

## **AMOR Presentation from Japan**

### **I. Updated data**

Membership:	Association of Major Superiors of Women Religious in Japan
Number of Congregations:	102 congregations, including contemplative orders 76 congregations are registered with the Association of Major Superiors of Women Religious in Japan
Number of Sisters:	5782 (as of December 2011)

### **II. Resolutions from AMOR 15**

I would like to make a report on ‘Collaboration and Promotion of Networking’.

#### **Disaster (areas) of the Great East Japan Earthquake: Actions taken by the Church and the Association of Major Superiors of Women Religious in Japan**

In the past 3 years, the Association of Major Superiors of Women Religious in Japan worked on ‘The reality of Japanese society and the future of religious congregations aiming towards solidarity and collaboration’. By taking part in the forums organized by both men and women religious congregations, we tried to unite our efforts to make an initial step towards moving beyond the boundaries of congregations or parishes.

It was during this process that the great earthquake, the powerful tsunami and the nuclear power plant accident hit Pacific seashores in east Japan on March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011. This unprecedented disaster resulted in over 13,000 deaths and 15,000 people missing (as of April 15<sup>th</sup>). More than 130,000 people had to move to evacuation sites and millions of victims lost homes and property.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for the support you have given to the victims and to ask for your continued support in prayer and action.

Churches and religious congregations in Japan launched volunteer activities immediately after the earthquake. These activities proved to be a major turning point; parishes and religious congregations moved from merely working towards solidarity and collaboration, to the next step of living the reality.

Only five days after the earthquake, the Sendai diocese offered its building and grounds as a base and started the Sendai Diocese Support Center, backed fully by Caritas Japan. The relief project was extended not only to the church members but to all people in the disaster areas.

The Association of Major Superiors of Women Religious in Japan believed that we should make full use the network of religious congregations in Japan for the recovery of the victimized area and invited the religious all over the country to take part in an emergency support program called ‘Sisters Relay’.

Each religious congregation was able to offer human resources beyond the boundary of the congregation, and relayed their support. Main activities at the Support Center were research on volunteers’ needs, volunteer supervision, liaison with the base, and so forth.

As no religious congregations existed on the seacoasts of the disaster area, it was the first time for many victims to meet religious and they were consoled by the overflowing kindness shown by them. As a result, ‘Sisters Relay’ also created a bond of collaboration with people

who had no connection with the church until then.

This ‘Sisters Relay’ ended on March 31, 2012. Then, at the General Meeting of the Association of Major Superiors of Women Religious in Japan in May 2012, a decision was made to continue ‘Sisters Relay’ in a new form.

‘Sisters Relay Part 2—a circle of solidarity in prayers’.

By praying together, the congregations deepened their solidarity, strengthened ties with the disaster areas and hoped for early restoration. 76 congregations belonging to the Association started from north and south Japan simultaneously to take on the responsibility of one week of prayers. When each relay was completed, the congregation wrote a report on the process and sent it to all other congregations. At the annual General Meeting in May 2013, a Mass was celebrated to express gratitude for the successful accomplishment of the relay.

During the three years following the earthquake, working in close cooperation with the local residents, foreigners residing in Japan, people from different religions, public organizations and various local groups, churches and religious congregations succeeded in earning trust in the local area.

The foreigners (mainly Filipino women married to Japanese) living in the seacoast areas were connected with the church after the earthquake. They were victims of various damages and yet, being foreigners, did not always receive sufficient support. The Sendai diocese, with the help of the religious congregations, sent priests and sisters who could speak the native language to the area in order to work towards building a community and help them become independent. The congregations began new communities or sent members to serve.

These efforts have brought a blessing to the church in Japan. Churches and religious congregations in Japan have tried to live with the people in this ‘neglected area’, to encourage, bond, support and stand close with them. In other words, we remain close to the story of resurrection where people are healed from the depths of suffering and despair. Today as we continue to take part in the support activities as ‘one in Christ and a new creation’, pulling down the walls that divide the supporters and those receiving support, we learn to be ‘One in Christ’.

### **III. Economic, political and ecclesiastical situations that impact the prophetic and mystical missions (of the religious)**

How we approached the nuclear plant issue:

The accident of Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant contaminated both ocean and land by radiation and disrupted the daily lives of an enormous number of people.

Radioactive contamination is serious in Fukushima prefecture. Nearly 100 thousand people have been evacuated and the reconstruction of their hometowns is hardly in sight, or even worse, the towns face the risk of vanishing. Many evacuees face a new problem of ‘family separation’. They are in constant anxiety and frustration as their daily lives are insecure and their future is unknown.

Despite experiencing such a nuclear power disaster, Japan seems unable to break away from nuclear power plants. The business world depends on nuclear power for electricity and employment, the related industry is keen to keep their interest and the restart of the nuclear power plants is now in focus. On the other hand, radiation from the Fukushima plant continues to contaminate land, ocean and food.

The Japanese church views the problem of the nuclear power plant as an ethical issue. On November 8th, 2011, the Catholic Bishops' Conference in Japan published a message called: 'Abolish Nuclear Plants Immediately' and appealed: 'most important of all, we as members of the human race have responsibilities to protect all life and nature as God's creation and to pass on a safer and more secure environment to future generations. In order to protect our precious lives and beautiful nature, we must decide at once to abolish nuclear plants. The focus should not be on economic growth, placing priority on profitability and efficiency.'

In June 2011, two anti-nuclear power plant actions were launched, led by the Nobel laureate Kenzaburo Oe with 9 others.

The Association of Major Superiors of Women Religious in Japan supported and worked in cooperation with these actions.

Many religious congregations in and around Tokyo helped to send out the paper for collecting 10 million signatures. Many elderly sisters claimed, "though it is difficult for us to actually go to the disaster areas, we can help prepare the envelopes to be sent out". There were also volunteers to count the signatures. As of June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013, we have collected 8,270,933 signatures and this action will continue until we reach 10 million.

In June 2013, in Tokyo, 7500 people gathered to protest government plans to reopen or export nuclear power plants. After the assembly, sisters joined in the march to Hibiya Park.

To strengthen our international ties and to work with people over the whole world on the common goal of implementing new energy policies and abolishing nuclear plants, and to realize a non-nuclear world based on renewable energy, each one of us needs to reflect on our daily life. Our power is limited, but we are not powerless and we will make our best effort.

The problem of Fukushima is extremely complex.

#### (1) An Unpredictable Future

- There are still 160 thousand evacuees from Fukushima prefecture. The stress from invisible radiation is great. The radiation is measured, but its effect on the human body is not clear and their anxiety is never lifted. De-contamination is time-consuming, making it difficult to make any definite plans for the future.
- In some areas, it is possible to live in temporary housing for 2 years. However, it will probably take 5 years to return to their homes, and the elderly who want to return as soon as possible are losing hope (as they worry whether they can ever move back or not).

#### (2) Rumor-based damage

- People who engage in primary industry (agriculture, fishing or farming) in the Fukushima area cannot sell their products if high radiation is detected and their living is ruined. Even if the radiation count is within an acceptable limit, they suffer from rumor-based damage.

#### (3) Separation issue

- Within the families with young children, some members have remained in Fukushima, while others have evacuated further. As the period of family separation lengthens, friction and stress increase causing serious difficulties between husbands and wives, or between parents and children.
- People in the evacuated community are in isolation. There are cases of antagonism between

the evacuees and local residents.

- The difference in the scale of disaster and compensation can bring about discrimination issues among the victims.
- ‘Compensation for mental damage’ by Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) is deducted if one works, therefore, people’s will to work is dampened. There are people with money but no jobs, creating a negative spiral of daily drinking and pachinko gambling: problem gambling and alcoholism ⇒ domestic violence ⇒ depression.

(4) Serious disparity between rich and poor

- Those who evacuated on their own accord within Fukushima prefecture receive little public support. They have to sustain both the life at the evacuation site and their original home and thus are under economic stress. Finding support from the private sector is also difficult. The number of such people has not been identified.
- The evacuation zone was reorganized on April 16. There are now 3 areas:  
**Area 1:** Areas to which evacuation orders are ready to be lifted  
**Area 2:** Areas in which the residents are not permitted to live  
**Area 3:** Areas where it is expected that the residents will have difficulties in returning for a long time

However, even in Area 1, neither the de-contamination nor the reconstruction of infrastructure has been completed, and people are not permitted to stay overnight, making permanent return far from reality. This reorganization of the areas has diminished the hope of the evacuees. Their goal was “to return home together”.

- The nearer the home is to the nuclear power plant, the further away is the day that people may return. The prospect of their return is dismal.

On July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Masao Yoshida, the general manager of Fukushima Dai-ichi Power Plant and the leader in charge of settling the accident, passed away. In the catastrophic event of the total failure of the generator, he put his life at risk and stayed at the site with his workers to minimize the damage and to control the atomic reactor. Thanks to their efforts, the worst situation of radiation release due to the explosion of the atomic reactor containment building was avoided. Today there are many workers still working at the site, despite the fear of radiation.

In the past, poor areas became prosperous by inviting nuclear power plants to be built. Local residents had power plant related jobs and thus co-prospered with the nuclear power plant. Because of this accident, however, people cannot return to their homes. Their whole lives have been destroyed and they live in anger and despair. Let us keep these people in our thoughts.

The nuclear power accident has left deep scars in people, nature and all things.