

**6 AUGUST, THE FEAST OF THE TRANSFIGURATION, WAS ALSO THE
80TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DROPPING OF THE FIRST ATOMIC BOMB
ON HIROSHIMA – THE ULTIMATE DISFIGURATION**

*J. Kevin Appleby - 80 years after Hiroshima, the world still lives
under threat of nuclear destruction*



*Religious sisters and others pray during
Mass on Aug. 6 at the World Peace
Memorial Cathedral in Hiroshima,
Japan, for the victims of the 1945 atomic
bombing.*

*The Mass was part of a "Pilgrimage of
Peace" by four U.S. archbishops and
U.S. Catholic university leaders and
students.*

Walking down the main streets of this bustling, orderly and peaceful city of Hiroshima, Japan, I would not have thought that 80 years ago, on Aug. 6, 1945, at 8:15 a.m. local time, an atomic bomb brought death and destruction to its residents, killing more than 150,000 people. Three days later, another bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, killing 75,000.

I am here as part of a Catholic peace delegation, led by Cardinal Robert McElroy of Washington, D.C.; Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago; Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, N.M.; and Archbishop Paul Etienne of Seattle; and also including school officials and students from several U.S. Catholic universities. Our purpose is to commemorate the victims of the atomic bombings and to express solidarity with the Catholic community four decades after these tragic events.

It has been a learning experience, not only because of the facts of what happened that day but because of the emotional and psychological scars left on this city. At the official ceremony to mark the 80th anniversary, I saw two elementary school children speak movingly, committing to keep alive the memory of those who suffered and died that day: *"We, the children, have the ability to take action for peace. In order to avoid repeating what happened that day, to avoid repeating the history of Hiroshima, we will build peace by continuing to convey the will of the hibakusha [the "bomb-affected people"] and weaving our voices together as one."*

The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked the beginning of an era that is still evolving, in which humanity lives under the threat of immediate annihilation by nuclear weapons. Scholars continue to discuss whether the action of the United States that day was necessary to end World War II and to save a larger number of American lives—and where we would be today if the bombs had not been developed and used. But here we are, regardless, living in a world with the firepower to destroy itself. The weapons we have now are infinitely stronger than **"Little Boy,"** as the bomb dropped on Hiroshima was inaptly named, with more than 500 times the power of what was unleashed that morning. The world has not done enough to end the possibility of all-out nuclear war but has only increased it.

The latest example of this failure is the sabre-rattling between the United States and Russia, in which provocative language from a high Russian official about all-out war was met with President Trump "repositioning" U.S. nuclear submarines, presumably to more easily strike Russia if nuclear war did break out. Such rhetoric—and action—should not be taken lightly, but it now seems as if it has become a matter

of course, with no end in sight to this type of reckless behaviour. Two powerful nations are playing games with fire.

If you play with fire, won't you inevitably get burned? Over the past 80 years, there have been several close calls. The Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 nearly ended in a nuclear exchange, which was averted, according to then-Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, by sheer "luck." In 1983, a Russian officer saw what appeared to be several approaching U.S. nuclear missiles on his early-warning computer screen but waited before telling his superiors, avoiding an inevitable Russian nuclear response. It was a false alarm. And in 2019, tensions between India and Pakistan came close to a nuclear exchange, with the United States intervening to halt any escalation.

Despite nuclear arms reduction during a period of détente, the U.S.-Russia nuclear arms race is alive and well. Both nations have enough weapons to destroy the other in minutes, and both are working to take the nuclear threat into space. Russia now boasts a "dead hand" capability, in which nuclear weapons would be launched even if the country's leadership were killed. Perhaps most terrifying is the concept that artificial intelligence could soon increase the risk of nuclear war.

A nuclear exchange between the United States and Russia is not the only potential danger. Should China attempt to take over Taiwan, some military experts argue, only U.S. nuclear weapons could stop them. A nuclear-armed North Korea now poses a threat not only to South Korea but also to Japan and the U.S. mainland. And Iran continues to attempt to develop its own nuclear weapons, posing a threat to Israel (although its nuclear programme may have been delayed by recent strikes by both Israel and the United States).

Acknowledging the threat to the survival of humanity, Pope Francis concluded in 2019 that the mere possession of nuclear weapons was immoral. This statement recognized the futility of building nuclear stockpiles as a form of deterrence, a policy that has given false comfort to many over the years. Pope Leo XIV reaffirmed this teaching in a letter to atomic bombing survivors commemorating the 80th anniversary of the bombings in Japan: *"In our time of mounting global tensions and conflicts, Hiroshima and Nagasaki stand as symbols of memory that urge us to reject the illusion of security founded upon mutually assured destruction. Instead, we must forge a global ethic rooted in justice, fraternity, and the common good."*

In a joint statement with several Japanese and South Korean bishops issued on Aug. 5, the U.S. bishops on this trip to Hiroshima echoed this theme, condemning *"all wars and conflicts, the use and possession of nuclear weapons, and the threat to use nuclear weapons. Alongside other civil society and religious organizations, we will continue to protest the inhumanity of nuclear weapons and insist on the common good of protecting the earth and all life in it."*

But the remaining survivors of the atomic bombings have the greatest credibility in warning us about the human consequences of a nuclear war. Here in Hiroshima, survivors recalled to our delegation the terror of that fateful day. **Hiroshi Kanemoto**, 80 years old, was an infant who was saved by a stranger who pulled rubble out of his mouth. **Hiroshi Harada**, now 86 and a former director of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, was only 6 years old when the bomb exploded a little over a mile away from him. His father shielded him from the blast, allowing him to survive.

Both members of the **Japan Confederation of A- and H- Bomb Sufferers Organizations**, which was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year for its work on multilateral nuclear disarmament, are living reminders of the destructive power of these weapons. In their testimonies to us, they said that there *"are not words"* to describe the horror of that day in Hiroshima. Mr. Kanemoto concluded, *"We must wipe out these weapons or they will wipe us out."*

While the atomic bombings of Japan will continue to be discussed by historians, the bigger question now is how the world can prevent the use of much more powerful weapons in the future. The lesson from the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is that the world's governments can do only one thing to prevent their use: eliminate them from the face of the earth.

Let us pray that it will not take another nuclear bombing to learn this lesson. Because next time there may be no survivors.

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