

# **The Holy See, Trident and O'Brien**

**By Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.**

**Address to Ecumenical Meeting, Friends House, Euston**

**October 4, 2006**

I wish to thank the organizers of this meeting for inviting me to participate. My theme is that, as a result of the actions of the Nuclear Weapons States themselves, the limited acceptance the Catholic Church gave the strategy of nuclear deterrence during the Cold war no longer applies. In the eyes of the Catholic Church, nuclear weapons are evil and immoral and must be eliminated as a precondition to obtaining peace. As a consequential consideration, the government of the United Kingdom cannot claim any moral legitimacy in the replacement of the Trident nuclear weapons system.

My argument rests on the nature of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons are anti-human. That is what the moral aspect of the discussion is all about. Humanitarian law has always recognized that limitation and proportionality must be respected in warfare. But the very point of a nuclear weapon is to kill massively; the killing and the poisonous radiation cannot be contained. The social and economic consequences of nuclear war in a world whose life-support systems are intimately interconnected would be catastrophic. The severe physical damage from blast, fire and radiation would be followed by the collapse of food production and distribution and even water supplies. The prospect of widespread starvation would confront huge masses of people. Rampant

disease would follow the breakdown in health-care facilities. These immense brutalities would violate the universal norm of life: to go on living in a manner befitting a human being with the inherent right to life. No civilization, no culture has ever denied the common foundation upon which all people stand. The entire question of human rights would be up-ended. The right to a social and international order, as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, would be completely lost. The structures underpinning humanitarian law would be gone. Order would be inverted into disorder.

\* \* \*

Definitive Catholic teaching on nuclear deterrence is found in Vatican II and subsequent statements by Pope John Paul II. Vatican II taught:

Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation. (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, No. 80).

Though they elaborated their concern that a universal public authority be put in place to outlaw war, the Fathers of Vatican II rather grudgingly accepted the strategy of nuclear deterrence. The accumulation of arms, they said, serves “as a deterrent to possible enemy attack.” Thus “peace of a sort” is maintained, though the balance resulting from the arms race

threatens to lead to war, not eliminate it. The Catholic position on nuclear deterrence in a message to the U.N. Second Special Session on Disarmament in 1982:

In current conditions, “deterrence” based on balance, certainly not as an end in itself but as a step on the way towards a progressive disarmament, may still be judged morally acceptable. Nonetheless, in order to ensure peace, it is indispensable not to be satisfied with the minimum, which is always susceptible to the real danger of explosion.

In this statement, it is readily seen that deterrence, in order to be acceptable, must lead to disarmament measures. Consequently, nuclear deterrence as a permanent policy is not acceptable.

A full reading of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World shows the revulsion the Council Fathers had for nuclear arms: “the arms race is an utterly treacherous trip for humanity ...” And they warned that if the arms race persists, “it will eventually spawn all the lethal ruin whose path it is now making ready.” In the exigencies of the Cold War, with two superpowers poised to strike at each other, the Holy See accepted deterrence as a “balance.” But not only was the approval temporary, Pope John Paul II specifically stated, the policy of deterrence must lead to Progressive disarmament.”

In some circles, it is held that nuclear disarmament, of a sort, is now taking place and hence the toleration of nuclear weapons by the Church

could continue. It is argued that the U.S., Britain, France and even Russia have massively reduced their armories. Such a view completely overlooks what the nuclear weapons states are actually doing. *Quantitative* reductions plus *qualitative* improvements do not equal disarmament. In fact, the reductions serve as a cover for the continued modernization of nuclear weapons. The nuclear weapons states trumpet their good work in reducing stocks while completely ignoring the core commitment required by the Non-Proliferation Treaty: negotiations for the elimination of nuclear weapons. The International Court of Justice has held that States have an obligation to “conclude” such negotiations, but the nuclear weapons states have not shown any sign of even starting comprehensive negotiations.

The U.S. plans to rebuild every weapon in its nuclear stockpile and install new components to make weapons lighter and more rugged to improve the consistency of their explosive yield and to improve the accuracy of their delivery. Russia is carrying out research and missile tests of state-of-the art nuclear missile systems and is developing new warheads for its most recent silo-based and mobile missiles. France is planning the deployment of new warheads whose concept was tested in 1995-96 on new versions of its cruise and submarine-launched missiles. China is currently

replacing its force of 20 silo-based long-range missiles with a longer-range variant. All these activities of the declared nuclear weapons states are arms racing. Of that, there is not the slightest doubt.

Moreover, India has an estimated 95 nuclear weapons, Pakistan 50, and Israel 200. All are engaged in modernization. The eight countries now in the nuclear club have a combined population of 3.1 billion, which means that 48 percent of the people in the world live in a nuclear weapons state. The small to mid-level states are increasingly resisting this nuclear hegemony.

The facts are stark: the total number of 27,000 nuclear weapons is, in the words of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, headed by Hans Blix, “extraordinarily and alarmingly high.” The U.S. has 1,600 nuclear warheads ready for delivery within minutes of an order to do so and Russia has 1,000 similarly on high alert; every moment of every day, the two countries remain locked in a Cold War-style nuclear stand off. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan says the world is “sleep walking” towards a nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism. Mohammed ElBaradei, Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency and winner of the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize, says, “If we wish to escape self

destruction, then nuclear weapons should have no place in our collective conscience and no role in our security.”

Far from disarmament, nuclear weapons have become permanent instruments in the military doctrines of the powerful. The U.S. and Russia have put new emphasis on the war-fighting role of nuclear weapons. The nuclear weapons states refuse to give up their arsenals, and North Korea and possibly Iran, seeing that nuclear weapons have become the currency of power in the modern world, are trying to acquire them. So are terrorists. No major city in the world is safe from the threat of a nuclear attack. The risk of accident multiples daily. All these are characteristics of the Second Nuclear Age.

The Non-Proliferation Treaty, which experienced a failed conference in 2005, is at risk. The situation is so dangerous that the U.N. Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change warned: “We are approaching a point at which the erosion of the Non-Proliferation regime could become irreversible and result in a cascade of proliferation.”

The Holy See, observing the development of nuclear weapons into permanent instruments of warfare, has stepped up its warnings in a series of statements at the United Nations. These official statements have made clear that nuclear deterrence, in the modern context, cannot claim any

moral legitimacy. The Holy See's position was made clear at the 2005 Review Conference of the Non-Proliferation Treaty by Archbishop Celestino Migliore, Permanent Representative of the Holy See at the U.N.

When the Holy See expressed its limited acceptance of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War, it was with the clearly stated condition that deterrence was only a step on the way towards progressive nuclear disarmament. The Holy See has never countenanced nuclear deterrence as a permanent measure, nor does it today when it is evident that nuclear deterrence drives the development of ever newer nuclear arms, thus preventing genuine nuclear disarmament.

In this statement, the Church is not changing its teaching. Rather it is the conduct of the nuclear weapons states in making their nuclear weapons permanent who have broken the condition the Church first placed on its Cold War tolerance of nuclear deterrence. The Church's present statements are a logical consequence of the rebuff to morality signaled by the nuclear states. The Church has always held nuclear weapons to be abhorrent. Limited acceptance of nuclear deterrence was a prudential judgment in the grave conditions of the Cold War. The nuclear weapons states cannot justify their ongoing contemptible policies by hiding under any kind of moral cover – which does not exist.

\* \* \*

The United Kingdom today stands poised on the brink of a momentous decision. Whether or not to develop and deploy another



generation of British nuclear weapons after the existing Trident submarine system is decommissioned after 2020 is a question of world importance. If the government proceeds with this new development, it will be a direct contravention of the pledge it made in 2000 to make “systematic and progressive efforts” to implement Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, specifically through:

An unequivocal undertaking by the nuclear-weapon states to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament to which all states parties are committed under Article VI.

Further, the U.K. government said it would take a series of steps “leading to nuclear disarmament in a way that promotes international stability, and based on the principle of undiminished security for all.” Those steps included: “A diminishing role for nuclear weapons in security policies to minimize the risk that these weapons ever be used and to facilitate the process of their total elimination.

Again, the Trident decision will be a signal to the world whether the government is serious about its commitments or just playing with words to strike an agreeable posture in international meetings.

Spokesmen at the highest levels of the government have said that the nation needs to retain its nuclear deterrent. But why? If the U.K. does, why not the other nuclear weapons states? Why not other countries around the

world? This argument is to doom nuclear disarmament and ensure the proliferation of nuclear weapons, nullify international law, and consign the world to life in a nuclear jungle. It is a lie for any country to state that it needs nuclear weapons for security. This falsehood must be exposed.

It is the proper work of religion to expose falsehoods, particularly when they impact on the lives of the people in the mammoth way that nuclear weapons do. Thus Cardinal Keith Patrick O'Brien of Edinburgh should be commended for speaking out so clearly against the Trident replacement. He was well within his rights in asking men and women of good will to raise their voices because, as he ruefully noted, Scotland has "the shameful task of housing those horrific weapons."

Moreover, the Scottish Bishops have clearly reaffirmed their opposition to nuclear weapons, and it is quite disingenuous to claim that their stand against the possession of nuclear weapons does not represent the consistent view of the Church. In other words, it is entirely wrong to assert that the Scottish Bishops are out of harmony with the Holy See. The fact is that Cardinal O'Brien and his Episcopal colleagues have applied the teaching of both Vatican II and Pope John Paul II that nuclear deterrence could only be accepted as long as it led to progressive disarmament. In addressing the Trident issue, Cardinal O'Brien has projected locally what the

Holy See is stating universally: “The Holy See has never countenanced nuclear disarmament as a permanent measure ....”

It is not Cardinal O’Brien who needs any defence for his statement. Rather, it is the U.K. government that must explain why it is even considering the modernization of its nuclear weapons, which flies in the face of its legal obligation to proceed in a “systematic and progressive” way to nuclear disarmament. The government needs to consider carefully the admonition of Brazil: “One cannot worship at the altar of nuclear weapons and raise heresy charges against those who want to join the sect.”

Of course, the U.K. government is worried about the reaction of Washington if it should signal that it is phasing out of the possession of nuclear weapons. It would expose even more the recalcitrance of the U.S. government to qualitative nuclear disarmament. NATO would be forced to re-consider its policies that nuclear weapons are “essential.” European publics would escalate pressure to get NATO’s tactical nuclear weapons removed from their soil.

Does the U.K. government have the courage to face the world without nuclear armor? Let us turn the coin around. If the U.K. took the decision not to replace Trident, and deliberately phase down dismantling of its nuclear weapons, it would be hailed around the world for its courage and

faithfulness to its signature on the Non-Proliferation Treaty. It would give new hope to the world that nuclear weapons, the ultimate evil, can indeed be removed from military doctrines. Addressing the paramount moral issue of our time – the continuation of life on the planet – is very much the business of all religious leaders.