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Interview with Gerard de Korte

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Summary:

In this interview, Bishop Gerard de Korte discusses the Catholic Church's stance on nuclear weapons, emphasizing moral opposition to their use and the Church's complex stance on deterrence. He notes that while nuclear disarmament is important, it has taken a backseat to more pressing social justice and environmental issues, particularly in Dutch society. De Korte highlights that the Vatican and Church leaders condemn nuclear weapons, but Dutch Catholics often support NATO's deterrence strategy, reflecting a lack of unified consensus. He concludes that a nuclear-free world would still face significant security challenges due to conventional weapon threats and international tensions. This document summary was generated by an artificial intelligence language model and was reviewed by a Wilson Center staff member.

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Gerard de Korte: I am within the Bishops' Conference of the Netherlands the referent for "Church and Society". During this time, I am especially busy promoting Pope Francis' thinking around sustainability and social justice. His two latest social encyclicals *Laudato Si* of 2015 and *Fratelli Tutti* of 2020 address these themes. I am originally a historian and only later became a theologian. So I have developed some views regarding war and peace, also how the Church views this, as it has been expressed throughout history.

Michal Onderco: How are you personally involved with this topic and what is your background within the topic regarding peace, security or nuclear weapons?

Gerard de Korte: I actually became interested in politics and history very early on. I can trace that back to 1967, the Six-Day War, when I was 12. So I was born in 1955. War and peace are also one of the big themes of social ethics. I can remember, you may know, in the 1980s, the World Council of Churches had a three-pronged approach: peace, justice, and the wholeness of creation. When it comes to macro ethics, those are still the three big themes: war and peace, social justice and the protection of creation. Even in the Catholic world, these are the major themes to which encyclicals by the pope are also regularly dedicated.

But it might be good to start broadly: how Christianity thinks about violence. And that actually began in the early Church with the doctrine of just war. In the first centuries, Christians were a minority, a persecuted minority from time to time. Then you get the conversion of Constantine at the beginning of the fourth century, and at the end of that century, under Emperor Theodosius, Christianity becomes the state religion. The Christian princes wage war, to the shock of some theologians. And then the doctrine of just war is developed to indicate that a war is just only if a number of criteria, which they take from the Bible, are met. For example, you must never destroy the opposing party's sources of life. Specifically, this is also found in the Old Testament, you must never destroy the opponent's orchards and fields. There is a strict distinction between soldiers and civilians. Thus, some of these criteria were established by Christian theologians such as Ambrose and Augustine. This has led the popes of the last century, of course after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to say: actually, at the level of nuclear war, there is no just war to be fought.

Michal Onderco: I agree with you but there was a theological discussion, for example, during the pontificate of John Paul II: these weapons may exist if they have been used to deter the "evil empire." For example, there was also a discussion among Dutch bishops in the 1980s about whether or not this is allowed. Do I understand correctly that in church speech the strategy of deterrence has been abandoned and the use of nuclear weapons is immoral?

Gerard de Korte: Deterrence still plays a prominent role in both the East as well as the West. If you ban them out of this world, they can be quickly produced, because the knowledge is there. That, of course, is the big problem. This is more of a political approach.

Seen from the point of view of Church as a moral authority, the position is that the consequences of usage are of such magnitude that they should never be used. Then, of course, there is the question, in this world with a number of nation states, and also some superpowers, and smaller states for that matter, if deterrence can play a role or not. There you see among Catholic ethicists increasing doubts because things can still go terribly wrong. It remains, of course, a dilemma. Either way, there are way too many nuclear weapons. The conversations regarding reduction are immensely important.

Michal Onderco: I understand that.

Gerard de Korte: Unfortunately those talks are stagnating. In any case, reduce it further to a minimum which is still has a deterring effect. You don't have to be able to destroy the world five times so to speak, to put it very cynically. But indeed, of course, you now see some Catholic ethicists saying: they are so destructive and in that sense so immoral that they should never be used....

Michal Onderco: I have other questions but I still want to ask: you said earlier that you are responsible for the bishops' policy for peace and security.

Gerard de Korte: Church and society, and that includes this topic.

Michal Onderco: Why did you choose that theme?

Gerard de Korte: It's entrusted to me. All bishops have a kind of ministry at the national level in addition to their dioceses. We call that a "referent-ship", for example, for the medical ethics, for liturgy, for catechesis and so on. We even have a bishop for the army. That might also be an interesting discussion partner for you, I am realizing just now. Bishop De Jong, auxiliary bishop of Roermond, is the apostolic administrator for the armed forces. He keeps in touch with the chaplains and is, therefore, in touch with the army leadership there as well.

Michal Onderco: Do you, for example, have disagreements with the army bishop on issues related to peace and security?

Gerard de Korte: No, there is great agreement on this topic within the bishops' conference.

Michal Onderco: Okay, I ask each person I talk to how they see the role of nuclear weapons in the world today. Often people speak of nuclear weapons as a stabilizing factor in international politics.

Gerard de Korte: That, of course, is the deterrence ideology.

Michal Onderco: Conversely, people often speak of nuclear weapons as causing great destabilization.

Gerard de Korte: I would say that it is a threat in the background. When I look at those three themes of the 1980s, nowadays, especially social justice and sustainability are emphasized. And that is also the case within the public debate, the fact that the whole peace theme actually gets less attention. We have, of course, Pax Christi, Justice and Peace in The Hague, Justitia Pax from Rome. Right now Sebastiaan van den Zwaan is the director. Maybe you know him?

Michal Onderco: No.

Gerard de Korte: He has a small office in The Hague. In a large number of countries, there is a commission of

Justice and Peace. One of their projects is called "Shelter City", that is a big project. They want to give human rights activists a home for three months to recover and also to get inspiration for their activities in the Netherlands.

Michal Onderco: Okay, nice.

Gerard de Korte: The emphasis there, too, of course, is on human rights. In our country, it's been decades since large demonstrations with hundreds of thousands of participants against nuclear weapons were held.

Michal Onderco: Were you there as well?

Gerard de Korte: No, I have not. I do remember that Ruud Lubbers was Prime Minister at that time, and he also spoke at that mass meeting. The whole theme has disappeared somewhat in the Netherlands, of course.

Michal Onderco: Why do you think that is the case? Nuclear weapons still exist....

Gerard de Korte: Definitely.

Michal Onderco: And they are still a threat. Why do you think this is not a big topic anymore today or in the last 20 years.

Gerard de Korte: I find that hard to estimate why that is the case. But I do see that other themes have been given priority. And that's of course that global social justice theme, rich and poor in the world, and it's particularly also of course the climate crisis and the whole sustainability theme. While of course, we realize that everything is connected to everything but you get people much more motivated on these two issues of justice and sustainability than the issues relating to war and peace.

Michal Onderco: How is that like among the Dutch bishops? Is that a major theme peace and security or are the other themes?

Gerard de Korte: I think the latter. I myself am working on the pope's latest social encyclicals, and in it the emphasis is still on those two other themes. So the wholeness of creation and justice.

Michal Onderco: I always ask my respondents to say something about their organization and I don't think that's necessary with the Catholic Church but maybe it's useful to say something about the role of the Dutch Bishop's Conference among Dutch Catholics and also in Dutch society and maybe also something about your relationship with other actors in civil society in the Netherlands.

Gerard de Korte: You can say that roughly 20 percent of the population is still connected to the Catholic Church. We assume 3.6 million out of 18 million people. We are, therefore, the largest Christian Church in terms of the number of baptized. If you look at the map of Europe then you could see that the Netherlands, Scandinavia, East Germany and the Czech Republic are the most secularized areas. My diocese is in the south of the Netherlands with historically a Catholic majority. That still has its effects in the "South" of today. There is still a lot of cultural Catholicism. For example, the "we" feeling is very important in this diocese. "Our" mother is said here. Not my father or my mother but our father and our mother. That us, that we, that community thinking is, I think, typically Catholic. Catholicism thinks in terms of the community. Protestantism is much more individualistic. Luther's question, "How do I get a just God?" is more of a Protestant question than a Catholic one. As a Catholic, you are included within the people of God. I am part of a community with which God has made a covenant. A Catholic knows, I think, individual struggles with God less often than an average Protestant. But we have fortunately gained very good ecumenical contacts since the last half century. There is a lot of cooperation since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), also regarding peace issues. You have the Catholic Pax Christi but, in the Netherlands, there also is the Interchurch Peace Council, the IKV. They played a big role in organizing the big anti-nuclear weapons demonstrations we talked about earlier.

Michal Onderco: I don't know how to ask that question so I'll just ask it in a Dutch way, that is, directly. Within society, does the Church's opinion on political issues still count? There are also statements by

Pope Francis against war, against nuclear weapons. Does that also, in your view, affect what people think about nuclear weapons?

Gerard de Korte: I think Pope Francis is considered a moral leader for many people, even outside the Catholic Church. Especially when it comes to the social ethics. For micro-ethical issues, that is much less true in our liberal culture. Regarding abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, you can name that whole list, we have a minority position. But when it comes to the macro-ethical issues such as refugees, migrants, fighting poverty and protecting the earth, Pope Francis regularly makes clear statements about those that are widely supported by the population and appreciated far beyond the Church. This also came into focus in 2015 with the Paris Climate Agreement. The encyclical *Laudatio Si* inspired a number of participants in the Paris climate summit to come up with a good result.

Michal Onderco: Bishops in the Netherlands, do they also play such a role, at least among Dutch Catholics?

Gerard de Korte: Without a doubt, but also with our political contacts in The Hague. We, as a Bishops' Conference, also have regular discussions with political parties.

Michal Onderco: Not only with the CDA?

Gerard de Korte: We try to be as inclusive as possible. So also with the Labor Party, the VVD, D66, the Christian Union.

Michal Onderco: Also around the issue of peace and security for example?

Gerard de Korte: That's often less the case, if I'm being honest. We recently spoke with the CDA and there this was not a topic of debate.

Michal Onderco: And why do you think that is the case?

Gerard de Korte: The most important topic right now is the climate crisis. The whole transition, the whole theme of how can you live in a sustainable way pushes away other themes. Added to that of course, but that is very recent, is the war between Russia and Ukraine. Suddenly a majority in parliament advocates spending 2% of what we earn in the Netherlands on defense. Which before then was actually quite disputed. There are still critical voices on that point that do point to the much higher amounts that NATO countries have available for defense than Russia. But those voices represent a minority at the present time. The dominant view in society is that Russia is aggressive and must be resisted with a strong defense. A discussion of its own is building a European defense apparatus and transatlantic cooperation with the United States within NATO.

Michal Onderco: Is there one position on this topic among Dutch Catholics?

Gerard de Korte: No, there are disagreements there. In the past I have discussed with the CDA's defense specialist the 2 percent standard for defense and NATO's much higher defense spending than Russia's military spending. According to this CDA defense spokesman, it was difficult to compare spending, for example, because salaries in Russia are much lower than in the West. Still, I continue to have questions. After all, NATO invests many times more than Russia in defense, I believe 7 or 8 times as much. Surely you then start asking about the influence of the military industrial complex. The interests of the arms industry are, of course, enormous. This critical voice may sound within the Church but it constitutes only one of several voices.

Michal Onderco: When I talked to Peter Buijs (“Artsen voor Vrede”), he said you are involved in the “Balieberaad”.

Gerard de Korte: Through him, I have, indeed, been involved in the “Balieberaad”.

Michal Onderco: Are you also more broadly in touch with Dutch civil society on the issue of nuclear weapons or was it a one-time participation?

Gerard de Korte: The latter. There is no further contact. The contacts I have around war and peace are through Pax Christi and the Interchurch Peace Council anyway. Pax Christi has over 100 staff members, but Pax works much more abroad and does not only have activities related to armament.

Michal Onderco: Pax was, for example, the biggest and loudest voice on the issue around disarmament and also around nuclear weapons, also in recent years.

Gerard de Korte: But I doubt that they have much support within the Catholic constituency at this point.

Michal Onderco: Okay, and why?

Gerard de Korte: As mentioned earlier, because other issues are much more salient among the population.

Michal Onderco: Does that also mean that then an organization like Pax also has more latitude around those themes so, for example, to determine their own path?

Gerard de Korte: Yes, they have that in part. There was a name change: Pax Christi became Pax. There still remains Pax Christi functioning under that big Pax but they themselves have chosen to come to broaden their reach. They also target people from non-Christian backgrounds. Of course, Pax may make this choice, but is it wise if it leads to loss among the original constituency? I have good contact with the president of IKV, that is Dr. Ad van der Helm. He has become the new president. And Ad who recently emailed me that he is involved in appointing a new director at Pax. I hope it will be a professing Christian. The bulk of their money comes from the government, of course. So, they are less dependent on their own constituency, financially speaking. The quality of the work seems to be so appreciated by “The Hague”, of which they receive money from the ministry.

Michal Onderco: In your work around the issue of peace and security, who are the most important actors for cooperation?

Gerard de Korte: No, we have within our Catholic circle, for example, Dr. Fred van Iersel. He was a professor who published a lot in the field of war and peace. Bilaterally, there is good ecumenical contact with the largest Protestant church, the PKN. And of course, we also have lines of communication through the Council of Churches. Within the Council of Churches, a number of Christian churches work together, led by a Catholic president and a Protestant secretary. There are a number of consultative groups, including a committee on social issues: Fred van Iersel is involved with that for regarding the theme of war and peace. The Council of Churches is also important for contacts with the government. Our government prefers to consult all philosophical movements at once. But as Christian churches, we try to avoid that to let the Christian voice be heard.¹ For example, I have been involved several times in talks at the Catshuis. We talked there with a cabinet delegation about societal

¹ Dutch proverb meaning “to make your own position heard”

issues. What is very much in play now is the reception of refugees, people from Ukraine. The church is participating in this. Especially in Catholic circles, monasteries and retreat houses have been contracted to receive people. Recently the action of the "the home givers". Perhaps you have heard of them. The goal is to provide a home for status holders.² State Secretary van de Burg is involved. As churches we manifest ourselves in this way and help the government in the reception of refugees. So again, the focus is more on refugee reception and social justice than war and peace.

Michal Onderco: And also, when it comes to war and peace, are you in contact with Catholic churches in other European countries?

Gerard de Korte: Yes, but I am not involved, another bishop is. You may be familiar with COMECE in Brussels.

Through COMECE, the European bishops try to influence the policies of the European Union. Bishop Hoogenboom, the auxiliary bishop of Utrecht, is regularly in Brussels. Through COMECE, the Catholic Church keeps in touch with the European Commission on themes that are relevant from the Church's point of view.

Michal Onderco: Some time ago the president of the Italian Bishop's Conference made a statement against nuclear weapons and this was seen as a remarkable statement, precisely also by the government.

Gerard de Korte: But Pope Francis also does that regularly.

Michal Onderco: But my question is, if something like that happens in Italy, does that also give the Dutch bishops cause to speak out on this issue?

Gerard de Korte: That has not happened in last years. Many Catholics in the Netherlands agree that the use of nuclear weapons is impossible, it will only be catastrophic, therefore that doom and gloom in the background. At the same time, most Catholics, including Catholic politicians, support the strategy of deterrence. We do need to ensure that there are as few of these nuclear weapons as possible. Negotiations around that issue are incredibly important. But most people also realize that the Netherlands is a small NATO country with limited influence... I think a lot of people believe that ultimately people in Washington, Moscow, Beijing "push the buttons".³

Michal Onderco: But, for example, the Italian Catholics say: American nuclear weapons should leave Italy. The Netherlands is in a similar situation.

Gerard de Korte: They are probably even in this Diocese, in Volkel. But I read that Minister Hoekstra refuses to make a statement as to whether they are there or not.

Michal Onderco: Ultimately, that's a secret.

Gerard de Korte: Exactly.

Michal Onderco: I don't know if I have read this correctly but I believe that in the last 15 years the Dutch bishops have not talked about removing nuclear weapons from the Netherlands.

² Status holders are asylum seekers whose claim was recognized by the government

³ Dutch proverb meaning "being in charge".

Gerard de Korte: True, as far as I know we have not made a statement on that.

Michal Onderco: Maybe in the 80s?

Gerard de Korte: Yes that could be, but I don't have that ready. Look, I myself became a bishop in 2001, auxiliary bishop in Utrecht then, in 2008 diocese bishop in Groningen and since 2016 here in 's-Hertogenbosch. I would have to check if the Council of Churches has said anything about nuclear weapons in recent times.

Michal Onderco: But now it hasn't?

Gerard de Korte: Not now, no.

Michal Onderco: But because that topic is no longer important now?

Gerard de Korte: Of course, the theme is important but we have to note that other themes such as social justice and sustainability receive much more attention socially.

Michal Onderco: As a bishop around peace and security, can you influence government policy?

Gerard de Korte: That is very limited, I'm afraid. The Roman Catholic Church is only one of the Christian churches. I think the Council of Churches has more influence. But if you look at the political landscape right now and the balance of power, there is little to gain at this point, I would almost say. Because of the war in Ukraine, a majority of politicians favor robust defense, including a strategy of deterrence by nuclear weapons. A majority of political parties in the House of Representatives also support this.

Michal Onderco: Do you or does the Council of Churches intend to influence politics or is that outside your purview?

Gerard de Korte: Right now, a statement from myself or the bishops' conference would not fall on good soil and would be seen as symbol politics or "clean hands" politics. There is no constituency for it at this time either.

Michal Onderco: What would have to happen for you to say that your attempt to influence politics would be successful?

Gerard de Korte: Possibly through an appeal by doctors. I have signed petitions several times that Dr. Peter Buijs as president of "Doctors Against Nuclear Weapons"⁴ discussed with me. Recently there was a conference of this organization in the Peace Palace. The opposing forces are much stronger.

Michal Onderco: Occasionally when I talk to people who have spent their whole lives working around the issue of nuclear weapons. And now in 2023 they say it's going to be hopeless because it's going in completely the wrong direction. Have you had similar thoughts yourself?

Gerard de Korte: Unfortunately, I think they are right. The World Council of Churches, Pope Francis, the Dalai Lama and other moral leaders condemn nuclear weapons but it lands on rocky ground. That makes one feel powerless. The majority of Western politicians say nuclear weapons should not be used but at the same time they do not renounce the deterrence strategy.

Michal Onderco: Donald Trump did threaten to use the big red button.

⁴ Physicians for Peace

Gerard de Korte: I think that was at the level of deterrence. After all, if nuclear weapons were used, of course, we would have an Armageddon. That means the end of civilization or at least enormous damage to a lot of countries.

Michal Onderco: Of course, I understand that on the one hand there is a difference between deterrence and use of nuclear weapons but of course in order to make deterrence credible armies have to practice how it should be done if necessary.

Gerard de Korte: I think deterrence entails that you should prevent usage, with all risks involved. Because humans can always fail. There can be communication failures between major powers. If you look at how NATO is operating right now, it is extremely cautious. The leadership is doing everything possible to prevent NATO from getting involved in the war in Ukraine.... they supply weapons and for the rest, Ukraine is only allowed to use those weapons to regain its own territory. NATO will do everything possible to prevent another country from getting involved in the war.

Michal Onderco: From a Catholic perspective, do you see that as just?

Gerard de Korte: I follow the line of the Vatican on this issue. The pope sees Russia as an aggressor who has violated the sovereignty of a neighboring country by brutal force. We see one sovereign country attacking another sovereign country and occupying 20 percent of the territory there. At the same time, the Church also says there are two losers (of this conflict). Thousands of soldiers and civilians are dying on both sides, and in Ukraine in particular there has been enormous destruction. Entire towns and villages lie in ruins. So many people who have lost everything. I understand that a Kremlin survey has now been leaked with the majority of the Russian people hoping for a ceasefire. The desire for the war to continue is not as great (within the country) as suggested by President Putin. From a Christian perspective, the war should end as soon as possible. But that is not so easy in practice. It has not even been possible to achieve a ceasefire yet. Of course, Ukraine is allowed to defend itself. But there is no question of a just war in the classic sense. On the contrary, civilians are even the target of military actions constantly. Even children's hospitals have been destroyed. Russia is trying to demoralize the people of Ukraine by bombing power plants in order to leave civilians out in the cold. In this sense, it is a very dirty war that cannot be defended in any way based on the criteria of just war.

Michal Onderco: Finally, I would like to ask some questions regarding the vision of the future. I always ask respondents for their expectation regarding the issue of nuclear weapons in the next fifty years. Do you think that in fifty years nuclear weapons will still exist?

Gerard de Korte: Yes, and if they no longer exist, then they will be made again in no time. After all, the genie is out of the bottle, that's the tragedy. Of course, that applies to all inventions. They can be used positively but also negatively. We have nuclear power, with all the questions surrounding the waste, but it does provide a lot of electricity. But at the same time, nuclear bombs were made and deployed at the end of World War II with terrible consequences for the residents of two cities in Japan. The knowledge is there and unfortunately the proliferation of that knowledge continues.

Think of the whole discussion around Iran I hope the negotiations for nuclear weapons reduction to a minimum at least continues. But the fact that there are nearly 200 nation-states with vast differences in interests makes the situation extremely complex. Our politicians are elected by citizens of nation-states. If they get too far ahead of the curve they will be voted out at the next election. The fact that

our world is divided into nation-states does not make finding solutions easy. I noticed this myself at a major congress in Rome. There were Catholics from all over the world, devout people talking to each other about peace and justice. The penultimate day Catholics from the third world said, "tomorrow we will all be on our planes and you will go to your rich countries and we will go to our poor countries." Catholics are members of one world Church but we live in rich and poor countries and thus have differences in interests. Of course, Catholic funds from rich countries help Catholics in poor countries. But that is somewhat different from realizing truly just international relations. The same, unfortunately, applies to the issue of war and peace. How many countries officially have nuclear weapons?

Michal Onderco: Nine.

Gerard de Korte: But this could increase, unfortunately.

Michal Onderco: Yes.

Gerard de Korte: Most of them are superpowers. But countries like Pakistan and Israel also have them. We should strive with all our might for a reduction of nuclear weapons in the next 50 years. Let us hope that all these talks will turn out successful, purely out of self-interest, it would deliver a lot of money for better things. But the fact remains that the knowledge about nuclear weapons will not disappear from this world.

Michal Onderco: My last question is always: suppose there is a nuclear weapons-free world, what does security policy in such a world look like?

Gerard de Korte: A world with nation states without nuclear weapons is not automatically safer. Because, of course, there are lots of conventional weapons that can also cause enormous devastation. Not in the sense that it would make entire areas unlivable for generations. But the misery of a major war with conventional weapons is incalculable. Think of the situation in Germany and Russia shortly after World War II. So much death and so much destruction.

With the power of today's conventional weapons, you hold your heart.⁵ So as long as there are conflicts of interest, there is a chance of war. That is also what I find complicated about the deterrence strategy. It sounds very cynical but deterrence has at times almost certainly averted the outbreak of war.

⁵ Dutch proverb meaning "to be concerned"