

**Statement by the Very Reverend John C. Wester
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**For the Annual Meeting of the Arms Control Association
June 2, 2026**

Good morning and good afternoon. I'm John Wester, the Archbishop of Santa Fe. I am honored to speak here on the Catholic Church's evolving position towards the abolition of nuclear weapons.

I'll begin with the fact that the Vatican chose to be a non-voting Permanent Observer at the United Nation. This allows the Church and the Holy See to be neutral and relatively free of political constraints. Therefore, the Catholic Church can be an umpire of sorts, calling balls and strikes in the deadly serious game of nuclear disarmament. The last three Review Conferences of the NonProliferation Treaty have failed to make any progress toward nuclear disarmament. **I say three strikes and you're out!**

In my view, the primary responsibility for this failure lies with the original five nuclear weapons powers. **Not once since the NPT went into effect fifty-six years ago have they begun to fulfill the Treaty's obligation to pursue negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament.** Instead, they are aggressively implementing so-called "modernization" programs to keep nuclear weapons forever while blaming one another.

In this circular game of finger pointing, the United States accuses China of a reckless nuclear buildup. China argues that it is the U.S. that is accelerating the new arms race. Russia continues its war on Ukraine, with not-so-veiled nuclear threats to deter Western intervention. The U.S. attacks Iran for alleged nuclear weapons programs, allied with Isreal, an undeclared nuclear weapons power and non-signatory to the NPT.

The nuclear weapons states are holding on to the raw naked power that their terrible weapons seemingly convey. **But they are losing the moral, spiritual and humanitarian argument that will ultimately prevail, or otherwise human civilization may perish.** Indeed, the moral, spiritual and humanitarian argument has already produced the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which the Vatican was the first nation-state to sign and ratify.

But how did the Vatican get there? To begin to answer I'll start with my own individual journey in nuclear disarmament. In 2020 I was asked by Tina Cordova of the Tularosa Basin Downwinders Consortium to speak at the New Mexico state capital building on the suffering of the Trinity Test victims. Afterwards I was cornered by Jay Coghlan of Nuclear Watch New Mexico. He asked me if I was aware that more money was spent on nuclear weapons research and production in my archdiocese than any other diocese in the USA.

In short, this subsequently led to three trips to Japan for the atomic bombing anniversaries and the creation of the [Partnership for a World without Nuclear Weapons](#) to work on nuclear disarmament. That Partnership is composed of the dioceses of Santa Fe, Seattle, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, representing the birthplace of nuclear weapons, where the most deployed nuclear weapons are, and the only two dioceses to have suffered atomic attacks. I have been deeply honored that my fellow bishops have blessed me with their active collaboration.

In January 2022 I published my [pastoral letter](#) *Living in the Light of Christ's Peace: A Conversation Toward Nuclear Disarmament*, which Fr. John Dear and Jay Coghlan helped to

draft. I traced the evolution of the Catholic Church toward nuclear weapons abolition. It begins in 1955, when Pope Pius XII (12) addressed the nuclear threat in his Christmas Radio Message, explaining that “there will be **no cry of victory, but only the inconsolable weeping of humanity, which will desolately contemplate the catastrophe brought about by its own folly.**”

In 1963, one year after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Pope Saint John XXIII (23) issued his landmark Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (or “Peace on Earth”). He pointed out that it is “hardly possible to imagine that war could be used as an instrument of justice.” He declared that “**Nuclear weapons must be banned**... [and a] true and lasting peace among nations cannot consist in the possession of an equal supply of armaments but only in mutual trust.”

In 1964 the Second Vatican Council declared “**The arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity**, and one which ensnares the poor to an intolerable degree.”

In 1983 the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops published a pastoral letter that famously offered a “**strictly conditioned moral acceptance**” of nuclear deterrence. In combination with the so-called Just War Theory, it has been often misused as justification for nuclear weapons. However, it deserves emphasis that it was conditioned as *only* a temporary step toward progressive disarmament, which the Church later recognized as a failure.

On January 1, 2006, for his World Day of Peace Message, Pope Benedict XVI (16) declared that the idea that nations need nuclear weapons to maintain peace is “not only baneful but also completely fallacious. **In a nuclear war there would be no victors, only victims.**”

In 2019 Pope Francis declared that the mere possession of nuclear weapons is immoral. In his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (or “Brothers and sisters all”), he closed the door shut on the Just War Theory, calling war a “shameful capitulation” and a failure of politics and humanity. He declared:

“International peace and stability cannot be based on a false sense of security, on the threat of mutual destruction or total annihilation, or on simply maintaining a balance of power... In this context, **the ultimate goal of the total elimination of nuclear weapons becomes both a challenge and a moral and humanitarian imperative.**”

Today, driven by the inevitable humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons and the failure of deterrence to lead to disarmament, Catholic teaching is shifting further away from the Just War Theory toward “Just Peace.” The Church increasingly views active nonviolence not as passive or naive but instead as the most realistic means for conflict resolution.

As Pope Francis wrote:

“We can no longer think of war as a solution... It is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a just war.”

This gradual shift in Catholic social teaching has been driven by two inescapable realities:

- 1) **The concept that a nuclear conflict can be “limited” is at best highly uncertain, at worst intentionally delusional.**
- 2) **While once accepted as a conditional, temporary measure to prevent nuclear war, so-called “deterrence,” can now be viewed as a structural failure.**

In truth, neither Russia nor the United States have ever had only deterrence. Instead, they have always had a hybrid of deterrence and nuclear warfighting capabilities that can destroy human civilization overnight. That is why we have thousands of nuclear weapons instead of the few hundred needed for minimal deterrence. This why the U.S. has a \$2 trillion “modernization” program to keep nuclear weapons forever.

Moreover, given past accidents and false warnings, we need to ask the question, **what is to deter the deterrence?** Won’t there always be a threat as long as nuclear weapons exist? I reiterate what Reagan and Gorbachev famously said long ago: “A nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought.” Why is that? **Simply put, there is no such thing as a just nuclear war. Therefore, the Church calls for the total abolition of nuclear weapons.**

Pope Leo XIV (14) has continued along the path traced by his predecessors. On June 14, 2025, the day after the U.S. and Israel started bombing Iran, he said: “The commitment to creating a safer world, free from the nuclear threat, should be pursued through respectful encounter and sincere dialogue, to build a lasting peace, based on justice, fraternity and the common good. **No-one should ever threaten the existence of another.**” That was perhaps prophetic given that Trump later threatened to wipe out an entire civilization overnight.

For the 80th anniversaries of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Pope Leo wrote:

"True peace demands the courageous laying down of weapons—especially those with the power to cause an indescribable catastrophe. **Nuclear arms offend our shared humanity and also betray the dignity of creation...**"

In his 2026 New Year’s message Pope Leo declared, **“The idea of the deterrent power of military might, especially nuclear deterrence, is based on the irrationality of relations between nations, built not on law, justice and trust, but on fear and domination by force.”**

In March 2026, Pope Leo wrote: **“Let us pray together that nations may move toward effective disarmament, particularly nuclear disarmament...”**

Pope Leo has now published his first encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* (or “Magnificent Humanity”). He intentionally signed it on May 15, the 135th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII’s (13th’s) Encyclical “Rerum Novarum” (or “Of New Things”), which addressed workers’ rights and became the foundation of modern Catholic social thought. The current Pope Leo believes that artificial intelligence poses existential questions just like the Industrial Revolution posed over a century ago.

While Pope Leo’s questioning of artificial intelligence is grabbing global headlines, he also very much addressed the nuclear threat as well. He starts with **“it is not permissible to entrust**

irreversible, lethal decisions to AI systems,” which especially applies to potential AI command and control of nuclear weapons.

But he goes much further by declaring:

“In the past, recognition of the threat posed by weapons capable of destroying all of humanity had promoted paths toward détente and disarmament negotiations. Unfortunately, this approach has been left behind... **In this context, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which came into force in 2021 with the support of over seventy countries, is an important step.** However, it risks remaining largely symbolic since the major nuclear powers have not agreed to it. This has led to the widespread yet erroneous belief that nuclear deterrence is an indispensable prerequisite for security. This has also contributed to a new arms race, which is hard to control and accompanied by the gradual dismantling of nuclear reduction agreements...”

So where does this leave us? I can tell you that the Partnership for a World without Nuclear Weapons will be at the United Nations for the first Review Conference of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons at the end of this November. My brother Japanese bishops will bring a replica of the famous Nagasaki Madonna, burnt by the plutonium bomb on August 9, 1945. We are planning a big interfaith service with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize winners. We look forward to working closely with the Holy See to make the TPNW more than just symbolic, to help transform it into a powerful ecumenical global movement to eradicate nuclear weapons.

I close by quoting my childhood friend, who now happens to be the Cardinal of Washington, DC. Last year, on the 80th anniversary of the first atomic bombing, Bob McElroy eloquently spoke from the World Peace Cathedral in Hiroshima, Japan. He declared:

“... we refuse to live in such a world of nuclear proliferation and risk-taking. We will resist, we will organize, we will pray, we will not cease, until the world’s nuclear arsenals have been destroyed.” [End quote]

So, let us go forth and march towards nuclear disarmament! Let’s do the noble work of ridding the world of the scourge of nuclear weapons. While doing so, we mirror our own divinity to each other and reflect the splendor of God’s creation. The grim and grey alternative is the radioactive ashes of a destroyed world. **Therefore, let us go forth and shine!**

Thank you, and may God bless you all!

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