

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND NUCLEAR WEAPONSⁱ

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*"In the 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."*¹ In 1982, these words by Pope John Paul II to the United Nations formed the basis for the letters of various national bishops' conferences on nuclear weapons in 1983. In 1984, after publication of the letters by these conferences, Cardinal Casaroli underlined the conditional nature of the acceptance of nuclear deterrence by the Catholic Church: *"According to papal doctrine, deterrence can in no way be regarded as 'a goal in itself. It has an essential provisional character and is, as it were, an aid."*²

The 'provisional acceptance' of nuclear weapons was bound to conditions in the letters of the bishops' conferences. The American bishops stated the most specific provisions. In their letter *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response* they analyze both the tradition and criteria of the 'just war' doctrine as well as those of the Christian pacifist tradition.³ Mainly based on the criteria of the 'just war' doctrine they accepted nuclear deterrence as morally justified on three conditions:

- a. a reliance on deterrence as a strategy can only be an 'interim' policy. *"We cannot consider it adequate as a long-term basis for peace."*
- b. the purpose of maintaining nuclear weapons in the interim period was only *"to prevent the use of nuclear weapons by others."*
- c. a reliance on nuclear deterrence must not be used as a means in itself, but *"as a step on the way toward a progressive disarmament."*⁴

In 1998, on the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary of *The Challenge of Peace*, seventy-five American bishops, all members of Pax Christi, used these three criteria to judge the 'morality of a nuclear deterrent' in current times.⁵ They elaborated on the follow-up letter of the American bishops' conference in 1993 and on statements of the Vatican in the nineties. Moreover, according to the tradition started by the American hierarchy in 1983, their evaluation was aimed at the policy of nuclear deterrence of the American government.

The American bishops' conference in 1993

In 1993 the bishops in the U.S.A. wrote a new pastoral letter: *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*.⁶ In this letter they stated that their *"judgment of 1983 that nuclear deterrence is morally acceptable under certain strict conditions remains a useful guide for evaluating the continued moral status of nuclear weapons in a post-Cold War world. It is useful because it acknowledges the fundamental moral dilemmas still posed by nuclear weapons, and it reflects the progress toward fulfilling the conditions we elaborated in 1983."*

ⁱ Reprint from *Nuclear Arms: From Yes to No and Vice-Versa*, IKV, The Hague 1999. Only minor corrections have been made.

ⁱⁱ At the time of writing, Ben Schennink lectured at the Peace Research Centre of the Catholic University in Nijmegen and was member of the Commission for International Affairs of Pax Christi Netherlands and of the Board of Pax Christi International

The bishops see progress since 1983 but consider additional steps needed *"if nuclear policies and priorities are to keep up with the dramatic changes in world politics and if our country is to move from relying on nuclear deterrence as a basis for its security policy."* The additional measures they suggest are:

- *"No to the very idea of a nuclear war";* a minimal deterrence *"may be justified only to deter the use of nuclear weapons"*. Therefore they argue for a 'no first use' statement by the USA, they reject of course *"proposals to use nuclear weapons to deter any nonnuclear threat"* and they insist that *"the fragile barrier against use of these weapons"* will be reinforced.
- *"Nuclear deterrence may be justified only as a step on the way toward progressive disarmament."* Therefore, the START Treaties need to be ratified and furthermore, *"much deeper cuts are both possible and necessary. The eventual elimination of nuclear weapons is more than a moral ideal; it should be a policy goal."* They argue, in addition, for a verifiable comprehensive test ban treaty, a renewal of the non-proliferation treaty, a global ban on the production of fissionable material for use in nuclear weapons and reinforcing the role of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).
- Commitment to co-operative security and an international legal order. *"Nuclear powers may justify, and then only temporarily, their nuclear deterrents if they use their power and resources to lead in the construction of a more just and stable international order."* Clearly, the bishops refer to their own government as well: *"An active commitment by the United States to nuclear disarmament and the strengthening of collective security is the only moral basis for temporarily retaining our deterrent and our insistence that other nations forgo these weapons. We advocate disarmament by example: careful but clear steps to reduce and end our dependence on weapons of mass destruction."*⁷

The American bishops elaborated on their letter from 1983 with a strong plea for further and even unilateral steps. The latter is clearly a new element in the letter of 1993 but matches their approach of 1983, in which their critical evaluation is primarily aimed at their own government's policy as well.

The Vatican after the Cold War

The American bishops are not alone in their critical approach to nuclear deterrence. With assent, they quote Archbishop Renato Martino, the permanent representative of the Vatican at the United Nations in 1993. He said that the end of the Cold War *"challenges the world community to adopt a post-nuclear form of security. That security lies in the abolition of nuclear weapons and the strengthening of international law."*⁸ The Vatican went even further. In 1997, during a speech to the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) of the non-proliferation treaty (NPT), Archbishop Martino stated: *"Nuclear weapons are incompatible with the peace we seek for the 21st century. They cannot be justified. They deserve condemnation. The preservation of the non-proliferation treaty demands an unequivocal commitment to their abolition."*⁹ He referred to examples such as the ban on biological and chemical weapons and the recent embargo on landmines to underline that nuclear weapons can be banned by the international community as well.

Political developments

The conditions the bishops stipulated in 1993 and the recent statements of the Vatican have been compared to recent developments by the Pax Christi bishops. To emphasize the provisional nature of their acceptance they quote the opinion of the International

Court of Justice, which declared in 1996: *"The threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable to armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law."* Moreover, the Court stated: *"There exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects under strict and effective international control."*¹⁰ The opinion in December 1996 of 61 former U.S. generals and admirals that nuclear weapons are to be abolished because they are unnecessary and destabilizing, is also quoted by the bishops in their plea for abolition.

However, the Pax Christi bishops conclude that political changes after the Cold War have not brought about a change in their government's policy as far as deterrence is concerned. They note that the investment of the U.S. government of 60 billion for the next twelve years in the 'Stockpile Stewardship' program and the intention of the government to continue developing, testing and relying on a nuclear deterrent until 2065 cannot be reconciled with an 'interim' policy and does not imply a *"progressive disarmament"*. Besides, the bishops observe that the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. policy has been expanded. Their presence is not only aimed at discouraging others from using nuclear weapons, but also at deterring the use of chemical and biological weapons or other threats to vital national interests of the U.S.. A pre-emptive use is not excluded. 'Rogue states' in the Third World must be kept in line with the threat of nuclear weapons. This clearly enhances the danger of deterrence failing, as the number of states that can call the deterrent bluff considerably increases.

Conclusions of Pax Christi bishops

The Pax Christi bishops draw the following conclusions:

- a. the policy of nuclear deterrence is being institutionalized and cannot longer be considered as an 'interim' policy;
- b. the role of nuclear weapons has been expanded in the post Cold War era well beyond the role of deterring the use of them by others;
- c. although the United States and the former Soviet Union states have eliminated some of their stockpiles of nuclear weapons, at least the US has no intention of eliminating these weapons entirely. *"Rather, the US intends to retain its nuclear deterrence into the indefinite future."*¹¹

Therefore they call for concrete action with regard to nuclear disarmament. They will make their opinion known at the plenary bishops' conference and from that discussion the American bishops can be expected to intensify their criticism on nuclear deterrence in the future.

European bishops

None of the bishops' conferences in Europe have spoken so explicitly about nuclear weapons after the Cold War. The statements of their colleagues from the U.S. and from the Vatican hardly met with any response here. In their letter of 1996, the Dutch bishops confine themselves to the statement that nuclear weapons *"present a danger not sufficiently eliminated. It is also a moral problem that only will be solved when all countries accept, verifiably, the obligation to abandon possession and use of these weapons."*¹² With regard to this issue, the bishops ignored the Pax Christi advice. The advice was drawn up based on a consultation that Pax Christi Netherlands carried out on request of the bishops in order to prepare the letter. In the consultation Pax Christi concluded that banning nuclear weapons still is an urgent matter and it listed various concrete suggestions that had emerged from the consultation.¹³ The bishops chose not to use this and limited themselves to a general reference to the problem, which is not

very binding.

The recent letter of the Commission of Bishops Conferences of the European Community (COMECE) is not very conclusive either. The lack of supervision on the distribution of nuclear technology for military purposes, the nuclear tests carried out in India and Pakistan in 1998 and the reluctance of nuclear powers to comply with their obligation in the nonproliferation treaty to substantial disarmament are called "*reasons for shame and sorrow*". This brings them to request political leaders to "*clearly understand that already agreed arms controls do not make more extensive disarmament superfluous. This applies especially to nuclear weapons: unless they demonstrate their own willingness to disarm, today's nuclear powers lack all credibility when they call other states to renounce their quest for nuclear weapons.*"¹⁴

In the near future, probably more can be expected of the pastoral conference of England and Wales. In the Strategic Defence Review, the Blair government has declared to strive for the abolition of nuclear weapons. However, it clearly stated that this could not be realized for another thirty or forty years. Cardinal Hume gladly drew the conclusion that the government pleads for abolition but omitted to urge it on. However, the committee, which advises the bishops' conference on this point, has recently decided to put the problem of nuclear deterrence on the agenda once more. It concluded that the gap between the Vatican's statements on nuclear weapons and the UK's policy is very wide.¹⁵

Pax Christi International and the World Council of Churches

On the occasion of the meeting of the Preparatory Committee of the non-proliferation treaty in April 1998, the World Council of Churches and Pax Christi International issued a common statement: *Act now for nuclear abolition*. Konrad Kaiser, Secretary General of the World Council of Churches and Cardinal Godfried Danneels, President of Pax Christi International, argued in this statement: "*Nuclear weapons, whether used or threatened, are grossly evil and morally wrong. As an instrument of mass destruction, nuclear weapons slaughter the innocent and ravage the environment. ... When used as instrument of deterrence, nuclear weapons held innocent people hostage for political and military purposes. Therefore, the doctrine of nuclear deterrence is morally corrupt.*"¹⁶ In the same statement the above quoted words of Archbishop Renato Martino to the PrepCom meeting of 1997 are recalled.

In his speech to the members of the PrepCom, Cardinal Danneels applauded these prophetic words of the Vatican and he put himself behind the call of more than hundred world leaders in February 1998.¹⁷ They ask the nuclear states to renounce their outdated and destabilizing doctrine of nuclear deterrence. This doctrine prevents the development of peace and threatens to cause a new arms race by legitimizing nuclear states to keep their arsenals up to date. Therefore Pax Christi International makes an appeal to the members of the PrepCom to start negotiations for a convention on nuclear weapons to ban these weapons. The Catholic peace movement is convinced that the commitment and responsibility of all countries in the world are necessary to make it work. "*Do not let the status quo of the nuclear weapons states become the status quo of the Parties to the NPT.*"¹⁸

Conclusion

The consensus in the Catholic Church that was reached in 1983 on the conditional moral acceptance of nuclear deterrence has remained the guiding principle of the considerations of the Catholic Church. Even bishops who were very reluctant to agree

at the time, among whom many Pax Christi bishops in the U.S., now use it to criticize the current policy of their own governments. That they are doing this is also due to the way in which the American bishops' conference in 1983 has developed its moral judgment. The moral judgment then was very specifically applied to their own government's policy. That course was followed in 1993 and in the statements of the Pax Christi bishops in 1998. In Europe, leading bishops' conferences, such as the German and French in 1983, chose a different course: less aimed at a moral judgment of their own government's policy and more directed towards a general verdict on nuclear deterrence in view of the tension between East and West.¹⁹ Thus far, the fading away of this tension has not induced West European bishops to answer the question whether "*in current conditions*" nuclear weapons are still morally acceptable and how they are used or should be used "*on the way toward an progressive disarmament*". The Vatican has not forgotten that statement from 1982 and the evaluation to which it coerces. That is why it can be expected that, not only in the American Catholic Church, the discussion on the moral acceptability of nuclear deterrence has not yet come to an end.

Notes

¹ John Paul II, *Message to the Second Special Session of the United Nations Assembly Devoted to Disarmament* (June 1982), in: *Archief van de Kerken* 38, 1983, nr. 7, p. 3.

² Cardinal A. Casaroli, *De Heilige Stoel en de vrede*, in: *Archief van de Kerken* 39, 1984, no. 5, p. 31. [The Holy See and Peace]

³ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, United States Catholic Conference, Washington, 1983, pp. 26-37

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58 en 59.

⁵ Pax Christi USA, *The Morality of Nuclear Deterrence. An evaluation by Pax Christi bishops in the United States*, Erie, 1998.

⁶ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, in: *Origins CNS documentary service*, Vol. 23, No. 26, 1993.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 459.

⁸ Archbishop Renato Martino, Address to the United Nations Committee on Disarmament, in: *Origins*, Vol. 23, No. 21, 1993, p. 382.

⁹ Archbishop Renato Martino, First Committee of the United Nations, April 27th 1997.

¹⁰ International Court of Justice, The Hague, July 8th 1996.

¹¹ *The Morality of Nuclear Deterrence. An evaluation by Pax Christi bishops in the United States, o.c.*, p. 4.

¹² *Can the World Make Peace?* Utrecht, 1996, p. 41.

¹³ *Advies van Pax Christi Nederland aan de Rooms-Katholieke bisschoppenconferentie van Nederland ten behoeve van een nieuw herderlijk schrijven over gerechtigheid, vrede en verzoening*, Utrecht 1995, p. 36-38. [Advice of Pax Christi Netherlands to the Roman-Catholic conference of bishops of The Netherlands in purpose of a new pastoral letter on justice, peace and reconciliation].

¹⁴ COMECE, *Truth, Memory and Solidarity. Keys to Peace and Reconciliation*, Brussels, 1999, p. 6 en 17.

¹⁵ Information from Brian Wicker, member of the advisory committee.

¹⁶ *Act now for Nuclear Abolition; Statement addressed to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Preparatory Committee*. Godfried Cardinal Danneels, President of Pax Christi International and Rev. Dr Konrad Raiser, General Secretary World Council of Churches, March 1998. Thanks to Paul Lansu of Pax Christi International who supplied the information for this paragraph.

¹⁷ *Statement on Nuclear Weapons by International Civilian Leaders*, 2 February 1998; in: *Disarmament Diplomacy*, February 1998.

¹⁸ Pax Christi International, *Thoughts and Concerns for Delegates to the 2nd Preparatory Committee of Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, Brussels, April 1998

¹⁹ J. Bryan Hehir, *De afschrikkingsdiscussie; notities over strategische en morele ontwikkelingen*, in: Cor Arends e.a., *Om de ander, elementen voor een ethiek en spiritualiteit van de vrede*, Baarn, 1987, p. 136-137. [The deterrence discussion: notes on strategic and moral developments].