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Nearing Hiroshima Day, Japanese bishop calls for discernment on nuclear energy

by Joshua J. McElwee



HIROSHIMA -- Ten of Japan's sixteen bishops are to arrive here tomorrow. It is not to be a synod. They are gathering Aug. 6 to commemorate humanity's first use of an atomic bomb in an act of war.

An annual pilgrimage, the bishops will join thousands of others in marking the 66th year since the blast's utter devastation -- and the first since the March meltdowns at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant following a 9.0 magnitude earthquake.

For Bishop Paul Otsuka of the Kyoto diocese that occasion is something for careful consideration.

Speaking in a letter on behalf of his diocese to the entire Japanese church, Otsuka wrote this month that Japan, "which is the only country in the world to have been attacked with atomic weapons," now "stands in danger of becoming a country fundamentally damaged because of atomic energy generation."

That possibility, Otsuka wrote, should cause Japan to use the occasion to "discern whether atomic energy, which threatens mankind and the environment, comes within the acceptable limits of our legitimate use of science and technology."

Otsuka's letter was issued as part of the Japanese church's annual celebration of ten days of peace during the month of August. From Aug. 6 (the date of the destruction of Hiroshima) to Aug. 15 (the date of Japanese surrender at the end of the Second World War), the Japanese church asks Catholics to pray and take action for peace causes.

NCR's Joshua J. McElwee spoke with Otsuka in his office in Kyoto Aug. 3 about his message, and how he thinks Japan should consider the question of nuclear energy. Following is that interview, edited for clarity and length.

Check back at nronline.org later for more from the conversation, which also saw the bishop talk at length about the unique struggles facing the Catholic Church in Japan.

In your message for the Japanese bishops' peace days this year, you focused on the issue of nuclear energy, and the ongoing disaster at the Fukushima power plant. Why? What do you think Catholics have to say about this?

I wanted to write about nuclear energy because the damage from March's accident at the Fukushima plant continues. And many people sincerely wonder if it is possible for humankind to use nuclear energy safely. Until the incident we believed it is possible for humankind to use our nuclear knowledge for peaceful use safely. It is good to use our nuclear knowledge for peaceful use if we have perfect technology to protect our planet. But this incident shows this is impossible. The perfect technical system is impossible.

So I and many other Japanese bishops started to think about this issue anew. I wanted to write about it from a Christian viewpoint. Pope John Paul II said in many documents that humankind has to be very careful how it uses technology. Generally speaking, God has given us inspiration to invent new technology. This does not mean we should have unlimited progress. We are not perfect. Although at this point we cannot say clearly that we should never use nuclear energy, we need a chance to seriously consider this issue.

What is the best way to have that discussion? How should it happen?

Like the Germans did, we have to first stop using nuclear energy even if it takes a long time to finish that process. Then we have to think about another way of producing energy. Many people say renewable energy may be the answer. But the problem is not simply nuclear energy. Another point is that now, in modern society, we are addicted to energy. It's like a drug. People automatically assume we need energy. But, generally speaking, energy itself is not the most important thing for our society. If we simply switch from nuclear power to something that does not damage the environment, we will continue this addiction.

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So, from the point of view of the evangelical life, the modern world has to stop take this chance to seriously consider our use of energy. Even though solar energy is unlimited, why do we need such a huge amount of energy? Is progress always a good thing?

Recently, the English-speaking people have begun to speak of sustainable progress. I don't like this idea. Sustainable means that countries that have more ? the G8 countries -- will use sustainable means for only their own countries. However, many countries, which are undeveloped, will remain undeveloped.

Sustainable, I think, means, "We want to keep our high level of society, but you are not allowed to join." Sustainable does not mean, generally speaking, "for all humankind." And sustainable is not true. It is impossible. Energy and natural resources are limited. Yet the many rich countries cannot go back to an undeveloped level. This makes me wonder about the relationship between humankind's progress and our energy problem.

In the United States we say we have to think about our way of life. What do you think we need to look at in our way of life when we consider our energy consumption?

I wrote in my letter that we have to consider a simple lifestyle. That does not mean we must conserve energy and endure an uncomfortable life for only a few moments. We have to completely change how we think about how we use and produce energy.

We need balance. As human beings, we need energy. But it is always more and more, more and more. For now, nuclear power is a good solution for energy. But we learned from the accident that this is very dangerous. So this is a chance to fundamentally alter humankind's attitude toward power.

Take for example the Amish in the United States. They have a very different lifestyle. They use very little energy, I think. Their lifestyle is an extreme example, but perhaps it is a good example to some degree. It shows that a new type of lifestyle is possible. We cannot force people to live that lifestyle, but we have to acknowledge that there should be limits.

In Japan, we depend on nuclear energy for over 30 percent of our power. One Korean bishop came to Japan to visit the Sendai area after the tsunami and he talked to me. He was shocked at the damage from the tsunami and the nuclear accident.

Korea depends on nuclear energy for 40 percent of its power. So the bishop said Koreans also have to think about which way to go with their energy use: Reduce, or keep increasing. As a Christian we have to choose about this issue and decide our attitude toward nuclear issues, not only at the political level or for economic reasons, but as part of our way of life.

In the United States, there are many more Christians than there are in Japan. Considering that Christians are such a minority, how can Christians in Japan influence this conversation on nuclear energy?

Generally speaking, we are a very few number of Catholics. Until now, we have made many messages to society and to our government. It's opinion and has no influence. Influence is very difficult, but we continue to send messages directed to the government, saying what we think about this problem from the Christian perspective. We also have good inter-religious relationships. Some religious leaders can start to talk about this issue together and have a greater influence coming from our one inter-religious group -- a group of Shintos, Buddhists, Christians. Together we can say something to the society, to the government.

I know that in two days, you are planning to go to Hiroshima for the annual Aug. 6 commemoration of the dropping of the atomic bomb. I wonder, what particular importance do you think the commemoration has this year after the March 11 earthquake and nuclear meltdown in Japan?

These days in the news many groups opposed to nuclear weapons are also opposing nuclear energy. For many people, not only in the church, the same message given at the Hiroshima and Nagasaki commemorations will refer to the problem of nuclear energy. Some groups say "Absolutely no. No nuclear energy." Others say, "Yes, but it is time to switch." Many people say it's better to have no nuclear

plants.

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