

Catholic Sendai Diocese Newsletter

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Christ Has Risen, Alleluia! Happy Easter!

Bishop Martin Tetsuo Hiraga



Since Ash Wednesday, we have journeyed for 40 days until Holy Week. Now, our journey culminates in the celebration of Christ's Resurrection. Happy Easter!

For some people, Easter may just be an ordinary yearly event. For others, Christmas maybe more meaningful because we all experience birth. However, resurrection is different. It is a reality that we must accept in faith.

Resurrection is not only a phenomenon of living again. It is a reality that happens beyond the passage of death. Resurrection is not something in front of us. Death is in front of us. We understand the word death and we sometimes hear the expression "return to death" or "enter death". But we don't understand that expression, "He has Risen". In the Bible, we only find the empty tomb. The moment of resurrection is not shown nor explained. It was later that Mary of Magdala heard the word resurrection from a humble person who was a gardener. We believe and sing, "Christ is Risen, Alleluia". We hope that beyond death resurrection is possible. This inspiration animates us.

In my 2019 New Year message, I expressed my desire to visit all parishes of the diocese. I was looking forward to meeting each one of you. But then, my health deteriorated. I got hospitalized and had to change my plans. Consequently, I had to reduce my work schedule in such a way that I could only visit big parishes. It is extremely regrettable and I sincerely apologize to all of you. Due to that situation, many people worried about my health. Thanks to your prayers, my mobility has improved significantly. I can now continue driving. So, don't worry.

At present, I have one desire; "I pray for unity". I always wonder how can priests and lay people be one? How the four prefectures of the diocese become one? This is my prayer.

Last year, I had the chance to meet Pope Francis during his visit to Japan. I have witnessed how busy he is as a person carrying heavy responsibility. On his way to Japan coming from Thailand, he was interviewed by journalist inside the plane. He was not afraid to respond to their questions knowing that his statements will be a news around the world. He may look very tough. On the

contrary, he was not afraid to show his vulnerability; fears, doubts and weaknesses. Let's pray for his good health.

Some people asked me, "Did all the bishops of Japan accompanied the pope during his 3 days visit?" Of course, thanks to media, you know that all the bishops concelebrated masses with the pope. Several bishops greeted the Pope at Haneda Airport on his arrival. In the meantime, the other bishops were waiting to welcome him at the Apostolic Nunciature. At the Nunciature, the president of the Bishops Conference gave the welcome address. Pope Francis replied: "I came to Japan as a missionary pilgrim. The faith of martyrs is the cornerstone of the Japanese church." It was a word of encouragement for all of us. He spoke most of the time in Spanish which was a bit difficult for me to understand.

On Sunday November 24, the Pope flew to Nagasaki on a special flight together with some bishops. The others took a commercial flight. It was raining in the morning when we arrived. The people were wearing rain coats at the Atomic Peace Park and The Memorial Hall for the 26 martyrs at Nishizaka Koen. Miraculously, the Holy Mass was celebrated under a clear blue sky. It was very touching. It was the feast of Christ the King. Pope Francis in his homily reminded us of the words to the good thief at the crucifixion, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." And Jesus replied, "In truth I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." It reminds us that His Kingdom is a kingdom of forgiveness and salvation. It was uplifting to hear this.

On Monday November 25, Bishop Kikuchi and me greeted the Pope at the underground parking of the meeting place reserved for the 300 guests coming from Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima. Together with the Pope, Japanese policemen, and Vatican bodyguards, we took the elevator going to the third floor. During the meeting with the victims, the words of Pope Francis made an impact on me when he said, "In order to overcome the consequences of the triple disaster (earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident) people have to work in unity, to join hands and to move in the same direction together."

At the end of the gathering, I presented him with a chalice of Aizu Nuri. I wanted to say a word or two, unfortunately I was too stressed to say something. After this, he went to the youth gathering at the Tokyo Cathedral and then to Tokyo Dome. At the Tokyo Dome, Pope Francis boarded the Pope mobile provided by Toyota and was waving and smiling to the crowd and was

hugging and kissing the children. This scene has touched many people's heart.

On the last day of his visit, he met with the Jesuit priests. Meanwhile, all the Japanese bishops went to

Haneda Airport by bus. Gathering on the tarmac close to the trap of the plane, we thanked him and bade him farewell before his return to the Vatican.

Pastoral District News

Meaningful Christmas Gathering

Monica Ono, Youth Leader, Sendai Church

I had a great Christmas celebration together with the Youth community and I Sing for Joy (ISJ) international choir community at Mototerakoji Church on Christmas day, December 25. Many people from different nationalities and ages gathered to honor this beautiful day!



Before we began the Christmas party, we all went to the chapel together for the Christmas prayer. Fr. Paul led the prayer. During the prayer service, each person lit a

candle and said a little prayer. At that moment, I felt each person brought with them the light of Christ. It was such a beautiful sight!

After the prayer service, the fun began! People from different ages and from various countries mingled with each other. We shared food, stories, and laughter. There were games, singing and dancing. It was exactly joyful! The relationship that bonded this community was made possible with the power of God's grace.

I deeply appreciate this opportunity to get to know other culture and encounter lots of friends from other

nationalities. I truly believe that accepting and getting along with people who are different from yourself is the beginning of the peace.

Christmas Candle Service at Fukushima Prisons

Chorus of Koriyama Church

The chorus of Koriyama parish accompanied by Fr. Itagaki visited two prisons (Men and Women Prison) during Advent in December 7 and December 13.



At the Fukushima men's prison, 50 persons gathered. The Koriyama Parish Chorus

sang 11 Christmas songs after the reading the Bible and the prayers.

The same program was presented at the Fukushima Women's Prison. There were 200 participants joined the event. As compared to last year's program which was a bit stressful, this time it was more relaxed.

The people laughed and enjoyed the sense of humor of the protestant pastor who gave the homily. In that joyful atmosphere, we sang songs like "Kikasete Kudasai, (Let Me Listen)", "Alleluia Christmas" etc. the inmates listened carefully and joyfully.

We cherish the memory of that joyful spirit.

News from the Disaster Stricken Area

Minami Sanriku

Chiba Michio

Nine years have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake. The kids with whom I played after the earthquake have grown and is now actively participating in school activities and games.

The grandchildren of senior citizens who were coming to the tea salon of temporary residences are now guiding visitors and sharing their own experiences about the tsunami.

Last December, the temporary housing complex of Minami Sanriku Cho was demolished and the occupants have been relocated to their new residences and have started a new life.

Recently, while I was visiting their residence, I was struck by the comment from one them. In the tea salon

(an open space) of the temporary housing, the volunteers would always wear a smile while serving those who visits the place. My first impression was that immediately after the tsunami, volunteers were saying ARIGATO to visitors in a light fashion. Now that time has passed, this remark came out naturally.

After a while, the persons coming to the tea salon became closer to one another and it continues up to now. Lately, I realized this is quite an achievement to be acclaimed. Volunteers from different places gathered here and reached out to the local people wearing a bright smile. For the locals who were affected by the disaster, it seems awkward that people can smile after a great tragedy. I ponder this in my heart. As time passes, I realize that this reflection seems to be a natural reaction. As volunteers, our smile was a good way to alleviate their sufferings or to demonstrate empathy. With this

experience, I remember a verse in the Bible that I vaguely understood for a long time, "Rejoice with others when they rejoice, and be sad with those in sorrow" (Romans 12:15). Thanks to the comment, I now realize the profound meaning of this word of God.



Another recent experience left a strong impact on me. It happened when I accompanied a group of high school volunteers at the Kesenuma

Tsunami Memorial Hall located in the former Koyo Koko. One of the volunteers, after kneeling for 10 minutes had difficulty to stand up. A Kesenuma resident saw the volunteer struggle to stand up approached her and said: "I lost my house in the tsunami. I thank you for sharing my pain." I was touch by that scene because she addressed the young volunteer with a gentle expression on her face. The volunteer said that it was the first time she had seen such gentleness from a person who went through a rough experience. Although there were other people in the Tsunami Memorial Hall, she was the one who came to the volunteer with a sense of concern and gentleness to share their common feeling.

For the past nine years, I tried to get closer to the survivors. In doing so, they also get closer to me. Even now, many volunteers before departure would greet the fishermen saying, "Thank you". The fishermen reply: "Thank you. Please come again."

In the past 9 years, by expressing our gratitude in a reciprocal way, we have accumulated an enormous amount of love and mutual respect.

We are now entering a new milestone, 10 years after the tsunami. While we treasure the importance of all encounters that happened in the past nine years, we are looking forward to a more enriching encounters in the future. It dawned on me that I should not take anything

for granted. I want to live every moment in a spirit of gratitude.

**Kita Sendai
Masako Fukuda**



On March 15, three days after the earthquake, the parishioners of Kita Sendai started to prepare meals for people living in the neighborhood of

our church. They called it "Charity Coffee" which is located in the premises of the parish. It became the cornerstone of an open church and it has been going on up to now.

For eight years, we visited the "kasetu jutaku". After the demolition of the temporary housing complex, we continued to visit people in their new residences. With volunteers from eight parishes of Sendai, Shiogama district, we participate in the activities of Ishinomaki Caritas Base.

Our volunteer activities evolved with the changing needs of the victims. We attended to people of Iwate and Miyagi. But we can't forget the people of Fukushima. An opportunity to do so happened with the request of the sisters in Watari, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM). They asked us if we could help prepare meals for the volunteers staying at the Haranomachi Caritas Base. We answered that we could.

Since last year, three of us taking turn three times a month preparing meals in Haranomachi. We want to continue to provide volunteer activities directly to people in need. Right now, we volunteer to give support to other volunteers. We are happy to be involved in the Fukushima area. We think that it is a blessing from God. We ask to all of you brothers and sisters to pray for us.

Profile of Priests Working in the Diocese

Marco Antonio de la Rosa Ruiz Esparza, M.G.
(Guadalupe Missioners)



Vocation Story

When I was 7 years old, my grandfather said to me, "You look like a Japanese." After that, I was always thinking what would be the best way to go to Japan. I thought the best way was to become a Missionary Priest.

When I was finishing Primary School at a Catholic School, Father Jose Alvarez of Guadalupe Missioners, came to our

school. He talked to us about missionary life. After that, I entered Minor Seminary in Guadalajara, City of Mexico in my country. It took 25 years for my dream to come true. In 1986 I arrived to Japan and I have stayed here until now.

Contribution to Sendai Diocese

The most important thing I wanted to do was missionary work. I wanted to do more than what an ordinary priest would do. There are many things that interest me as a priest. The missionary work of the church is one of them. Doing missionary work in Japan has fascinated me, especially reaching out the non-Christians. What is the best way to do? For instance, I believe that

understanding the mentality of the Japanese people will open to a deeper prayer. So, I tried the approach of Zen Meditation for 20 years in Buddhist Temples and finally in Shinmeikutsu, a Meditation Center for the Jesuits in Tokyo. I also practice Sadhana - A Way to God which is a Christian Exercises in Eastern form by Anthony de Mello (Indian Jesuit). I introduced it in several parishes for almost 14 years. Few months ago, I began to teach Lectio Divina, a prayer of St. Benedict using the Scriptures. I want to continue to practice Interreligious Dialogue, Ecumenical work, specially the awareness of the Ecological issue and other issues.

Hope and Desire for the Parishioners

My main suggestion is about Deep Prayer. I know a number of prayer groups in Sendai’s Diocese has lack of this, particularly on Deep Prayer. It would be great if parishioners would increase so that many can participate in spiritual retreats (individual or group), such as, Lectio Divina, Deep Prayer, meditation, etc. In the depth of the Japanese soul there is a very strong influence of Zen Buddhism, or a spirit of contemplation. This is the reason why they can do contemplative prayer very easily. I would like to apply contemplative prayer and teach it to the foreigners. Although, this will be quite challenging for western people.

On Care for Common Home

Pope Francis has an appeal to care for our common home. I would like to know from the parishioners of Sendai Diocese how to respond to Pope Francis appeal to care for our common home. I would like to support this initiative towards a better world through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Rafael Mejia Tadeo, M.G. (Guadalupe Missioners)



Vocation Story

I never had a clear and comprehensive reason why I decided to become a priest. But when I was 8 years old, I had the desire to become a priest. I used to go the mass everyday with my grandmother. One day, I saw the priest who was celebrating the mass and I thought, “I want to be a priest, too.” From that day onward, I still have the same aspiration and zeal.

Contribution to the Diocese of Sendai

As a priest, I want to be with the people. I want to meet them where they are and be a present to them. It’s

something I am trying to do as of the moment. During my ordination, someone asked me what kind of priest would I want to be. I cited Saint Paul’s words from his letter to the Romans; “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” I am trying to be one with the people in their joys and sorrows. This is my mission! Also, I want to reach out to the youth of today in the society. They are the future of our church and society. I am thinking of ways and means to connect to those young people who used to come to the church, both the Japanese and foreigners.

Hope and Desire for the parishioners

First of all, I want to send a message to the parishioners to never lose hope in sharing the joy and happiness of being a Christian. In a non-Christian country, it’s quite difficult and challenging to live out our Catholic Christian faith, especially outside of the church parameters. But, as Christian believers, it is our task and mission to bring the joy of the gospel and share it to others. We have to remember that God is with us all the time, especially when we are in trouble. In Japan, the Catholic church is a minority. Even so, our faith and mission to follow Jesus in building the Kingdom of God is our biggest contribution to the society of Japan. May our Almighty God give us the grace to continue our life with hope and lot of happiness.

YU JONG PIL, O.P. (Order of Preachers)



Vocation Story

As a child, I often went to play at the church and the rectory of my uncle who was a priest. So, it became natural for me to think of becoming a priest because I had the impression that man had to become a priest and woman had to become a nun. To me,

it was kind of a matter of fact.

Since the vision of the Dominicans was appealing to me, I decided to join their religious order.

Contribution to the Diocese

As a seminarian, I learned that for a priest traditionally, holiness, knowledge and health were important. I still think so today. As a priest, I learned that judgement, common sense and discernment were important. I want to put them into practice.

Hope and Desire for the Parishioners

Deepening our faith and joining our efforts to pursue evangelization.

Notice of Retirement of Bishop Martin Tetsuo Hiraga

On Wednesday, March 18, Pope Francis has accepted the resignation of Bishop Hiraga and has officially announced his retirement. Fr. Shiro Komatsu has been appointed as the Diocesan Administrator of Sendai Diocese