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The Church of France, Nuclear Disarmament and the Vienna Conference

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Honoured Bishops,

On 14 March 2013, the day after Pope Francis was elected, I sent you by email an Open Letter on "The Church and the abolition of nuclear weapons", published on the ACDN website under the title "Pope of the Poor, Pope of Peace?"

It said, among other things:

« The Church of France bears a grave responsibility in our nation's continued refusal to negotiate with others for the elimination of nuclear weapons, including French ones. International Law, notably in Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, states that this is a strict obligation. It is also a moral obligation, of course. Recently, on 4-5 March 2013, France refused to join over 130 states (including 35 European states) participating in the Oslo Conference which discussed the "the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons" and concluded that they should be eliminated urgently.

"Is it not time for the Church of France to assume spiritual leadership and take a clear position on the abolition of nuclear weapons (including French ones) and for the transfer of funds and resources away from this absurd and criminal project? Don't wait for Pope Francis to urge you to do so!

"I beg you to examine the arguments we have set out in our Open Letter to the President of France. If you find them valid, please be so kind as to write to him yourselves and to invite the Catholic faithful to do the same..."

That request remained without response, except for three of your number who had already signed the Open Letter and given their personal support to a protest hunger-strike that I did in 2012 (15 May to 26 June). Twenty months later, the matter is still topical, alas: nothing has changed surrounding France and nuclear weapons, not one iota.

France failed to participate in February 2014 in the second "Conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons" (Nayarit, Mexico). France even encouraged the diplomats of other nuclear nations to stay away. She continues to modernise her nuclear weapons. And today (20 November 2014) France has still not indicated her participation in the 3rd conference of this series, scheduled for 8-9 December 2014 in Vienna, Austria.

Besides, the Church of France as such has remained silent on the subject.

So now, honourable Bishops, here is an opportunity for you to break the silence. You should doubtless declare publicly that nuclear weapons are weapons for crimes against humanity; declare from the viewpoint of Christian conscience as well as universal human conscience that making them, stocking them, and threatening to use them is as intolerable as exploding them, since the weapons' existence is preparation for their use, and risks making their use possible by intention or by accident; declare that the so-called policy of "nuclear deterrence" actually encourages the proliferation of these arms; declare that it is imperative to ban them completely, as has been done for chemical and bacteriological weapons; declare that we must urgently rid the planet of them. In short, you should declare that the nations that possess them must all with no exception (certainly not France) proceed as soon as possible in a planned and verified manner to the total and definitive elimination of the estimated 16300 nuclear weapons that are still threatening humankind.

Without being certain, we think it likely that such will be message that will be sent by His Holiness Pope Francis to the opening ceremony of the Vienna Conference. A message is expected to be read by Mgr Silvano Mario Tomasi, Apostolic Nuncio and permanent observer of the Holy See to the United Nations in Geneva. Why don't you send

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such a message yourselves in the name of the Church of France? That would resonate in France and abroad. It would be your contribution to the abolition of nuclear weapons.

If, however, you feel the need to follow your usual debating processes before taking this basic decision - albeit one matching the demands of Scripture and the constant doctrines of the universal Church - you still have one or two ways of contributing effectively to nuclear disarmament on the planet.

You could collectively, in the name of the Church of France, write to President Hollande or publish a media release urging France to honour the Vienna Conference with her presence, as the Holy See will do. (The phrase "humanitarian impact" means, of course, the catastrophic and criminal effects of nuclear weapons on humankind.)

And you could, without any delay, make personal requests to President Hollande, by signing the letter that will be delivered to him on Monday 24 November by a delegation of ICAN-France - with a list of signatories already exceeding 5000 and very willing to accept yours as well.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God."

From Saintes, sent by email 20 November 2014

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