

# Catholic Sendai Diocese Newsletter

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*“Walk as Children of Light and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.” (Ephesians 5:8-10)*

## Our Profound Gratitude to Bishop Hiraga

An Interview by Sr. Hasegawa Masako, FSP



**Question:** Bishop, thank you very much for your long selfless service. As of now, there are several people writing about their experience with you as a priest, when you studied in Rome and other occasions. But first of all, where were you during the Great East Japan Earthquake?

**Bishop:** At that time, I was inside the shinkansen on my way to Nara. I knew that something went wrong, but there was no proper announcement. I stayed the whole night in the shinkansen without knowing the details of what was going on. I couldn't sleep. I was thinking of the faithfuls of Sendai Diocese, the priests and nuns. In the morning, when I got off the shinkansen, there were buses for Tokyo and Fukushima. I took

the bus for Fukushima. I walked from Fukushima station to Nodamachi Church and Fr. Thomas welcomed me. I was so exhausted that I borrowed a chair to sit on and took a rest. Then, I thought of getting a taxi, but there was none. So, I walked again towards the station and I finally found a taxi that brought me back to the Bishop's residence in the evening. Later at night, Fr. Komatsu informed me of the death of Fr. Lachapelle, PME

In the following days, Bishop Kikuchi of Caritas Japan, Bishop Tani of Saitama Diocese, and Fr. Narui of Caritas Japan visited Sendai to organize the Sendai Diocese Support Center. In less than a month, the support activities of the diocese increased considerably, I felt uncomfortable just sitting at my desk. Unable to contain my feelings at the sight of the victims, I decided to

drive around the disaster-stricken areas in two days and one night with Fr. Funayama Toru.

**<Kesenuma Church>** We went to Kesenuma Church and Fr. Aizu Takahashi greeted us. I was shocked at the sight of the terrible damage in Minamimachi Street, close to the church. The street was full of rubbles and only one car could pass through it. The triple disasters caused damage from Aomori to Fukushima. That's why, it was impossible to move around. I thought of starting from Aomori going south. But all hotels and inns were closed. I ended up staying in Ichinoseki rectory and commuting to the parishes of the coastal area.

**<Kuji Church>** The next day, we went to Kuji and the church was relatively in good condition. The tsunami had pushed big trees and overflowed the river. In an instant, I felt the power of this tsunami. Then I went south on Route 45. The small villages along the coastal area like, Nodamura, Omoto, and Iwaizumi town were damaged, and the city's landscape was destroyed. The whole town of Tarocho was washed out. The members of the self-defense forces helped in cleaning up the town. The national highway was finally passable. A ship had been pushed towards Miyako Church.

**<Miyako Church>** In Miyako Church, the person in charge of the church, Ms. Ito Junko, was around. The church was not damaged but there were some parishioners who were affected. We passed by Tsugaruishi Bay towards Yamadachou. But we couldn't get through the town. From what I saw on the way, I felt that the damage was worse than in Taro. Otsuchimachi was as devastated as Yamadachou, and all the houses were destroyed by the tsunami.

**<Kamaishi Church>** At Kamaishi Church, I could to talk with the Parish Council Chairman Onodera Tetsu and the Vice Chairman Ise Seiko. We were able to give them the gas stove we brought along. The tsunami reached the gate of Kamaishi Church where we could see some debris and cars pushed near the gate. We headed towards the south passing by the devastated area of Kamaishi City.

**<Ofunato Church>** In Ofunato Church, we were met by Fr. Aizu Takashi who was the Parish Priest of both Ofunato and Kesenuma Church at that time. There was no electricity, water nor gas in Ofunato Church and in the Umi no Hoshi Kindergarten. We met the Kindergarten teachers working hard preparing for the graduation until sunset. Afterwards, we visited Dr. Yamaura Harutsugu, a parishioner of Ofunato Church, who was affected by the disaster. He was a highly respected doctor by the local people because he was caring and attending to the needs of the victims. We left Ofunato and headed for Rikuzentakata passing through the national highway. I was greatly shocked because the whole town was washed out and it was like a desert. While I was driving on my way back to Sendai, passing through Ichinoseki, I was dumbfounded on my way home because I was in total shock after seeing the devastation. Every place I visited looks like a desert. I reached Sendai at 9:00 p.m. This was the end of an unforgettable one-night, two-day trip.

The support we received from different parts of the world was overwhelming. First, I received a message of sympathy from the Catholic Bishop Conference of Korea (CBCK) and from the Pope. I was extremely grateful. There were supports coming

from American civic organizations, Candanian Dioceses, from Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, Mexico, and from South American countries. I felt like the whole world had become one. I was profoundly moved and I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone.

On April 18, I published the "New Creation" Pastoral Development Plan for the reconstruction of the Sendai Diocese. The plan is a five-phase program and we are now in the middle of the fifth phase. Then, there were support projects set up by the different dioceses of Japan like, the Catholic Tokyo Volunteer Center (CTVC) from the Archdiocese of Tokyo, the Sendai Diocese Support Center (the logistical support) by ENGO project from the Archdiocese of Osaka, and the Ohtsuchi Base from the Archdiocese of Nagasaki. In addition, during the Catholic Bishop Conference of Japan (CBCJ) meeting, the Japanese church decided to support the Sendai Diocese setting up the All-Japan Program. Then, I was moved with so much gratitude and joy that I cried.

**Question:** Another important contribution that you did as a bishop was the district system. Can you talk more about this?

**Bishop:** I have announced this in my 2014 New Year's message. The implementation started in April of the same year. The 53 parishes of the diocese were grouped in 8 districts. The priests assigned to the different parishes in the district work as a pastoral team. Before, the priests were sent to their respective parishes and worked as a parish priest. Now, the priests are sent to the district and work as a team with other priests of the district. In doing so, I wanted to raise an awareness that we work together as one church and this diocese is our church. I think the number one priority in missionary work is to bring the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, closer to the people. So, as much as possible, I hope we can have many masses on Sunday.

However, immediately after implementing this district system, I received several feedbacks from priests about celebrating several masses in different churches on Sundays. It is important to have a fellowship between the priests and the parishioners after the mass. But because the priest has to celebrate another mass in another church, he has to hurry up to go to the next church. Because of this the fellowship is sacrificed. Also, it is customary for priests to attend parish council meetings. It was quite difficult to attend to several churches. The number of priests in the diocese is decreasing which affects the number of masses in different churches on Sunday. If we want to change the district system, I have to entrust it to the next bishop.

Also, one of the most significant events that happened is the visit of Pope Francis in November 2019. The persons affected by the triple disasters had an audience with him. I felt the Pope's magnanimous heart which reflects the courage and kindness of a good shepherd.

**Question:** Do you have anything to share regarding your hopes and dreams for the Sendai Diocese?

**Bishop:** Seeing senior members of the church passing away and no people to replace them is painful. How can you assume a

smooth transition to the next generation? How can we form the next leaders of our church? How can we transmit our faith and spirituality to the next generation if there is not one to pass it on to? I hope there will be young people to succeed the next generation. This is what I want to convey.

**Question:** What do you expect from the next Bishop?

**Bishop:** The baptism of infants is decreasing. I wish to increase the number of infants baptized. In order to accomplish that, we

need somebody to take care of the education of faith of the children and the families. That's why, I look forward to the work of the next bishop.

Lastly, I was hoping to meet and thank each member of the Sendai Diocese, the sisters, the priests and everyone, but I cannot do it. Therefore, I would like to borrow a space from this newsletter and express my heartfelt gratitude to each and every one of you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you very much.

## Pastoral Journey of Bishop Hiraga Tetsuo

January 2, 1945

Born in Hanamaki, Iwate Prefecture as the youngest of eight brothers.

February 24, 1963

Baptized at Hanamaki Church

March 1967

Graduated from Iwate University, Department of Education

April 1967-March 1975

Enrolled in Tokyo Catholic Theological Seminary

September 16, 1974

Ordained as a priest in Morioka Shirayuri Gakuen

March 1975

Graduated from Sophia University Theology Department

April 1975-March 1977

Assistant Pastor of Ichinoseki Church

January-March 1977

He replaced the parish priest of Nishi Sendai Church



Nishi Sendai around 1977

July 1977

Studied in Rome, University of Urbano in the Department of Canon Law

June 1980

Graduated with a Master's Degree in Canon Law at the University of Urbano.

January 1981 to March 1991

Chancellor of the Sendai Diocese while serving as assistant parish priest of Ichinoseki Church, Senmaya Church and Nishi Sendai Church.

April 1985-March 1987,

Acting parish priest of Shiogama Church and Director of Shiogama Catholic Kindergarten.

November 1989 to March 1994

Started the joint missionary ministry in the southern district of Miyagi Prefecture, with residence in Shiroishi Church.

April 1994 to March 1996

Editor-in-chief of the Japan Catholic Weekly Newspaper

April 1996-March 1997

Sabbatical

April 1997-March 1998

Assistant Pastor of Morioka Yotsuya Church

April 1998-March 2000

Parish Priest of Ominato Church and Director of Ominato Catholic Kindergarten

April 2000-March 2002

Parish Priest of Kesenuma Church, Director of Kesenuma Catholic Kindergarten

April 2002-March 2003

Member of the joint missionary ministry of Sendai Central District

April 2003-May 2004

Vicar General of the Sendai Diocese while serving as Parish Priest of Furukawa Church

May 14, 2004

Selected as Administrator of the Sendai Diocese

December 10, 2005

Appointed as a Bishop of Sendai Diocese

March 4, 2006

Ordained Bishop at Regina Pacis Hall in Sendai Shirayuri School

March 17, 2011

Established the Sendai Diocese Support Center Program

April 18, 2011

Published the "New Creation" project, which is a Pastoral Development Plan for the reconstruction of Sendai Diocese.

June 13-17, 2011

It was decided during the regular Catholic Bishop Conference of Japan (CBCJ) meeting that the whole Church of Japan will support Sendai Diocese in the program called "All - Japan".

January 1, 2014

Presented the "District System" to the diocese in his New Year message.

March 18, 2020

Acceptance of his resignation as Bishop of Sendai

## Reminiscing my memory with Hiraga Tetsuo as the Bishop of Sendai Diocese

Mr. Nakamura Nobutada  
Mototerakoji Church

First of all, I would like to let you know that Bishop Hiraga has dedicatedly and wholeheartedly served Sendai Diocese as a Bishop for 14 years, from March 2006 to March 2020. For this, I sincerely appreciate it and I am deeply grateful. My encounter with Bishop Hiraga Tetsuo dates back to 53 years ago. Bishop Hiraga graduated from Iwate University in March 1967 with flying colors. In April of the same year, he entered the Tokyo Catholic Philosophy, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo as seminarian of Sendai Diocese. It was during that time that I entered the theological school as a seminarian of Sendai Diocese too. I was a fourth-year philosophy student, and Hiraga was a first-year philosophy student. Few days later, during a meeting, the senior seminarians from each diocese, starting from Sapporo to Kagoshima, introduced the new seminarians. Hiraga looked a little nervous. But he was a fine young man who was an intelligent person with a prominent smile.

The daily life in the seminary begins with a morning prayer, followed by 30 minutes private meditation, holy mass, breakfast, cleaning and seminary classes. At the end of the evening prayer, everyone sings "Salve Regina". The Sunday Mass was a Gregorian chant mass led by a selected four-part chorus. Seminarian Hiraga was chosen as a choir member from the first-year class and he was in charge of the bass part. His voice was impressive. (I was first tenor but I was not that good.) Seminarian Hiraga successfully completed the four-year philosophy course and four-year theology course, an eight years formation towards becoming a priest. He was ordained by Bishop Kobayashi Arikata in 1974 in Morioka Shirayuri School. It was a solemn and memorable celebration.

For me, one of the most inspiring pastoral activities that Bishop Hiraga did as a priest was during the visit of Mother Teresa on November 21, 1984. At that time, Bishop Hiraga, as

a priest, was the Chancellor of the Sendai Diocese. An Ad Hoc Committee was created to welcome Mother Teresa. There were more than a dozen members of the committee which included Bishop Sato Chihiro, priests, brothers, sisters and parishioners. The committee met once a month starting from April. Fr. Hiraga with his calm and quiet nature gave a clear-sighted and proper orientation to welcome Mother Teresa.

Mother Teresa arrived at Mototerakoji Church by car coming from Sendai Airport in the morning of November 21. She immediately attended the Holy Mass. Afterwards, there was a seminar held at Shirayuri School in the afternoon attended by the clergy. Later in the afternoon, there was a lecture held at the Sendai City Gymnasium which was attended by the public. Before Mother Teresa left that evening of the same day of the visit, the Ad Hoc Committee had a chance to have a conversation with her at the reception room of the Sendai City Gymnasium.

Bishop Hiraga has a gentle and approachable personality that parishioners can easily go to him for an advice or request and he would generously take time to listen. Likewise, whenever Bishop Hiraga would go to his office on the second floor and would pass by my office on the first floor, he would always raise his hand to say hello to me. It was very refreshing to be treated that way.

I met Bishop Hiraga two weeks after Pope Francis officially accepted his retirement on March 18, 2020. When I met Bishop (Emeritus) Hiraga after Pope Francis has dismissed him from his heavy responsibility as the leader of the diocese, I felt he was relieved from that hefty responsibility after 14 years.

I look forward to your continued health and encouragement and guidance. I'm deeply grateful to you. Thank you very much.



Can you spot Bishop Hiraga in this picture?