

A BOND OF SOLIDARITY BECOMES A BEACON OF HOPE
Ten Years of Great East Japan Earthquake Reconstruction

March 11, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It has been 10 years since an unprecedented catastrophe struck eastern Japan, mainly along the Pacific coast of Tohoku. Nearly 20,000 people died, the fates of more than 2,500 people remain unknown, and more than 40,000 people continue to live as evacuees. We continue to pray for the eternal rest of the deceased and extend our deepest sympathies to all the victims.

Thanks to volunteers, fundraisers and supporters

In the face of damage far greater than we could have imagined, many people not only in Japan but from all over the world rushed to support us. The activities of volunteers who have worked closely with the reconstruction efforts in various parts of Tohoku have built bonds of solidarity that have spread throughout the world. Those bonds have led to further relief activities in various parts of the country that have experienced disasters since then.

On March 16, 2011, immediately after the disaster, the Catholic Church in Japan established a center for reconstruction assistance in Sendai and began activities centered on the Catholic Diocese of Sendai, which has responsibility for the Tohoku region. At the end of March, the country's 16 dioceses agreed to work together to provide reconstruction assistance for 10 years. Based on this resolution, they established eight volunteer bases in various parts of the Tohoku coast to accept volunteers from all over the country.¹

We want to express our heartfelt gratitude to the many volunteers who rushed to the volunteer bases from inside and outside the Church and from Japan and abroad and participated in activities together with the people in the disaster-stricken areas over the past decade. There could have been no reconstruction support activities without the presence of volunteers. We would also like to thank local governments and social welfare councils for their understanding of this work of the Catholic Church and for the opportunity to work together.

In addition, Caritas Japan, the humanitarian organization of the Catholic Church in Japan, received financial support from Caritas organizations around the world, as well as donations from many people in Japan. Caritas Japan joined reconstruction support activities in Tohoku. Fund-raising activities were carried out for months and years after the earthquake, expanding the circle of goodwill. We express our sincere gratitude to the many donors in Japan and overseas who have supported our reconstruction activities over the past decade.²

Moving Ahead as "A New Creation"

As a locally rooted presence even before the disaster, the Catholic Church has aimed to create hope for life not only in temporary relief efforts, but also in the future as it works together with the people of Tohoku. When the Catholic Diocese of Sendai, which has responsibility for the disaster-stricken areas, took the lead in reconstruction assistance with the motto "A New Creation," it chose to continue moving forward with hope rather than returning to the past. Church activities will not end at the 10-year milestone.³

At a gathering with people from the disaster-stricken areas of Tohoku during his visit to Japan in November 2019, Pope Francis said, "many people, not only from Japan, but from all over the world, mobilized immediately after the disasters to support the victims with an outpouring of prayers and material and financial aid. We should not let this action be lost with the passage of time or disappear after the initial shock; rather, we should continue and sustain it."⁴

Ten years have passed, and some volunteer bases have already completed their activities. Others have developed into NPOs, etc. Through its local parishes the Catholic Church in Japan will continue to change the shape of its relationships and contribute to the further reconstruction of local communities.

Pope Francis also said, "Without basic resources such as food, clothing and shelter, it is not possible to live a worthy life and have the bare minimum needed to succeed in rebuilding. This, in turn, calls for experiencing the solidarity and support of a community. No one 'rebuilds' by himself or herself; nobody can start over alone. We have to find a friendly and fraternal hand, capable of helping to raise not just a city, but also our horizon and our hope."⁵

Guided by these words, the Catholic Church in Japan is not limited to material support but will continue to walk in the bonds of solidarity with the people of Tohoku as friends, brothers and sisters, a solidarity that spreads around the world to "raise ... our horizon and our hope."

Abolition of nuclear power plants and ecological conversion

In November 2011, eight months after the earthquake and in response to the nuclear power plant accident in Fukushima the bishops released a message "Abolish Nuclear Power Plants Immediately." In it, we called for the immediate abolition of nuclear power plants from the standpoint of believers who protect life, the gift of God. At the same time, we stressed that "Christians have an obligation to bear genuine witness to the Gospel especially through the ways of life expected by God: 'simplicity of life, the spirit of prayer, charity towards all, especially towards the lowly and the poor, obedience and humility, detachment and self-sacrifice.'" We proposed a new look at the way society should be.⁶

Unfortunately, we feel that over time the situation is moving in a different direction from this call. Ten years after the accident, we renew our call for the immediate abolition of nuclear power plants and a review of lifestyles.

The Catholic Church believes that human life is a gift from God. The theme of Pope Francis' visit to Japan was "Protect All Life." Responding to the pope's call, we want to bring about a society in which all life is protected without exception, its dignity is preserved, and no one is forgotten.

Now with the coronavirus pandemic the world is in solidarity to "Protect All Life." Pope Francis calls on us to go to those in need of help, to those who are isolated and facing the crises of life in this modern world of conflict and division, discrimination and exclusion, isolation and loneliness.

When we were struck by that unprecedented disaster, we felt the limits of human wisdom and knowledge. Before the power of nature, we understood how weak we are. At that time, we engraved on our hearts the importance of helping each other, the importance of solidarity to protect life, and the importance of a caring heart. Now, 10 years after the great earthquake and tsunami, the world surely needs to think about that importance.

As we mark the 10th anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake, we pray for the eternal rest of those who have died and pray for the blessings and protection of God for the many who have been affected by the disaster. In the bonds of solidarity with one another let us journey hand in hand to find the light of hope.

Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan

¹ Sapporo Caritas Miyako Base, Caritas Otsuchi Base, Caritas Kamaishi, Caritas Ofunato Base, Caritas Yonekawa Base, Caritas Ishinomaki Base, Caritas Minamisoma, Iwaki Fir Tree Support Center. In addition, there are other bases such as the Independence Center for Persons with Disabilities conducted by the Nagoya Diocese.

² As of December 15, 2020, the total amount of aid from Caritas Japan was ¥2,434,749,157. Donations in Japan to Caritas amounted to ¥991,508,908, while ¥1,868,856,927 (including ¥739,822,350 from the United States) came from overseas.

³ See "Sendai Diocese New Creation Basic Plan", Sendai Catholic Diocese Newsletter No.199, May 15, 2011. (Japanese only)

⁴ Pope Francis, Meeting with the victims of Triple Disaster, (Apostolic Journey to Japan: Meeting with the victims of Triple Disaster - Activities of the Holy Father Pope Francis | Vatican.va).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ (Comments on the Bishops' Message "Abolish Nuclear Plants Immediately" | カトリック中央協議会 (catholic.jp) (Nov. 10, 2011) .

On November 11, 2016, the Catholic Bishops of Japan published "A Message from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan to All the People of Earth, Our Common Home." (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 | カトリック中央協議会).

Earlier, in November 2011, eight months after the Great East Japan Earthquake, the bishops announced plans for a book that would complement and support their de-nuclearization message scientifically, philosophically, and theologically. It was published on October 4, 2016. An English-language version was published in July 2020 and is available for download on the CBCJ website, ("ABOLITION OF NUCLEAR POWER An Appeal from the Catholic Church in Japan" English version Released | カトリック中央協議会). Based on Japan's history of using of nuclear energy, the book questions the nation's responsibility as the site of a nuclear accident. It gives a scientific explanation of nuclear technology, and referring to the May 24, 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* of Pope Francis, it develops an ethical consideration of nuclear power based on Catholic doctrine and modern environmental thought.