

O Lord,

That evening, while major aftershocks continued and tsunami alerts were still sounding, people all over Japan stood dumbfounded before their televisions as they saw the damage done by the tsunami.

On March 11<sup>th</sup> at 2:46:18 PM, the Tohoku Pacific coast earthquake occurred on the ocean floor around 130 km East by Southeast from the coast of Miyagi Prefecture's Oshika Peninsula, causing unprecedented damage. 15,843 dead, 3,469 missing: the largest earthquake in Japan's recorded history drastically changed the world that we live in. Damage from the earthquake and the tsunami, and that from the accident at the TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant which was brought in their wake, took away many human lives, family members, friends, livelihoods, jobs, and people's sense of belonging, tearing relationships apart. We are still in the midst of that pain. Even now, after a year has passed, we still cannot forget that day.

A certain person visited a shelter. Just after the disasters, the shelter was in chaos, and they were not ready to accept volunteers. Hoping to do something in spite of this situation, that person became a volunteer listener, but all that could be done was to sit by people as they lay in their sleeping areas demarcated by cardboard, and wait for them to start speaking. Facing these hurt and grieving people, a devastating situation spreading before the listener's eyes, it was clear that something had to be done. But it was not clear how to interact with them, or what to say. Not a single word could be found to say to them. This indescribable barrier, the heavy atmosphere: even just sitting there for 2-3 hours a day was truly exhausting. Now, on this occasion, thinking back on our relief activities, this scene is always remembered as our starting point.

A certain person met someone whose spouse had been taken by the tsunami. Searching for the body, that person visited temporary morgues daily. But it simply wasn't to be found. Several weeks passed, and that person continued to visit morgues almost every day. But eventually, finally, the spouse's body was found. What came to that person's mind was, "I don't have to come here anymore. What a relief." Upon hearing these words from this person, imagining how much suffering lay behind them, there was simply nothing that could be said.

A certain person attended a funeral service for unidentified bodies at a crematory. Watching the service, with people being sent off without even their names, the realization that each one of them had family, friends, and acquaintances was carved into his heart.

A certain person joined in the volunteer work to remove debris after the tsunami damage. Picking up pieces of the wreckage, the person realized that these were not trash or debris, but that each one of them was a testimony to someone's existence, that each one was filled with memories, and tears flowed.

A certain person met some people who had evacuated due to the nuclear power accident. According to these evacuees, they had all had to move from one shelter to another five, six, even seven times. This was a result of the government repeatedly changing their policies after the nuclear power plant accident, altering the evacuation radius each time. And each time the policies were changed, people had to

flee from the shelters into which they had finally settled. However, no directions to another shelter were provided to them. They had to ask around to find their way. More often than not, after finally finding a shelter, they were denied admittance. One of them said, “The hardest thing was when my grandchild got sick with a fever as we were evacuating in the cold weather. We could not find a hospital where the child could be treated. It was just terrible.” In this way, the people were at the mercy of the government’s whims, evacuating with painful conditions at every turn. And those conditions are ongoing. They simply wish to return to their own homes, but they go on without even that wish being realized. It is impossible not to feel irritated and frustrated in the face of these people’s situations.

The declarations, groans, and cries expressing the worry, un-dissipated pain, and grief of so many people are even now all around us. We cannot do anything about any one of these things. On the other hand, as time passes, the occurrence of the disasters is little by little becoming more like a thing of the past. Yet, recovery work is still not making sufficient progress, and there are still people who spend each day in distress.

There are still people in the midst of suffering from the nuclear power plant accident. There are people living in temporary housing complexes within the dangerous zone, there are those who evacuated to other prefectures fearing radiation damage, and there are others who, with much anxiety, stay within the prefecture, who for various reasons cannot leave. There are people who are still risking their lives working to end the nuclear power plant disaster. And we continue to be at the mercy of all sorts of incorrect information regarding this issue.

Even putting the nuclear issue aside, there are many people who moved to other prefectures due to the lack of local jobs. At temporary housing complexes in disaster areas there are people who have lost the communities to which they belonged, whose days are spent in loneliness and anxiety. Also, there are those who suffer when they recall the time just after the disasters – when there was nothing that anyone could do – who blame themselves, saying “I was unable to do anything.” And there are people who, shifting away from their time in temporary housing, have finally started building houses, but because of the disparity between the people who can build houses and those who cannot, their sense of emotional distance only increases. They are facing the difficulties of living together under such different conditions within the same community.

May we never forget these things. May we listen to the voices that need to be heard, faithfully taking into our hearts that which should be taken in.

Through these disasters, our faith was questioned, and greatly shaken. In the midst of that, although we had learned that our Lord is the Lord of love, and of truth, and that what He does is best, we sometimes lose sight of Him, and question Him, saying “God, why?” Also, though we know that we must walk together with united hearts, especially in times like these, we are sometimes unable to do so. Although there are many people in pain and suffering, we sometimes cannot be there for them. Although human folly was clearly shown to us through this nuclear power plant accident, and we know well enough that we never want to go through that kind of experience again, that we absolutely must not, yet we still have the potential to repeat the same kind of mistakes.

Forced to face the reality of the disasters, we have been harshly shown our lack of faith, lack of love, lack of patience, the ease with which we become lost, and the depth of our sinfulness. But the Lord is still with us even in the midst of these, walking alongside us without forsaking us. He continues to give us the mission of being Christ’s Church, helping us to keep standing in the community.

O Lord, please walk before us. Even now, in this place of deep sorrow and pain, may the work of comfort in Jesus Christ of the cross and the resurrection take place. May the Lord's truth be revealed. May each one of us live our lives with remembrance of the pain in this place, sharing in the suffering of others. All is in the Lord's hands. On the Lord's hands, still now there are scars from the nails of the cross. He took on all pain in advance of us. May we be able to move forward by placing our hope only in the Lord.

I offer this prayer in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.