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A Christmas of Peace and Fraternity for a World without
Nuclear Weapons

Letter addressed to the Conference of Bishops of France

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Pope Francis, on December 8, 2014, in a message to the 3rd "Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons" attended by representatives of 158 states in Vienna, declared that "a world without nuclear weapons is really possible" and called on us all to bring it about. This challenge, naturally, includes the Church of France, as is suggested in the following letter addressed to its bishops. In this Christmas period dedicated to peace and fraternity, we can only wish that the French bishops will hear the Pope's words and assist in awakening peoples' consciences, right up to the people at the head of the State. And that the press, all France's media of all political tendencies will at last open up to the question.

Messeigneurs,

Let me draw your attention to a message from the Pope on a matter that might concern you. This is my third time of writing to you about this, please excuse me. Whether it is the last time depends largely on you.

In March 2013, just after to the election of Pope Francis, who was heralded as « the Pope of the poor and the Pope of peace » - as he has indeed proved to be - I wrote to you saying this :

« Is it not time, Messeigneurs, for the Church of France, standing tall in its spritual leadership, to take a clear position for the abolition of nuclear weapons, even France's nuclear weapons, and for the transfer for good human purposes of the resources used for this absurd and criminal project ? Don't wait to be urged by Pope Francis before doing so !
»

I received no reply.

On November 20, 2014, in the lead-up to the Vienna Conference on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons (8-9 December), I wrote to you again:

« Here is an opportunity, Messeigneurs, for you to break silence. You should probably say publicly that nuclear arms and weapons for crimes against humanity, that making them, stocking them, and threatening to use them are (from the stadnpoint of Christian conscience and universal human conscience) as intolerable as their actual use would be, since they are preparations for that use, they make it possible, and they risk provoking it, including by accident (...). Without being certain in advance, that message is very likely what His Holiness Pope Francis will be giving in the text he will send to Vienna, to be read out at the opening ceremony of the conference by Mgr Silvano Mario Tomasi, the apostolic nuncio, the Holy See's permanent observer to the UN in Geneva. Why do you not say it yourselves in the name of the Church of France? That would have wide echoes, in France and abroad. It would be your contribution to the abolition of nuclear arms. »

Many of you acknowledged receiving my letter, and I thank you. But only two of you wrote back, and at least one of those wrote to President Hollande asking him to send official French representatives to the Vienna conference.

In the end, France didn't go to Vienna, though some twenty French citizens did, including myself. There I met Mgr Silvano Tomasi, and he encouraged me to address you again. To say the following:

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It would be absurd to hold you responsible for France's absence from this conference, despite the fact that 158 UN member-states took part, including four nuclear-armed states of whom two have (like France) permanent seats on the UN Security Council - the USA and the UK.

All the same, Messieurs: are you not a little responsible, collectively, for the *omerta*, the conspiracy of silence that for decades has stifled the question of nuclear disarmament in France? Responsible, collectively, for the censorship which the French media (including the Catholic press) applies to the Pope, *your* Pope, with respect to this particular question? Admittedly, you delegate to Pax Christi (an activist group of Catholics, open to other Christians) the duty of publishing on its website the Pope's clear and repeated views. But does that exonerate you from airing the subject in your role as pastors of the Church of France?

Your silence weighs heavily, and I am not the only one to regret it. In the words of Cardinal Walter Kasper: « *The bishops are too accustomed to waiting for their instructions from Rome. They need to be bold and to take their responsibilities. They need to express themselves and speak out loud. We don't hear much from the French bishops, although France has pastors of a high quality.* » (*La Croix*, 16/12/2014, p. 18)

On the matter of nuclear disarmament, you don't wait for « instructions from Rome »: it's as if you don't even hear them! As a result, *La Croix*, which didn't hesitate to reprint in full the Pope's speech to the European Parliament and which devoted its « Religion » page on 17 December to a « *reminder of the Vatican's measured order to American nuns* », completely ignored the Pope's message to the Vienna conference, thus joining the chorus ... of silence ... performed by the rest of France's media, which for the *Figaro* to *l'Humanité* by way of *Le Monde*, mentioned nothing about it, or about the conference itself!

Should we conclude that the Conference of Bishops of France is censoring the Pope? The Gospel?

Conversely, consider the attitude of Japan's bishops. Not content to condemn nuclear arms, well-known from the tragic experience (the tragic experiment) visited on the populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. They also condemn, vigorously, nuclear power-plants. Here are some articles printed by *Pax Christi*: *Au Japon, les évêques réaffirment leur refus des armes nucléaires*; *Les évêques catholiques du Japon demandent au gouvernement de sortir du nucléaire*; *Au Japon, l'Eglise catholique réitère au gouvernement son appel à sortir du nucléaire*.

Should we conclude that France's bishops have less courage than Japan's? That the French people need to suffer the same fate as the Japanese, two nuclear bombings and one nuclear catastrophe, before their pastors become concerned about their fate? That the percentage of Catholics in France needs to fall to that of Japanese Catholics (0.5 % of the population) before the bishops collectively at last claim the same freedom of speech that their Japanese counterparts have towards their government?

It is paradoxical, Messieurs, that I, an unbeliever, should be transmitting the Pope's message to you and begging you to listen to it. Yet that is what I am doing, after translating it [here](#). After all, « the Ways of the Lord cannot be fathomed »... And with Christmas upon us, his message of peace will surely inspire you.

What I am begging you to do - in a spirit which I think many Christians share - is simple and easily done: take hold of this question, debate it, and adopt a clear position as the voice of your Conference. Believers and unbelievers will thank you for it.

I have published the two letters I sent you previously. I would be glad, this time, to be able to publish your response also, within a reasonable time-frame.

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I wish you a Christmas of Peace and Fraternity, and a Happy New Year.

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