

A REMEMBRANCE OF HIROSHIMA

[Pedro Arrupe, a Jesuit priest, was Superior General of the Jesuits from 1965 to 1983. As the 37-year-old Superior of the Jesuit Community in Nagatsuka, Japan on the outskirts of Hiroshima in 1945, he witnessed the effects of the atomic bomb attack there. The following originally appeared in *Recollections and Reflections of Pedro Arrupe, SJ.* (Michael Glazier, 1986) and is excerpted here from *Pedro Arrupe: Essential Writings*, selected and introduced by Kevin Burke, SJ. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2004-Eds. Note]

On the morning of August 6 something happened to break the monotony of the previous months. At about 7:55 in the morning a B-29 appeared. The air raid alarm did not cause us any undue worry since we had grown accustomed to seeing squadrons of a hundred planes flying over our heads. There seemed to be no reason to be concerned. Ten minutes after the alarm began to sound we were sure the enemy had left the city. We then resumed our usual activities in peace.

I was in my room with another priest at 8:15 when suddenly we saw a blinding light, like a flash of magnesium. Naturally we were surprised and jumped up to see what was happening. As I opened the door which faced the city, we heard a formidable explosion similar to the blast of a hurricane. At the same time doors, windows and walls fell upon us in smithereens.

We threw ourselves or were thrown to the floor. I say we were thrown because a German priest, who weighed over two hundred pounds and had been resting against the window sill

of his room, found himself sitting in the hall several yards away with a book in his hand. The shower of roof tiles, bricks and glass rained upon us. Three or four seconds seemed an eternity because when one fears that a beam is about to crash down and flatten one's skull, time is incredibly prolonged.

When we were able to stand, we went running through the house. I had the responsibility for thirty-five young men who were under my direction. I found none of them had even a scratch. We went out into the garden to see where the bomb had fallen since none of us doubted that that is what had happened. But when we got there, we looked at one another in surprise: there was no hole in the ground, nor sign of an explosion. The trees and flowers all seemed quite normal. We searched the rice fields surrounding our house, looking for the site of the blast, but to no avail. After about fifteen minutes, we noticed that in the direction of the city dense smoke arose. Soon we could see enormous flames.

We climbed a hill to get a better view. From there we could see a ruined city: before us was a decimated Hiroshima

I shall never forget my first sight of what was the result of the atomic bomb: a group of young women, eighteen or twenty years old, clinging to one another as they dragged themselves along the road. One had a blister that almost covered her chest; she had burns across half of her face, and a cut in her scalp caused probably by a falling tile, while great quantities of blood coursed freely down her face. On and on they came, a steady procession

numbering some 150,000. This gives some idea of the scene of horror that was Hiroshima.

We continued looking for some way of entering the city, but it was impossible. We did the only thing that could be done in the presence of such mass slaughter: we fell on our knees and prayed for guidance, as we were destitute of human help.

I had studied medicine many years earlier, and I ran back to the house to find medical supplies. I found the medicine chest under some ruins with the door off its hinges. I retrieved some iodine, aspirins and bicarbonate of soda. Those were the only supplies at a time when 200,000 victims needed help. What could I do? Where to begin? Again I fell on my knees and implored God's help.

It was then that He helped me in a very special way, not with medications but with a simple and essential idea. We quickly decided to clean the house as best as we could and tried to accommodate as many of the sick and wounded as we could possibly fit inside. We were able to take only 150.

The first thing that had to be done was to gather up extra food to provide those patients with sufficient energy to react against hemorrhages, fever and infection caused by burns. Our young people, on foot or on bicycles, rushed about the outskirts of Hiroshima. Without thinking how or from where, they came dashing back with more fish, meat, eggs, and butter than we had seen in four years. With these we were able to care for our patients.

Some success crowned our efforts because, almost without realizing it, we were attacking from the outset the anemia and leukemia that would develop in the majority of the wounded

who had been exposed to atomic radiation. We can rejoice that none of those hospitalized in our house died except one child who suffered an attack of meningitis as a result of the accumulation of fluid on the brain and died the following day. All the rest survived.

While the young people were busy gathering food, I was trying to prepare the patients in a more scientific manner to react favorably. First of all, it was necessary to clean the three kinds of wounds we saw.

There were contusions caused by the collapse of buildings. These included fractures and cuts produced by jagged pieces of tile from falling roofs. Dirt and sawdust were encrusted in torn muscles and wounds. Those raw wounds had to be cleansed without anesthetic as we had neither chloroform nor morphine to assuage the terrible pain.

Other wounds were produced by fragments of wood or glass imbedded in the body without tearing the muscles.

The third group included all kinds of burns, some very serious. When asked how they were burned, the answer was often the same: they had been trapped under a collapsed smoldering building and as they tried to extricate themselves from under it, they were burned in the process. But there was another kind of burn whose cause no one could explain.

I asked one victim: "How were you burnt?" I recall his answer, "I wasn't burnt, Father."

"Then what happened to you?"
"I don't know,. I saw a flash of light followed by a terrible explosion but nothing happened to me. Then, in a half hour I saw small, superficial blisters

forming on my skin which soon became infected, But there was no fire.”

It was disconcerting. Today, we know that it was the effects of the infrared radiation which attacks the tissues and produces not only the destruction of the epidermis and the endodermis, but also of muscular tissue. The infections that followed resulted in the death of many and confused those treating the victims.

To cleanse the wounds it was necessary to puncture and open the blisters. We had in the house 150 people of whom one-third or one-half had open wounds. The work was painful because when one pierced a small blister, a tiny drop of water spilled out; but when one had to lance a blister that extended over half of a person's body, the discharge measured 150cc [over half a cup]. At first we used nickel-plated pails, but after the third patient, seeing all there was ahead of us, we began to use all the kettles and basins we could find in the house.

The suffering was frightful, the pain excruciating and it made bodies writhe like snakes, yet there was not a word of complaint. They all suffered in silence...

After twelve hours we were able to enter the city. As usually happens after great fires, an enormous amount of water vapor condenses and descends in torrential showers. In this way, at least, the burning embers were extinguished...

Much more terrible, however, was the tragic sight of those thousands of injured people begging for help. One such was a child who had a piece of glass imbedded in the pupil of his left eye, and another who had a large wooden splinter protruding like a dagger from between his ribs. Sobbing, he called out: “Father, save me!” Another

victim was caught between two beams with his legs calcified up to the knees.

Moving along, we saw a young man running toward us half-crazed and calling for help. For twenty minutes he had been hearing his mother's voice as she lay buried under the rubble of what had been their home. The flames were already enveloping her body, and his efforts to lift the large wooden beams that held her captive had been in vain...

We were to witness more horrible scenes that night. As we approached the river, the spectacle was awful beyond words. Fleeing the flames and availing themselves of low tide, the people lay across both shores, but in the middle of the night the tide began to rise, and the wounded, exhausted now and half buried in mud, could not move. The cries of those drowning are something I shall never forget.

At five in the morning, we finally arrived at our destination and began our first treatments on the Fathers. In spite of the urgency of our work, we had first stopped to celebrate our Masses. Assuredly, it was in such moments of tragedy that we felt God most near to us. It is at such moments one feels in need of supernatural assistance...

Apart from all these understandable events, there was one that disconcerted us greatly. Many who were in the city at the moment of the explosion and had suffered no apparent injuries whatsoever, but who, nevertheless, after a few days felt weak and came to us saying they felt a terrible interior heat, that, perhaps, that had inhaled a poisonous gas, and in a short time they were dead.

The first case occurred for me when I was treating an elderly man for two deep wounds on his back. A man came to me and said: “Please, Father,

come to my house because my son tells me he has a very bad sore throat.”

Since the man I was treating was gravely ill, I answered: “It’s probably a cold. Give him some aspirin and make him perspire; you’ll see he’ll get well.” Within two hours the boy died.

Later a girl of thirteen came weeping and said: “Father, look what’s happening to me.” And opening her mouth, she showed me bleeding gums, small sores on the lining of the mouth and an acute pharyngitis. She showed me too how her hair was falling out in her hands in bunches. In two days she was dead...

Of the dead, fifty thousand died the moment of the explosion itself, another two hundred thousand during the following weeks, and others much later as a result of wounds or radiation. Until the day after the explosion, we did not know that we were dealing with the first atomic bomb to explode in our world.

At first, without electricity or radio, we were cut off from the rest of the world. The following day, cars and trains began arriving from Tokyo and Osaka with help for Hiroshima. They stayed in the outskirts of the city, and when we questioned them as to what had happened, they answered very mysteriously: “The first atomic bomb has exploded.”

“But what is the atomic bomb?”

They would answer: “The atom bomb is a terrible thing.”

“We have seen how terrible it is; but what is it?” And they would repeat: “It’s the atomic bomb...the atomic bomb.”

They knew nothing but the name. It was a new word that was coming for the first time into the vocabulary. Besides, the knowledge that it was the

atomic bomb that had exploded was no help to us at all from a medical standpoint, as no one in the world knew its full effects on the human organism. We were, in effect, the first guinea pigs in such experimentation.

But from a missionary standpoint, they did challenge us when they said: “Do not enter the city because there is a gas in the air that kills for seventy years.” It is at such times that one feels most a priest, when one knows that in the city there are 50.000 bodies which, unless they are cremated, will cause a terrible plague. There were, besides, some 120.000 wounded to care for. In light of these facts, a priest cannot remain outside the city just to preserve his life. Of course, when one is told that in the city there is a gas that kills, one must be very determined to ignore that fact and go in. And we did. And we soon began to raise pyramids of bodies and pour fuel on them to set them afire.

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