

CALLED TO BE PEACEMAKERS

A Catholic approach to arms control and disarmament



Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

Department for International Affairs



Catholic social teaching offers us both a practical framework for action and an important source of hope in our approach to arms control and disarmament.



When Pope John Paul II visited Coventry, a city once devastated by war, the United Nations General Assembly was about to convene in a historic special session dedicated to disarmament.

Inviting Catholics in England and Wales to pray for its success, he proclaimed:

“The voices of Christians join with others in urging the leaders of the world to abandon confrontation and to turn their backs on policies which require nations to spend vast sums of money on weapons of mass destruction.”¹

Today, more than forty years on, that call continues to resonate. The UN Secretary General recently warned:

“Humanity now confronts a new arms race. Nuclear weapons are being used as tools of coercion. Weapons systems are being upgraded, and placed at the centre of national security strategies, making these devices of death faster, more accurate and stealthier. All this, at a moment when division and mistrust are pulling countries and regions apart.”²

These issues may sometimes feel abstract to us here in England and Wales. However, there are many reasons why they should concern us greatly.

Public funds spent on weaponry, including by our own countries, could be better used to promote the common good of humanity.



Weapons are fuelling conflicts across the globe with catastrophic consequences for the most vulnerable people, some of whom seek sanctuary in our communities.

Wars are inflicting damage to ecosystems around the world and increasing carbon emissions, with devastating implications for our common home.

Arms races are fomenting a breakdown of relations among the international community, making cooperation on a wide range of issues more difficult with repercussions for our own futures.

Above all, every human life lost to violence and conflict is a tragedy for our universal family. In *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis encourages us to recognise all people as our sisters and brothers, wherever they are in the world.³ We cannot, therefore, ever ignore the devastating use of modern weapons beyond our own borders.

Confronted with these challenges, Catholic social teaching offers us both a practical framework for action and an important source of hope. The papal encyclicals and other works of the Church discussed in these pages clearly demonstrate that arms control and disarmament are not naïve aspirations but real possibilities.

It is our responsibility to share this message. For as scripture reminds us: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace” (Isaiah 52:7).

Mary Queen of Peace, Pray for Us.



Bishop Declan Lang



Bishop William Kenney



Bishop Nicholas Hudson

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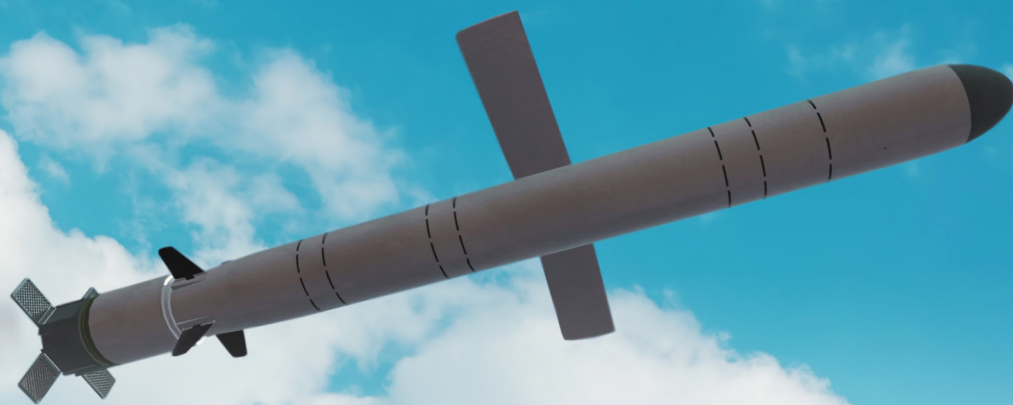
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Concluding reflection

We are witnessing technological shifts in the way that people fight and kill one another but the principles of our faith remain consistent. The aspects of Catholic social teaching set out here provide an important guide as we navigate these developments.

Introduction

In the modern world, an integral aspect of being a peacemaker involves working to limit the proliferation of weapons and advance the cause of global disarmament.



At the height of the First World War, Pope Benedict XV denounced the conflict as a “useless massacre”⁴.

On the centenary of its outbreak, Pope Francis spoke from amidst the graves of Italy’s largest military cemetery, warning that, “Even today, after the second failure of another world war, perhaps one can speak of a third war, one fought piecemeal, with crimes, massacres, and destruction.”⁵

Since the Holy Father spoke those words, violence has continued to spread across the world including, among many other conflicts, the catastrophic war in Tigray, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, multifaceted fighting in Yemen, the military coup in Myanmar, fresh clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, civil strife in Sudan, and the Holy Land’s most deadly period for decades.

Such conflicts are, in the words of Pope Francis, “driven by culpable human decisions.” In his message for the 2023 *World Day of Peace*, he urged us to think in terms of the common good and recognise the interconnectedness of political, social and environmental challenges. Our response must be “inspired by God’s infinite and merciful love” in order to build a new world of justice and peace.⁶ In doing so, it is important to recognise that so many acts of violence blighting our world today are only possible because of the modern weaponry available to those responsible.



The repercussions of modern weapons also go far beyond their immediate use in conflict. Writing to UN Secretary General U Thant in 1966, Pope Paul VI highlighted how growing stockpiles of arms were poisoning international relations, stating that “every passing day shows more clearly that no stable peace can be established among men until there is effective, general, controlled armament reduction.”⁷

Proceeding to highlight the simultaneous depletion of resources that could be better deployed for the common good of humanity, he explained: “every passing day also establishes more painfully and dramatically the contrast between the enormous sums invested in the production of ammunitions and the immense, ever increasing material distress of more than half of mankind, which is waiting to witness the satisfaction of its most elementary needs.”⁸

As Christians, we are called by Jesus to be peacemakers (*Matthew 5:9*). In the modern world, an integral aspect of this mission involves working to limit the proliferation of weapons and advance the cause of global disarmament.

These challenges are relevant to the mission of the Catholic Church in England and Wales today. The UK remains one of only a handful of states to possess nuclear weapons. It is also one of the largest exporters of conventional weaponry and is at the forefront of developing new military technology that has the potential to reshape how wars are fought.

At the same time, the UK is a signatory to important international frameworks such as the *Non-Proliferation Treaty* and the *Arms Trade Treaty*, and it retains considerable diplomatic influence, not least through its permanent position on the UN Security Council. As Pope Francis, reminds us “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.”⁹

Called to be Peacemakers draws upon the Catholic social teaching concerning weaponry and disarmament to set out principles for our own public witness as Christians and peacemakers. We begin by exploring the unique threat presented by nuclear weapons and the Church's commitment to global nuclear disarmament. We then turn to address conventional weapons, which are responsible for most deaths in conflict, and the concept of General and Complete Disarmament which has been largely sidelined in international discourse during recent years. Finally, we reflect upon some of the recent developments in military technology and the new challenges that these present.

In engaging with such issues, there are many difficult questions which cannot be ignored, especially around the mechanisms for global disarmament, the legitimacy of providing weapons for countries to defend themselves against aggression, and the nature of new weaponry. We hope that the teaching reflected in this document will assist Catholics throughout England and Wales, as well as those of other faiths and all people of goodwill, in responding to the tragic situation of armed violence and the proliferation of weaponry. May it also serve to educate the conscience of Catholics in accordance with Church teaching and to deepen their discipleship as followers of Christ.

Above all, it is our intention that this document and the actions flowing from it, will contribute towards the wider work of the Church and Catholic organisations across the world to build a new culture of peace. We join in the words of Pope Francis as we pray to God: "Give us the strength daily to be instruments of peace; enable us to see everyone who crosses our path as our brother or sister. Make us sensitive to the plea of our citizens who entreat us to turn our weapons of war into implements of peace, our trepidation into confident trust, and our quarrelling into forgiveness."¹⁰





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Pope Francis encourages us to recognise all people as our sisters and brothers, wherever they are in the world.

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Bishops Declan Lang,
Nicholas Hudson
and William
Kenney

I. The Church's call for nuclear disarmament

We have a responsibility to respond to Pope Francis' call to counter the logic of fear and foster a climate of trust and dialogue.



We still do not know how many people were killed by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: most estimates vary from 110,000 to 210,000 lives lost.¹¹

In the aftermath, Pope Pius XII condemned nuclear bombs as “the most terrible weapon that the human mind has conceived up to date”,¹² and Pope Paul VI later remarked that the bombings represented “butchery of untold magnitude”.¹³

It was two years prior to the events of August 1945 when Pope Pius XII first voiced the Church's opposition to the use of atomic energy in warfare, warning that: “a dangerous catastrophe might occur, not only in the locality itself but also for our whole planet.”¹⁴ Since then, Catholic social teaching has been consistent and categorical: “Nuclear Weapons must be banned”,¹⁵ and their use should be considered a “crime against God and man himself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.”¹⁶

As the Holy See has highlighted, nuclear weapons are “fundamentally different from conventional weapons” given their potential to “cause damage on such a catastrophic scale as to wipe out a large part of civilisation and to endanger its very survival” and that “the large-scale use of such weapons could trigger major and irreversible ecological and genetic changes, whose limits cannot be predicted.”¹⁷ Pope Francis emphasised this in

Laudato Si', explaining that threats to “the environment and cultural riches of peoples [...] are magnified when one considers nuclear arms”.¹⁸

At the height of the Cold War, Pope John Paul II, whilst unequivocally opposing the use of nuclear weapons, accepted that minimal possession could be morally acceptable as a means of deterrence if this served as a step toward progressive global disarmament. He urged countries to “not be satisfied with this minimum, which is always susceptible to the real danger of explosion”¹⁹. This reflected the position set out by Pope John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris*, that the logic of deterrence is not an adequate strategy for long-term peace and that “true and lasting peace among nations cannot consist in the possession of an equal supply of armaments but only in mutual trust”.²⁰

Today, however, many nations including the UK still rely on the logic of deterrence as a justification for continued possession, maintenance, or even expansion of their nuclear arsenals. Pope Francis reaffirmed the Church’s opposition to this in *Fratelli Tutti*, stating: “International peace and stability cannot be based on a false sense of security, on the threat of mutual destruction or total annihilation [...] In this context, the ultimate goal of the total elimination of nuclear weapons becomes both a challenge and a moral and humanitarian imperative.”²¹

The Holy See’s contribution to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference in 2022 underscored that: “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”. It also encouraged signatories “to adopt a renewed conviction of urgency and commitment to achieve concrete

and durable agreements towards nuclear disarmament and non-poliferation”.²²

Writing to Bishop Alexis-Mitsuru Shirahama of Hiroshima the following year, Pope Francis again warned against “the continuing climate of fear and suspicion” created by the mere possession of nuclear weapons and stated that they “represent a multiplier of risk that offers only an illusion of peace”.²³ Furthermore, *Fratelli Tutti* explains that nuclear weapons are an inadequate response to the principal security threats facing humanity today, such as terrorism, asymmetrical conflicts, cybersecurity issues, climate change, and poverty.²⁴

Another persistent focus for the Church has been challenging the vast sums spent on developing, upgrading, and maintaining nuclear weapons and the decisions of governments to invest colossal human, economic and political resources away from the global common good and towards the ‘balance of terror’.

Reflecting Pope Paul VI’s call in *Populorum Progressio* for governments to “set aside part of their military expenditures for a world fund to relieve the needs of impoverished people”,²⁵ the Holy See’s contribution to the Vienna Conference on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons in 2014 stated explicitly that: “maintenance of the world’s nuclear weapons establishment results in misallocation of human talent, institutional capacities, and funding resources. Promotion of the global common good will require re-setting those allocations, re-ordering priorities toward peaceful human development.”²⁶

Here in the UK, our Bishops have affirmed that “the cost of nuclear weapons should be measured not only in the lives destroyed through their use, but also the suffering of the poorest and most vulnerable people,

who could have benefited were such vast sums of public money invested in the common good of society instead.”²⁷ Likewise, when the UK Government announced plans to increase the country’s nuclear arsenal, Christian leaders came together to emphasise the immorality of “committing resources, which could be spent on the common good of our society, to stockpiling even more [nuclear weapons].”²⁸

Drawing these themes together, Pope Francis explicitly sets out that not only the use or threatened use of nuclear weapons but also “their very possession” is to be firmly condemned.²⁹ He has reaffirmed this on several occasions including at the peace memorial in Hiroshima, where he stated that “the use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possessing of nuclear weapons is immoral.”³⁰

The Church has persistently called for those states possessing nuclear weapons to disarm, including our Bishops encouraging successive governments to forsake the UK’s nuclear arsenal.³¹ We recognise that while, each State has a moral responsibility for its own disarmament, this will most effectively be progressed through international frameworks. For this reason, the Holy See has been a leading force behind the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the first legally binding instrument to prohibit the development, testing, production, stockpiling, stationing, transfer, use and threat of use of nuclear weapons. Archbishop Paul Gallagher, as Vatican Secretary for Relations with States, described this as “one more blow on the anvil toward the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks’.”³²

The treaty was born out of a desire, among many states and different parts

of civil society, to reinvigorate progress towards global nuclear disarmament. In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI appealed: “At a time when the process of nuclear non-proliferation is at a standstill, I feel bound to entreat those in authority to resume with greater determination negotiations for a progressive and mutually agreed dismantling of existing nuclear weapons. In renewing this appeal, I know that I am echoing the desire of all those concerned for the future of humanity”.³³

The Holy See has been consistently clear that the TPNW complements the NPT, which since 1968 has formed the cornerstone of global disarmament efforts, observing that the TPNW “mutually reinforces the nuclear non-proliferation regime, especially Article VI of the NPT, which calls for ‘effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.’”³⁴ This is an important reminder that, while we are called to work for disarmament of existing nuclear stockpiles, it is also essential to support diplomatic efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons to other countries.

During negotiations on the TPNW in 2017, Pope Francis repeated calls for full implementation of the NPT, while characterising the new treaty as “an exercise in hope”, going on to state: “it is my wish that it may also constitute a decisive step along the road towards a world without nuclear weapons [...] although this is a significantly complex and long-term goal, it is not beyond our reach.”³⁵

Specific steps towards fulfilment of the treaty were set out in the Vienna Declaration and Action Plan adopted at the first meeting of signatories in 2022.³⁶ In its contribution to the meeting, the Holy See reiterated its call for every country to join TPNW, for those who have not yet joined to

participate as observers at future meetings, and for all to seek constructive engagement with the TPNW regime.³⁷ This has been echoed by the Church in many countries that have yet to join, including here in the UK.³⁸

The TPNW, along with the Vienna Declaration and Action Plan, also includes important steps to assist victims and communities affected by nuclear testing. The Holy See has highlighted that these tests have had a “disproportionate impact on women, girls, and the unborn” and were often accompanied by “forced displacements, the desecration of cultural heritage, and debilitating public health issues” for which nuclear-armed states have a moral obligation to provide redress for.³⁹ This is applicable to the UK’s own legacy of nuclear testing.⁴⁰

It is important to reinforce that, while the Church strongly supports multilateral disarmament efforts, including through the NPT and TPNW, Catholic teaching is also clear that “a world without nuclear weapons is not simply the present world minus nuclear weapons”.⁴¹ Rather, nuclear disarmament is an integral aspect of wider disarmament efforts which, in turn, are one component of building the “enterprise of justice” called for by the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes*.⁴²

Action Points

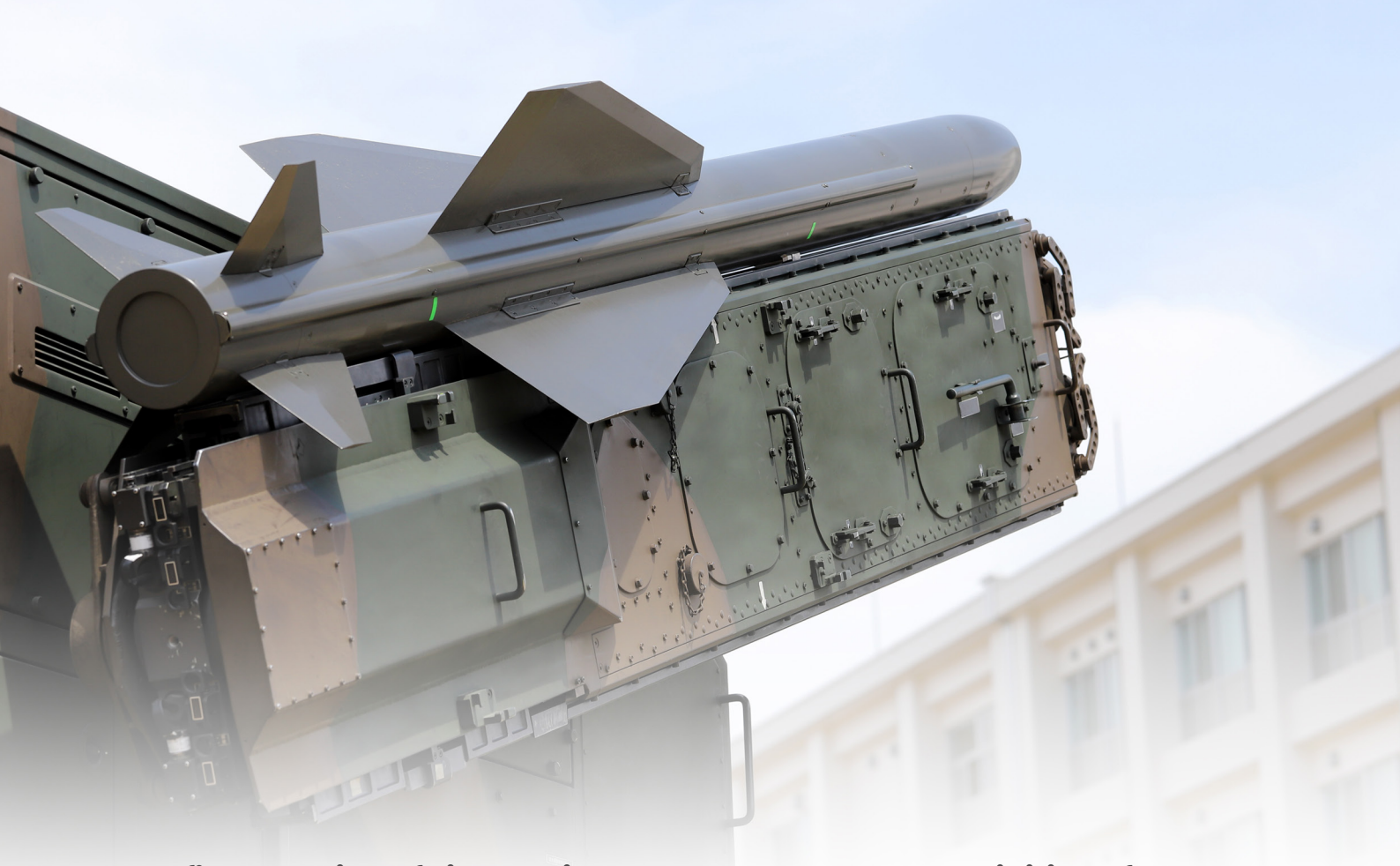
The UK is one of the few nuclear-armed states in the world. As the Catholic Church in England and Wales, we therefore have a particular responsibility in responding to Pope Francis’ call that: “Now is the time to counter the logic of fear with the ethic of responsibility, and so foster a climate of trust and sincere dialogue.”⁴³

Through our prayer and public witness, we seek for the UK to:

- ♦ **Ultimately forsake its nuclear arsenal, helping to create a world without nuclear weapons**
- ♦ **Fulfil its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty to pursue an end to the nuclear arms race, to advance multilateral disarmament, to refrain from expanding its own arsenal, and to work towards reducing it at the earliest opportunity**
- ♦ **Sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and, until this point, engage meaningfully with the treaty framework including participating as an observer in future meetings of signatories**
- ♦ **Redirect the economic, social and political resources spent on nuclear weapons towards promoting the universal common good**

II. The Church's call for General and Complete Disarmament

Eliminating weapons of mass destruction, regulating conventional arms, lowering military spending, and strengthening mechanisms for peace.

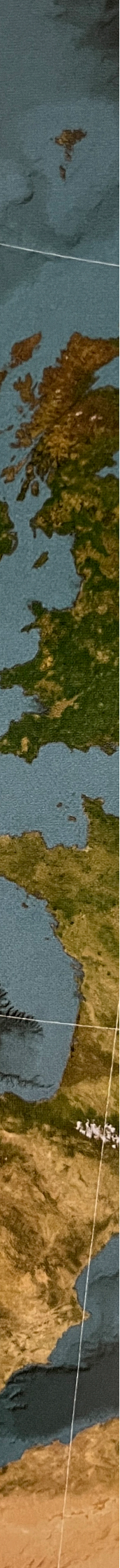


At the first meeting of signatories to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the Holy See warned that no country will proceed with nuclear disarmament “if in divesting itself of its nuclear arms, it feels that it will be left facing an imbalance of conventional forces inimical to its security.”

It went on to highlight: “that is why Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty wisely commits all signatories to General and Complete Disarmament even as it binds them to rid themselves of nuclear weapons.”⁴⁴

The concept of General and Complete Disarmament does not mean the removal of literally all weaponry and defence capabilities. Rather, it encompasses eliminating weapons of mass destruction, reducing and regulating conventional arms, lowering military spending to only the level required for self-defence, and strengthening mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of conflicts.⁴⁵

The UN General Assembly considered these challenges at its first special session devoted to disarmament in 1978. Addressing the meeting, Pope Paul VI called for “a strategy of peace and disarmament – a step-by-step strategy but one that is at the same time almost impatient, a strategy that is balanced yet courageous – always keeping our eyes and our wills fixed on the final goal of General and Complete Disarmament.”⁴⁶



Speaking at the second special session in 1982, Pope John Paul II emphasised the clarity of the Church's teaching in this area, noting that it has consistently called for "mutual progressive and verifiable reduction of armaments as well as greater safeguards against possible misuse of these weapons [...] while urging that the independence, freedom and legitimate security of each and every nation be respected."⁴⁷

Six years later, addressing the third special session, he reaffirmed: "The progressive, balanced and controlled elimination of weapons of mass destruction and the stabilization at the lowest possible level of the defensive weapon systems of countries is an objective that should garner the necessary consensus as a first step towards increased security."⁴⁸

However, despite some progress on disarmament at the end of the Cold War, this has stalled in recent years, with many countries expanding their military arsenals, going "far beyond what is needed to assure legitimate defense, foment[ing] the vicious circle of a seemingly endless arms race" and detracting "potential resources from addressing poverty, inequality, injustice, education and health." On this basis, the Holy See has called for "the resumption of a formal discussion on limitations of armaments and on general and complete disarmament, under effective systems of control and verification."⁴⁹

The human cost of our collective failure to take such actions is clear. While the absolute number of people killed in conflict has declined since the end of the Second World War, armed violence is still taking place in and between dozens of countries across the world, directly resulting in over 140,000 deaths each year.⁵⁰ Countless others are suffering and dying from the wider impacts of conflict including restricted access to; clean water, food, healthcare and basic services.

At the same time, as our Bishops acknowledged in *Love the Stranger*: "War, violence, and insecurity are often at the root of people leaving their homelands. Each member of the family of nations has a responsibility to promote peace and human rights throughout the world, so that all peoples can flourish in the countries in which they live."⁵¹

The deployment of weaponry also has repercussions for our common home. In *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis emphasised that: "War always does grave harm to the environment".⁵² Furthermore, the manufacture of weaponry generates significant carbon emissions, contributing to the wider challenge of military and conflict-related emissions which is largely unaddressed in international environmental agreements.⁵³

Despite the loss of human life, displacement of people, misallocation of resources, and damage to our planet, multilateral efforts towards General and Complete Disarmament have effectively stalled. A new special session of the UN General Assembly, the first in over three decades, would provide an important focal point and impetus for progress. However, while the fourth session has been formally approved and a preparatory working group established, it has

not yet been convened. In 2022, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales joined with other faith and civil society groups to declare:

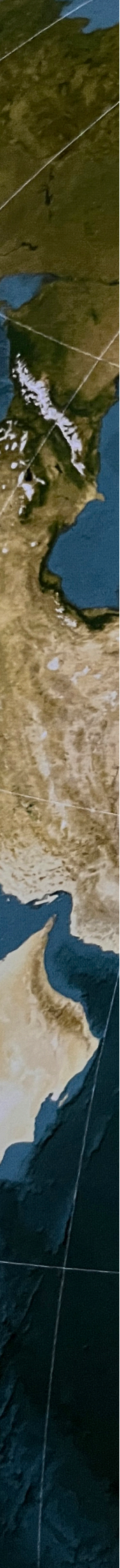
"In these unprecedented times, we appeal to states and others to harness their capabilities to achieve collective security through cooperative international agreements, by reinvigorating efforts to achieve sustainable, verified and irreversible disarmament. We call on states, including our governments and their representatives, to support the activation of a Special Session on Disarmament at the United Nations General Assembly."⁵⁴

The Church also encourages governments to "establish a 'Global Fund' with the money spent on weapons and other military expenditures, in order to [...] contribute to the development of the poorest countries."⁵⁵ As Pope Francis set out in his message for the World Day of Peace in 2021: "How many resources are spent on weaponry [...] that could be used for more significant priorities such as ensuring the safety of individuals, the promotion of peace and integral human development, the fight against poverty, and the provision of health care?"⁵⁶

As well as urging countries to reduce their own arsenals, Pope Francis has consistently challenged the global trade in weaponry, appealing: "Why are deadly weapons being sold to those who plan to inflict untold suffering on individuals and society? Sadly, the answer, as we all know, is simply for money: money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood. In the face of this shameful and culpable silence, it is our duty to confront the problem and to stop the arms trade."⁵⁷

This is especially significant for the Church here, given that the UK is among the pre-eminent exporters of weaponry and every two years hosts one of the world's largest arms fairs.⁵⁸ As our Bishops, along with Catholic organisations working for justice and peace, have stated: "The conflicts fuelled by this trade harm the poorest communities, force people to flee their homes as refugees, and have devastating consequences for our environment. We stand alongside all those people of goodwill who are peacefully campaigning against the arms trade and join in prayer with the Holy Father that our leaders may commit themselves to ending it, in pursuit of peace and care for our whole human family."⁵⁹

There have been various attempts to establish safeguards and controls on the arms trade, the most significant being the Arms Trade Treaty which requires signatories to maintain an effective control system for the movement of arms, take measures to prevent the diversion of weapons into the illegal arms trade, and provide annual reports. It also prohibits the transfer of weaponry knowingly for use in genocide, crimes against humanity and other breaches of the Geneva Conventions.⁶⁰ The treaty is strongly supported by the Holy See and has been signed by most states including the UK. However, while, along with other international agreements, it sets out an important regulatory framework limiting some of the worst excesses, we are called to continue challenging the



arms trade as a whole, which Pope Benedict XVI observed is “a grave sin”⁶¹ and Pope Francis has condemned as an “industry of death”.⁶²

It is important to emphasise that this does not necessarily prohibit the provision of weaponry to countries for their self-defence and that strictly regulated transfers can be in keeping with the pursuit of General and Complete Disarmament. Reflecting on countries sending weapons to Ukraine following Russia’s invasion, Pope Francis explained that this “can be moral – morally acceptable – if it is done according to the conditions of morality, which are manifold [...] But it can be immoral if it is done with the intention of provoking more war or selling weapons or discarding those weapons that are no longer needed. The motivation is what largely qualifies the morality of this act. To defend oneself is not only lawful but also an expression of love of country.”⁶³

Such decisions should always take place in the context of efforts to establish justice and peace, involving the minimum necessary supply of weapons, while incorporating robust safeguards, tracking, transparency and measures to prevent them falling into the hands of anyone other than the intended recipient. International systems of monitoring and enforcement are an essential part of this. After his visit to Iraq in 2021, Pope Francis reflected upon the dangers of proliferating weaponry, stating that “the response to war is not another war; the response to weapons is not other weapons. And I asked myself: who is selling weapons to the terrorists?”⁶⁴

Importantly, our opposition to the arms trade must also be accompanied by the promotion of a just transition for people whose jobs depend on the industry. While in the UK the production of weapons accounts for only a very small proportion of manufacturing employment, this is nevertheless the primary source of employment for some families who are concentrated in certain parts of the country.⁶⁵

As the US Bishops highlighted in their pastoral reflection *Sowing the Weapons of War*: “The predominant role of our own country in sustaining and even promoting the arms trade, sometimes for economic reasons, is a moral challenge for our nation. Jobs at home cannot justify exporting the means of war abroad.”⁶⁶ However, they also highlighted the importance of not forgetting those who would be affected by halting arms sales, calling for the impact to be addressed “through economic development and conversion programs, efforts to strengthen the nonmilitary economy, and programs to assist the unemployed.”⁶⁷ These are valuable principles which can be applied in our own context. It is important to note that weapons manufacturing programmes, while possibly creating jobs in the short term, divert economic resources from other valuable activities thereby undermining integral human development which the Church seeks for all people.

Finally, as Catholics, we have a responsibility to avoid complicity, through our financial investments, in harm inflicted by the arms trade. This is set out in *Mensuram Bonam*, the framework produced by the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences to help investors avoid moral evils and actively do good. In its discussion of exclusionary criteria for investments, relating to the intrinsic dignity of human life, the guidance explains: “The uncontrolled proliferation of arms facilitates many outbreaks of violence and erodes secure peace. Thus, industries which thrive on the production of these instruments of war and destruction engage in a reprehensible business.”⁶⁸ We commend and encourage the Catholic dioceses and other organisations in England and Wales that are examining their own investment guidelines to ensure they meet these standards.

Action Points

Conscious of our Christian duty as peacemakers, we recall Pope John Paul II’s message that “the production and sale of conventional weapons throughout the world is a truly alarming and evidently growing phenomenon [...] every step taken to limit this production and traffic and to bring them under an ever more effective control will be an important contribution to the cause of peace.”⁶⁹

Through our prayer and public witness, we seek to:

- ❖ **Encourage the UK to take meaningful steps towards General and Complete Disarmament including support for a new special session on disarmament at the UN General Assembly**
- ❖ **Build support for a global fund, diverting military expenditure towards promoting peace and integral human development**
- ❖ **Promote an end to the UK’s role in the global arms trade while being mindful of the need for a just transition protecting the livelihoods of people currently working in the manufacture of weaponry**
- ❖ **Promote the principles laid out in *Mensuram Bonam* relating to investment in the arms industry.**



III. The Church's call to put emerging technology at the service of humanity

Supporting a moratorium on the development and use of lethal autonomous weapons.



Throughout history, people have continually researched, developed and deployed new technology for the purposes of war.

Pope John Paul II, addressing the United Nations, reminded us: “Research and technology must always be at the service of man”.⁷⁰ Yet, too often, we have witnessed the consequences when ethical principles are relegated to an afterthought. The devastating impact of “chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, as well as antipersonnel landmines and cluster munitions, are just a few dramatic examples.”⁷¹

For this reason, the Church has long supported international frameworks to regulate the use of such weapons and affirms the importance of upholding the respective treaties amid today's ‘piecemeal third world war.’⁷²

Speaking after the use of chemical weapons against civilians in Syria, Archbishop Gabriele Caccia, as Apostolic Nuncio to the United Nations, stated that such atrocities “point to the continued relevance of instruments prohibiting their use and possession [...] more than a century after the use of chemical weapons in the First World War, the nations of the world should be completely rid of them and should be pursuing steps that strengthen the implementation of legal measures for effective compliance in this regard.”⁷³

The Holy See has similarly worked towards enforcement of the ban on landmines, collaborating with non-governmental organisations and Bishops' Conferences across

the world,⁷⁴ as well as supporting the Convention on Cluster Munitions.⁷⁵ Likewise, it has consistently supported the Biological Weapons Convention to guarantee “that the application of biological sciences remains solely dedicated to the improvement of health and development.”⁷⁶

Through supporting these endeavours in our own context, encouraging the UK to fulfil its obligations under such treaties, as well as assisting in their universal application and enforcement, we can contribute towards the universal Church’s mission of ensuring that technology is deployed at the service of peace.

Efforts must not, however, remain limited to upholding existing international frameworks. There is also an imperative to consistently develop new safeguards and agreements. For example, the Holy See was an important actor in negotiations which led, in 2022, to the international political declaration on protecting civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. Speaking upon the adoption of the declaration, Mgr Julien Kaboré, as head of the Holy See’s delegation, reflected that it “represents an important step forward in protecting the most precious gift we have received, that is, human life.”⁷⁷

It is also essential to address emerging technological developments in the field of weaponry. In 2013, Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, as the Holy See’s representative to the UN in Geneva, called for consideration “in addition to international law and the law of war, to [be given to] the humanitarian and ethical implications of the use of weaponized drones”, emphasising that they “like any other weapon – are and should always be subject to the rules and moral principles these juridical instruments impose.”⁷⁸

He went on to outline a series of specific challenges presented by the exponential increase in the deployment of this technology, including the need for processes to ensure greater transparency and accountability. While drones often appeal to governments based on their precision, capacity for targeted killings, and avoiding the deployment of troops into theatres of conflict, they do not remove risk or moral responsibility. There is a clear risk to those on the ground, including civilians, and an undeniable line of responsibility from politicians down to the drone operators.

Archbishop Tomasi also warned about “the lack of ability for pre-programmed, automated technical systems to make moral judgments over life and death, to respect human rights, and to comply with the principle of humanity”, observing that “these questions will

[Drones present] a clear risk to those on the ground, including civilians, and there is an undeniable line of responsibility from politicians down to the drone operators.

grow in relevance and urgency as robotic technology continues to be developed and utilized.”⁷⁹

This has been borne out in recent years with uncrewed drones increasingly incorporating artificial intelligence, being programmed to identify and attack targets without the need for further human intervention. For example, a report from the UN concerning conflict in Libya noted that “lethal autonomous weapons systems were programmed to attack targets without requiring data connectivity between the operator and the munition”.⁸⁰ Such developments are deeply troubling because a weapons system can “never be a morally responsible subject”⁸¹ nor can it truly “think, feel, decide or be accountable” for its actions.⁸²

Reaffirming this position in 2023, Archbishop Fortunatus Nwachukwu, as the Holy See’s representative to the UN in Geneva, warned that “we are witnessing the proliferation and a growing use of such technologies in various conflicts which are becoming ‘playgrounds’ for the testing of more and more sophisticated weapons”, citing in particular “the increased and widespread use of armed drones, including kamikaze and swarm drones.”⁸³

Considering this, the Church calls for a legally binding international framework which would ensure “adequate, meaningful and consistent human supervision over weapon systems”.⁸⁴ This would mean that any system must firstly be managed by a human operator to ensure compliance with international law and broader moral responsibilities, recognising that application of these requires an understanding of contexts and nuances which cannot be subsumed into algorithms. Secondly, they should have such input from a human at every stage of research, development, and

use. And thirdly, they should never have the capacity to contradict what the operator has prescribed.

This call has been echoed by the UN Secretary General in the New Agenda for Peace which recommends multilateral negotiations towards “a legally binding instrument to prohibit lethal autonomous weapons systems that function without human control or oversight, and which cannot be used in compliance with international humanitarian law, and to regulate all other types of autonomous weapons systems.”⁸⁵

Some aspects of lethal autonomous weapons systems may be judged to reduce the worst excesses of conflict. For example, they may allow for better precision and fewer civilian casualties. They may also mitigate the role of fear or vengeance in decisions taken on the battlefield. However, these considerations do not override the paramount importance of ensuring such adequate, meaningful and consistent human supervision. As the Holy See has set out: “Decisions over life and death inherently call for human qualities, such as compassion and insight, to be present. While imperfect human beings may not perfectly apply such qualities in the heat of war, these qualities are neither replaceable nor programmable.”⁸⁶ Therefore, until a binding treaty ensuring human supervision is negotiated, the Church also supports enforcing a moratorium on the development and use of lethal autonomous weapons systems.⁸⁷

In our own context we are called to encourage support for such a treaty and at the same time urge our government not to invest further resources in the development or production of lethal autonomous weapons systems. The Holy See explicitly

rejects the logic often employed by states that “if we don’t develop this technology, somebody else will”, explaining that the “development of complex autonomous weapon systems is likely out of the reach of smaller states or non-state actors. However, once such systems are developed by larger states, it will not be extremely difficult to copy them [...] the inevitable widespread proliferation of these weapon systems will fundamentally alter the nature of warfare for the whole human family.”⁸⁸

We also have a responsibility to encourage the redeployment of technological developments “toward an ultimate horizon which is not based merely on the criteria of utility or efficiency, but on furthering the common good of humanity”,⁸⁹ taking up Pope Francis’ call to put them “at the service of another type of progress, one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral”.⁹⁰ Developments such as the use of drones by the World Food Programme to deliver critical humanitarian assistance when infrastructure has been damaged, or for identifying routes that can be taken by aid convoys, are powerful examples of using such technology for the universal common good.⁹¹

The Church supports the establishment of a new International Organisation for Artificial Intelligence to facilitate “the fullest possible exchange of scientific and technological information for peaceful uses and for the promotion of the common good and integral human development.”⁹²

Another important consideration is the need to provide appropriate pastoral care for those engaged in the deployment and operation of weaponised drones and other uncrewed weapons systems. In his 2013 address, Archbishop Tomasi emphasised that people in these roles “have not

necessarily been given such training or adequate time to deliberate as they make decisions on the screen which affect life and death thousands of kilometres away [and that this] has ethical implications for the civilian cost at the receiving end of the drones, but it also adversely affects the operator.”⁹³ The Church has an important tradition of chaplaincy to the armed forces and we must continue to incorporate relevant ethical considerations around the use of new technology into this ministry.

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis challenges the tendency to view every technological advance as a positive step, writing that: “Science and technology [is] not neutral”.⁹⁴ We must therefore continue to judge future developments in weaponry, including expansions into cyberwarfare and the possible deployment of military technology into outer space, through the prism of Catholic social teaching.

Addressing the United Nations, Archbishop Caccia emphasised that: “Every State has a responsibility to safeguard the peaceful nature of outer space as a steward for present and future generations”.⁹⁵ The Holy See is active in the UN working group on reducing space threats. It has used this forum to encourage building upon international instruments, such as the Outer Space Treaty, in order to ban verifiably the placement of weapons into space and the development of anti-satellite weapons, thereby protecting outer space as a peaceful environment and helping to prevent a future arms race.⁹⁶

The Holy See also underscores such responsibilities in the field of cyberspace, emphasising that the actions of States “must respect the inherent dignity found in each human person”.⁹⁷ This was reaffirmed by Cardinal Peter Turkson,

when Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, stating that “there is an urgent need for states to establish a normative legal framework to develop a culture of responsibility as well as an ethics of fraternity and peaceful interactions in the context of cyberspace. But more desirable, and to the mutual benefit of all, would be the consideration of the cyberspace as a neutral ground or common heritage of humankind: a global common, preserved from tools designed to harm people directly or indirectly or to destroy national or individual assets.”⁹⁸

Finally, it is necessary to situate the Church’s response to emerging military technology in the context of our wider disarmament efforts. While responding to the specific ethical concerns presented by developments such as drones, lethal autonomous weapons systems, cyberwarfare and the possible weaponisation of outer space, we retain a focus on the ultimate goals of General and Complete Disarmament, as well as establishing a culture of peace.

Action Points

Pope Francis reminds us that: “where progress, ethics and society meet [...] faith, in its perennial relevance, can provide a valuable contribution.”⁹⁹ This is especially relevant in the field of weaponry.

Through our prayer, public witness, and pastoral service we seek to:

- ◇ **Encourage the UK to fulfil its obligations under international treaties such as the Biological Weapons Convention, the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Mine Ban Treaty and the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and work towards their universal application and enforcement**
- ◇ **Promote the agreement of new treaties regulating the use of emerging technology including weaponised drones and lethal autonomous weapons systems, ensuring adequate, meaningful and consistent human supervision**
- ◇ **Advance a global moratorium on the development and use of lethal autonomous weapons systems, and encourage the UK to redeploy investment towards technology that serves the common good of humanity**
- ◇ **Ensure that people receive appropriate pastoral care when engaged in the deployment and operation of weaponised drones and other uncrewed weapon systems**
- ◇ **Support the development of new international frameworks to protect outer space and cyberspace as peaceful environments.**



Concluding reflection

There are technological shifts in the way that people fight and kill one another but the principles of Catholic social teaching remain consistent.



Our world has changed significantly since Pope Benedict XV denounced the massacres of the First World War, a conflict characterised by rapid developments in military technology, including the first widespread use of tanks, aerial warfare and poison gas.

So too has it changed since Pope Pius XII condemned the use of nuclear weapons to destroy whole cities at the end of the Second World War. In the coming years, we will inevitably continue to witness further shifts in the way that people fight and kill one another.

Nevertheless, the principles of our faith remain consistent, and the Catholic social teaching set out here provides an important guide as we navigate these developments. Pope Francis explains that while Jesus himself lived in violent times, he offered a radically countercultural approach: “He unfailingly preached God’s unconditional love, which welcomes and forgives. He taught his disciples to love their enemies (Matthew 5:44) and to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39). When he stopped her accusers from stoning the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), and when, on the night before he died, he told Peter to put away his sword (Matthew 26:52), Jesus marked out the path of nonviolence. He walked that path to the very end, to the cross, whereby he became our peace and put an end to hostility (Ephesians 2:14-16).”¹⁰⁰

Catholic contributions to public life are an important aspect of what Pope Pius XI called “social charity”.¹⁰¹ More recently, in his encyclical on social friendship, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis called for a “better kind of politics, one truly at the service of the common good” and for a “renewed appreciation of politics as a ‘lofty vocation’”.¹⁰² All people of goodwill can respond to the call of Pope Francis, in a way appropriate to their situation, and thus make their contribution to making the world a safer place.

We therefore have an obligation to promote nuclear disarmament, to challenge the arms trade, and to encourage restrictions on the creation of ever more destructive military technology. Of course, Jesus’ call for us to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9) goes far beyond such issues and we must also remain conscious of the impact that weaponry has on wider questions of peacebuilding and international relations.

There are many practical ways that Catholics throughout England and Wales advance this mission: joining organisations working for justice and peace, engaging our political representatives to ensure that they are held to account, bringing these conversations into our parishes and schools, or taking part in public displays of support for peace. We hope that this document will inform and inspire people to build upon the rich history of Catholics working towards peace and disarmament.

Let us be inspired in all these endeavours by the prayer of Pope Francis:

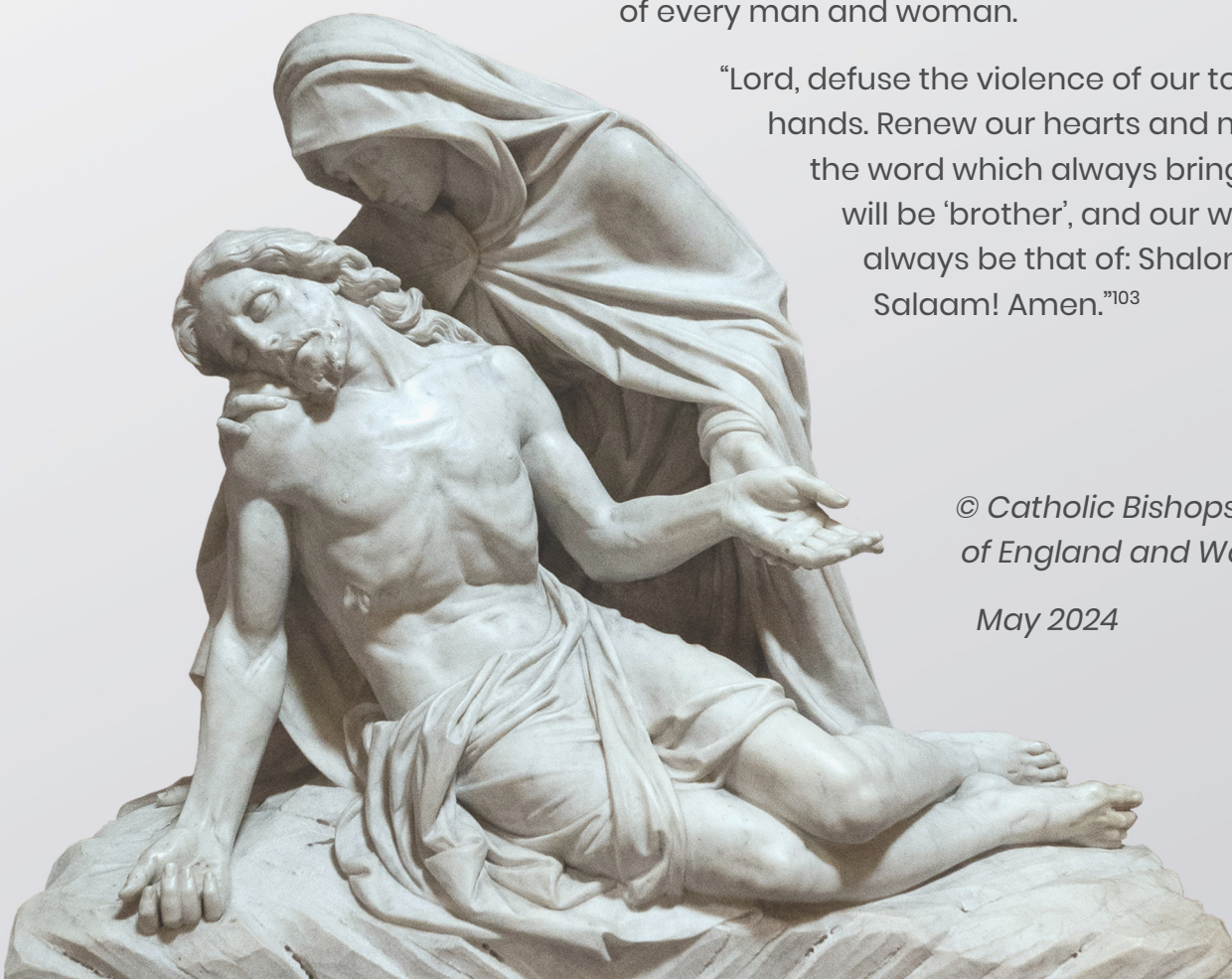
“Lord, God of Abraham, God of the Prophets, God of Love, you created us and you call us to live as brothers and sisters.

“Keep alive within us the flame of hope, so that with patience and perseverance we may opt for dialogue and reconciliation. In this way may peace triumph at last, and may the words ‘division’, ‘hatred’ and ‘war’ be banished from the heart of every man and woman.

“Lord, defuse the violence of our tongues and our hands. Renew our hearts and minds, so that the word which always brings us together will be ‘brother’, and our way of life will always be that of: Shalom, Peace, Salaam! Amen.”¹⁰³

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