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A woman sets a floating candle lantern on the river Aug. 6, 2015, in Hiroshima, Japan. (CNS p

A woman sets a floating candle lantern on the river Aug. 6, 2015, in Hiroshima, Japan. (CNS photo/Paul Jeffrey)

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Nagasaki, Japan — August 11, 2023

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On the 78th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, Archbishop Paul Etienne of Seattle and Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, joined three Japanese bishops in a formal pledge to concretely work toward "a world without nuclear weapons."

"In the spirit and teaching of Pope Francis, we recognize that even the possession of nuclear weapons is immoral," they said in the Aug. 9 partnership declaration, signed by the two U.S. prelates and Archbishop Peter Michiaki Nakamura of Nagasaki; Bishop Alexis Mitsuru Shirahama of Hiroshima, Japan; and retired Archbishop Joseph Mitsuaki Takami of Nagasaki.

The five bishops, from areas "impacted by nuclear weapons," urged "concrete progress" on this effort by August 2025, the 80th anniversary of the 1945 Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings.

They urged world leaders to take specific steps toward the abolition of nuclear weapons, outlined actions they will take in their own archdioceses and diocese, and said they will work with other dioceses and faith traditions to create an interfaith partnership.

"The road to peace is difficult -- we cannot travel it alone," they said.

The signatories of an Aug. 9, 2023, declaration to work together toward abolition of nuclear w

The signatories of an Aug. 9, 2023, declaration to work together toward abolition of nuclear weapons are, from left, retired Archbishop Joseph Mitsuaki Takami of Nagasaki, Japan; Archbishop Peter Michiaki Nakamuru of Nagasaki; Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico; Archbishop Paul Etienne of Seattle; and Bishop Alexis Mitsuru Shirahama of Hiroshima, Japan. The pledge was signed in Nagasaki on the 78th anniversary of the Aug. 9, 1945, atomic bombing of the city. (OSV News photo/courtesy Archdiocese of Seattle)

The announcement of their initiative came at the conclusion of an Aug. 1-9 Pilgrimage of Peace to Japan by Etienne and Wester. During the pilgrimage, the archbishops spoke about the need to abolish nuclear weapons, participated in memorial ceremonies in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and visited historic and Catholic sites.

During World War II, the U.S. detonated nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on Aug. 6, 1945, and Aug. 9, 1945, respectively. Those bombings marked the first -- and to date, only -- use of atomic weapons in war. Tens of thousands of people were killed in each of the initial explosions, and still more died from radiation poisoning in the following years.

Both Etienne and Wester have often noted their own archdioceses' connection to nuclear weapons. For the Seattle Archdiocese, it is the fact that in western Washington, where it is located, the United States has its major nuclear arsenal. And the Santa Fe Archdiocese is located in a state considered the birthplace of the nuclear bomb. During the pilgrimage, in an Aug. 5 address on nuclear disarmament, Wester noted with sadness that the atomic bombs dropped on Japan "were developed and built within my archdiocese."

In Nagasaki, as they did at the G7 meeting in Hiroshima in May, the U.S. and Japanese bishops in their declaration called on world leaders to take these steps toward abolition of nuclear weapons:

- Acknowledge the tremendous, long-lasting human suffering that the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings inflicted upon *hibakusha* (atomic bombing survivors).
- Acknowledge the tremendous, long-lasting human suffering and environmental impacts caused by uranium mining and nuclear weapons research, production and testing around the world.
- Reiterate that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought, as well as emphasize that, as the G20 agreed to in November 2022, the use and the threat of use of nuclear weapons are "inadmissible."
- Announce and commit to concrete steps to prevent a new arms race, guard against nuclear weapons use and advance nuclear disarmament.

The bishops said their pledge to work toward abolition of nuclear weapons is made "in the spirit of 'remembering, walking together, and protecting,' as Pope Francis said in his message in Hiroshima on November 24, 2019."

"We, the bishops of four arch/dioceses in areas that have experienced the devastation caused by nuclear weapons, call on our priests, religious and lay people to participate actively in this partnership to 'remember, walk together and protect' so that we may create a legacy of peace for current and future generations," they stated in the declaration.

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The bishops also outlined concrete steps they will undertake in their archdioceses/diocese:

- Remember: Listen to and dialogue with *hibakusha*, uranium miners, peace activists, nuclear engineers, military personnel, diplomats and others on a regular basis. Create opportunities to learn about the threat of nuclear weapons and the devastation caused by nuclear weapons.
- Walk together: Ask for God's help as individuals and as community with specific prayers. Offer Mass at least once a year with a special intention for a world

without nuclear weapons. Wherever possible, call for a special collection to support nuclear victims and restore the environment destroyed by nuclear weapons.
- Protect: Promote the signing and ratification of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Urge world leaders to redirect money spent on the development and maintenance of nuclear weapons toward helping vulnerable populations and addressing environmental issues.

"We conclude," the declaration said, "by calling upon Christ, the Prince of Peace, our partner and companion on the journey, to bless our partnership, and we ask for the intercession of Mary, Queen of Peace."

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