
'BONDS OF FRIENDSHIP': POPE FRANCIS HEADS TO THAILAND AND JAPAN

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Pope to visit two largely Buddhist nations to strengthen ties and reiterate call for elimination of nuclear weapons.

Japan may have few Catholics, but the pacifist message of Pope Francis resonates keenly in the only country in the world to have suffered a nuclear attack.

As he prepares to make his first journey to the country this week, expectations are high the pontiff will make strong anti-war statements in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where the United States dropped atomic bombs in the closing days of World War II.

"When John Paul II came the first thing he said in his message was: 'War is the work of man'," said Daichi Miyahara, newly ordained as a priest this year at Nagasakis Urakami Cathedral, referring to the late popes 1981 visit.

"I expect that (Pope Francis) will give us the message that people should not fight but engage with each other," Miyahara added on a recent Sunday, standing outside the hilltop church, which was destroyed in the 1945 blast and later rebuilt, to greet parishioners after a mass.

Francis has been vocal about sympathy for victims of war and appears to have a special feeling for Japan.

In late 2017, he issued a small card with a photo of a boy carrying his dead brother to a crematorium in the aftermath of the Nagasaki bomb. Inscribed on the card were the words: "The fruit of war."

Pope Francis is due to arrive in Thailand on November 20 before heading to Japan on November 23. In video messages to the people of the two majority-Buddhist countries posted to the Vatican website ahead of the trip, the pope lauded peace and stressed the need to eliminate nuclear weapons.

He lauded Thailand for its dedication to "harmony and peaceful coexistence" and said he wants to "strengthen the bonds of friendship that we share with many Buddhist brothers and sisters".

To the Japanese, he said: "Together with you, I pray that the destructive power of nuclear weapons will never be unleashed again in human history. The use of nuclear weapons is immoral."

Read more at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/friendship-pope-francis-heads-thailand-japan-191118065606626.html>

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