

Please Do Not Forget

Keeping in Mind the Acts of Charity Sparked by the Great Earthquake

In the current of time, we seldom recall what we did and where we were at a particular moment on a specific day. However, everyone probably remembers where and what he or she was doing shortly after 14:30 on March 11th, 2011.

I was on the way back to Niigata in an express train of Uetsu-line, after participating in a graduation ceremony in Akita. The train stopped suddenly with a power blackout. It was just before Tsuruoka station in Shounai region of Yamagata prefecture. I was waiting patiently amid repeated aftershocks with no way to contact others, until a bus arrived after 19:00 at night. When I switched on the radio I had brought by chance, the emergency news was calling for vigilance against tsunami. I still remember the newscaster's voice saying "Tsunami of over 10 meters is expected to hit the Miyako area."

The Miyako area of Iwate prefecture is my hometown. The whole area had been affected by gigantic tsunami several times before, so the area should have been well prepared. I remember that I felt at ease thinking it would be all right with the tsunami of only about 10 meters. However, when I came back to the bishop's residence in Niigata late at night on that day and switched on the television, the horrible scenes of tsunami caught my eye. Even now, those horrific images displayed repeatedly on TV and through inter-net since then are inscribed indelibly on my heart and memory.

Many people lost their loved ones, a faithful spouse, family members and friends, while being buffeted by the sudden disaster. Their life changed drastically at that moment from the one they had lived till the earthquake. Even now, one year since then, we find only difficulties on the way to reconstruction.

Now, as we walk a steep road, I would like to follow our Lord Jesus who walked together with his disciples on the way to Emmaus. Walking with afflicted people who face the task of reconstruction, I want to listen to their inner voice and seek the way to hope together. We believe God will plant the seeds of new hope even amid incredible calamity. The death and sufferings of the Lord Jesus himself must have been truly incomprehensible and irrational for the disciples. They could only think that all hope was lost. Angels told the grieving and anxious disciples that the

Lord is alive. A light of hope shone in their darkness. It is not easy to find out the answers to the questions why this disaster occurred and why we were embroiled in such calamity. However, living with faith in the risen Lord Jesus, we would like to live believing that God will bring out hope even amid incomprehensibly tragic realities.

At the end of last September, over 6 months after the earthquake, I had a chance to visit the afflicted areas and offer prayers with priests from Saitama and Niigata dioceses.

At that time I visited Kesennuma Church. Since the church and kindergarten were located on higher ground, tsunami did not reach them. However, the Kesennuma area was in flames so that the kindergarten staff spent a night in terror with the remaining children. The vice principal of the kindergarten told me her experience. She mentioned at the end, "I feel as if we are increasingly forgotten." These words have pierced my heart and never disappeared from my mind.

In summer 1996, I was in former Zaire in Africa in order to inspect the refugee camp for Rwandans for the third time.

In a refugee camp, I asked one of the leaders what they needed. Needless to say, in the refugee camp numerous things were "lacking." Amid such a situation of scarcity, the refugees were living in the camp with little hope for the future. As a matter of course, I asked this question expecting their request would be for goods. However, the leader's response was contrary to my expectation.

"Father, you are from Japan. Then, when you go back to Japan, please tell everyone we are still here. We have been forgotten by the rest of the world."

At first, when over 2 million people became refugees due to the unprecedented massacre, the relief organizations from all over the world sent their staff and volunteers to refugee camps, so much so that local people called it the Olympic Game of volunteers. However, as the situation became protracted, the interest of people in the world waned and the relief organizations were gradually withdrawn. Amid such a circumstance, the words "we have been forgotten" spoken by those who were left behind, pierced my heart.

Since then, I have realized that there are two ways to solve "problems" in the world. The "problem" is solved in an objective way when people are less

interested and not conscious of the problem. That is because it is no longer discussed in society and nobody cares about it. Of course, the problem is not solved at all, in fact, and the suffering people involved are gradually left behind alone. I think we must not try to solve the problems by not paying attention to them. Rather, we should seek the real solution staying closely beside people involved so that they are no longer left behind.

It is certain that the reconstruction from the calamity will take a long time. Visible reconstruction might be realized some day by investing money and time. Even so, people in the afflicted area should not be left behind feeling that they are forgotten. On the occasion of Lent, I would like to think in prayer what we can do so that the catchphrase “walk together” will not end up as just words.

After celebrating a mass together in Watari Church in Miyagi prefecture, one of the local faithful showed me around the afflicted area. In the coastal lowland area, tsunami took away towns as if covering them up with a carpet. On a dead flat land, there is nothing except roads and some buildings like ruins here and there. He said jokingly that he lost his way even when he just went home. The scenery of towns as landmarks, which existed before tsunami hit, was completely taken away. What has remained is a different sight of the town from the one people remember. Without landmarks, people lose their way.

Is it only a matter of the change of landscape? No, it isn't. The history of each person, which has been accumulated over decades, was destroyed indeed. Many volunteers cleaned family photographs left in the rubble, and returned them to owners. These efforts were not just to reminisce about the past, but were meaningful tasks because those photographs are indeed a part of the history of each person concerned. The Great Earthquake destroyed and took away the history of many people living in those areas.

It is possible to support the reconstruction of buildings, but it is not easy to assist the task of restoring history. Only those who have been accumulating their history can restore their own past. However, we can advance side by side in order to trace new history together.

Lent gives us the “time” to reaffirm our faith through prayers, fasting, and the acts of charity. “Prayers and fasting” can be considered as internal matters within oneself, while “the acts of charity” will not be realized without others as the

objects of such acts. That is to say, in order to reflect on our faith on the occasion of Lent, we must face our inner self, as well as ask ourselves how we can realize concretely “the acts of charity” in our relationships with others.

On the occasion of Lent this year, Caritas Japan issued this booklet focusing on what people experienced due to the Great Earthquake. During Lent, let us keep deep in our mind the acts of charity brought about by the calamity.