

## What does the Catholic Church teach about nuclear weapons?

The teaching of the Catholic Church on nuclear weapons is anchored in a concern to *protect human life*, an acknowledgement that *peace is ultimately built on justice*, and a need to place strict *moral limits on the use of force*.

- In 1954, Pope Pius XII argued that *“every possible effort must be made to avert (atomic warfare) through international agreement.”*

He condemned *“the pure and simple annihilation of all human life within the radius of action.”* Pope Pius made the moral argument that the use of force must be limited to *“self-defence”* within *“rigid limitations.”*

- St. John XXIII built upon this teaching in his 1963 encyclical letter, *“Peace on Earth”*: *“The stockpiles of armaments which have been built up in various countries must be reduced all round and simultaneously by the parties concerned. Nuclear weapons must be banned.”*
- The Second Vatican Council was equally clear that *“any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities ... is a crime against God and man himself.”* The council maintained that the arms race *“is not a safe way to preserve a steady peace.”*

Instead of eliminating the *“causes of war,”* the arms race aggravates them. *“Extravagant sums”* are spent on weapons and not on the underlying causes of conflict and the *“multiple miseries”* afflicting humanity.

- St. Paul VI called *“development, the new name for peace”* in his 1967 encyclical letter, *“On the Development of Peoples”* he said: *“For peace is not simply the absence of warfare, based on a precarious balance of power; it is fashioned by efforts directed day after day toward the establishment of ... a more perfect form of justice.”*

Pope Paul also inaugurated the annual World Day of Peace (Jan. 1) in 1968. In the first papal Peace Day message, he decried *“frightful weapons of extermination”* and the expenditure of *“enormous financial”* resources that *“hinder(s) the development of so many other peoples.”*

- Addressing diplomats in 2003, St. John Paul II was emphatic. *“NO TO WAR!”* *War is not always inevitable. It is always a defeat for humanity.”* He singled out *“those who still place their trust in nuclear weapons.”*
- Pope Benedict XVI in 2006 starkly warned *“those governments which count on nuclear arms as a means of ensuring the security of their countries.”* He called their viewpoint *“completely fallacious.”* *“In a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims,”* he added.
- Pope Francis has frequently addressed the moral and life-threatening dangers of nuclear weapons. In a message to the 2014 Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, he wrote: *“Nuclear deterrence and the threat of mutually assured destruction cannot be the basis for ... peaceful coexistence among peoples and states.”* He decried how expenditures *“on nuclear weapons squanders the wealth of nations.”*

## What about the role of “nuclear deterrence”?

In 1982 Pope John Paul II judged: *“In 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.”*

Decades later, the Church is re-examining *“current conditions.”* Nuclear deterrence has not led to *“progressive disarmament”* and a global nuclear ban. In fact, the nuclear powers are investing heavily in modernizing nuclear arsenals.

Given these conditions, in Hiroshima in 2019 Pope Francis declared: *“The use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possessing of nuclear weapons is immoral.”*

## Fuller quotations

*“Justice, right reason, and the recognition of man's dignity cry out insistently for a cessation to the arms race. The stockpiles of armaments which have been built up in various countries must be reduced all round and simultaneously by the parties concerned. Nuclear weapons must be banned.... Everyone must sincerely cooperate ... But this requires that the fundamental principles upon which peace is based in today's world be replaced by an altogether different one, namely, the realization that true and lasting peace among nations cannot consist in the possession of an equal supply of armaments but only in mutual trust.”* St. John XXIII, Peace on Earth (*Pacem in Terris*), nos. 112- 113

*“The horror and perversity of war is immensely magnified by the increase in the number of scientific weapons. For acts of war involving these weapons can inflict massive and indiscriminate destruction, thus going far beyond the bounds of legitimate defence. ... Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.... Scientific weapons, to be sure, are not amassed solely for use in war. Since the defensive strength of any nation is considered to be dependent upon its capacity for immediate retaliation, this accumulation of arms, which increases each year, likewise serves, in a way heretofore unknown, as a deterrent to possible enemy attack. Many regard this as the most effective way by which peace of a sort can be maintained between nations at the present time.”* Second Vatican Council, The Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), nos. 80, 81

*“Whatever be the facts about this method of deterrence, men should be convinced that the arms race in which an already considerable number of countries are engaged is not a safe way to preserve a steady peace, nor is the so-called balance resulting from this race a sure and authentic peace. Rather than being eliminated thereby, the causes of war are in danger of being gradually aggravated. While extravagant sums are being spent for the furnishing of ever new weapons, an adequate remedy cannot be provided for the multiple miseries afflicting the whole modern world. ... The arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which ensnares the poor to an intolerable degree.”* Second Vatican Council, The Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), no. 81

*“What can be said, too, about those governments which count on nuclear arms as a means of ensuring the security of their countries? Along with countless persons of good will, one can state that this point of view is not only baneful but also completely fallacious. In a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims. The truth of peace requires that all — whether those governments which openly or secretly possess nuclear arms, or those planning to acquire them— agree to change their course by clear and firm decisions, and strive for a progressive and concerted nuclear disarmament. The resources which would be saved could then be employed in projects of development capable of benefiting all their people, especially the poor.”* Pope Benedict XVI, 2009 World Day of Peace Message, no. 13

*“Here in this city which witnessed the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences of a nuclear attack, our attempts to speak out against the arms race will never be enough. The arms race wastes precious resources that could be better used to benefit the integral development of peoples and to protect the natural environment. In a world where millions of children and families live in inhumane conditions, the money that is squandered and the fortunes made through the manufacture, upgrading, maintenance and sale of ever more destructive weapons, and an affront crying out to heaven.”*

Pope Francis, Address on Nuclear Weapons, Nagasaki, November 24, 2019

*“With deep conviction I wish once more to declare that the use of atomic energy for purposes of war is today, more than ever, a crime not only against the dignity of human beings but against any possible future for our common home. The use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possessing of nuclear weapons is immoral, as I already said two years ago. We will be judged on this. Future generations will rise to condemn our failure if we spoke of peace but did not act to bring it about among the peoples on the earth. How can we speak of peace even as we build terrifying new weapons of war?”*

Pope Francis, Address at the Peace Memorial, Hiroshima, November 24, 2019