News

Shinto priests bow to the altar during an interfaith service at the Atomic Bomb Memorial Mou

Shinto priests bow to the altar during an interfaith service at the Atomic Bomb Memorial Mound in Hiroshima, Japan, Aug. 6, 2023, to commemorate those who died in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima Aug. 6, 1945. (OSV News photo/Northwest Catholic)

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HIROSHIMA, Japan — August 9, 2023

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On the 78th anniversary of the 1945 atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Archbishop Paul Etienne of Seattle and Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and the Pilgrimage of Peace delegation from their archdioceses participated in an interfaith prayer ceremony and a peace memorial ceremony.

"It was hard to fathom that with just one bomb, this entire city along with some 140,000 people died as a result, far more than the tens of thousands gathered this morning to remember them," Etienne wrote on his blog about the interfaith ceremony at the Atomic Bomb Memorial Mound that was led by the Hiroshima Prefecture Federation of Religions.

Since the bombing on Aug. 6, 1945, many more people have died from radiation poisoning and other illness because of the bomb, and survivors (called "hibakusha" in Japanese) still carry physical and psychological wounds, the archbishop said.

"All of this was on my heart as we prayed together in this site of so much devastation, suffering and death," he said.

During the service, several Shinto priests approached the altar with branches and reeds and bowed, followed by dozens of other dignitaries and religious leaders. Etienne and Wester read the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi as a reminder for all to be instruments of peace.

The Pilgrimage of Peace seeks to establish relationships with the bishops of Japan to work toward abolition of nuclear weapons, while "expressing our heartfelt sorrow for the devastating experiences endured by their nation," according to the official pilgrimage site.

After the interfaith service, the Seattle/Santa Fe delegation walked to Hiroshima Peace Park for the annual Peace Memorial Ceremony, attended by more than 5,000 people from more than 110 nations. Speakers included the mayor and governor of Hiroshima and Japan's prime minister. A representative shared words from the secretary general of the United Nations, and two young children read the Children's Commitment to Peace.

The children, Etienne said, "reminded us of simple and necessary things all of us can do to build a better world."

The Peace Bell rang at 8:15 a.m. to mark the moment the bomb dropped on the city, followed by a moment of silence.

At nearby Gion Catholic Church, parishioners welcomed the delegation for a homemade lunch and played a short documentary about the Jesuit priests serving in Hiroshima on the day of the bombing. Their diaries detailed the experience of the blast, the indescribable heat, the black rain and the countless people trapped in buildings that went up in flames.

Led by Jesuit Fr. Pedro Arrupe, the Jesuit novitiate at Nagatsuka -- located about three miles from the blast site -- was immediately turned into a clinic housing more than 70 people that day. The home was soon overwhelmed with injured people,

many with horrendous burns and bleeding, who made their way up the hill to the novitiate, Etienne recounted.

The Seattle/Santa Fe delegation toured the building, now mostly used as a retreat center. They saw the room where Arrupe lived and where many of the victims were laid and cared for, and learned more about his efforts.

Late in the day of the bombing, Arrupe took his four priests into the devastation of Hiroshima to assist victims and search for companions who lived in the valley and bring them back to the novitiate; a two-hour trip turned into 12 hours. Early the next morning, Arrupe celebrated Mass with the wounded crowded all over the chapel and the rest of the novitiate, the archbishop wrote.

"A significantly high percentage of those who received treatment at Nagatsuka survived," Etienne said. "Miraculously, the priests in the house were mostly unharmed, and none of them ever tested positive at any time all the years later for radiation poisoning."
Arrupe's cause for canonization was opened in 2019.

"The stories of devastation, suffering and death are as heart-wrenching as the story of Father Arrupe and his Jesuit companions is inspiring," the archbishop said.

The human family, he said, must "learn the lesson of this dreadful day in history, and never again resort to the threat or use of nuclear weapons. It is simply not morally justifiable," and deterrence provides a false sense of security. "The mere existence of the thousands of nuclear weapons in our world today is a potential threat of the annihilation of the world as we know it," Etienne said.

"Let us help build relationships of care and concern," the archbishop wrote. "Let us strive to heal broken relationships. Let us work to advance not only the cause of peace, but achieve this necessary gift of peace for ourselves and the future."

Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, N.M., and Archbishop Paul Etienne of Seattle concelebrat

Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, N.M., and Archbishop Paul Etienne of Seattle concelebrate Mass in Hiroshima, Japan, on the 78th anniversary of the Aug. 6, 1945, atomic bombing of the city. (OSV News photo/Northwest Catholic)

A private Mass in the basement chapel of the World Peace Memorial Cathedral in Hiroshima brought the Seattle/Santa Fe Pilgrimage of Peace delegation's visit to that city to a close, and the group embarked on a five-and-a-half-hour bus ride to Nagasaki for activities around the anniversary of the Aug. 9, 1945, atomic bombing of that city.

Accompanying the group were several Japanese archbishops and bishops and the apostolic nuncio to Japan, Archbishop Leo Boccardi.

"The countryside was captivating and sprinkled with rain -- the early warnings of the impending typhoon," Etienne wrote in a blog post.

On arrival, the delegation met with Nagasaki Mayor Shiro Suzuki, and Wester presented Suzuki with an executive order from Mayor Tim Keller of Albuquerque, New Mexico, commemorating Aug. 9, 2023, "In Honor of The Japanese Innocent Lives Lost." New Mexico was the birthplace of the nuclear bomb. The world's first nuclear explosion occurred July 16, 1945, when a plutonium implosion device was tested in a remote section of the state's Alamogordo Air Base.

In Nagasaki, a planned Aug. 9 public memorial to mark the atomic bombing of that city had to be canceled as Typhoon Khanun headed to the region.

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Earlier in the delegation's visit to Japan, Wester delivered an address on nuclear disarmament at Hiroshima's World Peace Memorial Cathedral -- a place where he said he felt humbled to be "because it was built upon the ashes of the Noboricho parish church" (destroyed in the atomic bombing) and constructed with bricks "made from earth containing ashes from the atomic bomb."

The prelate opened his Aug. 5 address by expressing "profound regret and sorrow for the atomic bombings that destroyed your beautiful cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

"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," Wester said. "But even more so, I plead that we join together to make certain that these weapons will never be used again."

To that end, he called for ongoing dialogue on nuclear disarmament, emphasizing this dialogue must be "respectful, rooted in prayer, based on nonviolence, and centered in the hope and belief that nuclear disarmament is achievable."

He urged the "hibakusha" -- the surviving victims of the atomic bombs that fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings -- to "continue to provide the world with their painful testament for the needed abolition of nuclear weapons." He called on the Japanese public to "press their national political leadership to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, as the Vatican has done."

"It is not enough that we become instruments of peace, as important as that is," Wester said. "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."

[Northwest Catholic is the magazine and website of the Archdiocese of Seattle.]