



Statement by H.E. Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher
Secretary for Relations with States of the Holy See
at the High-Level Segment of the
2021 Session of the Conference on Disarmament
Geneva, 24 February 2021

Mr. President,
Madam Director-General and Secretary-General of the Conference,
Excellencies and Distinguished delegates,

Allow me, at the outset, to convey the most cordial greetings of His Holiness Pope Francis to you all, as well as his hope that this Conference will swiftly overcome impasses through a renewed sentiment of urgency and co-responsibility.

Confronted with the many security challenges the international community is facing today, the inaction over the last two decades in this Conference increasingly forced the global community to search for solutions in other fora that should be offered by this Conference. In order to reassert its pertinence and value, this Conference must recognize that certain issues should transcend narrow individual interests by virtue of their contribution to the common good.

Mr. President,

The desire for peace, security and stability is one of the deepest longings of the human heart. However, the present climate of reciprocal distrust and the erosion of multilateralism impedes the efforts aimed at achieving these noble aspirations. This is even more serious in the field of disarmament. While the importance of disarmament is particularly evident for nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, it applies just as strongly to the increased

military competition in outer space, as well as in the fields of cyberspace and artificial intelligence (such as lethal autonomous weapon systems). Here, as elsewhere, States have common responsibilities, which give rise to concrete limits that must be observed in the interest of our common humanity.

The Holy See is also concerned about the illicit traffic of small arms and light weapons, as well as about explosive weapons, particularly in populated areas, which have become less and less “conventional” and more and more “weapons of mass destruction” and displacement, wreaking havoc on cities, schools, hospitals, places of worship and basic infrastructure for the civilian population, and affecting their integral human development prospects.

Disarmament, development and peace are three interdependent issues. The huge military expenditures, far beyond what is needed to assure legitimate defense, foment the vicious circle of a seemingly endless arms race, which prevents potential resources from addressing poverty, inequality, injustice, education and health. The link of national security to the accumulation of weapons is a false “logic” and remains a scandal as it facilitates the continuous “crying disproportion between the resources in money and intelligence devoted to the service of death and the resources devoted to the service of life.”¹

At the same time, “there are a number of encouraging signs, such as the entry into force [...] of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and the extension for another five-year period of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (“New START”) between the Russian Federation and the United States of America”.² As Pope Francis affirmed during his visit to Nagasaki: “Peace and international stability are incompatible with attempts to build upon the fear of mutual destruction or the threat of total annihilation. They can be achieved only on the basis of a global ethic of solidarity and cooperation in the service of a future shaped by

¹ Cf. Message of H.H. Pope Paul VI to the First Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly Dedicated to Disarmament, 6 June 1978.

² Pope Francis, Address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See 8 February 2021

interdependence and shared responsibility in the whole human family of today and tomorrow”.³

The Holy See wishes to reiterate that a world free of nuclear weapons is both possible and necessary. This conviction, reinforced by the entry into force of the TPNW, is also embodied in the spirit of the Treaty on Non-Proliferation (NPT), and especially in Art. VI, which is a binding legal obligation for all States Parties.⁴

The Holy See looks forward to the forthcoming Review Conference of the States Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), trusting that it “will result in concrete action in accordance with our joint intention ‘to achieve at the earliest possible date the cessation of the nuclear arms race and to undertake effective measures in the direction of nuclear disarmament’”.⁵ Ultimately, both the TPNW and the NPT are inspired and driven by the very same moral imperatives and objectives. They mutually reinforce and complement each other, demonstrating how zealous the desire for peace, security and stability truly is.

Mr. President,

In no way does the Holy See intend to overlook the complexity of disarmament and arms control. Addressing the multifaceted and difficult context in which we are living, the Holy See remains firm in its determination to contribute to the global efforts in building a more secure world and promoting a culture of peace. It is for this reason that it wishes humbly to submit to the Member States of this Conference the following two proposals:

1) The Holy See would like to encourage the Conference on Disarmament to engage in an expert study on the issue of verification, which could inform possible future negotiations on disarmament and arms control.

³ Pope Francis, Address on Nuclear Weapons, Atomic Bomb Hypocenter Park (Nagasaki), 24 November 2019.

⁴ Cf. Art. VI, Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons: “Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.”

⁵ Pope Francis, video-address to the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, 25 September 2020.

This is of particular importance with regard to nuclear disarmament - but it could also be applied for other types of weapons as well. In this regard, it is worthwhile to make use of the opportunities offered by new technologies to enhance reliable verification. The work of verification, besides being an incredibly valuable confidence-building measure, is a fundamental component in ensuring the efficacy of treaties under the well-known adage “trust and verify”.

2) The Holy See also considers that the resumption of a formal discussion on *limitations of armaments* and on *general and complete disarmament*, under effective systems of control and verification, would be extremely beneficial to the work of this Conference. Already in 1966, Pope Paul VI affirmed that: “*every passing day shows more clearly that no stable peace can be established [...] until there is effective, general, controlled armament reduction. 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 [...]*”⁶. This is even truer “if we take into consideration the principal threats to peace and security with their many dimensions in this multipolar world of the twenty-first century as, for example, terrorism, asymmetrical conflicts, cybersecurity, environmental problems, poverty”.⁷ These threats call us to respond with a more cohesive and responsible cooperation. The Covid-19 pandemic is also showing us dramatically the need to move in this direction. As Pope Francis has often noted: we will only be able to overcome the current crisis if we work together, as a united human family. Indeed, no one is safe until everyone is safe.

Mr. President,

Confronted with the enormous challenges the international community is facing today, disarmament can no longer be considered an optional objective. It is an ethical imperative. The concrete realization that we are all

⁶ Letter of His Holiness Paul VI to H.E. U Thant, Secretary General of the United Nations on the occasion of the resumption in Geneva of the work of the “Committee of Eighteen for Disarmament” (24 January 1966), one of the most direct predecessors of the current Conference on Disarmament.

⁷ Pope Francis, Message to the United Nations Conference to Negotiate a Legally Binding Instrument to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons, Leading Towards Their Total Elimination, 23 March 2017.

brothers and sisters, members of one human family is becoming more and more evident. The Holy See encourages this Conference to adopt a renewed conviction of urgency and commitment to achieve concrete and durable agreements towards peace and fraternity. Certain issues should rise above consensus, transcending individual interests and agendas. Tomorrow may be too late.

Thank you, Mr. President.