

Back to basic questions

John Battle



The tremendous struggle to respond appropriately to tackling the coronavirus pandemic is not only wearing out whole populations, it is exhausting the capabilities of governments to react.

The initial priority of saving lives and keeping everyone safe shredded into problems of care homes and the older and vulnerable who needed shielding. As that policy has resulted in a long, damaging isolation of the elderly, now some publicly are asking a more fundamental question of whether to save society at large and especially jobs and education for the young, in which case the older generation ought to be regarded as expendable.

The 'Stay safe to save your granny' message pushed at students has raised the intergenerational question of economic and health priorities in times of scarce resources. Ultimately it asks, 'should the less vulnerable young be held back to save the elderly who have at least had a life?'

Similarly the financial pressure on families (and not only the low paid) having being furloughed on short income and now becoming unemployed on even less, has led to a basic debate about who should now feed school children.

The free school meals debate has turned back into a fundamental debate about tackling poverty.

As the chief of Barnardo's put it, as half term arrived, families short of income with hungry children cannot wait for this debate on poverty in our society to be finally resolved.

Yes, causes of poverty in our society need to be examined and honestly and fairly addressed, but in the meantime, emergency daily measures are desperately needed.

Throughout the whole of these most difficult months Catholic charities, and not least the SVF, have been leading the practical responses. The dedicated staff and volunteers at St Vincent's Centre in Leeds led the way as a flagship of support to families and individuals, and spent last week tackling 'holiday hunger'.

As the poverty debate in a crisis always quickly polarises into state provision versus personal parental responsibility and dissolves into who should pay, perhaps as a Church we should again spell out the approach of Catholic social teaching developed over the past century in the face of poverty and injustice. We start from the dignity of each person which means that 'no-one can be left out' and as Sheena Eastwood, the inspiring compassionate manager of St Vincent's Centre Leeds put it, "We all have a part to play". Let's start the debate from that inclusive principle of solidarity.

UK needs to join the party as UN treaty bans nuclear weapons

COMMENT

Theresa Alessandro



As you will have read elsewhere in this issue of *The Catholic Universe*, the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) was ratified last weekend, and will come into force in 90 days. We peace campaigners are allowing ourselves a moment of celebration. Right has triumphed over might because nuclear weapons are now illegal. We wish we could meet together to share food, drink and exchange hugs.

As always, the work of peace is not yet done. Our Government has not engaged with the TPNW so far. Neither have any others of the nine countries who possess these weapons of mass destruction. However, your heritage may connect you with those who have already signed and/or ratified the treaty: Nigeria, Botswana, South Africa, Ireland, New Zealand, the Philippines, Vietnam and many more. The peoples of the world have spoken. What do we want? To eliminate nuclear weapons. When do we want it? NOW!

We applaud the moral courage and leadership of the ratifying nations and the Nobel Peace Prize-winning team who produced the treaty. Thanks to them we can all look forward with renewed hope to nuclear weapons finally being abolished.

Due to Britain's continuing possession of Trident nuclear submarines, we find ourselves firmly on the wrong side of history. Perhaps more pressingly, we are on the wrong side of Pope Francis: "Peace and international stability are incompatible with attempts to build upon the fear of mutual destruction or the threat of total annihilation." Francis says firmly of nuclear weapons, "Even their very possession is to be condemned."

Critics suggest that because the TPNW is not binding on the nuclear-possessing states it can have no effect. Some say it is a distraction from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty – when in fact it is designed to complement it. In fact, the UN ban treaty methodology has already worked for other controversial weapons such as landmines and cluster bombs.

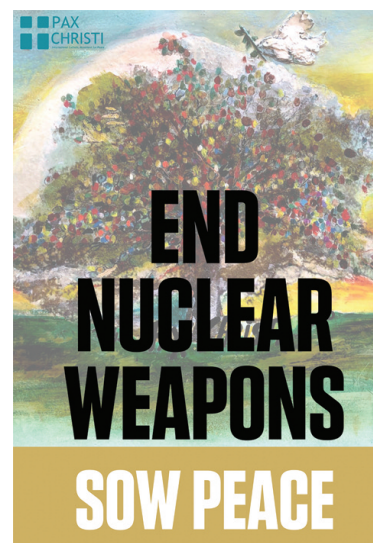
The ban treaty builds on the truth that the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons are unacceptable. It is a modern example of nonviolence in action. In the best tradition of nonviolence, the TPNW creates space for something different to happen. It is like Jesus bending to write in the sand as the people urged each other to stone a woman. When he had the people's attention,



Pax Christi members on the steps of Coventry Cathedral on the anniversary of the Nagasaki bombing, and below, outside Westminster Cathedral on the 75th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima

Jesus asked them who was without sin. The process of signing and ratifying the TPNW has got the people's attention. Now those 50 states are saying to the rest of us, 'Who among you? Who among you would continue to produce, maintain, and make threats against humanity and our planet with these immoral weapons?'

Campaigning against nuclear weapons has been part of the work of peace since the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki 75 years ago. Pax Christi members are among those who have kept going despite efforts by some to discredit, wear down and marginalise their prophetic voices. Pax Christi members, Christian CND members, and many other people of goodwill, marched, sang, wrote letters, raised funds, painted posters and made jolly hats to grab attention over decades of activity. At a recent Pax Christi zoom meeting, Martin Birdseye recalled repeatedly getting up early to stand outside Aldermaston and Burghfield as workers arrived. Henrietta Cullinan shared a photo of her first anti-nuclear protest in 1986 at a base due to host Cruise missiles, in which seeds were planted around the perimeter. Pat Gaffney sent pictures of a Good Friday liturgy outside the Alconbury base. Pax Christi Vice President Bruce Kent said, "There have been since 1945 many brave individuals and organisations whose voices have been raised in opposition to nuclear weapons. Few



will now know the name of Gertrude Fishwick who in 1957 helped to get CND started, or of Archbishop Thomas Roberts who spoke out when most of his fellow bishops stayed silent or were ambiguous about so called nuclear 'deterrence'."

The *Hibakusha*, survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, have continued to tell their stories. Pope Francis says: "Like the *Hibakusha*, many people in today's world are working to ensure that future generations will preserve the memory of past events, not only in order to prevent the same errors or illusions from recurring, but also to enable memory, as the fruit of experience, to serve as the basis and inspiration for present and future de-

cisions to promote peace."

Aaron Humphriss is a Pax Christi member who interned recently at the Holy See Mission to the UN. He reports: "This will not just be a significant milestone for those countries that have ratified the treaty but, by its very existence, it provides for the remaining countries to be lobbied and persuaded of the efficacy of becoming a signatory. It will also provide campaigners with the much-needed leverage to convince nuclear-possessing states of the importance of taking meaningful strides towards nuclear disarmament."

So, how do we transform UK Government policy – and spending – to fit our new, nuclear-weapon-free future? Catholic people have an important role to play in supporting the peace message of Pope Francis and the UN. Tell your friends, neighbours, fellow parishioners about what is happening. Ask for prayers on this issue. Write to your MP – the 50 ratifications give you something new to say. Call for the money spent on Trident to be spent on healthcare, combatting poverty, sustainable energy. Ask your bank or pension provider whether they fund nuclear weapons with your money. The information and letter-writing tool here will help you, at moneyleftofnukes.wordpress.com

Do something creative in these difficult, restricted times and make space for something different to happen. Meet in the park, put up a banner and eat cake. Call out to people passing, 'Hey, nuclear weapons are banned! Change is coming!' Send pictures to the local press (or the national press).

Find like-minded people to share ideas with. Pax Christi is the movement for peace, rooted in the Catholic Church. We might be the like-minded people you are looking for. Check out our website: pax-christi.org.uk. Consider joining us!

Theresa Alessandro is the director of Pax Christi England & Wales.

