

Catholic Social Teaching on Nuclear Weapons

The Catholic Church's teaching requires that any use of force be proportionate and discriminate. It must not produce more harm than good and must respect noncombatant immunity and protect civilians. The Church has long opposed the use of nuclear weapons, especially against non-nuclear threats, and the development of new nuclear weapons. The Church urges that nuclear deterrence be replaced with concrete measures of disarmament based on dialogue and multilateral negotiations. The following quotes explore Catholic teaching on nuclear weapons. The quotes are from:

Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris), St. John XXIII's 1963 encyclical, offers a fundamental framework for building a just peace through the creation of a political order that serves the common good.

The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes), the 1964 Pastoral Constitution by the Second Vatican Council, reflects on issues facing our world, such as the arms race, in the light of our faith.

The Challenge of Peace, the 1983 Pastoral Letter on War and Peace by the U.S. Catholic Bishops, offers criteria for applying Catholic teaching to U.S. nuclear policy.

The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace, a 1993 statement by the U.S. Catholic Bishops on peacemaking in a post-Cold War world.

The World Day of Peace Message from Pope Benedict XVI for January 1, 2009, addresses nuclear weapons.

Address at the Atomic Bomb Hypocenter Park (Nagasaki) and Address at the Peace Memorial (Hiroshima) on November 24, 2019, by Pope Francis reiterates Catholic teaching on nuclear weapons in our day.

Statement on Nuclear Disarmament, by United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Committee on International Justice and Peace, February 14, 2020, affirms the efforts of Pope Francis to address the nuclear threat.

"Justice, right reason, and the recognition of man's dignity cry out insistently for a cessation to the arms race. The stockpiles of armaments which have been built up in various countries must be reduced all round and simultaneously by the parties concerned. Nuclear weapons must be banned.... Everyone must sincerely cooperate ... But this requires that the fundamental principles upon which peace is based in today's world be replaced by an altogether different one, namely, the realization that true and lasting peace among nations cannot consist in the possession of an equal supply of armaments but only in mutual trust."

- St. John XXIII, *Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris)*, nos. 112- 113

“The horror and perversity of war is immensely magnified by the increase in the number of scientific weapons. For acts of war involving these weapons can inflict massive and indiscriminate destruction, thus going far beyond the bounds of legitimate defense. ... Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.... Scientific weapons, to be sure, are not amassed solely for use in war. Since the defensive strength of any nation is considered to be dependent upon its capacity for immediate retaliation, this accumulation of arms, which increases each year, likewise serves, in a way heretofore unknown, as a deterrent to possible enemy attack. Many regard this as the most effective way by which peace of a sort can be maintained between nations at the present time.”

- Second Vatican Council, *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, nos. 80, 81

“Whatever be the facts about this method of deterrence, men should be convinced that the arms race in which an already considerable number of countries are engaged is not a safe way to preserve a steady peace, nor is the so-called balance resulting from this race a sure and authentic peace. Rather than being eliminated thereby, the causes of war are in danger of being gradually aggravated. While extravagant sums are being spent for the furnishing of ever new weapons, an adequate remedy cannot be provided for the multiple miseries afflicting the whole modern world. ... The arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which ensnares the poor to an intolerable degree.” #

- Second Vatican Council, *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, no. 81

“The need to rethink the deterrence policy of our nation, to make the revisions necessary to reduce the possibility of nuclear war, and to move toward a more stable system of national and international security will demand a substantial intellectual, political, and moral effort.”

- USCCB, *The Challenge of Peace*, no. 196

“In the words of our Holy Father, we need a ‘moral about face.’ The whole world must summon the moral courage and technical means to say ‘no’ to nuclear conflict; ‘no’ to weapons of mass destruction; ‘no’ to an arms race which robs the poor and the vulnerable; and ‘no’ to the moral danger of a nuclear age which places before humankind indefensible choices of constant terror or surrender. Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith. We are called to be peacemakers, not by some movement of the moment, but by our Lord Jesus. The content and context of our peacemaking is set, not by some political agenda or ideological program, but by the teaching of his Church.”

- USCCB, *The Challenge of Peace*, no. 333

“In 1983, we judged that nuclear deterrence may be morally acceptable as long as it is limited to deterring nuclear use by others; sufficiency, not nuclear superiority, is its goal; and it is used as a step on the way toward progressive disarmament.”

- USCCB, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, no. 1

“The eventual elimination of nuclear weapons is more than a moral ideal; it should be a policy goal.”

- USCCB, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, no. 1

“What can be said, too, about those governments which count on nuclear arms as a means of ensuring the security of their countries? Along with countless persons of good will, one can state that this point of view is not only baneful but also completely fallacious. In a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims. The truth of peace requires that all — whether those governments which openly or secretly possess nuclear arms, or those planning to acquire them — agree to change their course by clear and firm decisions, and strive for a progressive and concerted nuclear disarmament. The resources which would be saved could then be employed in projects of development capable of benefiting all their people, especially the poor.”

- Pope Benedict XVI, 2009 World Day of Peace Message, no. 13

“Here in this city which witnessed the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences of a nuclear attack, our attempts to speak out against the arms race will never be enough. The arms race wastes precious resources that could be better used to benefit the integral development of peoples and to protect the natural environment. In a world where millions of children and families live in inhumane conditions, the money that is squandered and the fortunes made through the manufacture, upgrading, maintenance and sale of ever more destructive weapons, and an affront crying out to heaven.”

- Pope Francis, *Address on Nuclear Weapons*, Nagasaki, November 24, 2019

“With deep conviction I wish once more to declare that the use of atomic energy for purposes of war is today, more than ever, a crime not only against the dignity of human beings but against any possible future for our common home. The use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possessing of nuclear weapons is immoral, as I already said two years ago. We will be judged on this. Future generations will rise to condemn our failure if we spoke of peace but did not act to bring it about among the peoples on the earth. How can we speak of peace even as we build terrifying new weapons of war?”

- Pope Francis, *Address at the Peace Memorial*, Hiroshima, November 24, 2019

“The Words of Pope Francis serve as a clarion call and a profound reminder to all that the status quo of international relations, resting on the treat of mutual destruction, must be changed. As Bishops of the United States, we have made similar appeals in the past when we stated, ‘the moral task is to proceed with deep cuts and ultimately to abolish these weapons entirely.’”

- USCCB Committee on International Justice and Peace, *Statement on Nuclear Disarmament*, February 14, 2020

USCCB – The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.