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Sendai Diocesan Center
1-2-12 Honcho, Aoba-ku, Sendai-shi 980-0014
Tel 022-222-7371 Fax 022-222-7378
Publisher: Tetsuo Hiraga Editor: Fumiaki Komatsu
Postal Money Transfer Account : 02260-9-2305
Account Name:カトリック仙台司教区本部事務局

It has been three months since the earthquake and tsunami, but we have been so busy just getting by that there has been little time for reflection. Though it is difficult to approach people who have lost family and friends, the time has come to gradually record the memories of people who lived through the disaster.

In this first memoir, Bishop Tetsuo Hiraga describes his activities after the quake.

Chronicle: What I saw and did --- Bishop Hiraga ---

When the quake struck, I was on a Shinkansen bullet train out of Fukushima, heading to Nara. I wound up spending the night on the stopped train. I realized that we had experienced a huge earthquake, and worried about the Catholics of Sendai, the priests and the sisters. I tried to get information, but phone service was out. So, even after getting back to Sendai, it took a long time to find out about them and about the parishes, convents, kindergartens, nurseries and other institutions.

As soon as I got back to Sendai, I had some of the priests go around by bicycle to check on the parishes. Apart from some cracks in walls and broken windows, every place was alright. I asked the various religious communities to report to me on conditions at their convents and institutions. But, we still could not get information about parishioners and that was the worst time for me.

There was no way I could simply sit at my desk and wait for reports. Though there might not be much I could do, I decided I had to see the devastation myself. So, accompanied by Fr. Toru Funayama, I spent March 28 and 29 traveling through the disaster area.

My First Trip to the Disaster Zone

To Kesenuma

We left in the afternoon drove to Kesenuma. There was nothing but rubble, and the car could barely get through. I was shocked at the devastation in the town just below the church, where Fr. Takashi Aizu, the pastor, was waiting for us.

The area affected by the disaster stretches from Aomori in the north to Fukushima in the south, so there was no way we could get to all the affected towns. We decided to start from the north at Hachinohe in Aomori Prefecture and head south from there. When we got to



Viewing the ruins of Kesenuma

Hachinohe, the hotels and inns were all closed, so we stayed in Ichinoseki.

On to Kuji

The next day, we moved on to Kuji in Iwate Prefecture. The church there was undamaged. The tsunami had raced up the river, tearing up huge trees along the



Visiting the pastor of Kuji Church

way. Seeing them gave me a sense of the awesome power of the wave.

Route 45 had been cleared, and we headed south on it. Small seaside towns like Noda, Omoto and Iwaizumi had been smashed by the tsunami. The town of Tarō had been

wiped away, and what houses remained were smashed. Self Defense Force troops were at work in the rubble.

Our trip took us through many towns in the same condition. I knew those towns and missed landmarks I once knew. I kept saying, "That's where such-and-such a shop was!" or "There used to be a building there!" And now, there was nothing. Along the way, we saw a boat that had been washed up on shore. Eventually, I could no longer speak.



Miyako

We stopped at Miyako, where Ms. Itoh, the church caretaker, told us that while the church itself escaped damage, parishioners suffered losses. We continued south along Tsugaruishi Bay to Yamada. Since it was impossible to get through the town, we took a road along the mountain. As far as I could tell, the damage here was worse than in Tarō. And the town of Ōtsui in was even worse shape than Yamada. Every building had been toppled and the town was wiped out.

Kamaishi

Onodera-san and Ise-san, members of the Kamaishi parish council, met us and we were able to give them some gas burners we had brought along.

The tsunami had reached the first floor of the church, and debris and cars were piled up at the church gate. We then continued south through the grim scene that had been Kamaishi.



And, finally, Ofunato and Rikuzentakata

Fr. Aizu of the Kesenuma Church is also the pastor of Ofunato and he was waiting for us when we arrived. The Church and the parish kindergarten were without water, electricity or gas. Even so, the teachers at the kindergarten were working hard to arrange a graduation ceremony. One of the parishioners, Dr. Harutsugu Yamaura, suffered his own losses in in the tsunami, but had resumed providing medical care. It was easy to see why he has always been respected by the townspeople.

From Ofunato, we headed to Rikuzentakata, getting there in the evening. It was the most shocking experience of a shocking journey. It used to be a large town



Now it was a desert. The pine trees for which it was famous were all gone. Buildings, the train station – all gone. At the foot of the mountains, there were piles of corpses and debris. The shock was such that I could only drive on in silence, not stopping at Ichinoseki, but heading straight back to Sendai. We arrived after nine o'clock that night. It was the end of a two-day journey that I will never forget.