



Was Hiroshima and Nagasaki a Sin?

By National Catholic Register

Nuclear effects of the atomic bomb lingered in Japan for years.

Do Hiroshima and Nagasaki's effects on our logic linger in America?

We at the Register were startled by the number of angry letters — a few of them canceling subscriptions — that we received in response to Catherine and Michael Pakaluku's column calling America's use of the atomic bomb 60 years ago "Our National Sin."

After all, the Church's position on this matter is clear.

Pope Paul VI called America's use of the atomic bomb "butchery of untold magnitude." Pope John Paul II called it "a self-destruction of mankind" and named Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Auschwitz as places marked by man's sin that should now be places of pilgrimage.



1. Post-attack Nagasaki

The Second Vatican Council condemned our nation's use of the atomic bomb. The Catechism repeats its denunciation verbatim in No. 2314:

"Every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and man, which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation."

No matter how vicious the Japanese war tactics were, and they were cruel and brutal, America crossed a line we never should have crossed.

Though we were surprised at the intensity of readers' response, we can understand the concern that many letters expressed. The Church's condemnation of the bomb is severe and unsettling. It could seem that, by calling our use of the atomic bomb a "crime against God and man" and comparing Hiroshima and Nagasaki to Auschwitz, the Church is making America's position in World War II the moral equivalent of our enemies'.



2. Ruins of Nagasaki's Urakami Cathedral

Nothing could be farther from the truth.

American sacrifices in World War II are not in the least impugned by the judgment that our president was wrong to use the atomic bomb. Without America's contribution to the war, the world would be a very different, and much darker, place. Pope John Paul II himself said he was "personally grateful for what America did for the world in the darkest days of the 20th century."

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen in his series of talks titled "What Now America?" said that, by our tacit refusal to recognize the evil of the atomic bomb, Americans became susceptible to a new notion of freedom — one divorced from morality.

"When, I wonder, did we in America ever get into this idea that freedom means having no boundaries and no limits?" he asked. "I think it began on the 6th of August 1945 at 8:15 am when we dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. ... Somehow or other, from that day on in our American life, we say we want no limits and no boundaries."



3. Fragment from Urakami Cathedral

Shortly before becoming Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said much the same thing.

"There no longer exists a knowing how to do separated from a being able to do, because it would be against freedom, which is the absolute supreme value,"

he said in his talks about the crisis facing Europe.

He put this misunderstanding of freedom at the heart of the use of the atomic bomb, and of many contemporary problems.

"Man knows how to clone men, and so he does it," he said. "Man knows how to use men as a store of organs for other men, and so he does it; he does it because this seems to be a requirement of his freedom. Man knows how to build atomic bombs and so he makes them, being, as a matter of principle, also disposed to use them. In the end, terrorism is also based on this modality of man's self-authorization, and not on the teachings of the Koran."

Abbreviated from an editorial on the National Catholic Register website August 24, 2005. Published at Japan Focus on August 26, 2005.