

The Tohoku earthquake and tsunami

A Harrowing Experience

Aside from the fact that it was bitterly cold, the 11th of March 2011 was no different from any other day. The electronic device I used to remind me of my appointments drew my attention to a meeting I was scheduled to have with a young mother on a visit to Japan, who was eager for me to meet her two little children. The lunch we ate that day was enjoyable, the pizza was delicious, and the children were cute. Yet, they revealed such a vivacious and energetic disposition, that a waiter humorously remarked that the two were a bigger kettle of fish than an earthquake. On reflecting back, I see that the man could not have been further from the truth, for at around 2:30 PM, when I had returned to my office after having seen them off at the railway station, we in Japan were assailed by what was perhaps the most violent earthquake registered in the annals of the nation. It struck at precisely 2:46 PM, and it was of an intensity of ten on the Japanese scale. Ten traumatic minutes elapsed before it subsided, but those ten minutes seemed like an eternity.

My initial impression was that we were undergoing one of those periodic earthquakes that often occur in the country, but I soon realized that I was wrong; for this was far more forceful than any others I had known. Rushing into the room of my secretaries I hastily ordered them to crawl beneath the steel desks, but on returning to my office and glancing out of the window I was struck by a feeling of panic, for the entire city of Tokyo seemed to be in a state of unruly gyration. Fearing that our building was on the verge of collapse I thereupon swiftly bolted back to the secretaries, screaming that I had changed my mind and that I wanted them all to exit the building using the southern staircase. A hasty exodus thereupon took place down five flights of stairs, and all of us descended stumbling and keeling over, all the way to the ground floor. Standing before the Church, we felt as though we were navigating a turbulent sea, when all of a sudden, a terror-stricken voice screamed out aloud saying, "Building number 2 is falling on us." On glancing above, that was precisely what I felt myself, for the university building of twenty stories was observed to sway like a bamboo pole, and a couple of seconds later, a steel cross weighing 400 kilograms that decorated the Church tower, came crashing down. Thanks to a steel wire the cross hung suspended above the ground, but it continued rhythmically to batter the tower walls, as a clapper strikes a bell.

Soon the darkness descended, and all means of transportation came to a halt. Trains, taxis, buses, and all other vehicles ceased to move, radios, telephones, computers, and elevators ceased to work, and thousands were seen aimlessly walking down the streets, devoid of any direction. An eerie silence



pervaded the place, but despite it all order prevailed, for there was to be witnessed neither rioting nor ransacking, and neither abusive words nor complaints were to be heard. Convenience stores ran out of goods, but none purchased more than was needed to survive the night. It was a historic moment for Japan, a period when the nation had a unique message to offer the world, a message concerning the manner in which people needed to behave in times of anxiety or crisis. In communicating this message the Japanese exerted a profound impact upon the entire world, an impact that instantly transformed them into the cynosure of all eyes, owing to their integrity and courage. Indeed, we who serve as missionaries in Japan, feel justly proud of our people.

It was past 9:00 PM when I realized that I was shivering, for it had grown excessively cold, and I had not the time to grab some warm clothing prior to vacating the building. On returning to my office to fetch my coat however I found the place resembling a combat zone, with objects scattered everywhere. Dropping to the floor in frustration I wondered whether I should weep, but instead I smiled, and then, laughing aloud I exclaimed, "God, your jokes are scary." Then, rising to my feet, I began to clean up the mess.

That night we opened the doors of all our institutions to the public and offered shelter to hundreds of Japanese, who were unable to return home owing to the absence of transportation.

A Terminal Disaster

The earthquake had hardly ended when a fresh crisis arose, namely the tsunami. Its appearance was so sudden that there was scarcely time to evacuate the affected population. Waves exceeding fifteen meters in height annihilated entire cities, villages, airports, and vehicles, besides thousands of human lives.



The ocean inundated three vast prefectures and eliminated all signs of civilization and life over an area covering hundreds of square kilometers, and when the waters finally receded, they left in their wake a gruesome panorama of desolation and grief. The newspapers and television broadcasts presented scenes that were truly heartrending. A certain young woman spent two days in piteous weeping when she saw the spot where her house had once stood, for the tsunami had deprived her of the lives of her parents, her husband, and her two children. When finally coaxed to enter a refugee shelter, she remarked, "How sad it is to cry alone." There were also among others the case of an old man, who was rescued a week later. He was discovered floating on a kitchen table, twenty kilometers away from the shore.

Rescue teams promptly swung into action, and volunteers from all over the nation arrived to assist the victims. Unlike treasure hunters, whose joy on encountering hidden treasure is immeasurable, these people were looking for corpses, and sad to say, on discovering them, the little hope they cherished in their hearts vanished abruptly, leaving in its place anguish and pain. We went through such experiences often in those days. During the succeeding months and days a series of after-shocks continued to plague us, but even today, the recovery of corpses is an experience we find truly unendurable.



Yet, through it all, the people of Japan conducted themselves with an attitude of dignity and calm that was remarkable. An employee of mine confessed that his brother resided in a small village located near a coastline, from where an entire city had disappeared. As he spoke he was in perfect control over his emotions, and all that he

begged of me was for my prayers. Fortunately however, we later learned that his brother had been away when the tsunami occurred, and that his life was consequently saved. He communicated the good news to me with tears in his eyes, adding, “Father I knew that if you prayed my brother would be saved, because your faith is strong.”

A Persisting Threat

The third disaster that assailed us on that occasion was linked to technology. Waves as high as thirteen meters submerged the nuclear plant at Fukushima, sparking off an imminent threat of a meltdown. Radiation caused by



iodine and cesium was detected in the area, and this led to instant panic, for memories of the atomic catastrophes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki continue to haunt the minds of the people. The government ordered the evacuation of all living within a radius of thirty kilometers from the nuclear plant, and severe decontamination measures were taken. It was providential that the nation was capable of tackling the crisis, for the most innovative technology was employed to control the level of contamination in all living within the vicinity, including the animals, plants, and so on. The employees of the Tokyo Electrical Company volunteered to stay within the plant, and not a single individual among them left. Their dedication to duty prevailed over their fear of personal danger, and hence they continue to remain there even today, carefully monitoring the situation so as to avert any further crises.

The government in a few cases permitted the evacuees to return to their residences for brief periods, and special means of transportation and garments resistant to radiation were provided for this purpose. The nation’s television programs presented numerous plaintive scenes related to these returnees. I recall with sadness the scene of an old couple moving directly to their stable, and collapsing in tears on finding it empty. “We have lost all our belongings,” wept the lady, “and our loss besides is irreparable, because the cows were our only friends.” The husband in the meantime began to fill the troughs with grass.

Why is Nature so hostile to Japan?

Japan ranks third among the economies of the world, and yet is it one of the most vulnerable nations on earth. A study of the past reveals that it has continually been the target of the malevolence of nature, for assaults by earthquakes, floods, typhoons, and tsunamis have never ceased to occur. Natural resources are scarce, and the country's few paddy fields are limited to strips of land between the mountains and the sea. Nevertheless however, all such deficiencies are offset by the ingenuity of its people who import raw materials and turn them into sophisticated goods, for exports constitute the real wealth of the nation.

The geographic instability of Japan's islands is on account of their location on four tectonic plates (that is, Eurasia, North America, the Pacific, and the Philippine sea), all of which mutually pressurize each other so as to occupy the epicenter, and the ensuing friction releases a powerful energy that gives rise to earthquakes. Seismographs at observation centers inform us that owing to the great Tohoku earthquake, the entire nation of Japan has moved a few inches.



The all-inclusive damage ran into astronomical figures. Over 3,451 individuals are reported missing, 15,844 are reported dead, and 5,890 are reported as having suffered injuries. Additionally, four million were in need of water and electricity, and 125,000 residences were demolished. The government estimated the civic losses to amount to thirty-five billion U. S. dollars, and experts predict that over a decade of strenuous effort would be needed before life returned to normality in the affected areas. Villages lying buried in the ground however will never be seen again.

Jesuits Sharing in this Tragedy

The Jesuits in Japan are deeply committed towards the restoration of the areas affected by the tsunami. Many have already devoted a great deal of time and effort towards the cleaning and rebuilding operations, several scholastics sacrificed part of

their vacation for these purposes, and Jesuit institutions have organized various events to raise the required funds. Obviously, our on-going Jesuit fund-raising tasks are mostly focused on assisting Bishops and Religious in reconstructing their lost properties. Our benefactors were invited to participate in this Jesuit commitment, and they responded with great generosity. Speaking from many years of experience, I declare that we maintain the same policy with regard to our benefactors, namely:

- Never ask for money. Rather, ask only for prayers.
- Never accept restricted donations, unless they are for on-going projects or scholarships.
- The Jesuit Provincial should be assured of the freedom to decide the purpose and use of donations.
- Always acknowledge and thank the benefactors for their contributions, regardless of how small their contributions may be.

Our benefactors understand and respect these policies, and they are aware that their contributions may be utilized for whatever purposes “The Mission of Japan” may decide upon.

Tough Evaluation of this Tragedy

I would like to finish this article by quoting the Prime Minister of Japan, Naoto Kan, who described the tragedy with the following words:

“In the 65 years after the end of World War II, this is the toughest and the most difficult crisis for Japan.”

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