Good evening, everyone and thank you for your warm welcome. I am especially grateful to Bishop John Stowe, Johnny Zokovitch, the National Council, and all of you, my fellow Pax Christi members. I’m happy and excited to be here, and the first thing I want to say to you is thank you! Thank you for all your work for justice, disarmament and peace. And I want to congratulate Pax Christi on its fiftieth anniversary, for fifty years of Gospel peacemaking, for all your good works and efforts to proclaim the Gospel of peace to our country, our church and our world. Thank you also for your tremendous support of my pastoral letter calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons. Thank you, Johnny and the staff, for publishing copies of it, and for hosting a series of study groups about it. I’m so moved and grateful. I am becoming one of your best customers! I keep ordering more and more copies and say, “Oh, I know that guy!” Thank you as well to the founders and elders of Pax Christi, many of whom are here tonight, including Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, Sr. Mary Lou Kownacki, and Marie Dennis. Thank you for your leadership and for inspiriting countless people to live lives of peace.

As a new member of Pax Christi, USA, I keep hearing about Marie Dennis. I would like to take a moment now to acknowledge and congratulate Marie, the winner of the Paul VI Teacher of Peace award. If Marie is here, I’d like to invite her to stand and let’s give her a round of applause for all her great work for peace.
I also want to acknowledge the presence of Robert Ellsberg and his wife Monica. I am currently reading his father’s book, *The Doomsday Machine*, and Robert tells me that his father is reading my pastoral letter. I cannot hold a candle to Daniel Ellsberg in the disarmament movement and I am humbled that he would take a look at my few pages.

I also want to acknowledge Anne Avellone, our archdiocesan head of the Peace and Justice Office. Yesterday was her birthday and she spent it with me at Dallas Love field for seven hours as we waited for our flight after our connection was cancelled. She is dedicated to our cause! Thank you, Anne and Happy Birthday!

As you know I’m coming to you from New Mexico, the birthplace of the atomic bomb, the first place where an atomic bomb was set off, in Alamogordo on July 16, 1945, and the place where we have built every one of our nuclear weapons since. As you may have read, this journey began for me five years ago when I visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The evil of nuclear warfare becomes very real if you visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In one exhibit, I read about school children in Hiroshima who ran to the windows as the bomb went off, to see the bright light. For us Christians, Christ is the light of the world who brings life to all. Tragically, the light that day brought those children death. While there in Japan, I kept thinking of those children. I was twelve during the Cuban Missile Crisis and I can remember walking home from school and looking up at the sky to see if the planes over head were Russian. I ran home, afraid, to a safe and loving home. Those children would never run anywhere again. I kept thinking of the tens of thousands of people who were killed instantly in Japan and the tens of thousands killed gradually in the days that followed the attack. Their voices seemed to cry out to us, the living, giving witness to the horror and inhumanity of nuclear weapons. I recalled the words of T. S. Eliot “The communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.” Tongued with fire indeed! And we fail to listen at our own peril!
About a day or two after I returned from Japan, some friends visited me in Santa Fe, and we decided to go to the New Mexico History Museum. There, in one display, I read about the Manhattan project and the development of the Los Alamos and Sandia national laboratories. I saw photos of Little Boy and Fat Man, the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where I had just been a few months before and where I saw what those two bombs did to our Japanese brothers and sisters. I felt very disturbed by all this, to see these exhibits proudly displaying how we built atomic bombs and vaporized some 130,000 people, now 77 years ago, and then built tens of thousands of nuclear weapons ever since. As I began to talk about this with friends, I decided to write a pastoral letter to the people of New Mexico, the country and the world, to say publicly: we were the first to build and use nuclear weapons and so we must be part of the process that seeks to dismantle them, making sure that they are never used again. So, with my letter I have called for a serious conversation about nuclear disarmament in New Mexico and across the nation so that we might take new concrete steps toward abolishing nuclear weapons and ending the nuclear threat once and for all.

This evening, I’d like to reflect a little with you about what Pope Francis has been saying about nuclear weapons and nonviolence, about the threat that the existence of nuclear weapons poses for us, some of the things I have learned since publishing my letter, and a few thoughts that may help us in rejuvenating and sustaining a conversation on nuclear disarmament.

Pope Francis

I know that I am not alone when I say that I am quite fond of Pope Francis. It’s not easy to be fond of someone who lives 6,000 miles away, but Pope Francis makes it easy. He has endeared himself to not just Catholics but to people all over the world. Not that he is always saying things people want to hear. But he does speak the truth and he speaks it with love. Over the last few years, as you know, Pope Francis has led the
church in a dramatic shift when it comes to nuclear weapons. By declaring the mere possession of nuclear weapons to be immoral, he dramatically moved the moral needle and altered the entire ethical landscape of thermonuclear armaments, denouncing nuclear weapons, and even their use as a deterrence, as immoral and calling for their complete abolition. Just this past Monday, Pope Francis tweeted his now famous statement. “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’ ends up poisoning relationships between peoples and obstructs real dialogue.” The Pope’s call has been, by and large, ignored by the US church and the media, but that does not detract from its importance. In his visit to Nagasaki, he said, “In a world where millions of children and families live in inhumane conditions, the money that is squandered and the fortunes made through the manufacture, upgrading, maintenance and sale of evermore destructive weapons are an affront crying out to heaven.” He later said: “Convinced as I am that a world without nuclear weapons is possible and necessary, I ask political leaders not to forget that these weapons cannot protect us from current threats to national and international security. We need to ponder the catastrophic impact of their deployment, especially from a humanitarian and environmental standpoint, and reject heightening a climate of fear, mistrust, and hostility fomented by nuclear doctrines.” In January 2020, he again called upon all nations to work for a new world without nuclear weapons. His appeal came two days ahead of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the first legally binding international agreement to prohibit signatory states from developing, testing, producing, stockpiling, stationing, transferring, and using or threatening to use nuclear arms; and he made sure the Vatican was the first to sign it. On the 75th anniversary of Hiroshima, he again called for “prayer and commitment to a world completely free of nuclear weapons.” So, Pope Francis has started a new global conversation on nuclear disarmament, and I think that part of our job these days as Pax Christi people is to join that conversation all over again and raise the vision of a nuclear free world with everyone and encourage everyone to take action for nuclear disarmament.
The bishops of the United States took a bold leap in this direction almost 40 years ago when they published their pastoral letter “The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and our Response.” Bishop Gumbleton, a founding member of Pax Christi, USA, and president of Pax Christi when the letter was being written, was also a member of the committee that wrote the letter. My dear friend, Archbishop John Quinn, was also very much involved in this critically important pastoral letter. It started a conversation that helped to reinforce the efforts made at nuclear de-escalation. Yet, understandably at the time, this landmark pastoral letter did allow for the possession of nuclear weapons for deterrence. Now, Pope Francis has taken even that concession off the table. He has initiated more than a tremor in the moral landscape and caused a paradigmatic shift in how we view nuclear arms from a moral point of view. He has repeated this bold assertion many times since 2017 but I wonder how many are listening.

At the same time that Pope Francis has been calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons, he has also started talking about nonviolence, as Gandhi and Dr. King taught, and teaching us that Jesus was nonviolent, and that we are all called to practice and teach Gospel nonviolence. In his World Day of Peace Message on January 1, 2017, entitled “Nonviolence—A Style of Politics for Peace,” Francis invited us to make “active nonviolence our way of life.” “To be true followers of Jesus today,” he wrote, “includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence.” “May charity and nonviolence govern how we treat each other as individuals, within society and in international life,” he concluded. “In the most local and ordinary situations and in the international order, may nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms.... May we dedicate ourselves prayerfully and actively to banishing violence from our hearts, words and deeds, and to becoming nonviolent people and to building nonviolent communities that care for our common home.” This is what Pax Christi has been doing for fifty years, and I encourage everyone to join Pope Francis’s call to practice, teach and spread the vision and way of Gospel nonviolence,
that we might all become more nonviolent, that the church would become nonviolent and that the nation and world would become more nonviolent.

So in my letter, I reflected on Jesus’ commandments—“Love your enemies” and “offer no violent resistance to one who does evil” and “put down the sword.” And I included the story from Luke about the time when Samaritan villagers refused to welcome Jesus because he was walking toward Jerusalem, where their enemies lived, and how James and John asked Jesus: “Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?” They had just sat through the Sermon on the Mount and heard Jesus command them to practice universal love and creative nonviolence, and how do they respond? “Do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?” Luke writes simply that Jesus turned around and rebuked them. Two thousand years later, we still want to call down hellfire from heaven. In fact, we built the most destructive weapons in history to do it, and then we did it. We called down nuclear hellfire and killed hundreds of thousands of sisters and brothers in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and since then, we have built tens of thousands of more nuclear weapons and are closer than ever to using them and even at the risk of killing the entire human race and destroying the planet. We have far surpassed the ignorance of James and John. I think Jesus is rebuking us all and we need to hear that rebuke and take it to heart. So, I invite us to take this conversation far and wide, to talk about the nonviolence of Jesus and his command to love our enemies, and his rebuke of James and John. I invite us to help one another obey the commandments of the nonviolent Jesus, and stop these ongoing preparations to call down hellfire, and instead let’s start calling down blessings of peace from heaven upon everyone, the holy fire of Pentecostal nonviolence upon our poor world so that we might all live in peace with one another.

It is sometimes difficult to translate these ideas, these concepts of peace, into our day to day lives, much less the life of our world. One way to do this, which has meant a lot to me, has been described as “the third way.” As I understand it, this third way offers
an option to the traditional “flight or fight” instinct that we hear so much about. Instead of engaging in violence or simply running away from it, the third way describes another way of dealing with violence, a way that even offers the possibility of turning violence into peace, swords into plowshares.

One of the best examples of this “third way” that I have ever seen comes from Harper Lee’s book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. You will remember the scene when Atticus Finch is leaving Tom Robinson’s house and is confronted by Robert Ewell. With his children, Scout and Jem, looking on from the car, Ewell spits into Atticus’s face. The spittle drips down his face as he stands there resolutely, looking deep into the eyes of his attacker. After what seems like an eternity, while we wait for Atticus to knock Mr. Ewell down with a swift left to the jaw, Atticus takes out a handkerchief, wipes the spit from his face, and gets into the car to drive away. His children have learned a valuable lesson about the third way. Atticus stood resolutely in the face of violence and reflected to Bob Ewell the evil that he was inflicting on him. That pregnant moment opened the possibility that Ewell might see what he was doing and repent, have a change of heart.

I believe that this is the same course taken by Jesus as he stood in front of Pontius Pilate. He could have called down legions of angels to attack his accusers or, according to the scripture scholar Jerome Murphy O’Connor, he could have run away to Bethany and his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus and from there escaped into the desert. But he did not. He stood resolutely in front of his accuser and in his resoluteness reflected what the authorities were doing to him, hoping that they would have a change of heart.

Martin Luther King, Jr. captured this third way when he was addressing the Montgomery Improvement Association supporters on November 14, 1956, telling them, “The strong man is the man who will not hit back, who can stand up for his rights and yet not hit back.”
Another example of this “third way” came to me through Bishop Robert Barren on a retreat quite a few years ago. He related that during, apartheid in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was walking down a sidewalk wide enough for only one when a white man coming the other way growled at him, “I don’t make way for gorillas!” Tutu stepped aside, made a deep sweeping gesture, and said, “Ah, but I do!”

It seems to me that Pax Christi has been following this “third way” for fifty years. Whether speaking out against nuclear weapons, fighting racism, defending human rights, striving for a just world order or seeking an end to violence of all kinds, members of Pax Christi have neither run away nor resorted to violent methods. Rather, this international group of peace seekers has stood resolutely in the face of violence and sought to establish a just and lasting peace in a fragile and war-torn world. The words of Martin Luther King, Jr., come to mind here: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”

The Nuclear Threat

In the pastoral letter, Living in the Light of Christ’s Peace, there is a good deal written about atomic bombs. We could talk all night about the horrors of nuclear weapons, and what it means that we as a people continue to spend billions, even trillions, of dollars preparing for the end of the world, to vaporize millions of sisters and brothers. We could talk about how their existence already robs the world’s poor of resources for food, clean water, housing, healthcare, education, employment and dignity; how no one can win a nuclear war; how their existence poisons the earth; how they violate every commandment of love that Jesus ever uttered; how we can never exhaust every avenue of dialogue, diplomacy, and negotiation; how there is always a creative nonviolent way to respond to global tensions, crises and threats; how no one person or small group of people should ever have the power to vaporize millions, and therefore how no nation can have these weapons to insure that no one person orders their use or accidentally explodes
them; how they do not make us safe or secure—they sure didn’t protect us on September 11th; how they increase fear, suspicion, instability and hostility; how they make us all feel powerless over our own lives and future; how they consign us all to a kind of global death row; or how they prevent us from loving one another or even being human together. President Eisenhower summarized this situation well: “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children… This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.”

In 1970, 189 countries signed The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) saying that non-nuclear nations would never acquire nuclear weapons and the nuclear nations would undertake good faith measures toward nuclear disarmament. Today, however, not only have none of the nations with nuclear weapons honored that commitment, but they have moved in the opposite direction by implementing massive “modernization” programs designed to indefinitely preserve their nuclear weapons. For example, a few years ago, our Congress, in a sign of unity, Democrats and Republicans together, voted to spend $1 trillion to upgrade our nuclear arsenal over 30 years. Despite all this, one of the most hopeful things happening in the whole world right now is the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017, and which has been mobilizing for the UN Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. So far, 61 nations have ratified the Treaty; we need to support it and talk about it.

What I have Learned

For a moment now, I would like to reflect on a few things that I’ve learned since we published my letter. I was speaking to an interfaith group of ministers in New Mexico and afterwards an African American minister said, I’m glad for your letter but there’s no way I can get involved in that, because my people are struggling every day just to survive
racism. I was so moved by what she said, and I agree with her. I take note that Pax Christi has worked hard to fight racism and bigotry in our country, and we must continue to do what we can to dismantle white racism and resist white supremacy and fascism and build a more inclusive, more equal, more diverse movement and church and world. We remember our African American sisters and brothers who have been killed, such as Michael Brown in Ferguson; Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Breonna Taylor in Louisville, George Floyd in Minneapolis; the nine friends killed in the white supremacist shooting in the church in Charleston, South Carolina; the ten friends killed in the white supremacist shooting in the grocery store in Buffalo, and so many others. Part of our anti-racist work today means working for voting rights and civil rights for all; stricter gun laws to stop these massacres and all this gun violence; training our police in nonviolence methods to stop white police brutality; and of course, abolishing the death penalty everywhere.

The demonic spirit of white racism among Europeans that led to colonialism and imperialism hundreds of years ago and then the genocide of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, and then the enslavement of millions of African sisters and brothers, followed by our civil war and then segregation and discrimination and the ongoing killings and massacres today---this whole history of racism is directly connected to nuclear weapons. The development of nuclear weapons was led by white people in an effort to dominate the rest of the world, and racism lies behind it all. Abolishing nuclear weapons and war is part of the work of dismantling racism. Likewise, if you care about ending poverty, you must work for the abolition of nuclear weapons because all the money that belongs to the poor for food, clean water, housing, education and healthcare and jobs is going directly to the rich people and corporations who build and maintain nuclear weapons. If you care about the earth, you must work for the abolition of nuclear weapons, because these weapons already poison the earth and prepare for the destruction of the earth. If we do not also speak out for the abolition of nuclear weapons and the real risk of killing millions of sisters and brothers, then we will not wake people up to work for the abolition
of racism, poverty, war or environmental destruction and the end of all these structures of violence.

Someone once said to me, “Well, this is nice but there really is no hope.” I think we need to address this national despair. If you give up all hope, then you give up your faith in the God of peace or the risen nonviolent Jesus. With the God of peace, all things are possible. God does not want us to live in permanent despair and warfare. God’s will is that we disarm and live in peace. As Dorothy Day said, we cannot afford the luxury of despair, there’s too much work to do. As Daniel Berrigan said, if you want to be hopeful, you must do hopeful things. As Dr. King said, hope is the final refusal to give up. All we have to do is keep doing what we can for peace, justice, equality, creation and nuclear disarmament, and help reignite the grassroots movements for peace like Pax Christi and the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), and Plowshares, and know that this is how change comes about. If we keep at it, if we keep speaking up, organizing, taking a stand, and raising the issue, and leave the results in God’s hands, one day this vision of peace will become contagious. That’s how peacemaking works. Suddenly, the Berlin wall falls down peacefully; communism ends peacefully; apartheid ends and Mandela becomes president. We must keep the vision alive, and keep doing what we can, whether we live to see the outcome or not. We know that this is the right thing to do, to call for nuclear disarmament, racial and economic justice, environmental sustainability and a new culture of nonviolence. In small communities like Pax Christi, we can encourage one another not to give in to despair, but to keep on engaging in public action for disarmament, justice and creation.

Someone said, “Well, you’re just naïve, you’re too idealistic, you don’t live in the real world.” Putin, Russia, China and terrorism—this is the real world. But who is it that is really naïve? Robert McNamara, Defense Secretary during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, said that human civilization survived only by luck. Counting on luck is not a winning strategy. The history of nuclear weapons is replete with near misses,
miscalculations and accidents. With the war in Ukraine, we are now facing the most serious nuclear threat since the middle 1980s. Is it not the height of naivete to think that humanity can survive on into the future as long as nuclear weapons exist?

No, we are not naïve and nuclear war is not inevitable. Overnight abolition is unrealistic, but taking aggressive steps to build a global grassroots movement to push the nations of the world to abolish nuclear weapons is not only realistic and achievable but necessary and urgent. I think it’s very realistic to talk about nuclear disarmament and to call for it and work for it. We really have no other choice. We have had thirty serious accidents during the last 75 years where nuclear weapons almost went off; each time, by the grace of God, that did not happen. Millions could have died from our mistakes. The nuclear industry wants us to forget this, but we will not, and we cannot let them risk our lives and the lives of the millions of sisters and brothers. Nuclear disarmament is possible and achievable as Pope Francis said; we just need the political will to do it, and that’s where we come in. We can mobilize and organize the nation so that this vision catches on. That’s probably the greatest challenge: the apathy we face, the false belief that we cannot make a difference, that there’s nothing we can do. That is exactly what the nuclear weapons industry wants us to believe; they want us to feel powerless so that they can continue to make billions off these weapons. But the God of peace calls us to stand up, speak out and work for peace no matter what. Together we are more powerful than we realize; we have people power, the power of truth and nonviolence.

Another head wind that I have encountered is that in New Mexico, everyone says, “Well, we need the jobs that the Labs provide.” In New Mexico, the labs actually do not provide new jobs for the vast majority of our people; the money spent on these weapons are a dead end and benefit only a few. As to the few, the people who work at the national labs would still be needed once we disarm to manage verification and accountability systems to make sure the other nations maintain their disarmament. They could also work on the environmental cleanup of our radioactive waste. Again, we are not talking here
about some utopia without conflict, but a practical path toward a world without nuclear weapons, where we fund global nonviolent conflict resolution to cut the roots of warfare so that we can get on with the hard work of abolishing poverty and racism, and educate every human being in the way of nonviolent conflict resolution.

A Few Thoughts Going Forward

I think that most people would agree that the arms race in which we are currently engaged is arguably more dangerous than the first. New cyber and hypersonic weapons, artificial intelligence and multiple nuclear adversaries are increasing the grave risks, even as climate change and growing economic inequality undermine the status quo. The old argument that we need thousands of nuclear weapons for the declared rationale of “deterrence” is false when only a few hundred weapons are truly needed for just deterrence. Yet, the U.S. and Russian governments reject minimal deterrence in order to keep nuclear warfighting capabilities, despite their declared rhetoric that a nuclear war can never be won! Daniel Ellsberg, in his book, The Doomsday Machine, makes a sobering point in regard to the Cuban Missile Crisis. In that scenario, we had two leaders, Kennedy and Khrushchev, who were both adamantly determined not to use nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, we came precariously close, closer than anyone imagined, to using them. I shudder to think how close we are now, given the Ukraine war, the tension between China and the United States over Taiwan, and the increased alarm with would-be nuclear nations such as Iran. Are world leaders today as loathe to use nuclear weapons? I wonder.

While it is true that President Putin’s nuclear saber rattling has increased world anxiety, I believe that our world remains lulled into a false sense of security. Nuclear missiles are in their silos and we are in ours. And yet the threat of a thermonuclear war is more real than any of us would like to admit. There is truly an urgency to multilateral, verifiable nuclear disarmament. And that is why I am so pleased to have joined Pax
Christi and why this 50th anniversary is so important. Now more than ever, we need Pax Christi. We need to continue our important work of peace making, fighting hate with love. I would like to suggest some steps that we can take in this regard.

Last June, I had the privilege of attending the Association of United States Catholic Priests conference in Baltimore, Maryland. At the conference, Father Dan Horan, OFM, spoke of the crisis of the theological imagination. He quoted theologian Garrett Green: “It is time to acknowledge unapologetically...that religion – all religion, including the Christian – speaks the language of imagination, and that the job of theology is therefore to articulate the grammar of the Christian imagination.” Father Horan went on to observe that the challenge of the U.S. church today is to think more deeply and more dynamically and not to reduce faith to “moralism” or “yes-and-no dualisms.” This leads me to think that we must develop our peace imaginations, imaginations that seek newer and vibrant ways to come together in harmony, mutual respect and openness. The Scriptures all converge on peace through right relationships. The late Jesuit, Walter Burghardt, put it well: “Those who read in the sacred text a sheerly personal, individualistic morality have not understood the Torah, have not sung the Psalms, have not been burned by the prophets, have not perceived the implications and the very burden of Jesus’s message, and must inevitably play fast and loose with St. Paul. The social focus of God’s Book is evident on the first page; the song of creation is its overture. Our incredibly imaginative God did not have in mind isolated units, autonomous entities...God had in mind a people, a human family, a community of persons, a body genuinely one.” Rooted in scripture, we are challenged to let our imaginations run wild as we seek ways to come together in peace. This is the prayer of Jesus in John’s Gospel. The peace he leaves us is rooted in a right relationship with him, in the Father and through the Holy Spirit. It is in that intimacy that we find our union with each other and a peace that the world cannot give.
There was another point Father Horan made that strikes me as relevant to our efforts to establish peace in our world. He spoke of Holy Spirit atheism. He said this does not mean that we do not believe in the Holy Spirit but that we act as if the Holy Spirit did not exist. This can give rise to a sense of self-importance, that we must do everything, which in turn can lead to depression as we discover that we are inept. He urged us to “…begin to believe in the Holy Spirit”, otherwise, “we may continue to serve the institution, but it will not be the church of Jesus Christ.” This tells me that Pax Christi and all peace makers must be constantly open to the Holy Spirit so that we do not get in a rut, promoting inflexible ideas and not open to the Spirit’s prodding to find peace in corners yet unexplored. That is why my pastoral letter encouraged conversation in which people listen to each other, learn from each other and find ways to achieve what seemed impossible, even nuclear disarmament! I remember reading about a national geographic photographer who was quite well known for his beautiful pictures. Someone once asked him how he achieved such success and he replied, “Most people say, ‘I’ll believe it when I see it. I say, ‘I see it because I believe it.’” You and I are called to place our trust in the Holy Spirit, to believe that in God all things are possible, and to envision peace based on that belief.

One example of this “peace imagination” is the effort of the Association of US Catholic Priests to promote the “Eucharist of Gospel Nonviolence.” Father John Heagle, the Chair of the Nonviolence Working Group of the AUSCP, uses theological and peace imagination when he writes: “this eucharistic prayer is one step in the long journey toward reclaiming the nonviolent Christ…it has the potential to transform our communal worship and, thereby, our vision and practice of peace making…Communal prayer creates a shared vision, which in turn, leads to a transformed way of living.”

Father Heagle and his committee find inspiration for their “peace imaginations” in the witness of Benjamin Salmon who lived from 1888 to 1932. A Catholic layman, he was opposed to war and refused to sign up with the Selective Service. He was jailed,
condemned by the official Church, shunned by his community and eventually committed to a mental institution. While institutionalized, he wrote convincingly about his opposition to the just war theory, stating that it contradicted the nonviolent Christ. On his tombstone he wrote, “There is no such thing as a just war.” When I was a young priest, I do not think I would have seen Benjamin Salmon as someone to admire. I do today. By calling attention to his witness, we can help others to find the courage to pursue the “third way” and to stand up to violence, especially to war.

Another approach that comes to my mind is to see the intimate connection between nuclear disarmament and the care for the earth, our common home. Both movements have as their goal the preservation of our planet and human life. The climate crisis we now face has been developing gradually over a long period of time, especially since the industrial revolution. The nuclear threat, while having an adverse effect on humanity as evidenced by the downwinders in New Mexico, for example, and by its exorbitant cost, will also destroy our planet all at once. In either case, we see that both climate change and nuclear weapons pose a threat to our existence that is untenable. I believe that placing both before the consciousness of our fellow citizens gives the peace movement more traction and an even more compelling argument.

As I make clear in my pastoral letter, I believe that rejuvenating and sustaining a conversation about nuclear disarmament is essential. We must keep talking about it as we spread the word that we have come to the brink of total world annihilation, whether intentional or accidental. It is my conviction that such a conversation, entered with good will and an open mind and heart, will lead toward eventual nuclear disarmament. Obviously, it will not happen quickly and will take a concerted effort over many years and even decades. But we must turn the tide and we must do so now before it is too late.

I am pleased to join you, my sisters and brothers in Christ, as we take this conversation on nuclear disarmament to everyone everywhere. In a spirit of peace, love
and nonviolence, I encourage you to have this conversation about nuclear disarmament with your priest, your parish, your bishop and your politicians and with groups in your state. Please help everyone connect the dots between the issues. Keep adding nuclear disarmament to your vision, to your do list, to your call. Please get copies of the pastoral letter from Pax Christi and give them away, especially to civic leaders and other groups. Most of all, please keep holding up the vision of Pax Christi, the vision of a new world without nuclear weapons.

In other words, please keep on following the nonviolent Jesus on the path of peace. To be Pax Christi people means to be people who live in the peace of Christ. When the nonviolent Jesus rose, he gave his friends his resurrection gift of peace and sent them out to carry on his mission of peace and nonviolence. Dear friends, let’s welcome his resurrection gift of peace and take it to heart, and live in it from now on and go forth and proclaim what this resurrection gift of peace means—the coming of a new world of peace, justice and nonviolence with no more nuclear weapons, no more war, no more racism, no more poverty, no more violence, the coming of God’s reign of universal love, universal peace and universal nonviolence here and now on earth.

I remember my Latin professor in the minor seminary, Father Joseph Riddlemoser, telling us that the two saddest words in the English language are “too late.” I suppose he was hinting at that famous line in Maud Muller’s poem, “For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: ‘It might have been!’” It is my prayer that humankind never has to say this about nuclear disarmament and peace. Once the buttons have been pushed and the missiles have been launched, it will be too late.

As I am sure you know, the United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres gave a somber assessment of the world situation at the beginning of the Tenth Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which runs through August 26th. He said, “Geopolitical tensions are reaching new highs.
Competition is trumping cooperation and collaboration. Distrust has replaced dialogue and disunity has replaced disarmament. States are seeking false security in stockpiling and spending hundreds of billions of dollars on doomsday weapons that have no place on our planet.” He also noted that almost 13,000 nuclear weapons are now held in arsenals around the world. Furthermore, he cautioned that “the risks of proliferation are growing and guardrails to prevent escalation are weakening. Crises – with nuclear undertones – are festering, from the Middle East and the Korean Peninsula, from the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and to many other factors around the world.” Humanity is “just one misunderstanding, one miscalculation away from nuclear annihilation.” Such ominous notes underscore the importance of the non-proliferation treaty, which he hopes will put the world on a path towards a world free of nuclear weapons. He rightly believes that we must reinforce and reaffirm the norm against the use of nuclear weapons, strengthen avenues of dialogue and transparency, start anew in an agreed upon commitment to reduce the number of nuclear weapons and reinforce multilateral agreements on disarmament and non-proliferation.

It is, I believe, in this spirit that Pope Francis referred to the Russell-Einstein Manifesto in his Urbi et Orbi speech this past Easter: “Here, then, is the problem that we present to you, stark and dreadful and inescapable: Shall we put an end to the human race; or shall mankind renounce war? This dilemma was grasped by none other than General Omar Bradley as seen by a quote of his on the website of Nuke Watch New Mexico: “Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing that we know about living. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount.” It was in that Sermon that Jesus laid out for us the path to peace, the path to seeing God. We do well to follow Jesus, to be true peace makers, before it is too late.

Thank you very much and may God bless us all.