

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

CATHOLIC COMMENT

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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 holds international relations hostage and stifles peaceful coexistence." For many, nuclear weapons threaten indiscriminate killing, suffering and environmental destruction on a massive scale that can simply never be justified and is immoral.

Unfortunately it is not enough to try and persuade our opponents that they need to come round to our way of looking at nuclear deter-



rence. In fact, the slow and difficult work that is needed to resolve a wicked problem has been continuing since the first nuclear weapons were produced. The international Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) entered into force in 1970. More recently the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) – which is designed to complement the NPT – has given fresh hope to collaborative attempts to work towards removing nuclear weapons from the earth.

The newest approach put the terrible humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons before the notion of national securities, leading to overwhelming support for the TPNW.

The change of mindset required to make progress is underway and has gained new traction in the last four years. Countries in the global south particularly are ratifying the TPNW. It will become International Law soon. When that happens, it is anticipated that nuclear weapons will be as morally unpalatable as chemical weapons, biological weapons, landmines, and that historical wicked problem, institutionalised slavery.

Can you believe it? That we will rid the world of nuclear weapons one day soon? Is this the change of mindset that you need to embrace? Do you doubt that we can stop people making nuclear weapons now? Actually these weapons are very hard to build. Even for the earliest designs the infrastructure needed is complex, expensive, labour-intensive and therefore detectable. You can't build a nuclear weapon in your kitchen. It is possible for humanity

to ban nuclear weapons, but if you still struggle with a kind of despair that we are all doomed, might it help to remind yourself of Walter Wink's words: 'Faith requires at times marching into the waters before they part'?

Pax Christi's education worker Aisling Griffin reports that young people in schools are often surprised to hear that it is only nine of the world's 195 countries who have nuclear weapons. A change of mindset is certainly needed 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 side-stepping 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 capital punishment in this country.

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.icanw.org/>

If this issue really speaks to you, perhaps consider becoming a member of Pax Christi, or making a one-off donation to support our work.

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Pictured above and left, CND protestors outside Westminster Abbey during the controversial service to mark 50 years of the UK's nuclear submarine force