

World & Nation

The INF treaty and the pastoral: first steps to disarmament

By Liz Schevtchuk

Washington (NC) — In 1983, seeking an end to the nuclear arms race, the American hierarchy recommended progress in "negotiated bilateral deep cuts in the arsenals of both superpowers."

Perhaps that progress will come through the events of December 8.

The new U.S.-Soviet intermediate-range nuclear force, or INF, treaty signed that day by President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail S. Gorbachev for the first time ever specifies the abolition of more than 2,200 short- and medium-range nuclear missiles.

Although more work remains — on reductions in the number of long-range, strategic nuclear weapons, for example — Reagan, Gorbachev and other officials described the INF treaty as an important initial step on the road to peace.

So did Catholic leaders instrumental in drafting the bishops' 1983 war and peace pastoral, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response."

Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin of Chicago, who chaired the committee that drafted the peace pastoral, noted December 11 that the treaty "appears to be a step toward arms control" and described it as "a very positive breakthrough."

He noted that he had not analyzed the complex document itself. Nevertheless, he said, "from what I have seen, it is substantively important because it eliminates a whole class of nuclear weapons. Moreover, I believe it could be symbolically important in

strengthening the process of arms control."

Furthermore, he said, "the treaty seems to show that the superpowers are managing their relationship in a spirit of negotiation."

The bishops' pastoral letter called for "negotiations to halt the testing, production and deployment of new nuclear weapons systems. Not only should steps be taken to end development and deployment, but the numbers of existing weapons must be reduced in a manner which lessens the danger of war."

"U.S. proposals like those for ... INF negotiations in Geneva are said to be designed to achieve deep cuts" in nuclear arsenals, the bishops said in their letter. "Our hope is that they will be pursued in a manner which will realize these goals."

"We mentioned the INF in the pastoral, specifically," said Father J. Bryan Hehir, secretary for social development and world peace at the U.S. Catholic Conference. In terms of overall numbers, the INF treaty "is limited in its impact on the nuclear weapons in the world but it shouldn't be judged on that alone," said Father Hehir, who assisted the bishops in drafting the pastoral letter.

The INF agreement "is a real reduction. That's important to note," he said. While further efforts are required by both superpowers, the INF treaty "contributes to the arms control process and to political relations, and all of that is in the (bishops') letter."

The pastoral also opposed proliferation of weapons that "may seem to be useful primarily in a first strike" and, in a footnote, pointed out that some experts included such weapons as MX and Pershing missiles in that category.

Pershing missiles are listed among weapons expected to be destroyed under the terms of the new treaty. So are cruise missiles, whose deployment has been opposed by the U.S. bishops.

One possible new challenge — or drawback, according to INF critics — posed by the new treaty is that by decreasing the importance of nuclear weapons, it enhances the clout of such conventional forces as troops and non-nuclear weapons. And the Soviets are regarded by many, including U.S. allies in NATO, as having a probable edge over the West in that category.

"The military realities remain, especially the conventional (forces) imbalance," NATO secretary-general Lord Carrington explained December 10. "We must keep both nuclear and conventional elements of our defense up to date and adequately funded."

"The INF agreement," he said, "is only a first step."

The bishops anticipated this concern in the pastoral, suggesting that "it may well be that some strengthening of conventional defense would be a proportionate price to pay, if this will reduce the possibility of a nuclear war. We acknowledge this reluctantly," given the

world's other needs, they wrote. Rather, "we hope that a significant reduction in numbers of conventional arms and weaponry would go hand in hand with diminishing reliance on nuclear deterrence."

In the aftermath of the INF summit, Cardinal Bernardin said, "there is a need to build on the political wisdom demonstrated in this treaty and to utilize that wisdom in the ongoing negotiations on both strategic and conventional arms."

Another Catholic group, Network, a social-justice lobby led by religious congregations, also urged use of the INF treaty "as a step toward agreement on strategic nuclear weapons and space weaponry."

"Without limits on strategic, offensive and defensive weapons," Network said, "an INF agreement can be easily circumvented by replacing the destroyed weapons with new strategic weapons."

Although the two superpowers did not finalize any commitments regarding space weapons, Reagan and Gorbachev both promised further efforts regarding strategic nuclear weapons.

Reagan said that "the INF treaty, as proud of it as we are, should be viewed as a beginning, not an end. Further arms reduction is now possible."

Gorbachev said that through the INF, the United States and Soviet Union are, "we hope, setting in motion the process of nuclear disarmament."

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