

CATHOLIC TEACHING ON THE IMMORALITY OF
POSSESSING NUCLEAR WEAPONS:
A MORAL LEVELS OF ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

Robert W McElroy

Diocese of Hiroshima Dialogue

August 5, 2025

In November of 2017, the Vatican's Congregation for Integral Human Development held an international symposium on the prospects for a world free of nuclear weapons. The origin of this conference was unique in that it sprang from the unified plea of five Nobel Peace laureates to Pope Francis to launch an intense and broad initiative to build upon the approval of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

I was present at the Vatican Symposium, as were many diplomats and policy specialists whose nations had already signaled their intention

to ratify the Treaty. Others present were religious and cultural leaders from across the world, the Nobel laureates who had originated the call for the conference, and the incomparable witness of the Hibakusha.

On the second day of our deliberations, Pope Francis spoke to us about the profound moral choice that the world was facing at that moment, and about the reflections of Catholic teaching on the consequences of the cataclysmic decision that humanity had made seventy years before to develop and use the atomic bomb. I was listening to the Pope intently as he spoke, and his words mirrored positions by prior Popes and theologians. Then, suddenly, I was surprised by a single sentence that represented a new moment in Catholic teaching regarding nuclear weapons: “the threat of their use, as well as their very possession, is to be firmly condemned.”

When we returned to the symposium hall after the speech, the participants posed a series of rapid fire questions to Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the Vatican foreign who had been moderating that afternoon’s session of the Symposium: “What are the implications of

this teaching for Catholic leaders in nuclear states? Is it immoral for soldiers to carry out their duties that directly involve the possession and potential use of nuclear weapons? Can any elements of nuclear deterrence be morally utilized according to Catholic teaching?

These questions are central to the dialogue that we are having today on the eightieth anniversary of the use of atomic weapons against the people of Japan.

It was not that Pope Francis' statement constituted a rupture with existing Catholic teaching on the morality of nuclear weapons. In Pacem in Terris in 1962, Pope John XXIII, while acknowledging the deterrent role of nations' nuclear policies, stated unequivocally that nuclear weapons must be banned. In 1981 at Hiroshima, Pope John Paul II reiterated this theme, stating that "Our future on this planet, exposed as it is to nuclear annihilation, depends upon one single factor: humanity must make a moral about face." The following year he enunciated a more full-bodied reflection on the morality of deterrence by stating that the realities of the Cold War necessitated the moral toleration of an

interim ethic of deterrence. “In current conditions, he said, 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.”

In the aftermath of the Cold War, Pope Benedict increasingly emphasized that the claim 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. 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.”

It was during Benedict’s pontificate in 2010 that the Holy See’s representative to the United Nations stated that “The Holy See does not countenance the continuation of nuclear deterrence, since it is evident it is driving the development of ever newer nuclear arms, thus preventing

genuine nuclear disarmament.” And in 2014 the study group document released by the Vatican stated that because disarmament was not moving toward realization, “the very possession of nuclear weapons, even for purposes of deterrence, is morally problematic.”

Thus, Pope Francis’ declaration that the possession of nuclear weapons is itself immoral was fundamentally consonant with past papal teaching, and represented the ratification of that teaching when set within the context of a world where the interim ethic of deterrence had become not a pathway to disarmament, but an ever growing obstacle which froze and legitimated the nuclear status quo.

The implications of Francis’ declaration are profound for Catholic moral teaching. Catholic teaching now states that the possession of nuclear weapons is in and of itself morally wrong. How are we to apply this teaching to the questions raised by those attending the 2017 Symposium immediately after they heard the Pope’s words? What does this mean for individual soldiers or decisionmakers entrusted with taking actions that are inevitably tied to the possession of nuclear weapons?

What policy stances are open, according to Catholic teaching, for nations which already have nuclear weapons? Are there pathways forward for nuclear disarmament that are attainable and not dangerously destabilizing?

I would like to suggest in a very elementary way that the moral reflection on these and similar questions might profitably take place within an ethical framework that is analogous to the traditional levels of analysis in international relations. Such a moral framework would approach the moral issues raised by Catholic teaching on the possession of nuclear weapons first on the level of international society. Then it would turn to the question of state level actions. And finally, it would treat questions of individual actions and decisionmaking.

1. The Immorality of Possessing Nuclear Weapons as a Norm of International Society.

The statement which Pope Francis made in 2017 and has reiterated since is clear. There is no warrant in Catholic teaching for the

possession of nuclear weapons. One of the great problems of the interim ethic of deterrence was that it created conditions that have in the end favored stasis, rather than continual movement toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. Many policymakers genuinely seeking to foster peace have labored heroically for decades to alter this reality, through arms control and reduction efforts that have created genuine and lasting progress on several levels touching upon the development and use of nuclear weapons. But at the present moment, it cannot be ignored that the trajectory of policy on nuclear weapons in the world is more characterized by modernization, expansion and proliferation, rather than by nuclear arms reduction and eventual elimination.

In this context, it must be concluded that the acceptance and concomitant normalization of deterrence have utterly failed the moral requirement to frame a pathway toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. Deterrence is not a step on the road to nuclear disarmament, but a morass. That is why the Church could not continue to tolerate an ethic which *de facto* legitimates possession.

The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons was the declaration by the international community that the commitment of the nuclear powers to move toward eliminating their nuclear arsenals had become at its core illusory, creating a world where the United States, Russia, and China had large and modernizing nuclear weapons systems, while nuclear proliferation among state actors was growing, with increasingly perilous risks, as we have seen so piercingly this year in the bombing of Iran and the military confrontations between India and Pakistan.

The Treaty declares that possession is never morally legitimate. It enshrines, encases in law and solidifies an unconditional international norm. It's rational is clear: We are "concerned by the slow pace of nuclear disarmament, the continued reliance on nuclear weapons in military and security concepts, doctrines and policies,...(and we recognize) that a legally binding prohibition of nuclear weapons constitutes an important contribution towards the achievement and maintenance of a world free of nuclear weapons, including the

irreversible, verifiable and transparent elimination of nuclear weapons....”

It is essential to recognize that this particular treaty was not merely the creation of state actors, but societal, cultural, religious, educational and political communities throughout the world. In joining his voice to those in global society who have sought to underscore the universal moral illegitimacy of the use, threat to use, or possession of nuclear weapons in and of itself, Pope Francis sought to embrace this global consensus and proclaim unequivocally that Catholic teaching has reached the same conclusion.

2. The Moral Obligations of States to Move Toward Nuclear Disarmament.

If Catholic teaching and international society proscribe the use or possession of nuclear weapons, what impact does that have in shaping the moral obligations that individual nuclear states face? What does the state level of moral analysis say to us?

First of all, it is essential to recognize that states with nuclear weapons face more complex moral and political realities arising from the ethical illegitimacy of nuclear weapons than do non-nuclear states. Considerations of stability, political viability and technology must weigh heavily in wise and ethical decisionmaking.

But these factors cannot be allowed to obscure the fact that the implications of Catholic teaching morally constrain the legitimate options open to state decisionmakers. Equilibrium is so often a goal on nuclear policies because of the dangers of miscalculation or confrontation. But the stasis that flows from the search for equilibrium is precisely what Catholic teaching will not allow. Stasis has been the outcome of the ethic of deterrence. That does not mean that all elements of deterrence must be abandoned. But it does mean that a foundational ethic of deterrence is no longer acceptable in Catholic thought.

Catholic teaching on the illegitimacy of possession demands that every decision by nuclear powers regarding modernization, targeting, deployment and alliance structures must be made within the context of

whether specific decisions will advance materially the goal of limiting and ultimately eliminating the existence of nuclear weapons. All nuclear powers stand in a *prima facie* judgment of moral illegitimacy in their nuclear policies because of possession alone. Their concerted movement toward eliminating nuclear weapons determines the degree to which that illegitimacy is vitiated.

3. The Immorality of Possession and Individual Culpability.

In the moments immediately following Pope Francis' speech to us in 2017, the most poignant questions within the Vatican Symposium touched upon the implications of the moral prohibition of possession for individuals entrusted with the safety of their country, particularly those in the armed forces. Many of us were troubled that military men and women and diplomats might worry that the Pope was condemning their actions in facilitating their government's nuclear policies. What does the third level of analysis, personal action, have to say to this?

Catholic moral teaching has a very deep and nuanced theology of cooperation with evil. All of us live in the world and are enmeshed in fundamentally good activities that are tinged with moral wrong.

Catholic teaching states that we are morally culpable only when we substantively embrace evil itself or deliberately ignore its presence and implications in our lives.

The immorality of the possession of nuclear weapons does not substantively imprint itself on the actions of those who militarily or politically serve their countries. It is a moral wrong that exists at the state and the international levels. In Catholic moral theology, it constitutes structural sin which was created by personal sin and the lust for power over time but which now is embedded in the structures of the world in which we live. At the same time, Catholic teaching on the immorality of possession does carry with it a profound personal moral obligation for decisionmakers and military leaders to move expeditiously toward ending nuclear weapons and arsenals.

The decision by Pope Francis to teach in Catholic faith that the very possession of nuclear weapons is morally illegitimate was a hallmark moment in the Church's efforts to confront the ethical questions raised by the advent of the nuclear age. It is rooted in the imperative to move from stasis toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. The eightieth anniversary of the grave moral evil of using atomic weapons against the people of Japan is a searing witness to the urgency of that imperative, and to the immense human peril which the continued possession of nuclear weapons constitutes in our world.