falls. Bishop Zavala announced Pax Christi USA's new nuclear disarmament campaign publicly following the address.

Thank you. I am so pleased and honored to be with you tonight. I would like to express my gratitude to the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings and the Catholic University of Great Falls for sponsoring tonight's gathering. And I want to give special thanks to Bishop Warfel for this invitation to come, and also for his leadership in our Church on concerns of justice and peace, for he has served on the International Policy Committee of the U.S. Bishops Conference, and as a bishop member of Pax Christi USA.

I have been asked to share a reflection on the U.S. bishops' landmark pastoral: "The Challenge of Peace," written in 1983, by exploring the challenges of peace today, as well as the opportunities for charting new paths for peace for our country and our world.

The peace pastoral was a prophetic document issued at a time of heightened tensions between the nuclear powers. Yet it is very relevant for today, as I believe we are at a new moment for eliminating nuclear weapons from the world's arsenals. This gives me great hope, and I will share more about how I believe the Church can bring its moral voice to helping our country's leaders take decisive steps toward nuclear disarmament. It is an opportunity that we must seize upon, and do so with renewed urgency.

A second set of challenges to peace that I will reflect upon comes from the direction our country took following the events of September 11th. Part of the title for tonight's talk "Living with Faith and Hope," is from the name of the pastoral that the bishops issued in November 2001, two months after September 11th. The letter primarily spoke to the grief and vulnerability we were experiencing as a nation, but it also elevated a moral voice at a juncture when our nation's leaders were crafting parameters for the so-called "war on terror."

I believe that the way in which this "war on terror" has been carried out has, sadly, contributed to a terrible spiral of violence engulfing our world. Iraq is a clear example of how violence begets violence. And as the U.S. is poised to deepen military engagement in Afghanistan, I would hope we could step back from the brink and reflect on the consequences rising from our country's over-reliance on military strategies to address terrorism and resolve international conflicts.

I am here speaking as the Bishop President of Pax Christi USA, the national Catholic peace movement. Pax Christi's mission is to live out the gospel call to nonviolence and to promote peacemaking as a priority in our Church, and as leaven for our nation. Since our inception, Pax Christi has raised a moral voice in calling for a nuclear weapons-free world and has tried to work faithfully to build a more just and peace-filled world.

As members of Christ's body, we are all called upon to help envision new paths for peace for our wounded world, and to do so "with faith and hope." And this we must!

First, I would like to draw on Jesus' call to "read the signs of the times," by bringing the light of the Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching into dialogue with lived history. Let me begin by looking at the unique challenge posed by nuclear weapons. The Peace Pastoral was very much a document informed by a deliberate and detailed reading of the signs of the times in the early 1980s. Written when the nuclear standoff between the Cold War enemies of the Soviet Union and the United States literally was based on a MAD policy—Mutual Assured Destruction (or MAD). Deterrence was the mechanism on which the MAD policy relied. Each side was deterred from attacking the other for fear of the other wreaking total destruction upon it. "Peace," as it were, was maintained through this precarious balance, always threatening to break down into an unthinkable nuclear war. When the Pastoral was being discerned, there were even those in the Reagan Administration who were proposing "limited" and "winnable" nuclear wars. The nation was building hundreds of weapons each year, and developing new ways of delivering them.

The Peace Pastoral addressed this dangerous direction by reasserting Vatican II's condemnation of nuclear war and declaring that nuclear weapons could never be used. And on the central question of nuclear deterrence, the Pastoral was guided by Pope John Paul II's declaration at the United Nations Special Session on Disarmament the previous year that: "In current conditions "deterrence" based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself but as a step on the way toward a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable. Nonetheless in order to ensure peace, it is indispensable not to be satisfied with this minimum which is always susceptible to the real danger of explosion."

The Peace Pastoral took His Holiness' position and went on to lay out what the U.S. Bishops called a "strictly conditioned moral acceptance of nuclear deterrence" based on three criteria: First, a reliance on deterrence could be an interim strategy only. As the Pastoral stated, "We cannot consider it adequate as a long-term basis for peace." Second, the purpose of maintaining nuclear weapons in the interim could only be to "prevent the use of nuclear weapons by others," and finally, a reliance on deterrence could only be used "not as an end in itself, but as a step on the way to a progressive disarmament."

Ten years later, in the anniversary statement, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, we bishops further specified that "progressive disarmament" must mean a commitment to eliminating nuclear weapons, not simply as an ideal, but as a concrete policy goal.

Sadly, the Pastoral's strict conditions remained unmet through the mid-1990s. So in 1998, Pax Christi USA marked the 15th anniversary of the Peace Pastoral by issuing its own evaluation of the morality of nuclear deterrence. The report, issued by 105 U.S. Catholic Bishop members of Pax Christi USA, concluded that the strict conditions for the moral acceptance of nuclear deterrence were not being met. We found that the policy of nuclear deterrence had been institutionalized. It was in no way an interim policy, but rather had become the very "long-term basis for peace" that we rejected in the 1983 Pastoral. And we found that the role of nuclear weapons had been expanded in the post-Cold War period well beyond the narrow role of deterring the use of nuclear weapons by others to include a whole range of missions, including protecting so-called "vital interests".

We concluded that the United States had no intention or policy position of eliminating these weapons. It was clear that these weapons had become fully integrated into U.S. war-planning and strategy documents and that our nation intended to maintain and rely on these weapons indefinitely. We said at that time that nuclear deterrence as a national policy must be condemned as morally abhorrent and urged, instead, for the United States to take up the Vatican's call to outlaw nuclear weapons just as biological and chemical weapons had been outlawed.

Indeed, throughout the post-Cold War period beginning in the 1990's the Vatican has been among the strongest voices calling for nuclear abolition. And in May of 2005, the Vatican took a dramatic step that signaled a sea change in Catholic moral teaching on nuclear weapons. In his address to the delegates at the Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, Vatican U.N. ambassador, called into question the ongoing morality of nuclear deterrence: "When the Holy See expressed its limited acceptance of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War, it was with the clearly stated condition that deterrence was only a step on the way toward progressive nuclear disarmament. The Holy See has never countenanced nuclear deterrence as a permanent measure, nor does it today when it is evident that nuclear deterrence drives the development of ever newer nuclear arms, thus preventing genuine nuclear disarmament." This statement by the Vatican is the first since the early 1980s that challenged the very morality of deterrence itself.

Today we are in a new moment regarding nuclear disarmament.

Last December in Paris, one hundred international political, military, business and civil leaders came together to launch a new initiative called Global Zero, which includes high-level policy work and public outreach to achieve a binding agreement to eliminate all nuclear weapons through phased and verified reduction. In the Wall Street Journal, an op-ed co-authored over a year ago by Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, Sam Nunn and William Perry, endorsed nuclear abolition and advocated for a bi-partisan process with the Senate to achieve ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which would stop all underground testing. President Obama also has spoken out on a goal of eliminating all nuclear weapons as a central element of U.S. nuclear policy. And Russian Prime Minister Putin as well spoke of the new possibilities to "liberate humanity from nuclear weapons."

So I stand here today with great hope that a very new moment for dramatic and fundamental changes in U.S. nuclear weapons policies is within our reach. In addition to ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, long-sought goals of taking deployed nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert status, negotiating a fissile materials cut-off treaty, and amending the Moscow Treaty to make its proposed cuts in U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals real and irreversible, are all possible given the new Administration and Senate. Each of these important and achievable steps will build the momentum needed to move further toward an international treaty to outlaw nuclear weapons once and for all.

It is my deepest hope that the Catholic Church in the United States will embrace this new moment and play an important role in education and advocacy on these critical issues. To honor the Peace Pastoral must mean a commitment to hold our nation accountable to the Pastoral's strict conditions for the acceptance of nuclear deterrence. Just as I joined my voice with the voices of more than 100 of my fellow bishop members of Pax Christi USA, now more than 10 years ago, I say to you today that nuclear deterrence does not meet these criteria, it must be condemned and one day very soon, I am sure, the Catholic Church in the United States will echo the words of the Vatican that "nuclear weapons are incompatible with the peace we seek for the 21st Century."

In addition to addressing nuclear weapons, the Peace Pastoral's power also was in addressing the broader questions of peace in that day. So I would like to briefly name some of the new and complex challenges to peace in our time. In addition to finding ourselves in a world awash in weapons, we find ourselves embroiled in a worldwide economic collapse resulting in part from our extravagant consumerism while billions of God's people struggle for basic survival. We see rising tensions between faith traditions, and attempts to demonize "enemy" peoples. We have seen the acceptance of the use of torture, as well a campaign of fear and intimidation waged against immigrants and communities of color.

Next week, March 19th, will mark the 6th anniversary of the start of the war on Iraq. The very launch of a "war of choice" set a dangerous precedent for our country; and it is important to look with eyes wide open at the magnitude of the resulting suffering and human costs: over 4,000 U.S. service people have been killed, and an estimated million (plus) Iraqi civilians. Over 4 million Iraqis have become displaced. Although launched under the guise of the "war on terror," it



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