Opinion
Guest Voices



After a Peace Memorial Mass at Urakami Cathedral in Nagasaki, Japan, Aug. 9, 2025, people carry torches during a peace march to Hypocenter Park in commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the U.S. atomic bombing of Nagasaki. (OSV News/Reuters/Issei Kato)



by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy

View Author Profile
theresecw@aol.com

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Nagasaki, Japan — August 26, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The long arc of the Catholic Church's opposition to nuclear weapons has shifted from denunciation and moral critique to advocacy for abolition. But it has yet to translate into American Catholics renouncing what Pope Francis called "suicide" for humanity.

I write this not in judgment of the tireless advocates for nuclear disarmament within the Catholic community, but as observation. Amid the recent furor in Washington over the national budget, few Catholic lawmakers challenged cuts in domestic spending in the context of obscene expenditures for the modernization of our nuclear arsenals. A 2017 study found a majority of Americans would support using nuclear weapons in a war with Iran if it saved U.S. military lives.

The reasons for our ongoing embrace of nuclear weapons include: ignorance about their consequences; ignorance of church teaching; a deficiency of directives in those teachings; a sense of powerlessness in the face of an existential threat; and a nihilistic nationalism.

Our nuclear stockpiles may well imperil the planet, yet many Americans believe they provide the U.S. with the necessary currency for a global power. Those with the nukes make the rules, after all.

The problem is more than pedagogical or geopolitical. It's moral. At the root of our atomic addiction lies a disbelief in the God of life.

Related: At 80th anniversary Mass in Nagasaki, a plea to bring Christ's love, peace to world

"Truly at Los Alamos the United States created a destroyer of worlds that haunts the very core of the human family," said Cardinal Robert McElroy of Washington during an Aug. 7 address in Nagasaki, Japan. We cannot seem to shake that haunting.

McElroy spoke Aug. 7 at the Interreligious Symposium on Nuclear Issues and World Peace, one of many symposiums held during the Aug. 4-11 U.S. Catholic Peace

Pilgrimage to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, organized to coincide with the 80th anniversary of the U.S. atomic bombing of the two cities.

A number of Catholic prelates from the U.S. and Japan participated, including bishops from bomb-affected dioceses in both countries, as well as faculty, staff and students from several Japanese and U.S. Catholic colleges and universities. All had gathered to consider Catholic responses to war and nuclear weapons in the two cities where nukes were actually used.

McElroy spoke of the need to "speak unswervingly to the transcendent as the source for every grace and beauty" in this world. So much of global culture denies its "identity and the power," he said, but it was in articulating the transcendent, which recognizes the true mystery and richness of human life and the inviolable claim the transcendent dignity of every person has on each of us, that people of faith can challenge the determinism perpetuating our nuclear fixation.

How do we do this in the context of nuclear weapons?

Advertisement

On the morning of the cardinal's talk, I visited the Jesuit novitiate located on the outskirts of Hiroshima where a young Jesuit Fr. Pedro Arrupe was serving as superior general when the U.S. dropped its atomic bomb. He vividly recounts the cataclysmic event in *Pedro Arrupe: Essential Writings*.

Arrupe, who had some medical training, along with a dozen priests and nuns, cared for 150 of the injured at the novitiate. They drained blisters, removed grit and glass from badly wounded bodies and watched in bafflement as some patients, outwardly unmarred, complained of a mysterious internal heat then quickly died.

From a medical standpoint, it made no difference to later discover Hiroshima was the recipient of a novel atomic bomb, because its effects on human organisms were unknown, Arrupe wrote. "We were ... the first guinea pigs of such experimentation." That objectification did not blind him or his fellow priests to the transcendent dignity of every person within the obliterated city.

Warned not to go into Hiroshima because of a "gas that kills for seventy years," the Jesuit missionaries entered nonetheless to cremate the dead and tend to the injured, as required by their faith which was not obliterated that day. "In spite of this new

powerful weapon and any other that may still come," Arrupe later told his Japanese students, "you must know that we have a power much greater than the atomic energy. We have the Heart of Christ."



People view an exhibit in Tompkins Square Park in New York City Aug. 9, 2025, marking the 80th anniversary of the Aug. 6, 1945, and Aug. 9, 1945, atomic bombings, respectively, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. The exhibit was arranged by the New York City chapter of the War Resisters League to detail the history and horrors of the bombings. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Professor Myrriah Gómez from the Honors College at the University of New Mexico gave one of the last talks during the Catholic Pilgrimage of Peace. She spoke in the sanctuary of Nagasaki's reconstructed Urakami Cathedral, the original church having been destroyed when an American Catholic pilot dropped a plutonium weapon 500 meters away. Its incinerating heat and bomb blast immediately killed 74,000 Nagasaki residents, including 8,500 of the cathedral's 12,000 parishioners.

A native of the village of El Rancho, Gómez grew up 15 miles from Los Alamos Labs where the Nagasaki bomb was tested. We are the senior "*hibakusha*," the first bomb-affected people, she said. She chronicled the premature deaths from cancer of relatives who worked at the labs — a father, uncle and cousin — and talked of the communities exposed to radiation from hundreds of above-ground tests callously conducted in a nearby canyon.

Gómez then spoke of El Santuario de Chimayó, a holy site of pilgrimage, located 30 miles from Los Alamos. For centuries, people have journeyed to the church because of its special crucifix and dirt that is said to be holy.

Holding up a vial of the soil, with her voice breaking, Gomez said: "Today, I bring the dirt from our holy shrine of El Santuario de Chimayó to the Urakami Cathedral in Nagasaki as a symbol of peace and one of hope. As a daughter of the lands where this bomb was built, I come to say, I'm sorry. May this journey that we have made together awaken your spirit to work toward the total abolition of nuclear weapons."

There are a thousand ways we can instruct each other toward that goal. Essential to each is a conviction that God made us for life, not death, and life will prevail. Those who have endured the atomic nightmare often provide the best inspiration for that belief.

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy attended the Japan pilgrimage with a small delegation from Worcester, Massachusetts.