



BRIEFING NOTE
DECEMBER 2019

The Catholic Church and the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

Support for the TPNW

On a historic visit to the A-bombed cities of [Hiroshima](#) and [Nagasaki](#) in November 2019, Pope Francis, the head of the Catholic Church, condemned the use and possession of nuclear weapons by any state as “immoral”, and urged support for “the principal international legal instruments of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, including the [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#)”. He said that international peace cannot rest on a balance of military power, but must be based on mutual trust, and that a world without nuclear weapons is “possible and necessary”.

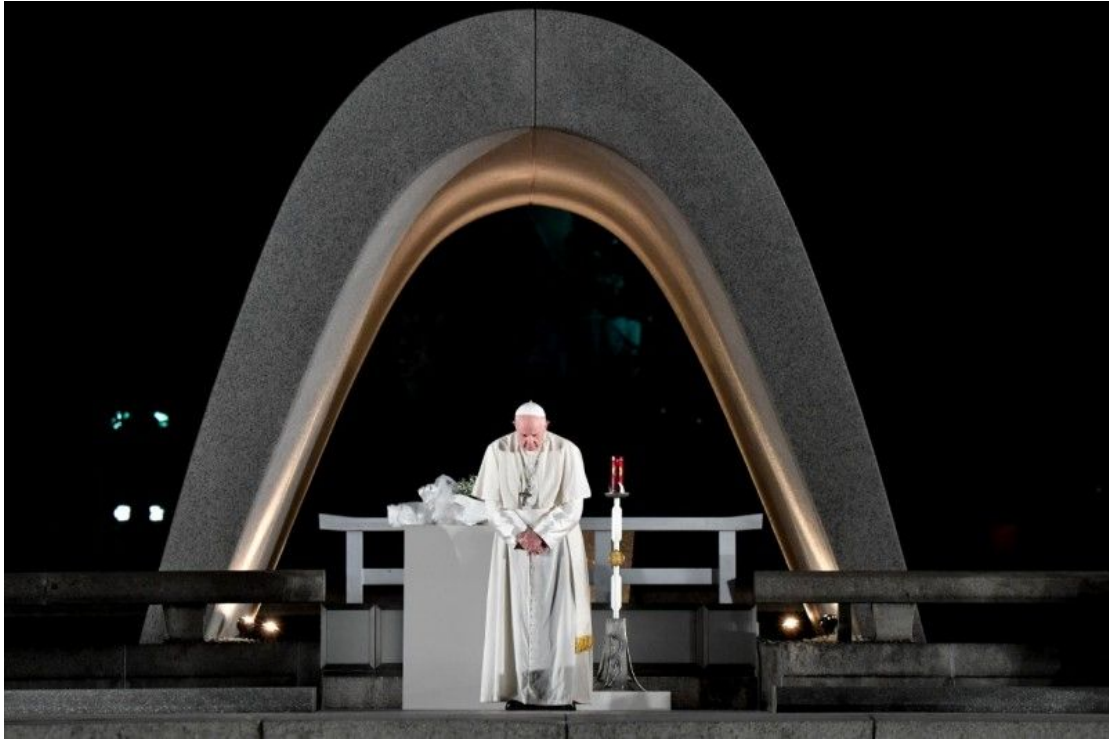
The Catholic Church has been a leading proponent of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which 122 states, including the Vatican, [voted](#) to adopt at the United Nations in July 2017. It is the first globally applicable multilateral agreement to outlaw nuclear weapons comprehensively. At a Vatican-sponsored [symposium](#) in November 2017, the Pope said that the treaty “filled a significant juridical lacuna” and showed that “a healthy realism continues to shine a light of hope on our unruly world”.

“We must never grow weary of working to support the principal international legal instruments of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, including the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.”

– Pope Francis, Nagasaki, 24 November 2019

The Vatican was among the first states to ratify the TPNW when it opened for signature in New York in September 2017. The Vatican’s chief diplomat described the treaty as “one more blow on the anvil toward the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.’” When the negotiations for the TPNW began in March 2017, the Pope [expressed](#) his wish that the treaty-making process may “constitute a decisive step along the road towards a world without nuclear weapons”, which is “not beyond our reach”.

The Vatican has called on all other states to ratify the TPNW “as soon as possible”, commending it as “an important step towards a nuclear-weapons-free world”. By adhering to the treaty, states formally reject “the fallacy that ‘might makes right’ and its pernicious modern corollary that some nations have the right to nuclear weapons while others do not”, and they affirm that “international peace and security consist in what supports the common good of all humanity”.



Pope Francis at the cenotaph for A-bomb victims in Hiroshima, Japan, on 24 November 2019.

‘Catastrophic humanitarian effects’

The TPNW was negotiated in response to the ever-deepening concern of the international community about the risks and consequences of the use of nuclear weapons. At the Vatican-sponsored symposium in November 2017, Pope Francis warned of the “catastrophic humanitarian and environmental effects of any employment of nuclear devices” and “the risk of an accidental detonation”, noting that nuclear weapons affect “not only the parties in conflict but the entire human race”.

In the event of a nuclear attack, the dead and injured would number in the tens or hundreds of thousands, if not the millions. Chronic illness would plague survivors, and genetic damage would be passed on to future generations, as was the case following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. A nuclear attack would also destroy major infrastructure, disrupt the economy, and cause irreversible damage to the environment. Even a so-called “limited” nuclear war involving a small fraction of the world’s nuclear weapons would severely disrupt the climate and agricultural production, resulting in widespread famine.

Rejecting ‘assured mutual destruction’

In recent years, the Catholic Church has grown increasingly critical of strategies of “nuclear deterrence”, which it argues are “[deeply flawed](#)” and have led to a permanent stockpiling of nuclear weapons. In his [speech](#) in Nagasaki, Pope Francis said that “nuclear doctrines” foment “a climate of fear, mistrust, and hostility”, and that the possession of nuclear weapons is never the answer to our longings for security, peace, and stability. Nuclear weapons only ever afford a “false sense of security”, as peace cannot be achieved through “the threat of total annihilation”, he said.

“The use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possessing of nuclear weapons is immoral.”

– Pope Francis, Hiroshima, 24 November 2019

The Pope also condemned the waste of “precious resources” on the ongoing “arms race”, urging leaders to reflect on how the world’s resources can be employed in light of the “complex and difficult implementation” of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. “In a world where millions of children and families live in inhumane conditions,” he said, “the money that is squandered and the fortunes made through the manufacture, upgrading, maintenance and sale of ever more destructive weapons, are an affront crying out to heaven.”



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On behalf of all the victims of atomic bombings and experiments, and of all conflicts, let us together cry out: Never again war, never again the clash of arms, never again so much suffering!

POPE FRANCIS
November 2019



Action for nuclear disarmament

In Nagasaki, the Pope said that a world free of nuclear weapons is “the aspiration of millions of men and women everywhere”, and that making this ideal a reality “calls for involvement on the part of all: individuals, religious communities and civil society, countries that possess nuclear weapons and those that do not, the military and private sectors, and international organisations.” He added: “Our response to the threat of nuclear weapons must be joint and concerted, inspired by the arduous yet constant effort to build mutual trust and thus surmount the current climate of distrust.”

Members of the Catholic Church have long been at the forefront of grassroots movements to oppose nuclear weapons and promote disarmament, including the [Plowshares movement](#), which advocates active resistance to war.



Pope Francis at an international symposium on nuclear disarmament hosted by the Vatican in November 2017, with the participation of Nobel Peace Prize winners, including ICAN.



ICAN campaigners of different faiths at the “Isaiah Wall” near the United Nations in New York ahead of the adoption of the TPNW in July 2017. *Photo: Clare Conboy*