Imagine a world without nuclear weapons: it isn’t hard to do...

CATHOLIC COMMENT

Theresa Alessandro

On nuclear weapons, Pope Francis says that ‘the threat of their use as well as their very possession is to be firmly condemned’. On 3rd May, during the service held at Westminster Abbey to mark 50 years of nuclear submarines in the UK, there were clergy and good people inside the Abbey believing that our nuclear submarines are instrumental in peace. And there were clergy and good people outside the Abbey witnessing to their belief that nuclear weapons are an immoral threat and obstacle to peace.

How can Christian people have such different views? How can we talk to each other, find some common ground and move forward?

The issue of nuclear deterrence has been characterised as a ‘wicked problem’. The term refers not to evil, but to problems which are wickedly difficult to resolve, where possible solutions seem only to create further intractable problems because the original problem is so embedded in other issues. Wicked problems require much creative collaboration to address and, most importantly, require a change of mindset before progress can be made.

These problems are also characterised by a shifting, complex range of views. For example, some say that we must acknowledge that nuclear weapons exist now and learn to live with them. Some argue that we would be vulnerable without our own nuclear deterrent – someone would blow us up – and this links with the view that the possession of nuclear weapons enables us to be key ‘players on the world’s stage’, a country not to be messed with.

On the other hand, some say that nuclear weapon possession by a few countries perpetuates unequal power balances across the world, impacting on all other systems – trade, development, decision-making at the highest levels – and it is this very imbalance which makes us suspicious and afraid of each other.

Pope Francis says, ‘The existence of nuclear weapons creates a false sense of security that perpetrates unequal power balances across the world, impacting on all other systems – trade, development, decision-making at the highest levels – and it is this very imbalance which makes us suspicious and afraid of each other.’

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The change of mindset required to make progress is underway and has gathered momentum in those nine countries. Their governments are not currently engaging positively in the creative, shared slog to resolve this wicked problem.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty has been stuck on Article VI for decades. Nuclear weapon-possessing governments cite the risk to stability of any upsetting of a nuclear balance. They point to a reduction in warhead numbers as their contribution to disarmament. So the UK is down to 120 available warheads; equivalent to ‘only’ 960 Hiroshima-sized bombs. New ways to be players on the world stage and new ways to balance international relationships need to be constructed. Such are the shifting, complex, interconnected sands of wicked problems.

There is a view that as a deterrent is not going to be used except to ‘deter’ by its (expensive) existence and grim readiness, the moral issues can be side-stepped. This neat sidestepping is also apparent in our capacity to suppress knowledge of a wide range of actual acts of war, described by Pope Francis as ‘a world war fought piecemeal’.

But wicked problems are resolved when that very sidestepping is resisted and the moral issues are finally confronted.

Think of the abolition of slavery; achieving votes for women; the end of Pax Christi. So, here is something you can do in your kitchen: imagine the world without nuclear weapons! Find people who are working to make this happen – there are lots! Speak up, write about it, pray, learn, use the talents God has given you. Step into the water.

For more information: paxchristi.org.uk https://christiancnd.org.uk/ https://www.icaw.org/

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