

## Arigatou!

Paco has spent almost thirty years in Japan, where he teaches in a university. He writes to express his thanks for the many prayers for his country and to recount the recent events there.

04/15/2011

I recently received a letter from a good friend back there saying that she and her two children, who are both quite sick at the moment, are praying a lot for us. She said she was struck by a photo of the Emperor

kneeling on the ground and speaking with several victims of the earthquake in the Tokyo “budoukan” (literally, “palace of martial arts”).

This brings to mind a scene related by Inazo Nitobe in his book *Bushido*. An old man takes off his hat as he stops to greet a missionary lady out working in her garden. “You don’t have to be so courteous out here in the country,” she tells him. To which the old farmer replied: “Since I can’t share my hat with you, at least I can share with you the sun’s heat.”

This humble attitude of solidarity is so typical of the Japanese people. They know how to listen, putting themselves in the other person’s shoes—a virtue worthy of great admiration, at least for me, since one of my “predominant faults” is talking too much. Never once in the 28 years that I’ve lived here have I noticed the

slightest impatience in the person I'm speaking with, who always listens with a smile and nods in agreement. Needless to say, this defect of mine has only grown worse here.

And along with courtesy, the people are always so grateful.

“Sumimasen” (I’m sorry) and “arigatou” (thank you) are the two most frequent words you hear in daily life, even amid the extreme situations we’ve lived through during these past few weeks. Watching TV yesterday I was moved to see a man in his 80s leave his shelter to thank some American soldiers for the bottled water they had just delivered. Grasping the officer’s hands, tears in his eyes, with bow after bow he kept repeating “arigatou,” “arigatou,” “arigatou.”

Having learned that lesson, I want to take this opportunity to express my

thanks for the many messages of support, and especially for so many prayers that will work and have worked so many small and large miracles. Perhaps most of them will pass unnoticed since they take place in hearts, in the depths of the soul. But I have seen in recent days the miracle of an unprecedented solidarity that will, without a doubt, have very positive consequences in relationships among peoples.

At the Fukushima nuclear plant we received from China a 200-foot-long semi capable of projecting tons of water from a long distance into the reactors to cool them; the Americans sent robots that were used in the Iraq and Afghan wars (with a very different purpose here); experts from France, Korea, Germany, etc. are also here helping out. Israelis have sent a complete hospital, with an operating room and a team of doctors and nurses chosen from among the best

in their country. I could keep adding to this list (more than 130 countries have offered assistance). So many groups and individuals are pouring out their resources to help us recover. Many thanks to all of them!

Yuko and his son Kento were beneficiaries of another small miracle. They were traveling by car when the tsunami overtook them. Their car was carried more than 500 yards by the two-storey-high wave, until it came to rest in a tree. As the water subsided, the car finally settled on the ground with its terrified occupants safe and sound—a small version of Noah's Arc.

Norie, 86, was in the kitchen of a home for the elderly when the wave came. The last thing he remembers is covering his mouth with a scarf as the water poured over him. When he recovered consciousness, he was in his wheelchair on top of a table in

the dining room, along with two other elderly people. The rest of the occupants (about 50 people) had drowned. “Now I must live what remains to me of life with intensity, also for those companions of ours who have left us,” he said gratefully.

A newspaper here carried the story of Manami, a four year old who lost her family. The story was accompanied by two photos. In the first one, she has fallen asleep over a letter she was writing to her mother: “Dear Mama. I hope you are alive. Are you well?” In the second photo she is seated on a bench looking out to sea. The article ends by saying that she sits there every day hoping for her mother’s return. I am praying that Manami and many other Japanese people may come to realize that they have another Mother, Mary “umi no hoshi,” Star of the Sea.

The Japanese are a people with many great virtues; it seems to me that one reason for this is that they are so familiar with suffering. It's enough to recall the catastrophes they have experienced just in the past century —the Tokyo earthquake of 1923, with 145,000 dead; World War II and the atom bombs that fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with almost two million victims; the typhoon of Ise wan (1950), with 5,000 dead; the quake that struck Kobe in 1995, with 6,000 casualties, along with the many other small quakes and typhoons that occur here regularly. And Japan has always arisen anew, thanks to the tenacity and solidarity of its people.

We have to contemplate all of these things not only with eyes of flesh, but also with those of faith and with the heart, moved by a compassion that leads us to “suffer with”—praying, offering our work well done and

small sacrifices, thinking of those who have been left with nothing.

I end with some words from Mother Teresa, so well loved in this country. (Right now there is an exposition about her in an art gallery only a hundred yards from where I live, commemorating the centenary of her birth.) She was a person who knew how to suffer, “suffering with” the poorest of the poor. Her nuns were among the first to offer themselves in Japan to care for those afflicted with AIDS, at a time when that sickness was considered taboo here because of fear of contagion—the “lepers” of the twentieth century: “The revolution of love,” she says, “begins with a smile. Smile five times at the person you would rather not smile at. Do it for peace.”

So once again, “ARIGATOU!”

P.S. Regarding my nickname Paco: In Japanese “pa” means “wave,” and

I've always loved the sea, while "co" means "called," alluding to my vocation, the greatest treasure God has granted me. A friend to whom I owe a lot, Yoshihiko Takayama, chose for me these "kanji" (traditional Chinese characters in the Japanese writing system). I want to mention him here to honor our friendship.

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