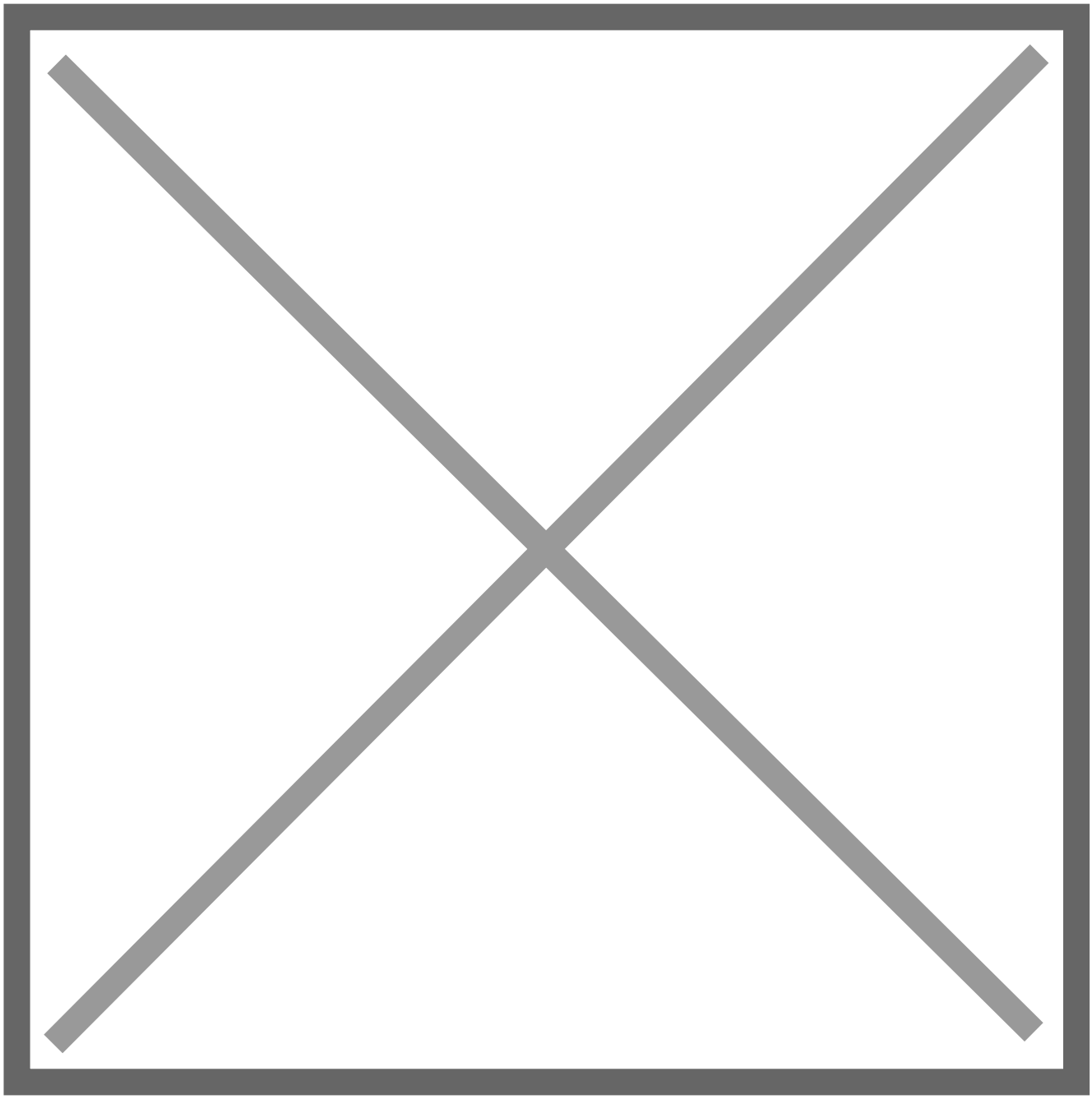
Vatican
News



Hiroshima's A-Bomb Dome, a ruin from the U.S. atomic bombing that is now part of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. (NCR 2011 file photo/Joshua J. McElwee)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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Pope Francis has announced his intention to become only the second Catholic pontiff to visit Japan, telling a group of pilgrims during a Vatican meeting that he hopes to make a trip to the country in 2019.

In a brief encounter Sept. 12 with members of the "Tensho Kenoh Shisetsu Kenshokai" association, the pope added a surprise to his prepared remarks, stating: "Taking advantage of this visit, I would like to announce my desire to visit Japan next year. Let's hope I can do it."

John Paul II was the first pope to visit Japan, traveling to Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1981.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is known to have extended an invitation for Francis to visit on several occasions, including during an encounter with the pontiff at the Vatican in June 2017.

Abe has suggested in the past that Francis could visit Hiroshima, the site of U.S. atomic bombing at the end of the Second World War, to raise awareness about the continuing dangers of nuclear weapons.

Christianity is a small religious minority in Japan, where those who identify with an organized religion are primarily Shinto or Buddhist. According to the Vatican's 2016 statistics, the latest available, there are a total of 539,000 Catholics in the country of some 127 million.

Francis gave special attention to the Catholic minority in Japan in June, when he included Osaka Archbishop Thomas Aquinas Manyo Maeda as one of 14 new prelates he elevated to cardinal.

The pontiff is known to have wanted to visit the Asian country as a young man, asking his Jesuit superiors to be sent there as a missionary early in his priesthood. But due to concerns about an earlier lung ailment, the request was denied.

At the moment, Francis has two confirmed upcoming visits abroad: to the Baltic countries of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia from Sept. 22-25, and to Panama for World Youth Day from Jan. 23-27, 2018.

This breaking news story is being updated.

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