
British Bishops: “Stop the weapons, be peacemakers.” UK Government urged to forsake nuclear weapons

“Called to be peacemakers. A Catholic approach to arms control and disarmament” is the title of a document published by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales on military technology and its ethical implications. The 20-page document, published by the International Affairs Department of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, is signed by Bishops Declan Lang, William Kenney and Nicholas Hudson. The text, consisting of an introduction, three chapters and a concluding reflection, draws on Catholic Church documents on arms, nuclear weapons, deadly robotic technology and disarmament, and calls on the UK to “renounce its nuclear arsenal and advance multilateral disarmament.”

The Pope's message. In their introduction, the bishops reference Pope Francis' message for the 2023 World Day of Peace. “As Christians - the bishops write - we are called by Jesus to advance the cause of global disarmament. These challenges are relevant to the mission of the Catholic Church in England and Wales today”, since the UK “possesses nuclear weapons” and is also “one of the largest exporters of conventional weaponry, and at the forefront of developing new military technology that has the potential to reshape the way wars are fought.” “We hope that the teaching reflected in this document will assist Catholics throughout England and Wales, as well as those of other faiths and all people of goodwill, in responding to the proliferation of weaponry.”

Fewer weapons, more common good. “Called to be Peacemakers” opens with a first chapter entitled “The Church's Call for Nuclear Disarmament”, in which the bishops draw on encyclicals such as John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* and Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*, as well as the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes*, which make repeated calls for nuclear disarmament. “The Church has persistently called for those states possessing nuclear weapons to disarm, including our Bishops encouraging successive governments to forsake the UK's nuclear arsenal”, reads “Called to be Peacemakers”. The chapter ends with a call on the British government to fulfil its obligations as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The bishops also ask that the economic, social and political resources spent on nuclear weapons be redirected to the promotion of the universal common good.

Peace and human development. In the second chapter, entitled “The Church's Call for General and Complete Disarmament” the bishops encourage “the United Kingdom to build support for a global fund, diverting military expenditure towards promoting peace and integral human development and to end the country's role in the global arms trade, while being mindful of the need for a just transition protecting the livelihoods of people currently working in this industry whose salaries depend on it.”

Technology and human control. Emerging technologies and the challenges they pose to the United Kingdom are the focus of the third and final chapter of the document, entitled “The Church's Call to Put Emerging Technologies at the Service of Humanity.” Quoting Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Holy See's representative to the UN in Geneva, the document calls for “consideration to be given to the humanitarian and ethical implications of the use of weaponised drones and autonomous weapons systems operated by artificial intelligence rather than the human mind.” The bishops point out that “the problems posed by pre-programmed technological systems, incapable of moral discernment in matters of life and death, are destined to increase as robotic technology becomes more sophisticated.” “The Church calls for a legally binding international framework to ensure adequate, meaningful and consistent human oversight over weapons systems,” the document states. “Any system must firstly be managed by a human operator to ensure compliance with international law and broader moral responsibilities.” The chapter ends by calling on the UK government “to fulfil its obligations under international treaties such as the Biological Weapons Convention, the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Mine Ban Treaty and the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and to promote new legislation to regulate the use of emerging technologies while ensuring consistent human supervision.”

Alternative approach. In their “Concluding

Reflection” that closes the text, the bishops point to the role model of Jesus, who, despite living in a very violent age, offered a radically alternative approach based on God's unconditional love and non-violence, encouraging contemporary Catholics to promote a culture of peace by participating in peacemaking bodies and by urging their elected parliamentary representatives to pursue this approach.

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