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By Douglas Roche

Canada's Catholic bishops have bravely stuck their necks out in a formal statement by solidly backing Pope Francis's condemnation of the possession of nuclear weapons and blasting NATO and the nuclear weapons states for continuing "to shirk their legal obligation...to pursue good faith negotiations toward the elimination of nuclear weapons."

Some may consider that Catholic bishops supporting the pope is the equivalent of adding ice cream to apple pie. But in the internecine battles that characterize Vatican curia politics today, the Canadian action is a striking counter-move against the American and European bishops who are undermining, by their silence, Francis's social justice teachings.

I attended the special Vatican conference in 2017 on nuclear weapons at which Pope Francis, in a historic statement, "firmly condemned...the very possession" of nuclear weapons. The clear language the pope used in speaking out against the "mentality of fear" and "false sense of security" that drives the new nuclear arms race captured the attention of scores of government diplomats, Nobel laureates and journalists. A senior cardinal told me the implementation of the pope's message would depend on whether the national hierarchies got behind it.

Catholic bishops in NATO countries felt themselves in a dilemma. The pope's words were a direct attack on NATO's nuclear deterrence policies, which continue to affirm that nuclear weapons are the "supreme guarantee" of security. A

vigorous debate broke out within the Vatican, pitting hard-line conservatives against those who want to implement the words of the Second Vatican Council 54 years ago that the nuclear arms race is an “utterly treacherous trap for humanity.” Turning words into action, the pope directed the Holy See to be among the first to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, adopted at the U.N. in 2017. All the NATO states are shunning the treaty, which will enter into force when 50 states have ratified it (so far 32 have).

Not one national hierarchy in a NATO country spoke up. Now a plenary meeting of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has— forcefully. “NATO policy undermines the new treaty,” the bishops said. “We call on Canada, through changes in its own own policies and practices, to persist in efforts to bring NATO into conformity with the treaty.” This action would clear the way for Canada to sign and ratify the treaty, which the bishops see as a “major step towards comprehensive negotiations for the elimination of all nuclear weapons.”

The bishops, pointing out the continued existence of 14,465 nuclear weapons held by nine countries, expressed “great concern at the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the use of even one nuclear weapon.” This led them to elaborate their concern that reductions in numbers since the Cold War “merely mask the modernization process in which today’s nuclear weapons contain far more explosive power than the atomic bombs which destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”

There is not a whiff of partisan politics in the Canadian bishops’ statement,. By publishing it on September 26, the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons, they have quashed any charge that they are interfering in the current federal election. Nonetheless, the bishops have made it clear that they

refuse, by silence on a principal moral issue in the world today, to give comfort to the Canadian government, which still refuses to sign the Prohibition Treaty. The Canadian bishops, unlike the American and European, have seized this issue and, in so doing, are providing moral leadership that will, at the very least, make the hierarchies in other NATO countries somewhat uncomfortable.

Whether it will affect the government of Canada, no matters who wins the election, remains to be seen. But in fully supporting Pope Francis at a time when his enemies would like to see him “retire,” and in standing up among all the hierarchies in NATO countries, the Canadian bishops are showing world leadership.

In November, Pope Francis will journey to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the sites of the only use — so far — of atomic bombs and where more than 200,000 persons perished. Francis has not forgotten this calamity even though NATO and the nuclear powers seem to have, and remain virtually mute as the hard-built architecture of nuclear disarmament crumbles. Francis’s re-statement of the moral evil of nuclear weapons will add to the growing calls for the U.S. and Russia to extend the START agreement, which limits the numbers of strategic nuclear weapons they possess.

This will be followed next spring by international efforts at the U.N. to put some teeth into the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The subject of nuclear disarmament is very much alive — and the Canadian Catholic bishops have done a double service in nudging their fellow bishops around the world and also waking up Canadian foreign policy at a critical moment.

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