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Nagasaki archbishop: nuclear arms never justified

by Beth Griffin by Catholic News Service



Archbishop Joseph Mitsuaki Takami of Nagasaki, Japan, prays near a statue of St. Agnes and the remains of a statue of Mary at the United Nations in New York May 4. The statues, which survived the nuclear bombing of Nagasaki, Japan, during World War II, are on display in New York during the U.N. Review Conference of Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. (CNS)

NEW YORK -- Speaking at two U.N.-related events May 4, the archbishop of Nagasaki, Japan, called the existence of nuclear weapons "inherently evil" and said "there is no reason whatsoever to justify this deadly weapon."

Archbishop Joseph Mitsuaki Takami, who as an unborn child survived the Aug. 9, 1945, atomic bomb that decimated his city at the end of World War II, brought his impassioned plea for nuclear disarmament and the abolition of all war to the events at a chapel overlooking the headquarters of the United Nations.

Archbishop Takami was born seven months after the bomb killed 60,000 people in his hometown, including his grandmother, two aunts and an uncle.

He addressed U.N. representatives, members of Catholic organizations and university students in the

Tillman Chapel at the Church Center for the United Nations. The archbishop's visit coincided with the May 3-28 international review of the U.N. nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

"Even one nuclear weapon should not be tolerated," he said.

As Archbishop Takami spoke, a scorched wooden bust of Mary with hollow eyes rested behind him on the altar. It is an image known as Mary the Hibakusha, or atomic bomb survivor. He carried it with him from Japan.

Archbishop Takami said a Trappist monk rescued the bust from the Urakami cathedral in Nagasaki after the atomic blast. It was all that remained of a full-size statue that had been displayed at the main altar of the church to commemorate the end of 250 years of persecution of Christians in Japan. The Urakami parish lost 8,500 of its 12,000 parishioners to the bomb, he said.

"It was providential that she was discovered," the archbishop said. "Her whole body had been ripped off, like others who suffer violence. Looking at her face reminds us of Mary by the cross and at the same time invites us to work for peace."

Sister Filo Shizue Hirota, a Mercedarian Missionary of Berriz who serves as Archbishop Takami's translator, told Catholic News Service that the purpose of the archbishop's visit to New York is "to communicate the message of Mary the Hibakusha to the American people and to people here for the nuclear (non-)proliferation treaty review conference."

During a prayer service organized by Franciscans International, Archbishop Takami read a letter he wrote with Bishop Atsumi Misue of Hiroshima, the bishop of the only other city to endure a nuclear attack.

Archbishop Takami said more than 100,000 people were killed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki by two atomic bombs; thousands more suffered and many continue to experience the physical, moral and social aftereffects of the attacks, even now.

He said modern thermonuclear bombs are "several thousand times" more destructive than the atomic bomb and have been "mass-produced in various forms after being improved by actual warfare."

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He said it is "sad and foolish" to abuse the progress made by humanity in science and technology "to destroy lives as massively and swiftly as possible" and to profit from producing weapons.

Archbishop Takami said his goal is a world free of nuclear weapons, but he considered weapons reduction a practical step toward that end. "No one desires to live in a world full of struggles, surrounded by weapons, but rather to realize a world where everyone can live a humane life filled with love and trust while cooperating with one another," he said.

He said young people in Japan need to study the modern history of war and aggression as an impetus to promote peace. Catholics should understand the non-violence of Jesus and work to model it, he said.

After the prayer service, Archbishop Takami met with students from the Catholic campus ministry program at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury, Conn. He detailed the horrors of nuclear weapons and said, "The cruelty of an atomic bomb is in its capability of mass destruction and murder. An atomic bomb means a total denial of the dignity of a human person."

He challenged the students to work to change the prevailing belief that "you need violence to protect yourselves. As long as you have arms, you will never be able to create peace."

With a smile, the archbishop suggested boxing as an effective method of conflict resolution.

Archbishop Takami said it is important for nations to establish relationships based on shared values and not arms. He said the European Community is taking steps in that direction.

Franciscan Father Michael Lasky, Catholic chaplain at Western Connecticut, told CNS that the meeting with Archbishop Takami was part of an ongoing effort to educate students about global diversity by participating in programs at the United Nations.

Dave Robinson, executive director of Pax Christi USA, told CNS that Archbishop Takami's message is timely as both a moral and a political statement. "When we hear from a survivor of the only use of atomic weapons who has committed his life to abolishing them," he said, "we should listen and take up [the cause]."

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