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Review Essay: Receiving Pope Francis’s Condemnation of Nuclear Weapons

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On November 10, 2017, Pope Francis issued the first papal condemnation of the possession of nuclear weapons. Speaking to an international symposium at the Vatican titled “Prospect for a World Free of Nuclear Weapons and for Integral Disarmament,” Francis stated of nuclear weapons that “the threat of their use, as well as their very possession, is to be firmly condemned.” Previous popes had condemned the use of nuclear weapons but not their possession as a deterrent, which involves a threat to use them if attacked.

Earlier in 2017, the Vatican had taken part in a conference at the United Nations that produced the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, of which it was one of the first signatories. One of the members of the Vatican’s delegation was Jesuit Father Drew Christiansen, a specialist in social ethics with a particular expertise in the ethics of nuclear weapons. After the November 2017 symposium, Christiansen, together with Carole Sargent, edited a volume of addresses given at the conference by religious and political leaders, A World Free from Nuclear Weapons: The Vatican Conference on Disarmament (2020).

Forbidden is a companion volume to A World Free from Nuclear Weapons, more than twice its length. At the request of papal advisor Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Christiansen solicited contributions from numerous ethicists as well as from some political scientists, strategic specialists, and diplomats, a British parliamentarian, and participants in the anti-nuclear movement. In all, the book contains thirty-two essays, ranging in length from four to nineteen pages, from twenty-nine contributors, including the editors. The purpose of the book is “to explain in depth the context of Pope Francis’s condemnation of nuclear weapons and explore its implications for those charged with responsibility for national defense and international security” (p. 3).

Forbidden’s subtitle indicates that it is aimed especially at Catholic audiences. “Reception” is a theological term for “the process by which a particular teaching, decision, or practice comes to be accepted into the life of the church through the guidance of the Holy Spirit” (Collinge, 2021, p. 382). The book aims to contribute to the reception process, especially on the part of Catholic academics, pastoral workers, and military and national security personnel.

On April 6, 2022, as the book was in its final stages of preparation, Fr. Christiansen died. The book is dedicated to him and to Pope Francis.

Without summarizing all the essays, I will attempt to set out the main lines of Forbidden’s argument, including points of divergence among the contributors, under the headings of “How Did
We Get Here?” and “Where Do We Go from Here?” Except as noted, my citations will be to essays in the book. Many points touched on below are addressed by multiple authors in the book; an excellent index enables readers to pull them together.

**How Did We Get Here?**
The film *Oppenheimer* recently drew the public’s attention back to the origins of nuclear weapons, to the decision on the part of the United States to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, and to the moral and political struggles of J. Robert Oppenheimer in the aftermath of that decision. Contrary to Oppenheimer’s wishes, the victorious powers in World War II did not engage in a peaceful exchange of nuclear technology. Instead, the United States and the Soviet Union undertook a rapid buildup of nuclear weapons under the prevalent doctrine of deterrence: each side would deter the other from attacking by retaining enough weapons to mount a devastating counterattack on the other’s populations.

As early as Jesuit moral theologian John C. Ford’s “The Morality of Obliteration Bombing” (1944), some Catholic moralists expressed opposition to acts of war aimed at the destruction of large numbers of civilians. This would include nuclear bombing. Such acts violated the traditional just war principle of discrimination, or non-combatant immunity, as well as, probably, the principle of proportionality, or balance of good to be achieved over harm done. The Church had little to say at high levels about nuclear weapons, however, until the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. That event prompted Pope John XXIII to issue the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), which set out a proposal for world peace that, among other things, declared “that the arms race should cease, . . . that nuclear weapons should be banned, and finally that all [should] come to an agreement on a fitting program of disarmament” (no. 112).

The Second Vatican Council, which opened three days before the start of the Cuban Missile Crisis, used its strongest language to condemn the use of weapons of mass destruction against populations: “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” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 80). It did not condemn deterrence in principle but stated that “the arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which ensnares the poor to an intolerable degree” (no. 81).

Progress was made in subsequent years toward arms control but not toward disarmament. This included the Test Ban Treaty of 1967, the Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972. Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty committed its parties, which included the major nuclear powers, “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control” (quoted by Pierce S. Corden, p. 130).

By around 1980, however, tensions had increased between the United States and the Soviet Union, which together possessed most of the nearly seventy thousand nuclear weapons then in the world. A general climate of fear gave rise to movements such as the Nuclear Freeze in the United States and sparked the U.S. bishops to compose their pastoral letter on war and peace, *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response*, initiated in 1980 and issued in 1983. In support of
writing the letter, Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton addressed the National Council of Catholic Bishops meeting in 1980:

We’ve just elected a President [Ronald Reagan] who has stated his conviction that we can have superiority in nuclear weapons, an utter impossibility. We have a Vice-President [George H. W. Bush] who has clearly stated that one side could win a nuclear war and that we must be prepared to fight one and to win it. When we have that kind of thinking going on, it seems to me we are getting ever more close to the day when we will wage that nuclear war and it will be the war that will end the world as we know it. We are at a point of urgent crisis. We have to face this question and face it very clearly. (quoted, Fahey, 2022, p. 137)

In their letter, the bishops repeated the condemnation of the use of nuclear weapons against populations and went on to condemn any use of nuclear weapons as likely to lead to mass destruction (The Challenge of Peace, nos. 142–161). They came close to condemning the possession of nuclear weapons for deterrence but in the end settled for repeating a statement made by Pope John Paul II to the United Nations in 1982: “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” (The Challenge of Peace, no 173). According to religious studies and peace studies scholar Joseph Fahey, “This statement doomed any attempt by the U.S. bishops a year later to condemn outright the policy of deterrence as heinously immoral. It was believed that the Reagan administration had an influence on the Pope’s statement since it was known that the U.S. bishops were seriously contemplating an absolute condemnation of deterrence” (Fahey, 2022, p. 140; see McBrady, 2015).

By then, what political scientist Daniel Philpott calls “the most forceful and clear argument in the large literature on nuclear deterrence” (p. 183), later spelled out by Finnis, Boyle, and Grisez (1987), was already in circulation.¹ Finnis, Boyle, and Grisez held that it is always immoral to intentionally kill an innocent person, and it is therefore immoral to intend to kill innocent persons, even under conditions you are hoping to deter, such as the launching of nuclear warheads against one’s own population. “The only morally sound course of action, they conclude, is unilateral disarmament on the part of nuclear states and immediate cessation of complicity with deterrence on the part of government and military officials,” regardless of consequences” (Philpott, p 184). I will return to this argument below.

In the 1980s and 1990s, significant progress was made in nuclear arms reduction. In October 1986 President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, meeting at Reykjavik, agreed to eliminate nuclear weapons altogether. According to David Cortright, “The proposed nuclear abolition agreement fell apart over significant differences on strategic missile defenses, but the negotiations at Reykjavik . . . laid the groundwork for the historic Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (1987) eliminating theater nuclear forces in Europe . . . followed by the START [Strategic Arms Reduction] treaties (1991 and 1993) that dramatically reduced nuclear stockpiles and helped to end the Cold War” (p. 70).

For decades, no further progress was made toward nuclear abolition, and national security scholar Lawrence J. Korb details how in the twenty-first century the structure of arms control treaties began to dissolve. In 2002 the U.S. withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. In 2019, the U.S. formally withdrew from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, citing Russian non-
compliance, and Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that the treaty no longer held force. START expired in 2009 and was replaced by New START (2011) (pp. 147–149).

On February 21, 2022, Russia suspended participation in New START. On February 24, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, pitting a nuclear power against a non-nuclear power supported by the nuclear powers of NATO. Forbidden was near publication when the Ukraine War broke out, and the war is not mentioned in the book (though it is mentioned on the dust jacket). Since the start of the war, Russia has from time to time signaled, sometimes overtly, sometimes subtly, that it might use nuclear weapons (Pifer, 2023). These developments heighten the nuclear threat while making the path forward more difficult.

The recent regress in arms control is complicated by the nuclear modernization programs undertaken by nuclear states, in particular the U.S., Russia, and China. Korb says that the U.S. program “will not only dramatically increase the targeting and kill capacity of US strategic nuclear weapons . . . but also could actually lower the threshold for using nuclear weapons” (p. 148). Nuclear modernization is one area on which I wish Forbidden had furnished more detail, but James P. O’Sullivan (p. 346) supplies a reference to a useful information sheet by Arms Control Association (2022).

The conclusion Christiansen draws from these developments is that contemporary deterrence fails to satisfy the moral conditions that the US bishops, following Pope John Paul II, had stipulated for the provisional acceptance of deterrence, namely

- The sole purpose of nuclear weapons systems is to deter nuclear attack by others;
- The nuclear arsenal should be only sufficient in size to deter; and
- A deterrent force should serve as a step toward disarmament. (p. 301, emphasis in original)

Thus, Pope Francis said in his November 2017 speech:

A certain pessimism might make us think that “prospects for a world free from nuclear arms and for integral disarmament”, the theme of your meeting, appear increasingly remote. Indeed, the escalation of the arms race continues unabated and the price of modernizing and developing weaponry, not only nuclear weapons, represents a considerable expense for nations.

Besides the apparent failure of deterrence to lead to disarmament, Pope Francis also cited the cost of maintaining nuclear weapons, at the expense of “the real priorities facing our human family, such as the fight against poverty, the promotion of peace, the undertaking of educational, ecological and healthcare projects, and the development of human rights,” and the continuing risk that nuclear weapons will be detonated, whether intentionally by a state or non-state actor, or by accident. In Forbidden, Korb, beginning, “Imagine what the approximately $2 trillion that the United States plans to spend modernizing its nuclear arsenal could do to deal with hunger and disease in this country and around the world,” details the good that could be done if the world were to forgo producing and maintaining nuclear weapons (p. 149). Theologian and Catholic Worker Margaret Pfeil discusses the problems caused by the production of highly toxic nuclear waste by the nuclear weapons industry, particularly its impact on Indigenous populations (pp. 210–214). Politics professor Maryann Cusimano Love relates several examples of near-disastrous nuclear
accidents, including the story of a courageous Russian officer, Stanislav Petrov. In 1983, in response to signals showing that the U.S. had launched missiles against the Soviet Union—signals he surmised were faulty—Petrov disobeyed orders requiring him to immediately report the signals to his superiors, who he believed would promptly launch a nuclear attack against the United States (pp. 288–294).

Besides all the above ways in which the world changed between the 1980s and Pope Francis’s statement in 2017, there were changes in the Church’s thinking about war. Ethicist William Werpehowski highlights two emerging themes. “One is that faithful discipleship encourages and demands service to and solidarity with those of our fellows who are marginalized or even excluded from participation in social life” (p. 32), This has led to increasing attention paid to those who would suffer from nuclear war and who suffer even now from the preparation and maintenance of nuclear weapons. The other is the increasing emphasis on nonviolence in Catholic moral theology. Nonviolence pervades the proposals in Forbidden for how to move away from nuclear deterrence.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Pope Francis has condemned the possession of nuclear weapons for deterrence. Forbidden is about the reception of this teaching. What should Catholics do now? What should the nations in which they live do now? Christiansen points out that Francis’s teaching is not a strict, deontological moral prohibition of deterrence, such as that of Finnis, Boyle, and Grisez (hereafter Grisez). It is based on contingent facts regarding the consequences and risks of maintaining the deterrent and the failure to progress toward disarmament. As such, it deserves “serious and prayerful consideration” (Christiansen, p. 306), what Vatican II called obsequium religiosum (Lumen Gentium, no. 25), but it does not preclude disagreement (p. 5; also Philpott, p. 183).

Nonetheless, according to Philpott, Grisez’s challenge remains valid: “One cannot intend the death of an innocent person”—even under conditions one hopes will never obtain—“without separating oneself from God” (p. 185). In his essay in Forbidden, Fahey judges differently from Philpott about the weight of Francis’s statement but agrees with his conclusion, saying that it “leaves no room for doubt or distinction: Nuclear weapons are intrinsically evil” and “Nations that manufacture and possess nuclear weapons are engaged in an intrinsically evil act” (p. 223). Catholics therefore may not serve in any military or civilian position that involves the planning of nuclear policy or the possession and possible use of nuclear weapons (pp. 226–227). It would seem to follow that a nation should dismantle its deterrent unilaterally, as Grisez argues, but Fahey does not explicitly say so, and he holds that in fact disarmament will take place only if a system of democratic global governance is established.

Philosopher Gregory M. Reichberg examines several attempts by moral philosophers to justify maintenance of the nuclear deterrent and concludes that they all fail to effectively refute the claim that “effective nuclear deterrence entails immorality” (p. 54). Philosopher Bernard G. Prusak resists calls to unilaterally disarm. Quoting Reichberg, he argues that to disarm unilaterally would be to “invite nuclear blackmail” and violate the moral “duty of political leadership . . . to protect the citizenry from harm” (p. 197). Can one be morally obligated to violate one’s moral duty? Taking a distinction from Cathleen Kaveny, Prusak holds that in the absence of common moral commitments regarding nuclear weapons, “prophetic indictment” such as Grisez’s, of the evils of
deterrence will not be effective. What is needed is “deliberative discussion” leading toward reduction of “the present dangers of nuclear catastrophe” (p. 197).

What should be the result of such deliberative discussion? Gerard Powers, in the longest essay in Forbidden (pp. 153–171), argues that we need “to develop an ethic of nuclear disarmament that is as sophisticated as the ethic of nuclear use and deterrence that was developed during the Cold War,” which will entail “a paradigm shift toward a system of cooperative security” (p. 154). Maryann Cusimano Love uses a “just peace” framework to guide progress toward such a system (pp. 172–179).

What might engender such progress? Diplomat James Goodby sees two possibilities. The first is “a nuclear explosion in a large city,” intentional or by accident, causing such death and destruction “that a lasting moral impact might be imprinted on human societies” (p. 111). The second is a gradual process of diplomacy, in which the “moral revulsion” that has sometimes been felt—after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in the Cuban Missile Crisis, in the 1980s—takes hold more generally (pp. 115–116). “Underlying all of the actions that states could take to measure up to the moral stance outlined by Pope Francis are the attitudes and opinions of ordinary people around the world” (p. 117). When it comes to imagining a world without nuclear weapons, according to peace studies scholar John Paul Lederach, “If people lead, leaders will follow” (p. 284).

The people of the nonnuclear states expressed their opinions through their representatives when 122 nations approved the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in the United Nations General Assembly in 2017, and ninety-three subsequently signed it. Among the nuclear powers, it is difficult, though not altogether impossible, for the people to influence the leaders of Russia and China, and perhaps prohibitively difficult in North Korea, so the more democratic nations will have to take the lead. Much of Forbidden is dedicated to transforming public attitudes in the United States.

According to ethicist Lisa Sowle Cahill, any moves toward disarmament “will be effective” among Americans “only if and because they manage to reshape the broader and deeper cultural imagination that is supportive of or resigned to the potential use of nuclear weapons” (p. 233). Powers, quoting Jonathan Schell, sees an obstacle in a “profound fatalism” that sees the bomb as “somehow immune to human control” (p. 166; Schell, 2007, p. 18). Arms control expert Kelsey Davenport singles out “public disinterest” that “has fostered a mindset that eliminating nuclear weapons is a desirable but unachievable goal” (p. 251). In contrast to Baby Boomers, who lived through the Cold War, younger people express more worry about “terrorism, climate change, and cybersecurity” (p. 252). Davenport sets out proposals to “make nuclear weapons more visible and more relatable,” so that young people will feel more emotional investment in their elimination. Though factual presentations are necessary, they can be overwhelming by themselves, and she suggests supplementing them by methods such as narratives, interactive graphics, and video games (pp. 254–257). One form of narrative that has been very effective in the past in raising nuclear awareness is the stories of the hibakusha, the survivors of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, detailed by Donald Hall of Soka Gakkai International (pp. 76–89).

Religious studies professor Theodore G. Dedan concludes from French theorist Jacques Ellul’s analysis of our propaganda-laden society, that “the game is not to educate—it is to inundate and
manipulate” (p. 270). We must, Dedan argues, embed a disarmament meme into nearly every memplex (structure of images that go viral) (p. 276). I would have liked for him to go on to say that whether or not our disarmament memes go viral, they must be rationally defensible. They must be consistent with the world we wish to bring about, which means they must be suitable for persuasion, not aimed at manipulation, and they must speak the truth. Truth-telling is an important part of peacebuilding, as both Cusimano Love (p. 177) and Philpott (p. 187) emphasize.

Any changes in our cultural imagination resulting from Pope Francis’s condemnation will depend on discernment within many individual consciences. In the 2020 volume, Christiansen said, “Older, legalist models of moral theology have left the impression that condemnation means ‘Stop what you are doing now!’” But Pope Francis offers a less narrow, nonapodictic style of moral deliberation” (2020, p. xvii). Here he characterizes Francis’s method as “discerning the signs of the times,” which may involve recognizing a conflict of moral demands and “an array of possible right actions” (p. 5). A discernment process “does not look to what everyone is called to do but to what I am called to do” in my situation (p. 241–242). Christiansen is particularly concerned with those in the military and government who are in the chain of command (pp. 297–313). Given that “nuclear abolition is the crisis of our age” (p. 242), how does a person involved in some way with nuclear weapons discern a course of action? With pastoral accompaniment one listens prayerfully to Scripture and the tradition of the Church, to the experience and wisdom of others, and to the realities of one’s own situation, examines possible courses of action, chooses one, and tests it through prayer and experience (pp. 242–243). Some may discern a call to become conscientious objectors, but others may discern a call to remain in their positions and work to reduce the likelihood of nuclear catastrophe.

Christiansen praises the ethical standards of many military leaders, as does Cusimano Love. (I saw this in the military lecturers’ in an interdisciplinary War and Peace class I led or co-led from 1985 to 1991 in response to The Challenge of Peace. The course ended with a panel of military people and peace activists, and I was impressed by how much they had in common.) Cusimano Love, however, deplores the fact that such “elder statesmen” in the nuclear establishment “are not being replaced by a younger generation committed to ethical nuclear stewardship” and emphasizes that “ethical leaders are essential in the military and civilian chains of command” (pp. 295–296).

Other chapters speak of the responsibilities of other groups. Susi Snyder, the former head of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, addresses the financial community, encouraging ethical shareholder proposals and a broadening of risk analysis to include nuclear risk (pp. 314–317). Corden (pp. 318–327) offers some suggestions for how scientists and technologists involved with nuclear weapons “can modify how they practice their professional lives” (p. 326), perhaps by dedicating their expertise to arms reduction. Ethicist James P. O’Sullivan turns to the responsibilities of ordinary citizens. While governments have the primary responsibility for arms reduction, citizens, at least in democratic societies, have the right, responsibility, and power to influence their governments. Civil society groups can and should educate the public as to the dangers of deterrence and the possibility of disarmament, as well as in a vision of a post-nuclear world. A critical mass of citizens must be awakened as to their responsibilities and be motivated to exercise these responsibilities through voting and advocacy (pp. 338–347).
Theologian Kevin Ahern concludes the book with a focus on one particular segment of civil society, namely lay Catholic groups (pp. 351–358). If it is the responsibility of the pope and bishops to teach what Christian faith demands for disarmament and peacebuilding, it is the responsibility of the entire church to receive this teaching. Pastoral ministers in parishes and schools can provide the accompaniment that Christiansen calls for. But Catholic religious orders, organizations such as Pax Christi, and lay movements such as the Community of Sant’Egidio can play important mediating roles in informing laity, enabling them to network with one another and to communicate with government and church leaders.

The above synopsis bypasses a number of essays in Forbidden, even though several develop important peripheral themes or approach the issue from perspectives not considered here. It also overlooks many points of fact, arguments, and proposed courses of action in the essays that have been cited. In all, Christiansen and Sargent have provided an indispensable source on the moral and practical issues related to nuclear weapons and to Pope Francis’s condemnation of them, and anyone interested in these issues would profit from reading the book in full.

Endnotes

1 Germain Grisez was my colleague at Mount St. Mary’s in Maryland. I first heard him present this argument publicly in 1982, and I believe he is its primary intellectual architect.
2 Schroeder (2023) argues that “it is very possible that” Russian President Vladimir Putin “will move toward using one against NATO.”
3 One of them, General William F. Burns, is one of two military leaders singled out by name for praise by Cusimano Love (p. 295).
References


