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The archbishop who opposes nuclear weapons

John Dear | May. 18, 2010 On the Road to Peace

?The way of Jesus and the way of the Bomb are absolutely, metaphysically incompatible,? Daniel Berrigan wrote 25 years ago in *Sorrow Built a Bridge*. ?That statement might seem, were the world sane and the church Christ-like, impossibly redundant. Because neither is either, the statement, though otiose to some, is a necessary drumbeat.?

I sounded that drumbeat a few weeks ago during a visit with a U.S. pro-life archbishop who told me directly he was ?glad? that we have nuclear weapons because ?we need them to protect ourselves against rogue nations.? But God will protect us, I said. Besides, Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, not to prepare to vaporize them, I pointed out. ?No,? the archbishop said, ?the church supports nuclear deterrence.?

How consoled I was a few weeks later to meet a far different kind of archbishop. Archbishop Joseph Takami of Nagasaki, Japan has dedicated his life to the abolition of nuclear weapons. He was in New York City to lobby officials at the United Nations? Non-Proliferation Treaty conference. I met him at a Pax Christi reception in mid-town.

He knows what he is talking about it. In his own words, he?s a *hibakusha in utero*. *Hibakusha* is the Japanese word for a survivor of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings. He was born in Nagasaki seven months after the atomic blast. He should have died, or been very sick. His entire life has been framed within the nightmare of nuclear weapons and the hope of the peacemaking Christ.

[An aside: Hearing his story led me to ponder how he almost died, and how many unborn children were certainly ?aborted? by the atomic blast; should that make anti-abortion, pro-life Catholics against the atomic bomb -- because it causes abortion? Likewise, one reflects on the estimated 6,000 children in their school buses on their way to school who were vaporized by the Hiroshima bomb; would that ?child abuse? merit the church?s unilateral opposition to nuclear weapons and final rejection of deterrence and just war? These are the thoughts that occur to me as I connect the dots.]

It was a pleasure to meet the good archbishop, who seemed gentle, warm, friendly and funny, and to share our passion for peace. He told me how he required all his parishes last year to publish some of my writings on Gospel nonviolence. He gave me a copy of the speech he made to our gathering, and I offer some of his statements here:

> An atomic bomb means a total denial of the dignity of a human person. The human race does not need such an inhuman weapon nor should we need it. Modern nuclear weapons are many times more devastating than these older prototypes. I dare say that the existence of nuclear weapons is intrinsically evil and there is no reason whatsoever to justify this deadly weapon. Even one nuclear weapon should not be tolerated.
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> The existence of nuclear weapons in the world is a grave threat to peace and we need to abolish them. We humans produce weapons and we humans can and must do away with them. I would like

to insist that the time has come to take concrete and definitive steps toward total nuclear disarmament.

A serious challenge for us who are committed peacemakers is to be what we say we are: to live out this commitment to peace rooted in our hearts and emanating out into the world from the central figure of us, the human person and community. We must ask ourselves: do we know how to deal with violence within ourselves? Do our deeds and words truly communicate peace and joy? How do people who come to us experience life and hope as they relate to us? How can we translate life-giving and hope-filled relationships to other levels of society and states?

Catholics should understand the nonviolence of Jesus and model it?[We] believe in the power of love, and love does not seek revenge but forgiveness, and this is what we Christians should embrace as our fundamental attitude in the face of conflict and violence.

Archbishop Takami brought with him a small wooden bust of Mary, which was all that remained of a prominent statue of ?Mary Immaculate? in the Nagasaki Cathedral after the atomic blast. He calls this scorched, burned, wooden statue, ?Mary the Hibakusha.?

"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,? the archbishop said. In the back of the prayer card he gave me, he wrote, ?This head of the suffering Blessed Virgin speaks on behalf of Mary who is always concerned about the foolishness of war. Mary intercedes to Christ on our behalf, praying for the realization of peace and the salvation of all people.?

During the reception, I spent some time looking closely at the head of the statue. It had been hollowed out and now has empty black eye sockets. The beautiful brown Spanish wood has turned black and white. You could not invite a more ghostly face. It is not pleasant to look at, but a powerful relic that stands in judgment before us, especially before Catholics in the United States. I wish it could be placed on the altar at the Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Los Alamos, New Mexico, for communal reflection.

I felt as if I?ve seen an apparition. Mary the Hibakusha urges me and all of us to beat the drum for nuclear disarmament, on behalf of her son and on behalf of all *hibakusha*, so that Nagasaki is the end of nuclear warfare.

?I encourage the initiatives that seek progressive disarmament and areas free of nuclear weapons, with a view to their complete elimination from the planet,? the Pope said during the first week of May. ?I exhort all those participating in the New York meeting to overcome historical conditioning and patiently to weave a political and economic web of peace in order to help integral human development and peoples' authentic aspirations.?

It was a blessing to meet this living saint, Archbishop Takami, and to see Mary the Hibakusha with my own eyes. Their message is deadly serious and extremely hopeful. God?s will is total nuclear disarmament. God?s will is peace for the whole human race. God?s will is the end of war, injustice, and violence of all kinds. God?s will is the new life of Christian nonviolence.

In a time of bad news, I?m grateful for their good news.

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To contribute to Catholic Relief Services? ?Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund,? go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. John will address the Tikkun/?Network of Spiritual Progressives? conference, with Rabbi Lerner and Joan Chittister, in D.C. on June 11 (see: www.spiritualprogressives.org). He will speak on ?Gandhi, King and Day,? at Loyola in Chicago, June 25-26 in Chicago (see: www.asrenewal.org), and teach a weeklong course, ?Gandhi, King, Day and Merton,? Aug. 2-6, at the spectacular Ghost Ranch Center, near Abiquiu, NM, see www.ghostranch.org. John?s latest book, Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings (Orbis), along with other recent books, A Persistent Peace and Put Down Your Sword, as well as Patricia Normile?s John Dear On Peace, are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to www.johndear.org.

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