

Keeping the Peace

**By Very Reverend Glennon Jones, Vicar General,
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July and August, of course, usher in the anniversaries of the first atomic explosion here in New Mexico and the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings which essentially ushered in the end of World War II. In my former parish of Los Alamos where “the bomb” was developed, we annually had disarmament demonstrators—well-intentioned folks, of course, and who can blame them for seeking the ideal of peace that we all desire. One consideration was overlooked, however; although Los Alamos is the birthplace of “the bomb”, Mankind’s attaining of nuclear capability was inevitable. War simply sped up its realization.

Many criticize the U.S. use of the atomic bomb to end the WWII, but war pursued in ANY manner is a horror. It plagues humanity regardless. At the time, it was estimated that hundreds of thousands of Allied troops and *millions* of Japanese would have perished in an invasion of Japan, and fire-bombing of Japanese and German cities (Tokyo and Dresden, for examples) had killed at least as many as did the atomic bombs. Had not the atomic bomb been used, that firebombing would have continued. Only the shock of the immense power contained in a single bomb—and the uncertainty about how many such bombs the U.S. possessed—convinced the Japanese emperor to break the ruling council’s deadlock in favor of surrender and peace.

As a dabbling student of history, I often muse on what would have happened if one of the other technologically-capable nations had developed

the bomb first? Had one of the Axis powers or the Soviet Union done so, very likely world conquest and even many millions more dead would have been the result; its more than obvious that neither Hitler nor Stalin revered human life when it stood in the way of their ambitions. Or, Japan may have continued its inexorable march through Asia and the Pacific...perhaps eventually into Europe and beyond. Even Great Britain—wary of years of war and suffering and indiscriminate bombing in the Blitz—may have been tempted toward lesser restraint.

What if the bomb had been developed during peacetime? Had nations stockpiled these weapons without ever having witnessed the very real results of their destructive potential, would they have been more inclined to utilize them? Remembrance of the effects of such weapons is largely what has kept them from being utilized again to this very day ... even 75 years later. And it seems hardly disputable that the deterrent effect of U.S. capability over the decades—maintained in large part by dedicated personnel of Los Alamos and Sandia national laboratories—has been a major determinant in that restraint.

What would result in our unilateral disarmament, as is often proposed? It’s hardly likely that nuclear-capable nations would be awestricken in admiration of U.S. magnanimity, and desire to imitate us; on the contrary, a worldwide nuclear free-for-all might very well ensue. How about a pacifistic wholesale surrender to “save lives”? Well, it might do so for time ... but the “absolute power corrupts absolutely” adage comes to mind, and history shows that genocide becomes a real possibility when rulers

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weary of the powerless ruled. We need only remember the very recent Holocaust to remember how lightly lay the veil of civilization upon Mankind.

Surprising to many, even the Catholic Church's thought on this topic is somewhat mixed. While of course lamenting arms races and urgently exhorting ever-increasing efforts for lasting peace and disarmament, the Church nonetheless recognizes the right and duty of nations for effective defense of its citizens. The bishops of the world stated at the Second Vatican Council: *"To be sure, scientific weapons are not amassed solely for use in war. Since the defensive strength of any nation is considered to be dependent upon its capacity for immediate retaliation, this accumulation of arms...likewise serves, in a way heretofore unknown, as deterrent to possible enemy attack. Many regard this procedure as the most effective way by which peace of a sort can be maintained between nations at the present time."* (Gaudium et Spes, 81)

And so...there's no simple solution to the ominous and constant threat of nuclear weaponry, else it would have been already attained. "The bomb" exists, and the nuclear genie as it's often called is not going back into the bottle; therefore, it must be dealt with realistically. Nuclear capability will be pursued in the world whether we like it or not. Yes, the ideal may be "No Nukes!" ... but until the day arrives in which such disarmament and its absolute verification is possible, the mission of the Los Alamos and Sandia labs is not only valid but essential in maintaining the (admittedly tense) nuclear restraint throughout the world. There is a vital difference between promotion of an ideal and being naively idealistic—the indispensable formula of realism separating the two, while yet always striving to make the ideal a true reality.

In a world of continually-expanding nuclear proliferation, we strive for—and pray ever more ardently—for peace among nations ... always remembering that *"...to us a child is born, to us a son is given...and his name will be called 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,'"* (Isaiah 9:6) ... and that *"Nothing will be impossible with God."* (Luke 1:37)



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