



Reflection of Archbishop Paul Etienne
Memorial Ceremony for Victims of the Atomic Bomb
Nagasaki, Japan
August 8, 2023

Archbishop John Wester and I are humbled to be part of this solemn gathering. We are grateful and honored to address the Nagasaki Prefecture Conference of Religious Leaders and all of you gathered here tonight. We thank you for your witness for peace over the decades.

Four years ago, when Pope Francis visited Japan, he spoke of the responsibility he felt to come here as a pilgrim of peace. He paid homage to all the victims who were “devoured by a black hole of destruction and death.” For Archbishop Wester and me, we, too, have come here as pilgrims of peace. During our visit, we have reflected on the numbing scale of suffering caused by two relatively small atomic bombs: the thousands of people who were vaporized in a flash; the thousands who were infected with radiation; the many who suffered the agony of burns from the fire storms ignited by the bombs.

Among U.S. Catholic bishops, we feel a unique and urgent responsibility to advocate for nuclear disarmament. The atomic bomb was developed and first tested in New Mexico, near Archbishop Wester’s home. In Washington state where I live, the Hanford factory produced the plutonium for the bomb that destroyed Nagasaki. Currently, thousands of people in each of our archdioceses work with nuclear weapons. In addition to destroying Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic bombs, the United States exposed tens of millions of its citizens to radioactive fallout from the testing and production of nuclear weapons. People exposed to those radiations continue to suffer and die—just as those who made this city their home in 1945 continue to suffer and die.

So how do we best honor the suffering of the Hibakusha, the American downwinders, the Marshall Islanders, and the other victims of nuclear weapons?

Together in solidarity, we will strive ever more diligently to abolish all nuclear weapons. In doing so, we must wean ourselves from nuclear deterrence and develop a new concept of global security that also addresses the climate crisis.

Mindful of our need for assistance, let us pray: O God of universal peace, bless us with creativity, faithfulness, and a sense of urgency in our unwavering efforts to abolish nuclear weapons. Amen.