

Bishops still hold to view of 1983 pastoral

Joshua J. McElwee | Jan. 22, 2010

Since the burgeoning of the U.S. nuclear force during the Cold War, Catholic ethicists and experts have offered all kinds of analysis of U.S. nuclear weapons policy -- from outright acceptance to outright condemnation, and everywhere in between.

Official Catholic response to President Obama's nuclear weapons policy, however, is largely the same as it was when the U.S. bishops released their pastoral letter "The Challenge of Peace" 26 years ago, said one prominent expert.

"The position articulated by the bishops in that letter is the same as now," said David Cortright, director of policy studies at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana. "Deterrence is acceptable only as a transitional condition leading to progressive nuclear disarmament."

Released in 1983 after a consensus-based drafting process led by a committee that included Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the late archbishop of Chicago, the pastoral letter urged the United States to take nuclear disarmament seriously.

"Each proposed addition to our strategic system or change in strategic doctrine must be assessed precisely in light of whether it will render steps toward "progressive disarmament" more or less likely," wrote the bishops. "Progress toward a world freed of dependence on nuclear deterrence must be carefully carried out. But it must not be delayed."

Cortright said that the bishops' argument in the letter outlined a basic view of all future U.S. nuclear weapons production.

"Their position would then imply that there's no need for producing any additional weapons of any kind," he said. "You don't need designs, or the preparatory work that is under way now, because the goal is to get rid of these weapons."

Archbishop Edwin O'Brien of Baltimore echoed these thoughts when he called for the United States to lead the way in abandoning the use of nuclear weapons last July (*NCR*, Aug. 7, 2009).

Speaking to an audience of U.S. military and diplomatic officials in Omaha, Neb., the former head of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services [issued the following challenge](#) [1]: "The path to zero will be long and treacherous. But humanity must walk this path with both care and courage in order to build a future free of the nuclear threat."

"Nuclear war-fighting is rejected in church teaching," he said, "because it cannot ensure noncombatant immunity and the likely destruction and lingering radiation would violate the principle of proportionality. And there is the danger of escalation to nuclear exchanges of cataclysmic proportions."

O'Brien was a keynote speaker at a two-day symposium on deterrence sponsored and organized by the United States Strategic Command and titled "Waging Deterrence in the 21st Century."

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