

## Easter Monday: getting through to Sendai, Japan

William Grimm, Maryknoll priest and publisher of ucanews.com, describes his Easter Monday journey to Sendai, where he hopes to “to try to be useful”. Having celebrated the Sacred Triduum and Easter in Tokyo, I flew to Sendai today to begin working with the Caritas Japan disaster assistance program.



Since train service between Tokyo and Sendai only resumed today, I had made plans to take a plane to Sendai since the airport reopened last week. To tell the truth, having watched TV images of the airport being overwhelmed by the March 11 tsunami, I was curious about what I would see.

The plane (one of four commercial flights per day) was not quite full. I had a window seat, and as we approached the landing strip from over the sea, I was shocked to see how close to the ocean the airport is – right at the edge of the beach, separated by a canal.

Originally, I had heard that it would take six months to restore the facility. There were more than 5,000 smashed cars and a bunch of wrecked aircraft to be cleared away, let alone other debris and bodies. However, a U.S. Air Force unit that specializes in setting up airfields in disaster- and combat areas with extra muscle provided by Marine and Army troops managed to restore service in four weeks.

The airfield is clear. Along one side of the runway is a small mountain of debris. On the far side of the mountain is a “very-used car” lot of smashed vehicles neatly lined up. Yet, on the other side of the runway, cherry trees that managed to survive the flood are in bloom. The terminal is cleaned out, but still not fully functioning. Ironically, that meant that there was no need to kill time at a baggage carousel waiting for my luggage to arrive. It was delivered to a lobby by airport staff faster than I’ve ever experienced with technology.

From the airport, it was a 40-minute bus ride to the center of Sendai where the Caritas operation is housed at the cathedral. There is apparently a shuttle train from the city to the airport. An abandoned train was sitting in the elevated station, but all the overhead power lines to run it were gone. Perhaps they had been removed intentionally in order to install new ones.

Entering the city on an expressway, I was impressed at how little damage there is beyond the reach of the tsunami. The earthquake here was one of the five strongest in history, yet there are no toppled buildings or fallen bridges. I saw one stucco-coated home that had lost a large piece of its wall

covering and a few buildings that had cracks in their decorative facing.

Good engineering, strict enforcement and little or no corruption really do make a difference in an earthquake.

William Grimm