



ASIA/JAPAN - The Bishop of Sendai: "Our mission is to bring hope"; an extraordinary meeting of Bishops planned

Sendai (Agenzia Fides) – It is a tragedy that has had “a strong emotional impact on society.” The citizens are “exhausted and disorientated”: for this reason the Japanese Bishops will have an emergency meeting in Sendai on 16 March, and give thanks to the Pope for his words which instil “courage and hope”. Hope is exactly “the gift that Christians can make to the Country at this time of suffering”: says Bishop Martin Tetsuo Hiraga of Sendai in a heartfelt testimony released to Fides. Sendai is the diocese most affected by the earthquake and tsunami. The Bishop recounts that “the electricity and phone lines have just come back on” and, in fact during the conversation with Fides, he advised that the aftershocks were continuing.

Bishop Hiraga says: “The situation is very difficult. We are not yet able to comprehend the enormity of the disaster. The news is fragmented. My diocese is very large and covers four civil prefectures, over 500 km of coast, in the North of the Island of Honshu, the largest Japanese island. The tsunami affected over 300 km of coastline. In the prefecture of Aomori two parishes were affected, four in Iwate, another two in Miyagi and two in Fukushima. We still do not know how many people have died, how many have been displaced and how many are missing? And of these we have no idea how many are Catholics.”

Given the uncertainty, “it is still difficult to say what can be done to help. The people are exhausted and disorientated. The emotional and financial impact on society is enormous. Helpers and volunteers are arriving from all over Japan. We need unity and goodwill from everyone. We Catholics in the Diocese of Sendai are few more than 10,000, a little flock. However, we continue to pray for the victims and we will do everything possible to bring relief, to testify, at this time of suffering, to the message of the Christ's love.”

The Japanese Bishops, informs the Bishop, will meet Wednesday, 16 March, in Sendai for an emergency meeting to decide the strategies: “We will consider how to go forward. Meanwhile, we trust in God and ask for the prayers of all Christians throughout the world. We received the Holy Father's message and we thank him for his words that instil courage and hope. Today this is our specific mission: to help the nation to raise its eyes to Heaven, and to keep alive the flame of hope.”

The Diocese of Sendai has a population of 10,944 baptised, representing 0.15% of the population (over 7.2 million) in the territory. The diocese has 53 parishes and 13 mission stations, served by 27 diocesan priests and 19 religious priests, 5 religious brothers and 262 sisters. Among the religious institutions in this diocese are the Dominicans (OP), the Society for Foreign Missions in Bethlehem (SMB), the Missionaries of Guadalupe (MG), and the Christian Brothers. Among the many women's institutions there are the Dominican Sisters (OP), the Congregation of Notre Dame (CND), the Daughters of St Paul, the Ursuline Sisters, the Sisters of Charity of Jesus, Missionary Sisters of Christ the King and others. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 14/3/2011)