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Message of the Holy Father on the occasion of the First Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

The following is the message sent by the Holy Father on the occasion of the first Meeting of the States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, read by Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, secretary for Relations with States and International Organizations (Vienna, 21 June 2022):

Message

*To His Excellency Ambassador Alexander Kmentt
President of the First Meeting of States Parties
to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons*

I am pleased to greet you and the other distinguished participants on the occasion of this First Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

In my message to the diplomatic conference convened five years ago to negotiate this Treaty, I asked: “Why give ourselves this demanding and forward-looking goal [of a world without nuclear weapons] in the present international context characterized by an unstable climate of conflict, which is both cause and indication of the difficulties encountered in advancing and strengthening the process of nuclear disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation?”[1].

At this particular moment in history where the world seems to be at a crossroads, the courageous vision of this legal instrument, strongly inspired by ethical and moral arguments, appears ever more timely. Indeed, this meeting takes place at a moment that inevitably calls for a deeper reflection on security and peace. In the current context, speaking of or advocating disarmament may seem paradoxical to many. However, we need to remain aware of the dangers of short-sighted approaches to national and international security and the risks of proliferation. As we know all too well, the price for not doing so is inevitably paid by the number of innocent lives taken and measured in terms of carnage and destruction. As a result, I emphatically renew my appeal to silence

all weapons and eliminate the causes of conflicts through tireless recourse to negotiations: “Those who wage war [...] forget humanity!”[2]

Peace is indivisible, and to be truly just and lasting, it has to be universal. It is deceptive and self-defeating reasoning to think that the security and peace of some is disconnected from the collective security and peace of others. This is also one of the lessons that the Covid-19 pandemic has tragically demonstrated. “The security of our own future depends on guaranteeing the peaceful security of others, for if peace, security and stability are not established globally, they will not be enjoyed at all. Individually and collectively, we are responsible for the present and future well-being of our brothers and sisters”[3].

The Holy See has no doubt that a world free from nuclear weapons is both necessary and possible. In a system of collective security, there is no place for nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Indeed, “if we take into consideration the principal threats to peace and security with their many dimensions in this multipolar world of the twenty-first century as, for example, terrorism, asymmetrical conflicts, cybersecurity, environmental problems, poverty, not a few doubts arise regarding the inadequacy of nuclear deterrence as an effective response to such challenges. These concerns are even greater when we consider the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental consequences that would follow from any use of nuclear weapons, with devastating, indiscriminate and uncontrollable effects, over time and space”[4]. Nor can we ignore the precariousness arising from the simple maintenance of these weapons: the risk of accidents, involuntary or otherwise, that could lead to very troubling scenarios.

Nuclear weapons are a costly and dangerous liability. They represent a “risk multiplier” that provides only an illusion of a “peace of sorts”. Here, I wish to reaffirm that the use of nuclear weapons, as well as their mere possession, is immoral. Trying to defend and ensure stability and peace through a false sense of security and a “balance of terror”, sustained by a mentality of fear and mistrust inevitably ends up poisoning relationships between peoples and obstructing any possible form of real dialogue. Possession leads easily to threats of their use, becoming a sort of “blackmail” that should be repugnant to the consciences of humanity.

In this regard “unless this process of disarmament be thorough-going and complete, and reach men’s very souls, it is impossible to stop the arms race or to reduce armaments or – and this is the main thing – ultimately to abolish them entirely. Everyone must sincerely cooperate in the effort to banish fear and the anxious expectation of war from men’s minds”[5].

For these reasons, it is important to recognize a global and pressing need for responsibility on multiple levels. Such responsibility is shared by everyone and lies on two levels: first, on a public level, as States members of the same family of nations. Secondly, on a personal level, as individuals and members of the same human family, and as people of good will. Whatever our role or status may be, each of us bears various degrees of responsibility: how can we possibly envisage pushing the button to launch a nuclear bomb? How can we, in good conscience, be engaged in modernizing nuclear arsenals? It is fitting that this Treaty also recognizes that education for peace can play an important role, helping young people become aware of the risks and consequences of nuclear weapons for current and future generations.

Existing disarmament treaties are more than just legal obligations. They are also moral commitments based on trust among States and among their representatives, rooted in the trust that citizens place in their governments, with ethical consequences for current and future generations of humanity. Adherence to, and respect for, international disarmament agreements and international law is not a form of weakness. On the contrary, it is a source of strength and responsibility since it increases trust and stability. Furthermore, as is the case with this Treaty, it provides for international cooperation and assistance to victims as well as to the environment: here my thoughts go to the Hibakusha, the survivors of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and to all the victims of nuclear arms testing.

In conclusion, as you lay the foundation for the implementation of this Treaty, I wish to encourage you, representatives of States, international organizations and civil society, to continue along your chosen path of promoting a culture of life and peace based upon the dignity of the human person and the awareness that we

are all brothers and sisters. For its part, the Catholic Church remains irrevocably committed to promoting peace between peoples and nations and fostering education for peace throughout its institutions. This is a duty to which the Church feels bound before God and every man and woman in our world. May the Lord bless each of you and your efforts in the service of justice and peace.

From the Vatican, 21 June 2022

FRANCIS

[1] *Message to the United Nations Conference to Negotiate a Legally Binding Instrument to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons, Leading Towards Their Total Elimination*, 23 March 2017.

[2] After the Angelus, 27 February 2022.

[3] *Message to the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons*, 7 December 2014.

[4] *Message to the United Nations Conference to Negotiate a Legally Binding Instrument to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons, Leading Towards Their Total Elimination*, 23 March 2017.

[5] Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 11 April 1963, n. 113.
