News



Pope Francis examines photos of the aftermath of the 1945 atomic bombing of Japan as he greets members of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Youth Peace Messengers at his weekly general audience June 19. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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November 12, 2019

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Most attention during Pope Francis' trip to Japan later in the month will likely focus on the significance of his visits to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the strong call he is expected to make for the global abolition of nuclear weapons from the only cities once devastated by atomic bombs.

But prominent local Catholics and political experts say Francis may also address a host of other issues that could make the journey politically sensitive, and even place the pope publicly at odds with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's conservative government.

The two largest issues: the government's plan to restart the country's nuclear power generation capability, despite the long-lasting effects of the 2011 disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi plant, and Abe's attempts to revise Japan's postwar pacifist constitution.

"The policy priorities are not necessarily in sync between the pope and Prime Minister Abe," said Koichi Nakano, a politics professor at Tokyo's Sophia University.

"One thing that's going to be interesting to look at is how the pope will be responding to or would perhaps even take initiative on issues that the church … may not see eye to eye on with the Japanese government, and its prime minister," said Nakano, who has written extensively on Japan's political parties.



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe carries a wreath for the victims of the 1945 atomic bombing at Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima, Japan, Aug. 6. (CNS/Kyodo via Reuters)

Abe, who has been in power since 2012 and will soon become Japan's longest-serving prime minister, has pursued policies that most commentators consider as right-wing and nationalist.

The Catholic Church in Japan, while representing less than a half of a percent of the country's population, has been a leader in its opposition to the government, especially regarding nuclear power and the possible revision of the peace constitution.

When Abe pushed through legislation in 2015 allowing the Japanese military to participate in foreign conflicts, despite overwhelming consensus that the measures were unconstitutional, the conference's justice and peace council wrote a public, formal "statement of protest" addressed to the prime minister.

And as some nuclear power plants were brought back online in the years following the Fukushima disaster, the bishops' conference wrote an open message in 2016 to "inform the world of the hazards of nuclear power generation and appeal for its abolition."

Nakano said he expected that many Japanese, while not Catholic, will be watching to see what the pope says when he addresses Abe and the country's other political leaders at the prime minister's residence Nov. 25.

"The Catholic population of course is tiny in Japan, but the moral authority of the pope and the church in general and its diplomatic influence is respected," said the political scientist.

"Is he going to touch upon the controversy surrounding what was supposed to be peaceful use of nuclear power?" Nakano asked. "Will the pope even make a polite but clear message, pushing Japan to keep its postwar pacifism?"

Two leaders of Japan's religious orders said they hope Francis will speak about both issues.

Sacred Heart of Jesus Sr. Mieko Uno, who leads her order's Japan province, said in particular that she wishes the pope might tell Abe to "break away from dependence on nuclear power generation."

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Likewise, said Uno, "it would be nice if [Francis] could say, 'What a beautiful constitution, what a powerful constitution that is.' "

"To value the spirit of that constitution is very important," she said.

Jesuit Fr. Yoshio Kajiyama, who was the provincial of his order's province in Japan from 2010 to 2017, called the message from his country's bishops on nuclear power generation "excellent."

"I'd hope that the pope would mention abolition of nuclear power stations," said Kajiyama. "Many Japanese agreed with the bishops' message."

The Jesuit said he had spoken with some Japanese bishops about the possibility that Francis will talk about nuclear power. "It will be quite difficult," he said. "But I hope the pope mentions it. I hope the pope will support the bishops' message."

The Fukushima Daiichi disaster, caused after Japan suffered a magnitude 9.0 earthquake and tsunami, is considered the most severe nuclear accident since the 1986 Chernobyl accident. Radiation danger led to the evacuation of some 154,000 people, and sparked widespread fears about possible contamination of local groundwater and crops.

Japan's postwar constitution, enacted in 1947, states that the Japanese people "forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes."

Francis will be visiting Japan Nov. 23-26, after first spending four days in Thailand. It is his fourth visit to Asia during his six-year papacy, following visits to South Korea in 2014, Sri Lanka and the Philippines in 2015, and Myanmar and Bangladesh in 2017.

Abe has been keen for Francis to visit Japan for years, first inviting the pope to the country during a June 2014 trip to the Vatican.

Francis is scheduled to undertake a large number of events over his three-day trip. After landing in Tokyo from Bangkok in the evening of Nov. 23, he will travel some 1,600 miles on Nov. 24 alone, heading to Nagasaki and Hiroshima in one day, before heading back to Tokyo that night.

The pope will meet Abe and new Japanese Emperor Naruhito separately on Nov. 25.

Francis is expected to give the major address of the trip in Nagasaki's Peace Park, located at the hypocenter of the blast caused by the U.S. bombing of the city, which killed some 100,000 people.

The pope has often condemned the world's continued maintenance of nuclear arms, and in 2017 even notably shifted the Catholic Church's position away from acceptance of the Cold War-era global system of nuclear deterrence.

Kajiyama said he hoped Francis would call on Abe and other world leaders to support the U.N.'s Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which has now been signed by 79 countries, including the Holy See.

"Japan is against the treaty, like the United States," said the Jesuit. "I hope that the pope will speak about this in Nagasaki."

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This story appears in the **Francis in Thailand and Japan** feature series. View the full series.