

Catholic Sendai Diocese Newsletter

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Catholic Sendai Diocese

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Happy Easter!!!

Edgar Gacutan
Bishop of the Diocese of Sendai

The Lord be with you

"And with your Spirit." I seem to hear such reply. As a child, the first time I was moved by such dialogue between the priest and the people during mass was on February 2, 1977, a few weeks before I graduated from elementary school. (At that time, the response of the people was "And also with you.") On that day, Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, I served for the first time at mass. I trace back to that day the beginning of my vocation to the priesthood. Getting acquainted with a priest (up close and personal) is part of my vocation story.

My parish church was located in a rural town that had several outlying villages. Each village had its chapel. Our parish priest had no assistant. On Saturdays, he presided the Lord's Day Mass at two or three chapels. As mass servers (aged 13-18) we prepared the liturgical books (Missal, Lectionary, etc.) and vessels and other equipment for the village masses. The head of the mass servers would make a final check of the preparation. Aside from the Lord's Day mass, wedding and funeral masses were also held at village chapels.

It happened once that before we were to begin the last Mass of that day, we realized that the Missal had been left at the previous chapel. The parish priest was also the principal of the Catholic middle school I attended. As school principal he was so strict that he was called "Father Fury" by teachers and students. I and another mass server thought that we would be scolded because we forgot the Missal. We waited for the priest's furious words, but we received no such scolding. Instead, he just signaled that

we begin the Mass as if nothing had happened. During the mass he offered the presider's prayers as if he was reading from the Missal. It was this priest who showed me the way towards the priesthood. I also met a missionary priest after him, and it was for that reason that I joined a missionary congregation. I received the grace of priestly ordination on April 23, 1994.

On April 29 this year, for the first time in 17 years, a priest of the Diocese of Sendai will be born. The ordination of Deacon Michael Kentaro Takagi is a great blessing and joy for us. As ordaining bishop, during my homily I will say to Deacon Takagi the following: "Impart to everyone the word of God which you have received with joy. Meditating on the law of the Lord, see to it that you believe what you read, that you practice what you teach."



We encounter such priests (and people) who practice what they teach and believe. They know what we are up to. They don't have to do something for us. Just being there with us is enough to lift us up.

"The Lord be with you." "And with your Spirit." This is a divine dialogue. The Lord Jesus Christ comes to us in many surprising ways, sometimes anonymously. Jesus comes through the closed door of fear. Jesus comes as a voice that speaks to our hearts. Jesus appears to us, like the stranger on the road to Emmaus. The Lord is truly alive. The Lord is with us.

Happy Easter.

The New Diocesan District System

Feast of the Presentation of the Lord
February 2, 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This year I wrote my first New Year's letter to you where I mentioned that our diocese would be reorganized from the current eight districts to five and that the parishes in each district would be grouped into "blocs". Some of you have shared your reactions to my message. I'm glad for your feedback. Since the retirement of Bishop Hiraga in March 2020 and while waiting for the appointment of a new bishop, Apostolic Administrator Fr. Shiro Komatsu met regularly with priests representing the eight districts of the diocese to discuss matters concerning the missionary-pastoral care of the Sendai flock. After I was installed bishop, I have been meeting with said priests and together we evaluated the "district system" of the diocese and how priests are appointed. Many of them have expressed their desire that the system introduced in 2014 be improved.

On the occasion of my pastoral visits to the parishes of our diocese, I received comments from the parishioners such as "Which priest in the district should I ask for parish or personal advice?" and "We don't know who among the priests sent to the district is in charge of our parish." Those comments coincide with the results of a survey from the laity that we conducted for the Synod at the beginning of last year.

I decided to respond to the call for improvements to the existing district system from priests and parishioners by introducing a new way of appointing priests. I hope that

this will clarify the responsibilities of priests eliminate confusion, and promote cooperation between priests and parishioners.



The priest I appoint to a particular bloc is the pastor of the parishes belonging to that bloc. Please consult with him about matters related to your parish. He is the pastor you can seek spiritual help from. I would like to reiterate the expectation I wrote in my New Year's letter: As the priest appointed to a bloc of parishes is the one in charge of that bloc, with him, please meet like a family. As you pray for and trust in the guidance of God the Father, with him, please discuss your dreams, concerns, and hopes.

This year I am able to appoint one priest to each bloc. Sanpachi bloc of District 1 is the only bloc to which I appoint two "full-time" priests. I hope the two of them will be able to carry out "jointly" their missionary-pastoral duties. I fervently hope that in the future I will be able to appoint more than one priest, especially to larger blocs.

Together let us pray for God's blessing and guidance upon the priests appointed to the new districts and blocs. May we, the flock of the Diocese of Sendai, be united in heart and mind and become truly God's family.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Edgar Gacutan
Bishop of the Diocese of Sendai

Journey to "New Creation" Thank you for the "Encounter"!

Twelve years have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake. Ofunato was devastated by the tsunami. Ofunato Church suffered little damage from the earthquake, but five parishioners died, and the kindergarten garage and the columbarium were washed away. The remains of 12 people who had been enshrined in the columbarium were swept away, and we don't know where they had gone. At a time of crisis, a helping hand from all over the country and the world came to our aid, and the Catholic Church in Japan united in an All-Japan effort to provide support to the disaster-stricken areas. Eight volunteer bases (Caritas Bases) were set up in the affected areas, and those who came to volunteer continued to engage in a variety of activities to help the people there.

Bishop Hiraga of the Diocese of Sendai announced the "Basic Plan for New Creation". As a member of the Ofunato Church and a staff member of Caritas Ofunato Base, I am working on the front lines of recovery and reconstruction from the disaster and "New Creation". In his basic plan, Bishop Hiraga wanted to be close to the affected areas and people, especially those in the "countryside" and those who live there. Pope Francis said during his visit to Japan in November 2019, "No one can recover alone. No one can start again alone. It is essential to meet friends and brothers and sisters who can restore perspective and hope. We were encouraged by his words and continued to work. The plan continues up to now under Bishop Edgar Gacutan.

The past 12 years seem to have passed in a flash. However, when I think of the changes in the Church, the activities of the base, and the recovery and restoration of the affected areas, I feel that it has been an extensive, intensive, and precious 12 years. When we realized that there were many foreigners in Ofunato and Rikuzentakata, the Diocese of Sendai asked other congregations to send priests.



The CICM Japan District sent Filipino and Indonesian priests to Ofunato Church. When a foreign priest was stationed at Ofunato Church, more and more Filipino believers began to gather and come to Mass. We decided not to treat these Filipinos as foreigners, but as spouses who had married into our community. We also asked them to read the Bible in Japanese during the Mass. We sang the "Lord's Prayer" in Japanese, followed

by the Tagalog song "Ama Namin" together. We also asked them to participate in meetings as members of the parish committee. Baptisms and First Communions, which had not been held for a long time before the earthquake, are now being held. And, these children will lead Ofunato Parish in the future. Sakai Parish in Osaka and Seijo Parish in Tokyo have become our sister parishes, and we continue to communicate with them. We lost a lot of things in the disaster, but we also gained a lot of "encounters" through the disaster, for which we are very grateful.



Ofunato Church has changed dramatically since half of the congregation consists of Filipino mothers and their children. I feel that we must overcome the differences in language and culture to create a new church community.

Keiichi Sugawara (Ofunato Church)

District News Update

District #3

All parishes in Japan have been affected by the declining birthrate and aging population. Kamido Parish is no exception. The passing of one of the pillars of the parish has forced parishioners to seek help from Yotsuya Parish in order to continue their programs and activities. Thanks to the influx of newcomers, the community has discovered new life and hope.



District #5

Shiogama Parish celebrated Christmas Eve Mass on December 24th at 6 p.m., with small children and adults who have not been seen for a long time. After Mass, all

participants were presented with a small round doughnut, bringing smiles and joy to everyone.

District #7

Fr. Paul Too was the spiritual director who led the Advent Recollection for the two parishes in Fukushima City. The theme of the joint recollection was "Community and the Life of Faith". The song "Keep Walking", by Ami Sano, was played to illustrate the theme. She has a congenital limb defect, but always looks forward to the future. The retreat was wrapped up with the message, "God has always been with us, and He is still with us."



Children from the Sunday school of Fukushima City's two parishes performed a Nativity Play before December 24th's Christmas Eve Mass. Sr. Yasuda and Sr. Egawa were assisted by the leaders and the children's mother in rehearsing the play many times with the fourteen children. The children's earnest acting was nonetheless filled with adorable cuteness, filling the hearts of the audience with warmth and happiness.



Introduction of Priest

Ignacio Martinez Baez

Guadalupe Mission

Date of birth : November 5, 1962

Birthplace : Mexico City, Mexico

Deacon ordination :

March 27, 1991,
Mototerakoji Church
(Sendai Cathedral)

Priestly Ordination :

August 15, 1992,
Our Lady of Guadalupe Cathedral
(Mexico City)



What inspired you to become a priest?

I am the eldest of four siblings. I went to elementary and junior high school at a La Salle mission school, so I was raised in a joyful Catholic atmosphere, and my relationship with the church was normal.

When I was in elementary school, I was crazy about Japanese TV programs. In particular, "Comet-san" (Yumiko Kokonoe) was very popular. I think it is no exaggeration to say that every Mexican child of my age knows the Japanese name "Koji" or "Takeshi". Ever since I was a child, I wanted to visit Japan with my own eyes and experience the tastes and smells of Japan. I wanted to sleep on a futon in a tatami room and eat with chopsticks. But I didn't think seriously about becoming a priest. I remember thinking how cool it was when the priest lifted the big white round loaf of bread during Mass and wishing I could do it myself someday (I had never served as an altar boy before entering the seminary because I was too shy to stand in front of people wearing a red dress). At that time, the chaplain of the school was a priest from the Guadalupe Mission, but I remember that he only talked about missions in Africa, and I honestly wasn't interested in stories about lions being scary or giraffes being huge. However, I first learned that the Guadalupe Mission was also active in Japan when I saw a sticker with a photo of a Japanese girl made for the 25th anniversary of the Guadalupe Mission's founding in 1974! At that moment, I made up my mind. I wanted to become a missionary to go to

Japan, and I decided to join the Guadalupe Mission in order to go to Japan. It was truly a magical opportunity that God had prepared for me. God's work is truly immeasurable.

What do you value as a priest?

As for what I value as a missionary priest, I think it is "living with joy". Since I was a child, I experienced church as a joyful and safe place where anyone can feel at ease. Especially as a child, I attended a church with a cheerful and friendly parish priest, so I thought all the priests were pleasant people. I wondered if I could become a priest, a missionary priest who would share God's joy and hope in some small way with the people I meet. But not every day is a good day. Even if I cannot always smile, even if I feel sad at times, I want to cherish such a joyful heart as long as I can. I want to be a priest who, when faced with trials, does not give up, even though I am not able to express my joy well and walk forward with Jesus and all of you.

What do you expect from the parishioners of Sendai Diocese?

What I want for the people of the Diocese of Sendai is to never lose hope, no matter what happens. God always walks with us. Since you all experienced the suffering of the Great East Japan Earthquake and the spread of the corona, I am sure you have learned a lot from that pain, and it was a great blessing that you joined forces to stand together. The breath of the Holy Spirit is constantly blowing in our Diocese of Sendai. I want each and every person, bishop, priest, layperson, child, adult, senior citizen, woman, man, and member of each community, parish, congregation, institution, school, and activity group to walk together and support each other, living joyfully beyond the differences in their thinking, gender, environment, culture, and nationality. I want them to embrace the richness of the diversity of God's Kingdom and rejoice in the wonderful blessings we have now that we are walking together as one family. Thank you for your continued support.

In prayer and gratitude.