

AS WITNESSES TO TRANSCENDENCE WE BECOME BUILDERS OF PEACE

A Contribution to Dialogue with the Nagasaki Prefecture Religious Association

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As we have gathered together to mark the anniversary of the terrible atrocity of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in these days, we have reflected deeply upon the unique horror of atomic and nuclear weapons, on the lives they have taken, destroyed and scarred, and upon their threat to the entire existence of humanity at this moment in human history. Truly at Los Alamos the United States created a destroyer of worlds that haunts the very core of the human family.

And our reflection here today must begin by pondering these overwhelmingly demonic realities of the history we have known and the present crisis in nuclear policy which we have wrought and continue to intensify through modernization programs, the growth of nuclear stockpiles and the proliferation of nuclear capabilities across the globe. The witness of the Hibakusha and the entire Japanese nation forbids us from blinding ourselves to these bitter realities and the ominous realization that if we do not change course in our global nuclear journey, a conflagration is not merely possible, but inevitable.

But if the peril of nuclear weapons, both in their historical use eighty years ago and in their present threat to the future of our planet, constitute the backdrop for our interreligious dialogue on this day, it is the nature of faith itself that provides the mandate that we precisely as religious leaders can bring in a compelling way to the forging of true bonds of peace in a nuclear world.

Last Year's Second Tokyo Peace Roundtable Statement spoke to this reality. "Inspired by the divine teaching of our respective religious and beliefs, we

unite in our multi-religious vision of peace, and our common responsibility to serve as bridgebuilders and peacemakers, and to foster reconciliation and positive relationships....We affirm that we all belong to one human family and bear a collective responsibility to advance action for shared well-being and human flourishing. We denounce war and violence, recognizing its violation of the sacred principle of upholding the sanctity of human life and human dignity.”

As we gather today, it strikes me that there are four specific foundations which interreligious dialogue and solidarity can provide for the wider societal discussion on nuclear weapons and war in general,

The first foundation for this mandate is to speak unswervingly to the transcendent as the source for every grace and beauty that we know in our world and as the one unassailable foundation for the dignity of every human person. So much of our global culture denies the identity and the power and the presence of the transcendent. Focused on the material world, the hyper-individualistic emphasis on autonomy and myopically self-centered perspectives, so much of contemporary life denies and degrades the beauty of that which goes beyond the material, the egoistic, the popularly accepted.

It is precisely in providing the counterpoint to this narrow view of humanity and our universe that we as people of faith confer our greatest contribution upon the world in which we live. We understand that it is in transcendence that we encounter the true mystery of human life and its richness. We recognize that it is precisely in the transcendent dignity of every human person that we confront an inviolable claim upon every one of us. We witness to the conviction that nuclear weapons are evil because they contravene the most fundamental values of our sacred identities as men and women placed upon this earth to safeguard and foster one another, not to destroy them in anger and war.

It is against this backdrop of the transcendent that we in communities of faiths seek to share a common bond which must reflect true and abiding friendship. The moments when we gather together to share our faith so often

bring and intimacy and friendship that call us all to reflect the better angels of our nature and the nature of the human family. One critical dimension of this friendship is the social and material aid which religious communities in particular are called to bring to the suffering of the world, particularly in humanitarian emergencies. If transcendence is the basis for our bonds as religious people of differing faiths, friendship constitutes the tenor of those bonds and makes possible the journey to greater unity beyond the empty divides that can sometimes separates us.

A third element of interreligious dialogue that can contribute to finding a pathway to peace in our nuclear world is courage. So many of the divisions of hatred and misunderstanding in our world thrive precisely because people are afraid to confront them and the structures of power and alliances and prejudices which lie behind them. The journey of faith in forging peace for our world is one that profoundly demands courage at every moment – the courage to alienate our own communities, the courage to leave behind precious beliefs and precious relationships, the courage to risk being wrong in seeking greater understanding and building new bonds.

Finally, the religious mandate in this perilous nuclear moment requires us to seek and exhibit a truly radical unity in faith and action. We must banish all of the tribalisms that have generated the hatred which made the development of the nuclear bomb possible and then made it both acceptable and, for so many, necessary and good. At the world gathering of religious leaders at Assisi in 1986, Saint John Paul II spoke of the differences of faith that distinguish the identities of the religious communities of the human family. But he pointed unswervingly to the common identity of people of faith as builders of solidarity, who never cease to challenge the tribalism that corrodes every land and people. In these days of remembrance and renewal, let us take up this challenge to banish the tribalism which denies the common identity of men and women and children and families in every land.

As religious leaders, we are acutely aware of the technological threats posed by nuclear weapons. We are equally clear on the peril posed by the

contemporary trajectories of policies of modernization and proliferation. Finally, we have seen too much of the human impulse toward war and violence to believe that war can be erased from our midst.

But as people of faith, we at our core witness to the power of hope, which is so essential in the religious impulse itself. Hope is not the belief that everything comes out well. It is the conviction that in our moments of greatest need grace will surround us and help us to get through. We must bring this same hope to the future of nuclear weapons and to that of war itself. For in the end, the religious communities of this world have a unique capacity to challenge the determinism that so often characterizes foreign policy and debates about weapons systems. We have the power to challenge false and facile assumptions. We have the tools to call our societies to look more deeply at themselves and the world they are creating for themselves and future generations.

The terrible power of this eightieth anniversary lies in its ability to bring the whole of humanity into confrontation with the possibility of the future catastrophe that the world does not wish to see or acknowledge. Part of that blindness arises from the incapacity to bring real depth to the robust discussion that we must be having as the human community.

Religious communities can bring just such depth to our dialogue. In witnessing to transcendence we refuse to accept the myopia that denies the sacred dignity of the human person which was not produced by man nor is validated by man. In our friendship in faith, we build up the bonds of community and refuse to accept any surface meaning of the solidarity that binds us. In courage we speak freed from many of the strictures that bind leaders in other dimensions of civil society, and at our best constitute a truly prophetic witness to our tormented world. And in the throes of hope, we refuse to assign the nuclear peril and the future of war to a fatalistic determinism, but instead cry out: It need not be so!

The faith of religious communities throughout the world are not a sidelight to the construction of our nuclear future. On the contrary they have a singular

capacity to challenge hatred and tribalism, forge solidarity and reflect the core elements of substantive piece. This is the challenge, and the mission that we must take up if our world is to avoid a new generation of Hibakusha, one even more devastated than the heroes whom we honor today.