

**International Seminar organised by Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace
‘Disarmament, Development and Peace
Perspectives for an Integral Disarmament’**

‘The Role of Religions’ – Cardinal Keith Patrick O’Brien

**Friday 11 – Saturday 12 April 2008
Palazzo san Calisto, Rome**

Introduction:

It is a great honour to be asked to speak at this seminar on disarmament, development and peace, and I thank Cardinal Martino most sincerely for this invitation.

I intend to speak this morning in a quite limited way, and from personal experience, the experience of taking action in the name of religion on one specific matter of disarmament. That is the matter of nuclear disarmament, and it will be in the context of the situation of the United Kingdom.

Through this, matters of development and peace will I hope become clear, as they are intimately connected. And through it, too, I hope we can draw out possibilities for religion to play a role in other spheres as well, such as action on behalf of chemical and small arms disarmament as we have discussed yesterday, and perhaps we can pick up the wider implications in our time of debate that will follow.

We have now heard a great deal about weapons and disarmament in very many contexts: yesterday morning we had important discussions on disarmament in terms of our ethics and spirituality, and in the sphere of politics and governance. In the afternoon we considered various military and industrial aspects, such as the international arms trade, the economic issues around warfare, and the central issue of human rights in it all.

Today has been a morning for widening the discussion to consider what can be done, and more precisely, who can do what to ensure it is done. We heard of the role of the international organisations, and then specifically the place in it all of the non governmental agencies, and now, finally, we consider that most vital matter for us in the church and for all men and women of faith, namely, what precisely is the role of religions in the task of disarmament.

Experience of Cardinal O’Brien and Bishops’ Conference of Scotland and of England and Wales:

In his letter inviting me to speak, Cardinal Martino kindly referred to my experience in this area, and I thought a good starting point would be say what that experience is. On first glance it is not very obvious. I am not an expert in nuclear science, I am no military strategist, I am not an economist, and neither am I well versed in the history of nuclear deterrence, détente, or the reality of the cold war politics which gave rise to the arms race in the first place.

What I am is a pastor, a bishop, president of a Conference of Bishops, who together realised we could not countenance nor accept weapons of mass destruction in our midst, nor the using of such weapons in our name.

You may or may not know that in Great Britain, though we are one country, nonetheless we have two Bishops' Conferences. There is the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, and our own Bishops' Conference of Scotland. Both of these conferences have recently considered and spoken on nuclear weapons because of the situation that the British government finds itself in, which concerns a decision they must make about the future of the British nuclear arsenal.

Some background facts on British nuclear weapons might be of some use here, and forgive me if I repeat some of the information heard in this seminar already. But it is so overwhelming and potentially destructive that I hope it bears repeating.

Britain is one of the five original members of the nuclear 'club', along with the USA, France, Russia and China. All 5 happen to be the permanent members of the UN Security Council, but in fact being a nuclear power is not a condition for permanent membership, though sometimes the impression will be given that this is the case. It is not.

Britain has had a variety of nuclear weapons systems in the past but the current and only system now in the British armoury is a system known as Trident. Trident is a submarine launched ballistic missile system.

You will understand why this is an issue of very particular relevance to the Scottish bishops and the Scottish people when I tell you that the entire armoury of Trident missiles is deployed on four nuclear submarines, which are all stationed less than 30 miles from Glasgow, Scotland's biggest city, and less than 80 miles from Edinburgh, my home and Scotland's capital city. In fact these weapons are kept within 100 miles of more than two thirds of the entire population of Scotland.

They are awesome in their power and potential. Each of the four submarines carries 16 missiles, and each missile can house 3 independently fired warheads. So each of our 4 submarines can carry 48 warheads, which gives a total of almost 200 nuclear warheads. Under current operational procedures there is always at least one submarine out at sea on patrol, in a high state of readiness to immediately attack a target.

We know well what happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, yet those were primitive bombs in comparison to these ones. Each of Britain's 200 warheads on our nuclear submarines has a firepower something in the region of 8 times that of the Hiroshima bomb. In other words, only 1 of our 200 warheads can perform 8 times the destruction wreaked on Hiroshima.

For us in Scotland this is a scale of potential for destruction that we cannot fathom. How much more difficult, then, to fathom this in a global context. I have said Britain has 200 warheads. But two countries, the USA and Russia, have between them a staggering 26,000 warheads.

Little wonder then that the bishops of Scotland felt compelled to speak about this unholy terror in our midst. Nor is this something we have come to late in the day.

As long ago as 1982 the Scottish bishops spoke of the immorality of nuclear weapons. In that same year **Pope John Paul was demanding nuclear disarmament at the United Nations.** Deterrence was only ever acceptable to him as an interim phase, a step on the way to complete nuclear disarmament. We recall well what the Holy Father said at that time, telling the nations of the world that "to ensure peace, it is indispensable not to be satisfied with this minimum" of mutual deterrence. Our bishops in that year considered whether "even the threat of use of these

weapons of terrible destructiveness can ever be morally justified” and concluded that it could not.

Now, though the spectre of nuclear weapons has never left Britain or the world, at least **we recently have had the chance to raise the matter again strongly and publicly, in the lead up to a parliamentary decision on the replacement of Trident, in 2006.**

That year I dedicated my Easter Sunday homily to the issue of nuclear weapons. I pointed out that the only replacement of nuclear weapons that the Catholic church can countenance is to replace them with projects that bring life to the poor. I was developing the work and teaching of my brother bishops and our Holy Week statement on nuclear weapons. That statement was clear and simple and concluded with a demand to our government that Trident not be replaced, and the current weapons system be dismantled. We were never in any doubt about this and we were, in turn, simply echoing the call of Pope Benedict XVI, who in his first message for World Day for Peace called on Britain and other countries with nuclear weapons to, as he put it, “change their course”.

The Scottish bishops were not alone in speaking out and speaking up for nuclear disarmament.. Firstly the **Welsh bishops**, in a joint ecumenical statement with many other Christian denominations in Wales, called on the government of Britain to take a stand for disarmament and not replace Trident. And then following that the whole **Conference of Bishops of England and Wales** produced a reflection on nuclear weapons in which they invited the government to ‘act with courageous leadership’ by disarming and not replacing the missiles.

As a result of these three strong interventions, the **British government could be in no doubt where the Catholic Church stands on the question of nuclear weapons in general, and Trident replacement in particular.**

Here then I think we demonstrate the first role of religion in this matter of nuclear disarmament. It is to speak out to those who can affect change. Particularly for bishops, it is to be teachers, communicating clearly and boldly the teaching of the Church.

Teaching of the Church:

Some will criticise us and suggest that we offer only opinion, which is why it is important that what bishops say is reinforced by the teaching of the church.

We have a wealth of teaching to draw on, from *Pacem in Terris* and *Gaudium et Spes* right up to the present day, and not least the three messages for World Day for Peace given by Pope Benedict XVI. I cannot recall any other issue that has been taken up three years in a row in the World Day for Peace message.

But the Pope has done so on this issue. In 2006 he said that the view of the nuclear weapons powers that nuclear weapons could help bring security “was not only baneful but also completely fallacious”.

In his 2007 message he reminded states that “The way to ensure a future of peace for everyone is found not only in international accords for *the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons*, but also in the determined commitment to seek their reduction and definitive dismantling”.

And this year, 2008, his frustration at the refusal to disarm was clear: “I feel bound to entreat those in authority to resume with greater determination negotiations for a *progressive and mutually agreed dismantling of existing nuclear weapons*.”

So here, too, is a clear role for religions, and particularly for religious leadership. It is **to repeat the message over and over again**, to speak the truth ‘**in season and out of season**’ and to not rest from doing so. Pope Benedict has led the way and I as a bishop have a duty to follow his lead.

Teaching of the Faithful:

The responsibility to teach goes beyond addressing leadership in our countries, those who can affect change. Indeed, the teaching responsibility we have is primarily to teach the faithful, and to this end, in recent years, we have received from the Holy See a number of very important documents to aid our teaching.

Not least among these, of course, has been the **Catechism of the Catholic Church**, with its powerful reiteration of the social teaching of the church taking an important place.

We have heard many times these two days of the awesome power for destruction that nuclear weapons have. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us of the words of the Second Vatican Council, in the document *Gaudium et Spes*, which warned that the use of such weapons must never be contemplated: "every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and man himself, which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation".

The role of religions is to remind the world of this. Pope John Paul II described that Catechism as the “statement of the Church’s faith” **so we should be in no doubt about this issue being an issue of faith**. Sometimes, perhaps, our religious leadership is anxious about saying this in so many words, imagining matters of justice and peace are not issues of faith the way the sacraments, or the doctrine of salvation or the creed are issues of faith. so it is important for us to be reminded that they are, and they rightly find their home in the Catechism of the Catholic Church alongside all other matters of faith.

Pope John Paul was a wonderful champion for peace and dreamed of an end to violence, war and weapons. During his memorable visit to Britain in 1982, he pleaded for peace in the city of Coventry, an industrial city in the middle of England, and so a place which was very heavily bombed during the second world war. He said in the rebuilt Coventry Cathedral: “Today, the scale and the horror of modern warfare - whether nuclear or not - makes it totally unacceptable as a means of settling differences between nations. War should belong to the tragic past, to history; it should find no place on humanity's agenda for the future”.

The teaching on peace in the Catechism is, therefore, vitally important, and a crucial contribution for peacemaking. What we find in the Catechism has been very skilfully supplemented and expanded through the publication in 2004 of “**The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church**”. This compendium is masterful in the treatment it gives to the whole range and scope of social justice issues that we face daily as pastors. It’s a most vital resource for us. For our purposes here chapter eleven, The Promotion of Peace, is of fundamental importance.

Inspired by this chapter, conscious of my role of teacher, and as a preparation for the national debate that we hoped might take place leading up to the vote in parliament, **our archdiocese recently produced a Study Guide on nuclear weapons**, and there are copies available at this seminar.

It was widely circulated throughout the archdiocese, and beyond there to every diocese in the country as well. In addition to its use in Scotland a number of dioceses and agencies in England and Wales and elsewhere have used the Guide to develop their understanding and to take up some of the ideas for action and reflection that the Guide contains.

The Guide covers many aspects of the nuclear weapons debate. We begin with a look at some of the biblical references to peace. We then give basic facts about nuclear weapons, and consider whether British weapons are in reality a so called ‘independent’ deterrent, or do the British government depend on another country for their effective maintenance. The guide considers the morality of use, threat and possession of nuclear weapons, and it answers a number of common issues often raised in support of a policy of nuclear deterrence. Much of the document is given over to recent Catholic teaching, but it also has an important section on the peace tradition in other religions, and includes prayers for peace from other faiths. There are suggestions for practical action, and throughout the Guide there are a number of reflection and action boxes, with practical ideas and suggestions for prayer and reflection.

Ecumenical Links:

A glance at that Guide will show that the action taken up in Scotland to oppose the replacement of Trident and in support of nuclear disarmament was very clearly and very strongly an **ecumenical one**. I am proud of the way I worked with the then Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the Right Reverend Alan McDonald. We took the opportunity to make a joint plea for peace on New Years Day 2007, which attracted much support and attention. We said quite simply, that “peace cannot be advanced by the commissioning of new weapons of mass destruction”.

I was humbled and gratified that our own host here in Rome, Cardinal Renato Martino, **noted the importance of the ecumenical and interfaith nature of our work for peace**. This highlights yet another vital role for religions, and that is to work together, in cooperation, sharing the best resources we have in any particular matter.

In the case of nuclear disarmament one particularly rich resource we have is our tradition of teaching on peace, beginning with the witness and example of peace given by Jesus himself, and ranging down through the centuries to the modern Catholic Social teaching which, as we have seen is incorporated into the Catechism, and perhaps particularly the teaching of the Holy Father each year on the World Day of Peace, January the 1st. Other denominations have their own structures for teaching and for deliberation, such as the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in my own home country, and the work done to further justice and peace at these forums is immense. The teaching role of all religions is a most vital one.

Role of other Faiths:

I have spoken until now mostly of ecumenical initiatives, but a glance at our Study guide will also show that the role of religions beyond the Christian religion is also a most important one.

In that Guide a number of prayers for peace from some of the **major world faiths** were reproduced, and the reaction to these was very positive. As an example, we had a prayer for peace from the **Sikh religion**, which reminded us that “God judges us according to our deeds, not the coat we wear”. That was, for me, an important reminder that for us in Britain our coat of nuclear weapons, assuring our so called safety, has no meaning in the sight of God. We are judged as peacemakers by the actions we take in the name of peace, not by the way we defend ourselves from those who would seek to harm us. By recognising the peace tradition in so many of the worlds religions, we recognise a powerful force for change in the world, and a central role of religion in disarmament.

Something of great importance in Scottish religious life is the **twice yearly meeting of the various religious leaders of Scotland**, and as we grow in friendship together, and in understanding of one another’s life of faith, we grow too in our understanding that we share much that is fundamental and common. There is perhaps nothing more fundamental to all of us than our desire for peace and prosperity for the world. Where governments of the world fail in pursuing this, it is perhaps the role of religions to lead the way.

A glance at the nations of the world which have nuclear weapons perhaps underlines the **importance of the interfaith dimension** of this issue. We note that largely **Christian nations** such as the USA, France and Britain put their faith more in nuclear weapons than in God. But by all accounts Israel, a **Jewish nation**, is also a nuclear power. Pakistan is a **Muslim** country but it has nuclear weapons and India, largely **Hindu**, has them too. How vital then that all the religions of the world discover and develop a religious language of peace that challenges the mindset of our governments.

Conclusion:

Before I conclude I wish to note something of central importance in all that we think and do and say on the matter of nuclear weapons. It concerns what is at the heart of a Trident missile or a nuclear submarine or a strategy for tactical nuclear warfare, or any other planning of war and violence for that matter. It is something that has surfaced many times at this seminar when we speak about disarmament of the heart.

A Jesuit priest who lives in Edinburgh, Fr Gerry Hughes, has reflected very powerfully on this question and tries to examine **where the heart of the nuclear problem lies**. It lies, he says, not in submarines, nor in the destructive power of the nuclear warheads. **The root of the problem lies in the human mind and heart**. “Trident submarines... are a human construction... and their purpose is to destroy on such a massive scale that no sane nation would dare to risk a nuclear attack.” And so, “If the root of Trident’s destructiveness lies in the human mind and heart, those who oppose Trident must never be content with the universal abolition of nuclear weapons”.

How right he is, for an unconverted heart will not understand *why* such weapons fail God. **How much, therefore, do we need to constantly turn to God in all of this**, to ask for forgiveness, to repent, to seek strength and guidance, and to keep our minds turned to thoughts of peace. **Who but people of faith can lead us in this?**

I would like to finish by reflecting that we gather here in Rome for this seminar during Easter. When I think of the role of religion in the task of bringing about nuclear and all other disarmament and in building a world of peace, I am very struck by what we can learn in this season of Easter. **One of the core Easter themes is the promise of peace which accompanies the resurrection appearances**, especially in the Gospel of John. When Jesus meets the frightened disciples his first resurrection words are ‘peace be with you’. These are frightened men, who have hidden themselves away for fear of what might happen to them. By this offer of peace Jesus is saying that fear and anxiety can be overcome.

The beautiful Easter song ‘The Exsultet’ says a great deal about the power and role of religion and faith in our work for justice. Towards the end of the Exsultet we sing that “the power of this holy night dispels all evil, washes guilt away, restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy; it casts out hatred, brings us peace, and humbles earthly pride”.

This should be our aim. **We do not simply wish to rid the world of weapons. In the process we want to build a better world.** We wish to dispel all evil, wash away guilt, and restore lost innocence. Our resurrection faith declares that there need be no more hatred, and no more fear of the other, which is the only reason to threaten in the first place.

As I said at the beginning of my lecture, I am no expert on nuclear or any other weapons, but I am convinced of the truth of this, and of the power of our Easter faith. It makes me realise that the role of religion in ensuring disarmament is very simple. It is to live religious lives, to speak out prophetically to our political leadership, it is to instruct our faithful, it is to work together to do this with all men and women of faith, and it is to keep our minds and hearts turned towards thoughts of peace.

May God bless us all with this gift of resurrection peace. Thank you.