
The family gathered in prayer with Francis at nighttime, from Tokyo: “A memorable moment”

(Tokyo) – On the morning of Sunday, March 29, the weekend when the Governor of the city, Yuriko Koike, had called on residents to stay home, as a countermeasure to the spread of the new coronavirus, Tokyo woke up in the snow. The Archbishop of Tokyo, Isao Kikuchi, for his part, had already announced a few days earlier that Eucharistic liturgies would be suspended until a date to be set, inviting the faithful of the capital not to go to their parish, to follow his Sunday Mass online and to stay united through individual and family prayer. Calling on Japanese Catholics to respond to the Pope's invitation, on 26 March the Bishops' Conference of Japan wrote on its official website: "We encourage you to spiritually participate in the prayer to be presided over by Pope Francis from the parvis of St Peter's Basilica on 27 March at 6.00 p.m.", with a link to log on and the Japanese translation of the Pope's message announcing the Urbi et Orbi blessing and plenary indulgence. It should come as no surprise that in Japan this kind of news does not reach the general public through mainstream media channels. *In fact, Japanese news agencies don't normally cover religious topics and even less do they transmit information about the Pope's activities, unless they are involve the country, as in the case of the recent papal visit.* But this time the Pope's prayer did not have the same resonance and was not considered "news", hence the leading TV network in Japan, in its newscasts, dedicated only 10 seconds to the event with the following note: "The Pope of the Catholic Church, Francis, prayed alone in St. Peter's Square" *In this period the faithful of the small Japanese Catholic Community, more than through official communiqués, receive and exchange news through emails, text messages, and telephone calls.*



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"It was through an e-mail message and a phone call from my sister-in-law that I learned about the two events in March announced by the Pope," said Mrs. Yuria Nakayama, "thanks to this information, together with my husband Hiroshi we were able to take part in the live-streamed event. On the 27th, at 6:00 p.m., when in Italy the first images of the Pope walking on the parvis of St. Peter's Basilica began to appear on the web, in the land of the Rising Sun it was already 2:00 a.m. on the 28th. And for Iroshi Nakayama

"It was a memorable moment.

I cherish in my heart two thoughts about this night: the words of the Gospel "Why are you afraid? Don't you still have faith?"; and the atmosphere of intense contemplation witnessed and transmitted by Pope Francis. Despite the translation into English, we could not fully understand the Pope's words, but *the atmosphere of intense spiritual reflection enabled us to join in this liturgy and to be in spiritual*

communion with the faithful of many other nations". concluded Mr Nakayama His wife Yuria noted that Japanese Catholics have few opportunities to see the Pope, unlike Europeans and Italians. She said that praying with the Pope in unity with the faithful throughout the world without rivalry and regardless of the greater or lesser difficulties that each nation is experiencing, was a powerful experience for her. Yuria and Hiroshi Nakayama, with their two sons Tayo, 12, and Yoshiki, 9, are members of a Catholic family spanning several generations. They live in a district of Tokyo's metropolitan area and attend a parish with some 300 registered faithful. "The Pope's initiative was of great help to us," Hiroshi remarked. "Thanks God none of our relatives were affected by the new coronavirus, but the spread of *this infection, which hit the whole world at the same time and which is causing so many people to suffer and die, calls us into question as human beings and as believers, we often talk about it as a family, even with our children*". Mr. Nakayama works for a company that does not use teleworking for his tasks and every day he travels by train to the centre of Tokyo, where his office is located. His wife Yuria teaches religion in a Protestant elementary school, and in this period when schools are closed, she is at home with her children. "It's not easy for them," she said, "but it's not easy for me either!" she added with a smile. Tayo and Yoshiki are allowed to go to school for a few hours a week because the Japanese government, as a form of support to the families and with a view to safeguarding the mental balance of children, allowed schools to autonomously decide to open school facilities for a few hours during the week, in accordance with the guidelines on safety and prevention of the new coronavirus laid down by the Ministry of Education. Most of the time of this forced vacation, however, is spent at home, but Yuria said that many small gestures of solidarity help her children to avert moments of boredom and monotony. "We were asked to look after two young children of a family of friends who needed help at home," she said. Tayo and Yoshiki welcomed them and treated them like they were their younger siblings. They spent a few hours distracted and having fun while they were taking care of them." *Hiroshi and Yuria pointed out that this period when they are forced to stay at home all together, is proving to be an opportunity to recover and strengthen the family dimension of faith: "Saturdays and Sundays,"* they explained, "are normally special days when we find time to read and reflect together on the Scriptural readings at the Sunday Mass that we follow via live streaming and pray together to help each other teach our children to view things through the light of the Faith."

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