News



Representatives of the Hiroshima Nagasaki Peace Messengers speak across the street from United Nations headquarters in New York City during a rally to abolish nuclear weapons Nov. 28, 2023. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Gina Christian

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As the world marks the 80th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki — and as renewed nuclear threats emerge in current conflicts — several U.S. Catholic bishops will travel to Japan on a "Pilgrimage of Peace."

Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago, Cardinal Robert McElroy of Washington, Archbishop Paul Etienne of Seattle and Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, will visit the two Japanese cities Aug. 5-10, celebrating Masses for the victims, engaging in dialogue and interfaith prayer, and participating in commemoration services and processions.

The delegation — which will include faculty, staff and students from several U.S. Catholic universities — will be welcomed and accompanied by Archbishop Peter Michiaki Nakamura of Nagasaki and Bishop Alexis Mitsuru Shirahama of Hiroshima.

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The two Japanese bishops' dioceses, along with the Santa Fe and Seattle archdioceses, have teamed up to sponsor the pilgrimage as part of their Partnership for a World Without Nuclear Weapons. Also supporting the effort are the Chicago and Washington archdioceses, as well as

the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities in North America, Georgetown University, Loyola University Chicago, the University of Notre Dame, Nagasaki Junshin Catholic University and Sophia University in Tokyo.

The pilgrimage has occurred annually since it was established in 2023. Etienne will attend the pilgrimage for the second time, while the pilgrimage is the third for Wester, an outspoken advocate for nuclear deterrence.In 2022, Wester issued a pastoral letter titled "Living in the Light of Christ's Peace: A Conversation Toward Nuclear Disarmament." His archdiocese is home to both the Los Alamos and Sandia

National Laboratories, longtime critical facilities in the United States' nuclear weapons program.

On July 16, Wester led an interfaith prayer for peace and disarmament at the Trinity site in the Jornada del Muerto desert, where the U.S. conducted nuclear testing ahead of striking Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The test led to radiation contamination of soil, livestock and water, as well as an array of cancers and health issues among area residents, who became known as "Downwinders."

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During World War II, the U.S. attacked Hiroshima and Nagasaki respectively on Aug. 6 and 9, 1945, in an effort to force the unconditional surrender of Japan and hasten the end of the war. "Little Boy," which targeted Hiroshima, was the first nuclear weapon used in war — a uranium device with a detonation strength amounting to 20,000 tons of dynamite.

"Fat Man," the plutonium implosion weapon which struck Nagasaki, had an equivalent explosive force, but because of Nagasaki's hilly terrain, the damage was somewhat less extensive than that to the relatively flat Hiroshima.

Gen. Leslie Groves, who led the U.S. atomic bomb initiative — known as the Manhattan Project — advised in a July 23, 1945, directive that additional bombs would be used if the first two did not result in Japan's surrender.

The two bombs killed an estimated 110,000 to 210,000 people. The true number of casualties is "probably fundamentally unknowable," according to nuclear weapons historian Alex Wellerstein.

Survivors of the bombings, known as "hibakusha" (from a compound Japanese word for "one who suffered in the explosion"), have endured numerous physical, mental and emotional consequences, including an array of cancers, disabilities and trauma-related conditions.

Masako Wado, assistant secretary general of Nihon Hidankyo, the Japanese nuclear attack survivor group that received the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize, delivered a July 16 video message at a University of Chicago-hosted assembly for nuclear war prevention, warning, "The risk of using nuclear weapons has never been higher than

it is now."

She added that "nuclear deterrence, which intimidates other countries by possessing nuclear weapons, cannot save humanity."



Cardinals Robert McElroy of Washington, Blase Cupich of Chicago, and Archbishops John Wester of Santa Fe, N.M., and Paul Etienne of Seattle, are pictured in a combination photo. In August 2025, during the 80th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the four prominent U.S. prelates will travel to Japan to participate in a Pilgrimage of Peace, fostering prayer, dialogue, and global advocacy for nuclear disarmament. (OSV News files/OSV News/CNS)

At the same gathering, Cardinal Silvano Maria Tomasi, a longtime Vatican diplomat and disarmament advocate, said that religious communities can "contribute to the global architecture of disarmament and restraint" in several "specific ways" that foster dialogue, prevention and accountability.

In a July 23 column for Chicago Catholic, the newspaper of the Archdiocese of Chicago, Cupich reflected on the upcoming Pilgrimage of Peace, quoting Gen. Omar Bradley's 1949 Armistice Day speech at the Boston Chamber of Commerce, in which the general observed that the occasion was "a constant reminder that we won a war and lost a peace," and "both a tribute and an indictment," since "armed forces can wage wars but they cannot make peace."

Bradley's address serves as "a rallying cry to all citizens living in a democratic society to take seriously their responsibility for peace-building and the prosperity of all," said Cupich.

Noting that the speech is "a needed reminder that democracy is not just about guaranteeing individual freedom, but a commitment to the common good," Cupich stressed that "democracy means that we are all in this together."

Citing a 2017 International Security journal article by scholars Scott D. Sagan and Benjamin A. Valentino, the cardinal pointed out that despite polls seeming to indicate historical decline in U.S. support for the Japan bombings, data shows that most Americans would back using nuclear weapons if they felt the risks warranted such action.

Specifically, Sagan and Valentino — who conducted a YouGov-administered poll in July 2015 with a hypothetical case of using nuclear weapons against Iran — found that "a clear majority of Americans would approve of using nuclear weapons against the civilian population of a nonnuclear-armed adversary, killing 2 million Iranian civilians, if they believed that such use would save the lives of 20,000 U.S. soldiers.



A file photo shows a "BAN NUKES!" slogan which was made of candle lights in front of the gutted Atomic Bomb Dome in Hiroshima, western Japan. (OSV News/Reuters/Kim Kyung-Hoon)

"In addition … an even larger percentage of Americans would approve of a conventional bombing attack designed to kill 100,000 Iranian civilians in the effort to intimidate Iran into surrendering," said the scholars.

"The entire population must be engaged in discussing and agreeing on the limits to warfare with a commitment that acts of intentionally killing innocents is unthinkable and never to be regarded as a regrettable but useful way to shorten a war," said Cupich in his column.

Moreover, he said, "The church has a special responsibility in helping people resist ideas of retribution, hatred, ethnocentrism and nationalism and in clearly presenting to the world an ethic of solidarity which gives priority to peace-building."

In a July 22 press release announcing the pilgrimage, Wester said, "We are pilgrims of peace and hope, crossing continents and histories to remember the past and

transform the future."

"This journey to Hiroshima and Nagasaki is not only a remembrance but a recommitment to the Gospel call for nonviolence and the abolition of nuclear weapons," he said.