

# Byzantine layman attends Vatican nuclear disarmament conference

By Father Andrew Summerson

**CHICAGO** — A Byzantine Catholic layman, who participated at a nuclear disarmament conference at the Vatican last month said he believes the Eastern churches can provide a vital contribution to assist Pope Francis in the promotion of his teachings on nuclear disarmament.

Jack Figel, founder of the Orientale Lumen Foundation and a faithful of the Eparchy of Passaic, was among the scholars, activists and representatives of bishops' conferences at the Nov. 10-11 conference, sponsored by the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

The event brought together 11 Nobel laureates, top officials from the United Nations and NATO, diplomats from around the world and experts in nuclear weapons and the disarmament process.

Figel is a collaborator with Global Zero, an international lobby group dedicated to the eradication of nuclear weapons, which also participated at the conference.

Figel was recruited by Global Zero due to his work with the Orientale Lumen Foundation, a grassroots ecumenical movement that promotes dialogue between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and his known Vatican connections.

Figel said Cardinal Peter Turkson, prefect of the dicastery, invited him to participate.

The pope, in his Nov. 10 address to conference participants, said the existence of nuclear weapons creates a false sense of security that holds international relations hostage and stifles peaceful coexistence.

"The threat of their use as well as their very possession is to be firmly condemned," the pope told conference participants.

For years, popes and Catholic leaders had said the policy of nuclear deterrence could be morally acceptable as long as real work was underway on a complete ban of the weapons. In condemning possession of the weapons, Pope Francis seemed to indicate that deterrence is no longer acceptable.

Nuclear weapons "exist in the service of a mentality of fear that affects not only the parties in conflict but the entire human race," he said.

Figel said he thinks Eastern Christian spirituality can help pro-



Photo: Jack Figel

*The panel of speakers at the Vatican nuclear disarmament conference Nov. 10-11 gathered scholars, activists and Nobel laureates in Rome.*

mote the pope's message on nuclear disarmament.

"The Eastern approach to living the Christian life is something that Pope Francis somewhat talks about from his perspective," he said.

"He quoted Pope John XXIII's 'Pacem in terris,' saying that we must reach men's very souls in order to arrive at nuclear disarmament," he continued.

"We can contribute to this the Eastern Christian notion of theosis and living a Christ-like life. If we can get more of this teaching in societies, the world would be a safer place," he said.

Figel said the most powerful speaker was Masako Wada, one of the last survivors of the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945.

Pope Francis told the group that the "essential" witness of survivors of the bombings in Japan as well as those suffering the effects of nuclear

weapons testing are prophetic voices that serve "as a warning, above all for coming generations."

In his speech, the pope said that when it comes to the ideal of a nuclear-free world, a "certain pessimism" exists and brings with it "considerable expense" as nations modernize their nuclear arsenals.

"As a result, the real priorities facing our human family, such as the fight against poverty, the promotion of peace, the undertaking of educational, ecological and health care projects, and the development of human rights, are relegated to second place," he said.

Pope Francis said the existence of weapons whose use would result in the destruction of humanity "are senseless even from a tactical standpoint."

What is more, he said, there is the growing danger that the weapons or weapon technology could fall into

the wrong hands.

"The resulting scenarios are deeply disturbing if we consider the challenges of contemporary geopolitics, like terrorism or asymmetric warfare," he said.

But despite the troubling global scenario, he said, initiatives such as the U.N. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, provide a dose of "healthy realism" that "continues to shine a light of hope in our unruly world."

The treaty, which would enter into force 90 days after at least 50 countries both sign and ratify it, bans efforts to develop, produce, test, manufacture, acquire, possess or stockpile nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.

As of Sept. 20, the treaty had been signed by more than 40 countries, including the Holy See, who was the first to sign.

At press time, the United States and other countries possessing nuclear weapons did not take part in the negotiations and do not plan to sign it.

Figel and the group Global Zero have proposed a smaller-round table discussion at the Vatican next year with the countries possessing nuclear weapons.

If they succeed in planning the meeting, it would gather religious, scientific and political leaders in a 25-person forum for a discussion on these issues.

*Rome reporting by Cindy Wooden and Junno Arocho Esteves Catholic News Service.*



Photo courtesy of Jack Figel

*Byzantine Catholic layman Jack Figel shakes hands with Pope Francis. Figel was at the Vatican last month to participate in a conference on nuclear disarmament.*

## Pope Francis to visit Myanmar

By Catholic News Service

**VATICAN CITY (CNS)** — At press time, Pope Francis was on a Nov. 26-Dec. 2 trip to Myanmar. The pope was scheduled to meet with various religious leaders and with Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, the commander of the military, harshly criticized by the international community for their campaign against the Rohingya people, a Muslim minority.

The pope was to celebrate Mass in Yangon Nov. 29.