

Homily for Mass on Peace and a World without Nuclear Weapons

by

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Urakami Cathedral, Nagasaki

August 9, 2015

It is a great honor for me to be here with you in this historic cathedral and at this moving commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the bombings that devastated so much of Nagasaki.

As I meditated on today's readings, I was struck in particular by the words of St. Paul to the Ephesians. He was exhorting the followers of Christ to be united, to put aside their fury and anger, to be kind and forgiving of one another, to be, as he put it, "imitators of God" who live in love. This is a powerful message to seek peace.

It is a message very much needed in this world so full of the distrust, anger, and hatred that fuel conflicts and the race to acquire more arms of all kinds, including nuclear weapons, supposedly to defend ourselves. But to pursue that path will only lead to more suspicion and distrust, a dangerous downward spiral with a potential for so much more destruction. Instead, we must turn away from that path and seek peace as the Lord would have us do.

Last September I went on a Prayer Pilgrimage for Peace to the Holy Land and stood on a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee. It was a place very near to where our Lord gave us the Beatitudes. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the children of God." (Matthew 5:9)

As I look around me now, I see all of you as peacemakers, as children of God, gathered here, committed to a world without nuclear weapons. I am reminded of the horrific loss of life that occurred 70 years ago and the agonizing suffering of those who survived. On the grounds of this church, I see the physical devastation wrought on the original cathedral that was the center of Catholicism over the years, despite the persecution of believers. It was in Nagasaki that Catholics were crucified in 1596 and became the "Twenty-Six Martyrs of Japan."

I am inspired by the faith of those who have sustained the Church over the centuries. I am in awe of the Church in Japan and the mayors and peoples of Nagasaki and Hiroshima who have dedicated themselves to appealing to the world to renounce violence and war, and pursue peace.

Over the years, several Popes have spoken about the tragedy that occurred in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and have called for the world to turn away from such destruction. In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI greeted a group of survivors of the nuclear attacks and "pray[ed] that the world may never again witness such mass destruction of innocent human life".¹

Pope Francis, when asked in November 2014 about what happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, said, "... humanity has not learnt its lesson ... Humans did this and discovered nuclear energy which has many positive uses, but they also used it to destroy creation, humanity."

The bishops of the United States join in solidarity with the Church in Japan in advocating for global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament in the face of the tragedies that occurred here when atomic bombs struck. In our 1983 pastoral letter on *The Challenge of Peace*, the U.S.

bishops committed themselves to shaping “the climate of opinion which will make it possible for our country to express profound sorrow over the atomic bombing in 1945. Without that sorrow, there is no possibility of finding a way to repudiate future use of nuclear weapons....”²

The statement of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Japan, “70 Years after the War: Blessed are the Peacemakers – Now especially, Peace must not Depend on Weapons,” says it all. Those who work for peace cannot rely on weapons, certainly not nuclear weapons, to keep the peace. As the Church throughout the world has repeatedly affirmed, military force alone, including the use of such weapons of mass destruction, will not solve conflicts -- rather the underlying causes of conflict need to be addressed.

Saint John Paul II, in his “Appeal for Peace” at Hiroshima, repeatedly said that “to remember the past is to commit oneself to the future.” He called on leaders to “pledge [them]selves to peace through justice; let us take a solemn decision, now, that war will never be tolerated or sought as a means of resolving differences; let us promise our fellow human beings that we will work untiringly for disarmament and the banishing of all nuclear weapons:... let us replace violence and hate with confidence and caring.”³

We share the Japan Church’s concern that too much emphasis is placed on military solutions to problems and not enough on dialogue and on funding for programs that help the poorest people, people who live on the margins and who may be most vulnerable to recruitment by extremists. Together let us work to promote respect for human life and dignity, human rights, and genuine development in a world plagued by injustice and poverty.

On this solemn 70th anniversary of the atomic bombings, I join with you in the fervent prayer that all governments will move away from a reliance on nuclear weapons for security and work to safeguard nuclear materials in this age of terrorism. I pray that our people will unite as one global family to reject acts of total war. I realize that this will not be easy. But remember how the angel of the Lord commanded Elijah in today’s first reading to “Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you.” May we be strengthened by “the bread that came down from heaven,” Jesus Christ, for the long journey of peace and justice.

Likewise may our Lord strengthen the Church in Japan and in the United States with a spirit of solidarity and commitment to embrace Christ’s gift of himself, the Bread of Life and the Prince of Peace. Thus may we be agents of hope and peace in the world.

Bishop Oscar Cantú is the Chair of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Angelus, October 11, 2009, and Homily on Pentecost, May 31, 2009, (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/angelus/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20091011_en.html and http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20090531_pentecoste_en.html).

² U.S. Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace*, 1983, no. 302 (<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/TheChallengeofPeace.pdf>).

³ Pope John Paul II, “Appeal for Peace,” Hiroshima Peace Memorial Hall, February 25, 1981, (http://atomicbombmuseum.org/6_5.shtml).