

**On the Abolition of Nuclear Power Generation:
A Call by the Catholic Church in Japan
Five and a Half Years after the Fukushima Dai-Ichi Nuclear Power Plant Disaster**

A Message from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan to
All the People of Earth, Our Common Home

Preface

A tsunami caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011, resulted in a disaster at the Tokyo Electric Power Company's Fukushima Dai-Ichi nuclear power plant. Eight months later, on November 8, 2011, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan issued a message in Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture, addressed to all the people of Japan, entitled "Abolish Nuclear Power Plants Immediately: Facing the Tragedy of the Fukushima Dai-Ichi Nuclear Plant Disaster." Our intention was to point out from a Catholic viewpoint the danger of nuclear power generation and to call for its abolition. Having viewed the immense damage caused by the Fukushima disaster, and considering that Japan is subject to many severe earthquakes with the attendant danger of large-scale tsunamis, we concluded that the immediate cessation of all nuclear power generation in the country is imperative.

Even today, residents of the Fukushima area suffer from the economic, social and emotional aftereffects of that disaster, and there is no end of their suffering in sight. In addition, as has been pointed out for a long time, there is still no way to completely dispose of radioactive waste. Despite that, the Japanese government has begun to reactivate 48 nuclear reactors that were shut down after the disaster, beginning with those they claim have been determined to be safe. In addition, work on new plants that was halted after the disaster is being resumed, and moves toward the export of nuclear power plants are accelerating.

While it may be unusual for the bishops' conference of a single country to direct a statement to the entire world, what Japan has experienced in the five and a half years since the Fukushima disaster convinces us that we must inform the world of the hazards of nuclear power generation and appeal for its abolition.

1. Why the bishops of Japan are issuing this appeal

Japan has experienced numerous disasters brought about by the release of nuclear energy. The 1945 atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the first uses of nuclear weapons in war, indiscriminately killing and injuring many noncombatants in those cities. Even now, survivors suffer the effects of radiation.

In 1954, only nine years after the atomic bombings, many Japanese fishermen, especially those on board the fishing boat Daigo Fukuryu Maru, were contaminated by a hydrogen bomb test conducted by the United States in the Bikini Atoll. In 1999, for the first time, workers in Japan died from accidental radioactive contamination in the Tokaimura criticality accident.

We bishops are convinced that in the light of these experiences and especially as the world's only victim of atomic warfare, Japan has a special responsibility to be in solidarity with all

those who have suffered from nuclear radiation, calling for total nuclear disarmament and a solution to all the problems that atomic power has produced.

2. What we have learned in five and a half years

In our 2011 message, we made the following points regarding our analysis of the situation:

- To fulfill our responsibility to protect life and nature, passing on a safer environment to posterity, we must understand humankind's limits, not overestimating the capability of technology nor believing in "safety myths";
- While we must not ignore energy shortages nor the necessity of reducing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, we must give priority to protecting precious human lives and beautiful nature rather than to profit or efficiency;
- We must look upon burdening future generations with responsibility for storing such dangerous atomic waste as plutonium as an ethical question;
- Research on renewable sources of energy and reducing energy consumption as means to replace atomic power generation should lead us to seek once again a simple lifestyle based upon the spirit of poverty as taught by the gospels.

Since issuing that message, we have continued to reflect upon the situation, and have realized the following:

- Nuclear fission rarely occurs naturally on earth, and when it is brought about artificially, the energy released is vastly greater than the forms of energy that sustain life, and also vastly greater than the conventional energy generated through combustion of fuels;
- Nuclear fission produces unstable radioactive waste that we do not yet possess the technology to dispose of or stabilize;
- Once a serious nuclear accident occurs, the lives of people in the immediate area are radically disrupted, and the resulting environmental damage from radiation will spread beyond borders and across time.

We have also come to understand that there are powerful forces that stand in the way of abolishing nuclear power. These forces continually raise their voices, asserting that the source of human happiness lies in economic growth, and try to move the world in that lopsided direction. We have come to know that these forces, while ensuring that their activities do not become apparent, seek to undermine any attempt to abolish nuclear power.

3. The government's pro-nuclear stance

Japan has promoted nuclear power generation as a national policy since 1955, and even after experiencing the tragic accident in Fukushima is not changing that policy.

In September 2011 following the disaster, the government announced a change in the policy of actively supporting nuclear power, setting the 2030s as a target for the complete abandonment of atomic power generation. Power plants that had been shut down for regular safety inspections were not restarted, and in 2012 all the nuclear power plants in the country were out of operation, a state of “zero nuclear power.” During that period, electric power supplies remained stable.

However, that policy was revised when in 2014 the government replaced the post-disaster regulatory standards, declaring nuclear generation to be “an important base-load power supply” while calling for “reducing as much as possible” dependence upon nuclear power.

In addition, the government continues to put huge funding into a program of nuclear fuel recycling, which can now only be said to be non-realizable. Furthermore, the government has avoided dealing in a sincere manner with the problems of workers exposed to radioactive contamination in nuclear power plant accidents or while doing decontamination work in Fukushima. It has lifted emergency evacuation restrictions as if problems resulting from the nuclear accident have been cleared up, and is vigorously pursuing sales of atomic power plants overseas.

Behind all these policies to promote nuclear power generation are huge economic powers with which the government has allied itself. It is not easy to abolish nuclear power or bring about change in society when opposed by these powers that are only interested in economic benefits.

4. The Christian point of view

In May 2015, Pope Francis issued his encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*.

Basing his message upon the latest scientific research into environmental problems, the pope considers ecological ethics, our responsibility to future generations and environmental justice. He sounds an alarm over such pressing environmental problems as climate change, water scarcity, loss of biodiversity and ecological debt related to ecological damage to poorer parts of the world for the benefit of more prosperous regions.

The Pope is cautious about calling for the abolition of nuclear power, but he does mention atomic energy among various sources of environmental damage (LS 184). He also points out that technological development, including nuclear technology, gives humankind vast power, but that power is limited to those with the knowledge and economic resources to use it. Their power is increasing continually, and there is no guarantee that they will use it wisely (LS 104).

We are convinced that to overcome this situation humankind, as the image of God, must return to a right relationship with nature, a relationship suitable to the common good of humanity and nature. Humans are naturally able to live happily in peace if they do so harmoniously in relation to themselves, to others, to the natural environment and to God.

The “integral ecology” and “ecological conversion” which the pope recommends in *Laudato Si’* are in line with the “poverty” that we called for in our 2011 message.

We must consider a lifestyle that looks anew at our consumption habits, values human dignity and promotes deeper relations with God, society and nature. All people on earth bear responsibility in solidarity to preserve the natural environment, which is God’s creation, and to protect all life.

We who live in this age of environmental crisis are invited to deepen our communion with the Triune God who created this beautiful universe, to be reconciled with our fellow creatures and to share with one another as we enjoy and take part in continuing God’s creative work.

5. An appeal for international solidarity

The dangers posed by nuclear power generation are global. Once an accident occurs, radioactive contamination spreads across borders.

Atomic power plants are in danger of becoming targets of terrorist attacks. In addition, the various stages in the technology of nuclear power generation involve a global system of uranium mining, fuel refining, spent fuel reprocessing and waste disposal.

Moreover, given the fact that the possibility of technology being transferred to or even developed for military uses is inherent in nuclear power, this issue cannot be considered separately from issues of security. Therefore, the abolition of nuclear power generation will be difficult to bring about without international solidarity.

We, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Japan, appeal to all people who share our common home called Earth that we join hands, rise together and act in solidarity to end nuclear power generation.

For that purpose, we turn first to the Catholic Church throughout the world, seeking cooperation and solidarity. Then, building on that, we hope to develop a global solidarity that transcends religions, races and nations.

In particular, we call upon the bishops’ conferences of each country to understand the dangers of atomic power generation and to discuss the situation from the point of view of the Gospel. In 2013, two years after the Fukushima disaster, the bishops’ conference in our neighbor country Korea published a booklet called *Nuclear Technology and Teachings of the Church - Episcopal Reflections on Nuclear Power Generation*, making clear their opposition. We hope that following the example of the Church in Korea, bishops’ conferences in countries where there are nuclear power plants or those in places that are in danger from accidents in nearby countries might learn from Japan’s experience and speak out forcefully.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ calls all people to “love one another” (John 13:34). Does this call not include the responsibility and duty to protect the earth which is the common home of humankind now and in the future?

There are various opinions about the rights or wrongs of atomic power generation. However, there is no denying the harm that has resulted from humanity's acquiring nuclear energy. When making judgments about atomic energy, we must do so from the point of view of protecting the dignity of all human beings, both in the present and in the future. In that light, those countries that already use atomic energy to generate power should move toward abandoning its use and expand the use of renewable energy sources. We must promote research and action to decrease energy consumption, conserve energy and increase awareness of environmental impacts. Furthermore, it is important to deepen solidarity and build networks with people who tackle environmental problems.

Once again, we must stop and ask ourselves what sort of human development society should aim for, and what constitutes true riches. This would not be a retreat from development, but an advance toward a new abundance. Let us join hands as a single human family, each of us doing all we can to awaken to our responsibility to protect the earth's environment

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