

Catholics Against Nukes: Archbishop Wester, the Church and Nuclear Deterrence

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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In what is a turn-up for the books, a senior voice of the Catholic Church made something of an impression this month that did not incite scandal, hot rage, or the commencement of an investigation. It did, however, agitate a few editors. Archbishop John C. Wester of San Fe, in speaking at the online Hiroshima Day vigil, had put up his hand to defy the validity and morality of nuclear weapons and, along with them, the idea of nuclear deterrence. One of the organisers of the event, the veteran peace activist Rev. John Dear, [claimed](#) it had “never happened before.”

Dear had a point. There has been a shift within Catholic ranks urged along by Pope Francis on that most fatuous of strategic doctrines, nuclear deterrence. Before the United Nations General Assembly in June 1982, Pope John Paul II chose [to argue](#) that nuclear “‘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.”

At a Vatican symposium in November 2017, the current pontiff [acknowledged](#) concern for “the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental effects of any employment of nuclear devices.” Given the risk of accidental detonation occasioned by error, “the threat of their use, as well as their possession, is to be firmly condemned.”

In November 2019 in Nagasaki, the pontiff expressed the view that peace and international stability were incompatible objects “with attempts to build upon the fear of mutual assured destruction, or the threat of total annihilation.” Such weapons could not “protect us from current threats to national and international security”. Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles and president of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops was of similar view in [his recent commemorative remarks](#), at one with the Pope and calling “on our national and world leaders to persevere in their efforts to abolish these weapons of mass destruction, which threaten the existence of the human race and our planet.”

Archbishop Wester reminded his listeners of the stance taken by the US Conference of Bishops: that Washington has a pressing obligation to reverse the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and “reduce its own reliance on weapons of mass destruction by pursuing progressive disarmament.” He spoke of the “fear, a dread and a sorrow” when visiting Nagasaki in September 2017. “It reminded me a little bit of those days during the Cuban missile crisis when I would walk home from school having been instructed what to do in the event of a nuclear attack within a few thousand yards of a Nike missile site in San Francisco.”

The travails and challenges caused by COVID-19 might have forced social distance between people but, according to the Archbishop, “we’re united in our resolve to eliminate nuclear

weapons and build a world that is grounded, not in fear and distrust, but in mutual respect for the life and dignity for all.” He quoted Pope Francis’s Nagasaki remarks about such instruments of death being an “affront crying out to heaven”, developed even as people continued to live in miserable conditions.

Support was also given to the efforts made by the [Tularosa Basin Downwinders Consortium](#), co-founded by Tina Cordova and Fred Tyler in 2005 with the express purpose of drawing attention to the health effects of the Trinity test of July 16, 1945. Their [aim](#) is compensation and health coverage for victims of the radioactive fallout drawn from the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act.

It stands to reason that Archbishop Wester is concerned. Two of the US’s three nuclear weapons laboratories are to be found in the dioceses of Sandia and Los Alamos. “In fact,” [observes](#) Nuclear Watch New Mexico executive director Jay Coghlan, “there are probably more nuclear warheads in his dioceses – some 2,500 stored in reserve at the Kirtland Air Force Base at Albuquerque.” The Los Alamos National Laboratory is also intending to expand plutonium pit production, but not, according to Coghlan, to maintain “the already extensively tested and reliable stockpile.” The future lies in dangerously “speculative new designs” that will be untested because of the global testing moratorium unless the US recklessly decides to get back into the testing game.

The laboratories do come with their biting paradox. Wester is aware that an enterprise involving such weapons of mass lethality has other aspects, those incremental, even accidental benefits drawn from the inventive drive to kill. Scientists, for instance, were turning their minds to “research that envelops energy and environmental programs, computing science, bio science, engineering science, materials science and micro-systems, as well as advances in medicine, and lately, helping in fighting COVID-19.”

The editors of the *Albuquerque Journal* [were unimpressed](#) by the Archbishop and the organisers. Wester and Dear inhabited “a world that sounds lovely but will never exist.” They had erred in not recognising the “deterrent benefit of the nuclear arsenal” which had “kept a nuclear peace since 1945 even as nations like Pakistan and North Korea have developed nuclear weapons.” They slipped up in not accepting that using atomic weapons on Japan saved the lives of Allied soldiers and millions of Japanese. Horrific as those weapons were, war was horrific. “World War II claimed 60 million lives.”

For the editors, it was far better to endorse the somewhat darker view of the Very Rev. Glennon Jones, whose piece for the August edition of the *People of God* newsletter for Catholics in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe impressed. “There is a vital difference between the promotion of an ideal and being naively idealistic.”

And so, we return to the historical reasoning that justified virtuous butcheries, the war is terrible argument, ignoring the obvious contention that such weapons are themselves potential incitements to error, lunacy and existential deletion. As long as nuclear deterrence, that most unmeasured of strategies, remains, it keeps company with the prospect of use and annihilation. Coghlan, in [his rebuke](#) to the editors also penned in the *Albuquerque Journal*, gave an acid summation: “the US arsenal has always been about nuclear war fighting, starting with the simple fact that we were the first to use it.” Only “sheer luck has kept us from nuclear catastrophe.”

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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Kampmark](#)

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