

**Remarks by Cardinal Blase Cupich  
Archbishop of Chicago  
Nagasaki  
August 7, 2025**

It is humbling for me to realize that I am here not only as a pastoral leader in the Catholic Church but as an American citizen. Allow me to share with you my thoughts on my country's action in the summer of 1945. I believe that, due to the abandonment of a fundamental claim of both international law and my Church's moral tradition, the decision to use atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was deeply flawed. The Geneva Conventions and just war theory both maintain that there is a line to be drawn between innocent people and those individuals who are liable to deliberate attack due to their role in a war effort.

During the course of World War II, large numbers of civilians in cities had already become targets prior to the atomic bombings. Indeed, an American Jesuit priest, John Ford, had published in 1944 a tightly reasoned and blunt assessment of what he called "obliteration bombing."<sup>i</sup> His essay was a protest against the Western allies' practice of bombing German cities indiscriminately. British prime minister Winston Churchill's use of the terror tactic was in response to the earlier actions of the German *Luftwaffe* over London. The firebombing of the city of Dresden, Germany helped set a precedent for the U.S. Air Force and normalized the intentional killing of great numbers of Japanese civilians. Tragically, the traditional insistence on noncombatant immunity had crumbled during the savagery of World War II.

By 1945 the goal was to shorten a war that was already years-long and civilian deaths were taken for granted as part of the cost of war.<sup>ii</sup> So in the Pacific theatre, the

U.S. operated under a strategy that had become, for all intents and purposes, virtually total war. In the weeks prior to the atomic bombing there had been a murderous air campaign of fire-bombing waged by the United States against many of the population centers in Japan. In fact, one of the reasons for selecting Hiroshima and Nagasaki to be on the list of potential targets was that so many other Japanese cities were already severely damaged, and the psychological impact of the atomic bombs would not be as great if used on these already devastated sites.<sup>iii</sup>

Historians tell us that when President Harry Truman decided the atomic bombs should be used, he did not find it a difficult decision. That judgment of historians is supported by Truman's own words found in his written memoirs: "I regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubt that it should be used."<sup>iv</sup> At the time, there was widespread support among the American people for the bombing, and little questioning about the decision within the small circle of civilian and military officials responsible for the development and use of atomic weapons.<sup>v</sup>

In the eighty years since the fateful atomic bombings the public mood in my nation about them has undergone change. A substantial minority of Americans still approve of Truman's decision, but a two-thirds majority does not. The passage of time since the events - the death of war veterans and the generations most affected by World War II, as well as the emotional distance from the horrors of the war - all help to explain the decline in support for use of the bombs. And, of course, the growth of friendship between Japan and the United States since the war's end has dramatically influenced the way that we see in each other people like ourselves.

And yet I note with regret, the same essay that reported the decline in Americans' support of the first use of atomic weapons in war, also revealed there remains a willingness among a majority of American citizens to use nuclear weapons against a contemporary threat to the U.S. military. When asked a series of questions about a fictional scenario in which a war with Iran could be ended by using nuclear weapons against Iranian cities, and thereby reducing American military casualties, it was clear that "the U.S. public's willingness to use nuclear weapons and deliberately kill foreign civilians has not changed as much since 1945 as many scholars have assumed."<sup>vi</sup> If U.S. military lives are at stake, the American public does not consider the use of nuclear weapons to be forbidden. Instead, a majority of Americans gives priority to winning a war quickly and saving the lives of U.S. soldiers, even if it means killing large numbers of foreign civilians.<sup>vii</sup>

The moral tradition of just war reasoning is an ongoing conversation about when, why, and how a war may be fought. Despite the numerous theories within the tradition attempting to answer those questions, the intellectual challenge a just war presents is not the major problem before those of us who pastor the People of God. As we gather to recall the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, we are reminded today that the real problem is finding people who are so committed to moral limits to warfare that acts of intentionally killing innocents is unthinkable and never to be regarded as a regrettable but useful way to shorten a war.

In other words, the just war tradition must be a resource for the moral formation not only of the military but the general population of a nation. Helping people resist

ideas of retribution, hatred, ethnocentrism, and nationalism should be a necessary element in any articulation of the just war tradition. For the just war tradition to remain a credible moral approach it must be situated within the broader context of an ethic of solidarity which gives priority to peacebuilding. This is what the Catholic Church has sought to do by talking about *integral disarmament*.

The phrase comes from the meeting hosted by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development at the Vatican in November 2017. The aim of the meeting was to develop a perspective on disarmament that moved beyond a narrow focus on weapons to consider not only the military aspects but also the social, economic, and ecological dimensions of disarmament. A more holistic approach, an integral one, places disarmament within the wider concern for peace and the need to address the deeper roots of our reliance upon nuclear weaponry. And I would add in line with what my brother Cardinal McElroy has argued, priority should be given to nonviolence in crafting a holistic approach to Catholic teaching on conflict, with just war theory focused on weaponry taking a more secondary role.<sup>viii</sup> For indeed, as Pope Francis observed, we for too long have relied upon nuclear weaponry for “a false sense of security.”<sup>ix</sup>

The use of threats, which is the essence of the strategy of nuclear deterrence, can never bring about the peaceful coexistence between nations that an ethic inspired by solidarity, authentic development, and human rights can produce. Nations, such as my own country of the United States, have sought to find security through nuclear stockpiles. What that has led us to is the uneasy reality of armed standoffs between nations, which we have mistaken for a genuine peace.

Such a posture has also led us to a world where countries like Iran appear to seek entrance to the “nuclear club” of nations. Fear of such ambitions led to this past June’s bombings of Iran by the U.S. and Israel, while the achievement of a nuclear arsenal by North Korea has only led to greater insecurity in this region. Genuine peace is more than a fearful truce. The human race must commit itself to the end of the nuclear arms race, for it is a race which none can truly win but countless millions can truly lose.

As the only nation that has used nuclear weapons in war, and as the nation with a nuclear arsenal that dwarfs that of all others besides Russia, I believe the United States has a special obligation to lead the human family in a different direction. The U.S. must seek to build an international order that rests upon a non-nuclear foundation. This cannot be done if America adopts a foreign policy of neo-isolationism, which some in the U.S. seem to want. Instead, diplomatic engagement with Russia should place nuclear arms reduction at the top of the agenda. When serious reductions are attained by the two superpowers, the time will arrive to expand the conversation to include the other nuclear armed nations of the world, including China and North Korea. But the U.S. and Russia must first demonstrate their willingness to fulfill the responsibility they have assumed as the twin nuclear superpowers. Together they have more than 10,500 of the roughly 12,300 nuclear warheads on earth. It is time for people around the world to call for leadership from the two nations with arsenals that threaten the continued sustainability of life on our planet.

In closing, let me acknowledge with deep gratitude the inspiring witness of the *Hibakusha*, the prophetic voices of those survivors of the atomic bombings who have

been agents of peace for decades. Their grassroots activity is precisely what we need to foster a public climate of peacebuilding and integral disarmament. The cause is far too important to leave to our politicians and military, without demeaning their valuable role. But we as citizens must live up to our role, especially those of us fortunate to live in democracies where public speech and action is protected and encouraged. May the United States, along with Japan and other allies, heed the call of Pope Leo: “We must try at all costs to avoid the use of weapons and seek dialogue through diplomatic means. Let us work together to find solutions.”<sup>x</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> John Ford, “The Morality of Obliteration Bombing,” *Theological Studies* 5 (1944) 261-309.

<sup>ii</sup> McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years*. Vintage Books, 1988, 63-68.

<sup>iii</sup> Paul Ham, “The Bureaucrats Who Singled Out Hiroshima for Destruction,” *The Atlantic* (August 5, 2015).

<sup>iv</sup> Harry Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman*, vol.1 *Years of Decision*. Doubleday & Co., 1955, 419.

<sup>v</sup> Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 54.

<sup>vi</sup> Scott Sagan and Benjamin Valentino, “Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran,” *International Security* 42.1 (2017) 41-79 at 42.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.* 77.

<sup>viii</sup> Cardinal Robert McElroy, Address for the Inauguration of The Catholic Institute for Nonviolence, September 29, 2024.

<sup>ix</sup> Pope Francis, “Address to the Participants in the International Symposium,” November 10, 2019.

<sup>x</sup> Pope Leo XIV, Angelus, June 22, 2025.