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Address on Nuclear Disarmament

The Most Reverend John C. Wester, Archbishop of Santa Fe
August 5, 2023, World Peace Memorial Cathedral of Hiroshima, Japan

My dear Japanese brothers and sisters, Archbishop Etienne and I are honored to be with you to commemorate the horrific bombing that took place here and in Nagasaki in 1945. We gather here today, members of various faiths and traditions — Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, Shinto — and with all people of good will to acknowledge that we are all part of the same human family, children of God, who have been given the awesome responsibility of being stewards of our common home, Mother Earth.

I am humbled to be in this Cathedral, built upon the ashes of the Noboricho parish church destroyed in the atomic bombing of August 6, 1945. My understanding is that the bricks used by the hand of man to build this holy place are made from earth containing ashes from the atomic bomb. To me, these bricks contain the vaporized souls of those 140,000 human beings who perished in the ultimate act of war. I hear their voices crying out for global, verifiable nuclear disarmament! As the famous poet, T.S. Eliot, put it: “...the communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.” How true!

My fellow pilgrims and I come to Japan, the Land of the Rising Sun, to express profound regret and sorrow for the atomic bombings that destroyed your beautiful cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We understand that Hiroshima is known for its warm, gentle light. But on that dreadful day, 78 years ago, a blinding, searing, destroying light was cast upon you.

I am told that Buddhism intimately fuses wisdom and compassion together, which I think is true of all great religions. In contrast, the atomic bombings of August 6th and 9th, 1945, were the apex of scientific knowledge, but evil and cruel. It was a towering technical achievement now made popular by the film *Oppenheimer*, but nevertheless an abomination of human intellect stripped of compassion, with hearts made cold and mean by total war.

Sadly, those atomic bombs were developed and built within my Archdiocese. I stand before you today, humbly assuring you that while we can never know the full extent of your pain, we do wish to join our hearts with yours in a compassionate embrace of mutual regret. But even more so, I plead that we join together to make certain that these weapons will never be used again. And the only way to make certain of that is to eradicate them from God’s precious planet — abolish them from this, our beautiful blue Earth circling the Sun, which itself travels in this vast cosmos infused with wisdom and compassion.

But here comes the difficult part: because we are of the same human family, we must therefore love, honor, cherish and lift up one another. However, at the same time, we must have righteous constructive criticism between family members. All of us, whether in Japan or the United States, must come together to apologize for the atrocities committed in World War II. In this way, we open ourselves to the healing graces of God’s forgiveness, purging our souls of the wrongdoings that we have committed so that we may be free together. Free to march in God’s universal love toward a better and more just world, free to build a future world free of nuclear weapons!

Nuclear weapons were built from the physics discoveries of Madame Curie and Albert Einstein. Einstein famously came up with the equation $E=MC(\text{squared})$, or energy equals mass times the speed of light squared. This directly led to humanity's unleashing of the horrific and barbaric destructive powers of nuclear weapons, which before had only been benevolently bestowed by God in the nuclear fusion of the Sun, located safely 93 million miles away. But humankind now brought that searing power down to Earth to kill and destroy our fellow human beings.

However, it is within humanity's grasp to transform $E=MC(\text{squared})$ into a declaration of universal, cosmic love, which is what it really is when not weaponized. What it really means is that despite, or even because of, the endless parade of changing forms, there is still no loss and still no gain. Energy remains energy, indifferent to our suffering, which, after all, is just another form of energy. I see in this the face of God, God's divine love and compassion while galaxies spiral and new stars are born. I gasp in wonder at the miracles of God's creation. What joy! What beauty! And to think that we human beings are the crowning achievement of God's creation, made in God's very image and likeness. To be true to God's creation, to be true to ourselves, we need to rid humanity of nuclear weapons.

[pause]

After the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Albert Einstein said, "The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything save our modes of thinking and we thus drift toward unparalleled catastrophe. ... the solution to this problem lies in the heart of mankind."

Einstein further said, "I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones." He added, "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." So, let us combine our faith and science in wisdom and compassion to purify our hearts and bring about nuclear disarmament.

[pause]

In advance of my trip, I told the good souls in my parish that I was going to Hiroshima and Nagasaki to "encourage conversation about universal, verifiable nuclear disarmament and to walk together toward a new future of peace, a new promised land of peace, a new culture of peace and nonviolence, where we all might learn to live in peace as sisters and brothers on this beautiful planet, our common home."

My spiritual brother on this trip, Paul Etienne, Archbishop of Seattle, told his flock that "God calls us to build a global community where the whole human family can flourish. Let us keep educating ourselves, praying for peace, and appealing for verifiable nuclear disarmament, which reflects our Catholic teachings and is the path for the common good."

In May, he and I joined Archbishop Peter Nakamura of Nagasaki and Bishop Alexis Shirahama of Hiroshima to send a letter to the world leaders at the G7 summit in Hiroshima. We noted that the Santa Fe Archdiocese has the most spending on nuclear weapons research and production in the United States. The Seattle Archdiocese has the most deployed nuclear weapons in the United States. The dioceses of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are the only two dioceses in the world to have suffered atomic attacks. We are therefore joined together by providence to speak out.

We called upon the G7 leaders to take concrete steps toward nuclear disarmament. We added that "Rather than viewing the war in Ukraine as an overwhelming impediment toward making substantial progress, we view it instead as a clear demonstration of the absolute need to do so." We called upon world leaders to "enter into serious multilateral negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament," as pledged to so long ago in the 1970 NonProliferation Treaty, but never honored.

Sadly, our message to the world leaders at the G7 meeting fell on deaf ears. You know what they say - - If you want the job done right, you have to go do it yourself. So, Archbishop Etienne and I have traveled here to join with you to do the hard work of nuclear disarmament. It needs people of faith that push their governments to do the right thing. So, let's roll up our sleeves and, with the grace of God, get the job done!

[pause]

But how do we do it? The answer is that first we must undergo our own personal conversions that lead to a commitment to nuclear disarmament. I begin by recounting mine.

I have been here in Hiroshima before, in September 2017. Please know that just being here taught me a lesson, which is a lesson in itself. It made me realize that on August 6, 1945, humanity crossed the line into the abyss of the nuclear age. We can now kill billions of people instantly and destroy human civilization in a flash. The reality of this evil becomes real as you walk through Hiroshima today. You Hibakusha are a living testament to this reality for all of the world to see. I am so sorry for your suffering! I am so proud that you refuse to let it destroy you, that you remain determined with your bodies to give living testimony to the urgent need for nuclear disarmament.

Here in Hiroshima, I read about school children who on that fateful morning 78 years ago ran to the windows, attracted by a bright light. Little did they know that it was the second rising of the sun, but this one cruel and killing. I wonder how many were running to their deaths, either instantaneously incinerated or dying later in agonizing pain. Normally, light brings new life and clear vision. But not on that day. Tragically, the light generated by the first nuclear explosion used in war brought only searing destruction and death.

Then I remembered when I was a schoolboy in October 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis. I vividly remember looking up at the sky on my way home from school to see if any Russian planes were about to drop atomic bombs on me. I became so frightened that I ran all the way home. Those Japanese school children had no time to be afraid. They had no time to run and there was no home left to run to.

Later, when I walked through the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park and stood before the incinerated Genbaku Dome, it dawned on me that I had not really thought about the possibility of nuclear war since then or felt fear over the nuclear threat. Those childhood days when we practiced for nuclear war by hiding under our desks or locating the nearest bomb shelter are dim memories. But Hiroshima brought them all back in a flood of images.

Within a day or two of my return to New Mexico, some friends visited me in Santa Fe. I took them to the New Mexico History Museum. There I saw a different exhibit with a different story. With Hiroshima still fresh in my mind, I read about the Manhattan Project, the development of

the Los Alamos and Sandia National Laboratories, and the creation of the nuclear bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. My perspective had changed. I viewed these displays much differently than I had on a previous visit, before my trip to Japan. I found it eerie to see photos of Little Boy and Fat Man, the nicknames given to the actual bombs, when only a few weeks before I had been to the very places they had utterly destroyed. I now knew with horror what those bombs had done to the flesh and bones of our Japanese brothers and sisters and their children.

When my friends and I stepped outside into our beautiful city of Santa Fe, I noticed how peaceful it was. Santa Fe— in Spanish it means the City of the Holy Faith of St. Francis, a sacred faith that enabled that venerable saint to be an instrument of Christ’s peace. I felt painfully disturbed by our history, the long, dark legacy of building the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, and the many thousands of nuclear weapons since then. We are the people who designed and built these killing machines of weapons of mass destruction. We were the first to use them. We must be the people to dismantle them and make sure they are never used again.

That day in Santa Fe, the City of Holy Faith, it struck me as blasphemous that we would create a weapon with the potential to destroy our entire planet, our common home, given to us by a loving God who wants us all to live in peace. It became abundantly clear to me that the Archdiocese of Santa Fe must help galvanize a vigorous peace movement, one that will help guarantee that these weapons will never be used again, that we would never destroy our civilization or one another. Instead, we should clean up our poisoned lands, address climate change and compel world political leaders to resolve all international conflicts through nonviolent means, using dialogue and negotiations.

We need to sustain a serious global conversation about universal, verifiable nuclear disarmament. We can no longer deny or ignore the dangerous predicament we have created for ourselves with a new nuclear arms race. This new arms race is arguably more dangerous than the past Cold War because of multiple nuclear actors and the rise of cyber and hypersonic weapons and artificial intelligence. A nuclear arms race is inherently self-perpetuating, a vicious spiral that prompts progressively destabilizing actions and reactions by all parties. We need nuclear arms control, not an escalating nuclear arms race.

Further, we need to figure out concrete steps toward abolishing nuclear weapons and permanently ending the nuclear threat. If we care about humanity, if we care about our planet, if we care about the God of peace and human conscience, then we must start a public conversation on these urgent questions and find a new path toward nuclear disarmament.

Pope Francis has made clear statements about the immorality of possessing nuclear weapons, moving the Church from past conditional acceptance of “deterrence” to the moral imperative of abolition. Moreover, we are robbing from the poor and needy with current plans to spend vast sums of money to keep them forever.

In reality, the United States and the USSR (now Russia) never possessed their huge stockpiles for the sole purpose of deterrence. Instead, their nuclear weapons policies have always been a hybrid of deterrence and nuclear war fighting capabilities, both of which threaten global annihilation to this very day. The U.S. and Russia continue to keep thousands of nuclear weapons instead of just the few hundred needed for only deterrence. This endless search for

competitive war-fighting capabilities is driving the huge nuclear weapons “modernization” programs of the nuclear powers, in which the U.S. plans to spend at least \$1.7 trillion over the next 25 years.

The Catholic Church has a long history of speaking out against nuclear weapons. In recent years, Pope Francis has led the Church in a dramatic shift away from supporting nuclear weapons and deterrence to denouncing them as immoral and calling for their complete abolition. The Vatican was the first nation state to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. As Pope Francis declared, “We must never grow weary of working to support the principal international legal instruments of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, including the Treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons.” It is the duty of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, the birthplace of nuclear weapons, to support that nuclear weapons ban treaty while working toward universal, verifiable nuclear disarmament.

On August 6, 2020, the 75th anniversary of the nuclear attacks on Japan, Pope Francis called “for prayer and commitment to a world completely free of nuclear weapons.” Earlier, in his 1984 State of the Union Address, President Ronald Reagan declared to Soviet leadership:

"There is only one sane policy, for your country and mine, to preserve our civilization in this modern age: A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. The only value in our two nations possessing nuclear weapons is to make sure they will never be used. But then would it not be better to do away with them entirely?"

The only solution that ensures enduring global safety is the multilateral and verifiable elimination of nuclear weapons that both President Reagan and Pope Francis have directed us toward.

I turn now to the failure of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, or NPT, commonly referred to as the cornerstone of the world’s nonproliferation regime. It went into effect in 1970, signed by 189 countries, more than any other treaty. Its grand bargain was that non-nuclear weapons states forswore the acquisition of nuclear weapons, in exchange for which “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...”

More than a half century later, not only have none of the nations with nuclear weapons honored that solemn promise, but they have increasingly moved in the opposite direction by implementing massive “modernization” programs designed to keep their nuclear weapons forever.

Noting this lack of progress toward nuclear disarmament, in 2014 the Holy See declared:

World leaders must be reminded that the commitment to disarm embedded in the NPT and other international documents is more than a legal-political detail, it is a moral commitment on which the future of the world depends... If there is little or no progress toward disarmament by the nuclear states, it is inevitable that the NPT will be regarded as an unjust perpetuation of the status quo. Only insofar as the nuclear-armed states move toward disarmament will the rest of the world regard the nonproliferation regime as just.

Since then, all Review Conferences of the Non-Proliferation Treaty have ended in failure, making no progress whatsoever toward nuclear disarmament.

So, what are we to do? I can only answer with the example of what I hope to do. I look forward to joining with other people as they may join me in building a robust movement toward nuclear disarmament.

My first step, while here with my brother Archbishop Etienne, is to explore with Archbishop Nakamura and Bishop Shirahama the possibility of forming formal sister relationships with the dioceses of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Think of the potent symbolism, where the Archdiocese that built the bombs and the Archdiocese that has the most U.S. bombs joins in sisterly relationships with the only dioceses to have been destroyed by those bombs. But beyond the symbolism, we seek to build an international platform rooted in faith that pushes global political leadership toward nuclear disarmament. Further, we argue that civilians should never be targeted, even in conventional war, which is particularly apt given the ongoing war in Ukraine.

In late November I plan to travel to the United Nations in New York City to witness the second meeting of the State Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. I encourage my peers in senior Catholic leadership to do so as well. There we can join the Nuncio at the United Nations to support the nuclear weapons ban treaty that the Vatican was the first to sign and ratify. Our growing presence will exert more pressure on the nuclear weapons powers to eventually honor that ban treaty, just as they have for earlier treaties banning chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction.

Moreover, sometime this coming winter I intend to have the Archdiocese of Santa Fe host another interfaith symposium on the need for nuclear disarmament, just as we successfully did on July 16, the 78th anniversary of the Trinity Test. We had more than 300 people in person and more than 300 online, a testament to the growing hunger of the public to address nuclear disarmament. But I intend this one to be bigger and better yet, with more senior Catholic leaders present to heed Pope Francis's call to work toward global, verifiable nuclear disarmament. That will send a message to the political leadership of the State of New Mexico, where forty percent of the federal government's budget for nuclear weapons research and production is spent.

As the key state in the American nuclear weapons complex, New Mexico has two of the United States' three nuclear weapons laboratories, the Los Alamos and Sandia National Laboratories. I will continue to advocate that the Labs curtail their nuclear weapons programs. Instead, they should focus on nonproliferation programs that provide the detection, monitoring and verification technologies that will help underpin a future world free of nuclear weapons. This is especially true of the Los Alamos Lab, which is spending many billions of dollars to expand the production of plutonium pit cores, the essential component of nuclear weapons. It was a plutonium pit that destroyed Nagasaki.

Finally, I am urging the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to adopt the issue of nuclear disarmament as a pro-life issue, congruent with the Vatican's ratification of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. After all, how can it not be a critical pro-life issue to ban the only weapons that could end human civilization overnight?

To my Japanese brothers and sisters, I respectfully suggest the following:

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- That the Hibakusha continue to provide the world with their painful testament for the needed abolition of nuclear weapons.
- That the Japanese population speak against increasing voices that Japan acquire its own nuclear weapons.
- Related, that Japan should find a safe, non-proliferating method to dispose of its own large stocks of plutonium.
- Finally, that the Japanese public should press their national political leadership to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, as the Vatican has done.

While doing all of this, all of our dialogue and discussions should be respectful, rooted in prayer, based on nonviolence, and centered in the hope and belief that nuclear disarmament is achievable. We can do this, and with the God of peace within us, we can do this soon!

Dear friends, brothers and sisters, I have shared the impact that my earlier experiences in Hiroshima had on me; the call of Pope Francis for nuclear disarmament; and the Gospel teachings of Jesus on peacemaking, nonviolence, and universal love. I have outlined the reality of the nuclear threat, the reasons why we must address this crisis, and what possible solutions and steps we can take toward nuclear disarmament. I propose that we now move on to nuclear disarmament itself, that we might heed Pope Francis' call to take new steps to end the production and maintenance of nuclear armaments and create a new future without nuclear weapons.

As I conclude, I think again of those young school children in Japan who ran to the window to see the bright light of the Hiroshima bomb just before they were incinerated. That light was not the light of peace but instead a false light of death and destruction.

Jesus came into the world as the true light. He came to lead us out of the darkness of violence, death, and destruction. In doing so, He is the "light of the world." His light is the exact opposite of the searing light of a nuclear weapon. His light is the true light of universal love, the light of universal compassion, the light of universal peace. His light is the light of nonviolence. His light of peace enables us to see a way forward on the path of life toward a new future of peace, a world without nuclear weapons.

But it is not enough that we become instruments of peace, as important as that is. No, we must take up the cause of worldwide nuclear disarmament with an urgency that befits the seriousness of this cause and the dangerous threat that looms over all of humanity and the planet. I call upon all of us to take up the challenge of nuclear disarmament by engaging in the vital discussion and work that will lead to concrete action steps toward this noble goal.

I close with the Prayer of St. Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
 where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 where there is injury, pardon;
 where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.

And with that, let us join together and push our governments toward a future world free of nuclear weapons!

Your brother in the Light of Christ's Peace,

Most Reverend John C. Wester, Archbishop of Santa Fe
August 5, 2023, from the World Peace Memorial Cathedral of Hiroshima, Japan

Recommended reading: Pastoral Letter: *Living in the Light of Christ's Peace: A Conversation Toward Nuclear Disarmament*, Archbishop John C. Wester, January 2022,
<https://archdiosf.org/living-in-the-light-of-christs-peace>
Translations in Japanese, Korean and Spanish are also available at that same link.