

KIZUNA

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FELLOWSHIP / COMMUNION

My name is **Keiichi Sugawara**. I live in the town called Ofunato of the Prefecture of Iwate, located in the northeast part of Japan. My wife and children are all baptized. My siblings and I were baptized when we were infants. I presently serve as a member of the parish council of the parish I belong to.

My town Ofunato is situated in the midst of a National Park. The town is sandwiched, as it were, between the mountains and the seashore. The shoreline of Iwate Prefecture is compared to the teeth of a saw: it is formed like notches or fringes. The sea, my town and the mountains are like interwoven, creating a lovely tapestry.

I have been living in this town since I was a child with my family, relatives and lots of friends.

On March 11, 2011, an earthquake and a tsunami hit my beloved town and many other towns located along the Pacific Coast of Northeast Japan. Until that day nobody in my town had ever experienced an earthquake of such strength. That earthquake lasted like eternity to us. Thirty minutes later, tsunami waves hit the shores of our town. The waves swept through our town dragging along humans, cars, houses, buildings and electric posts. Those waves destroyed the dikes and levies that, ironically, were meant to protect our town from tsunami. The tsunami sent the waters of the brooks and river in our town upstream for some kilometers. The tsunami hit our town several times and each time it did it also brought along black mud that it dug from the bowels of the sea. In a matter of an hour after the first waves hit the shores of our town, our peaceful town was flattened, its rows of houses gone. Black mud and debris of bottles, steel, wood and sea creatures covered our once beautiful town.

Hundreds of our townspeople died. Almost all of us lost a friend, a loved one, home, possessions, treasures and workplace. Electricity was shut off right after the earthquake. Soon all our phones were not working too. After the tsunami we had no running water and all the roads were impassable. Thus started our life as “refugees”, which to some lasted for weeks, to others for months. To this day some still live in temporary houses,

not knowing when their refugee life would end. Everyone in my family was safe and the tsunami stopped just a few meters from our house.

As of last count some 15,000 people died because of the tsunami and some 300,000 houses were swept away. In Fukushima, which is some 300 kilometers away from my town, a nuclear plant located close to the sea was destroyed by the earthquake and tsunami causing a nuclear meltdown. To this day a permanent solution has yet to be found to stop the meltdown.

We have a small Catholic parish community in Ofunato. Our church stands on a hill, which is located in the central part of the town. Because of its location, our church was spared from the onslaught of the tsunami, but a part of the road that leads to the top was washed away. The church columbarium, which stood at the foot of the hill, was swept away. The day after the tsunami I found what remained of the building some fifty meters away from where it once stood.

The remains (ashes) of 12 deceased brethren were interred in that columbarium. Those remains were deposited in urns. Not a single of those urns has been found. Our parish community also mourned the lost of five of our members who drowned in the tsunami. Several members of our parish community lost loved ones. Many of us lost their homes and have to seek refuge in temporary houses or transfer to another town in order to share a roof with a relative.

Why? Why did God allow this to happen? Each of us believers must have asked that question. Without receiving an answer, we who survived the earthquake and tsunami gathered as usual on that Sunday following the twin-disaster and celebrated the Eucharist. (March 11, 2011 fell on a Friday.)

Before the tsunami, our parish had on its register some 100 faithful. Regular Sunday mass attendees came to around 20-25, among them two Filipino women. Our parish priest learned from them that there were several women from the Philippines married to Japanese who live in the next town called Rikuzen Takata.

As a “foreigner” who marries into a Japanese family whose members are not fellow believers, going to mass on Sunday is impossible. As such there are those who have been living in our town for 20 years and have not been coming to church during those years.

In the company of our parish priest, some of us parishioners visited the temporary homes where we thought some of those sisters from the Philippines had sought refuge. The women we met then contacted other Filipino women they knew and in no time we had quite a company. They welcomed us and prepared dishes for us to partake of. They told us how they escaped from the tsunami, how they fled to higher places with their newborn babies, how they lost the loved ones of their husbands, how they saw their houses and possessions being swept away by the tsunami, how cold it was on that day and how they felt afraid and insecure. All these they related with tears in their eyes. To our parish priest and to us did they relate how they felt helpless and forlorn as people who live in a foreign land.

Immediately after the tsunami we were overwhelmed by the moral and material of support not only from Japan but also from all over the world. Different groups and organizations delivered relief goods to refuge places and centers where the victims gathered. Some of these goods were also brought to our church. We wanted to share these to as many people as possible. Through the women we had met earlier, we were able to contact other foreign wives who live in our town and nearby towns. In no time, many of them found their way to our parish church. Every Sunday we had new faces. Each time someone came we asked her to introduce herself to the community. We posed together for some pictures and shared a cup of coffee or tea. We asked them to write their names and how we may contact them. As we repeated these acts we began to remember their names and faces. We were really surprised that we were not aware that so many sisters who come from abroad were living in our midst. All of them were very cheerful and good-humored.

About two months after the great disaster, a group of Filipinos from Tokyo visited our parish. The group included a priest and some nuns. Our newfound parishioners welcomed the group and together they celebrated the Eucharist in Tagalog. Our church was filled and we saw the joy beaming from everybody's face as they sang hymns and heard the words of the bible and prayers in their native language. Many of them also shed tears of joy.

Soon some Japanese husbands began to drive their wives and children to church. The husbands were becoming cheerful too, infected, as it were, by the joy of their spouses. A nun started visiting the homes of these families.

Our parish belongs to the Diocese of Sendai. Having become aware that to our flock belonged sisters of other nationalities, our bishop successfully solicited the help of a congregation to send a pair of its members to come to Ofunato to minister to our mixed community. Two priests, a Filipino and an Indonesian, came to Ofunato and set up a center called “Support Center for Foreigners.” Thanks to their reaching out and visits, more new faces came to our Sunday mass. They also started presiding a once-a-month mass in Tagalog.

During one of our parish council meetings one of us remarked that we should not treat our new members as foreigners. We should consider them sisters or daughters, as they are part of our big human family married to our own townspeople. Soon some of them started serving as lectors, proclaiming the readings in Japanese. We also started singing with them the “Our Father” in Tagalog as an expression of our solidarity. Like them we also held hands when we sung.

To facilitate communication with our new parishioners we asked them to form a group through which parish communications would be channeled. They called their group PAG-ASA, which we learned means “hope.” Two representatives from this group are members of our parish council.

With the encouragement and the support of the “Foreigners Support Center” some PAG-ASA members took courses that would open to them more doors for employment. Some trained to become assistant English teachers; others to become caregivers. Indeed, some of them were immediately hired after their training.

Our after-mass celebrations on Christmas Eve and Easter have become merrier since the coming of our PAG-ASA sisters and their children. Our shared meals have become rich in variety. For quite some years before the disaster, our church rarely had infant baptisms and first communions. After the disaster several infants were baptized and three groups of children received their First Communion. These children are the future of our parish. We lost a lot to the tsunami. But what we gained far outweighs what we had lost. From a membership of some 100 before the disaster, our parish has increased double. And it has become animated.

A few days after March 11, 2011 a reporter of a weekly magazine interviewed me and posed to me the following question: “ Was this disaster a punishment from God.” I answered: “No, it’s not a punishment from God. We can never fathom the mind of

God. But I know that come what may, God is with us. He loves us and I truly feel that he guides and protects us.”

I truly believe those words I said to the reporter. Right now I feel that where I live God uses me as His instrument to spread His love.

After the twin-disasters of March 11, 2011, Caritas Japan put up a base that welcomed volunteers from all over Japan and the whole world who wanted to help in the recovery of the devastated areas. I’ve been serving as a staff member of that base since it was inaugurated. To this day some volunteers still come to lend a hand to residents who have yet to recover fully from the effects of the disasters.

From the ruins of the March 11, 2011 disasters we have been reaping and are still gathering a bountiful harvest. They are a harvest of love, solidarity, and friendship. The disaster brought down not only physical walls, but walls of indifference and prejudice. Indeed, I believe that fellowship among men and women (KIZUNA) of different races and cultures is one of the plans of God for us.

I’d like to believe that our small parish in Ofunato, a community gathered in the name of Jesus Christ, has been an instrument of God to realize His plan.