

## New Year's Pastoral Letter 2025

### A new step forward in light of the Synod

January 1, 2025

Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Diocese of Niigata, I wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. At the beginning of the year, especially in the year of the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II, we pray through the intercession of Our Lady, Mother of God, that we may be able to build peace together.

#### **Looking back on the previous year**

Last year, the Diocese of Niigata published the Mission and Pastoral Policy and began a diocese-wide effort to engage in mission and pastoral work based on the three pillars of communion, mission, and participation. As announced in last year's New Year's Pastoral Letter, I hope that each community will talk about the policy and formulate their own action plans.

Another important shift last year was the reorganization of the three districts in Niigata Prefecture. Taking this opportunity, we have been exchanging opinions on how the district management could line up with the Mission and Pastoral Policy. We are making adjustments and we will implement the new policy on district management this spring. I will keep you updated on this matter.

#### **The 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops**

Although many events took place in 2024, perhaps one of the most important event for the Catholic Church was the completion of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which had been held since 2021, and the issuance of its final document.

Discernment (the search for God's will in prayer and dialogue) on how the Catholic Church could walk together in the modern world had been the focus of the Synod at the Vatican over the past three years, which held consultations with parishes, dioceses, episcopal conferences, continental federations of bishops, and with representatives of the world at large. The Church has been listening carefully from the people of the world, including the Diocese of Niigata, on what "the Spirit" is telling the Church (Revelation 2:7). While I was reading the final document of the second session (hereinafter "final document"), I found that situations mentioned in the final document were quite similar to the current situation of the Diocese of Niigata. We can even conclude that the circumstances are similar in many countries of the

world, such as the population concentrated in urban areas, changes in the pastoral system amidst a decrease in the number of faithful in rural areas, and an increase in the number of foreign believers. We can also see that the concerns voiced by the communities of the Diocese of Niigata are alike the concerns taken up by the many similarly situated communities around the world.

Cardinal Kikuchi, who participated in the Synod in the Vatican, often said in his interviews that this Synod is “building the foundation of a Synodal Church”. Even after the end of the Synod Assembly, the work of building a church that walks together on that foundation will continue.

The Japanese translation of the final document quoted in this letter is a trial translation by myself. In fact, I ought to write this letter after the official Japanese translation of the final document is released. However, as we begin a new year following the closing of the Synod at the end of October 2024, I am writing this letter in the hope that I can share with you the fruits of the Synod, even if it is only a part of them, as a foundation for the Church in the future, and that we can move forward with our activities this year together with the Universal Church. The final document contains many hints for deepening our Mission and Pastoral Policy. I hope that when the official Japanese translation is released, you will read it and share your thoughts with your communities.

### **Spiritual and structural renewal**

The Document teaches about the meaning of synodality - walking together.

Synodality is the walking together of Christians with Christ and towards God's Kingdom, in union with all humanity. Orientated towards mission, synodality involves gathering at all levels of the Church for mutual listening, dialogue, and community discernment.

In simple and concise terms, synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ. (Paragraph 28)

It is important to note that this is not a mere organizational reform, but a spiritual renewal. The final document emphasizes the spiritual dimension of the community that walks together. “This mystery has its source and summit in the celebration of the Eucharist, that is, in union with God the Trinity and in the unity among human persons realised in Christ through the Holy Spirit.” (Paragraph 31)

### **Towards missionary work**

Regarding the purpose of the Synodality, the document states

Synodality is not an end in itself. Rather, it serves the mission that Christ entrusted to

the Church in the Spirit. (Paragraph 32)

In other words, we walk together not so much for a better organization of the internal workings of the Church, but rather to preach the Gospel according to Jesus' words, "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature." (Mark 16.15).

"Mission involves all the Baptised. The first task of lay women and men is to permeate and transform earthly realities with the spirit of the Gospel" (paragraph 66). It is only by living the spirit of the Gospel at home, school, work or institutions, that we can do our mission. The missionary work that priests and religious do is a part of that.

### **Community discernment and co-responsibility**

The final document noted that we can already see the fruits of this Synod, which began in 2021, in four areas. Conversation in the Spirit, community discernment, sharing of vocational gifts and co-responsibility in the mission (paragraph 7). The final document then calls for the various levels of Church communities to continue their daily journey with the Synodical methodology of consultation and discernment (paragraph 9). To this end, I hope that in the Diocese of Niigata, you will use the method of "Conversations in the Spirit" introduced in the "Synod Handbook" in order to share and promote community discernment.

The Synod Handbook: <https://www.cbcj.catholic.jp/2024/08/06/30457/>

As stated in the commentary on the three pillars of the Mission and Pastoral Policy of the Niigata Diocese, we want to listen to each other, learn from each other, be changed by each other, and engage in mission and pastoral work. We do this in order for the lay people, religious, priests, the bishop, women and men, whether local residents or from overseas, to be able to discern together and carry on the task of responsibly walking together.

Regarding co-responsibility, the final document describes the importance of all faithful cooperating and assuming responsibility, and then it continues to say that-

The experience of the Synod can be a response to this reality, helping Bishops, Priests and Deacons to rediscover co-responsibility in the exercise of ministry, which includes collaboration with other members of the People of God. A wider distribution of tasks and responsibilities and a more courageous discernment of what properly belongs to the ordained ministry and what can and must be delegated to others will enable each ministry to be exercised in a more spiritually sound and pastorally dynamic manner. (Paragraph 74)

In the Diocese of Niigata, the number of faithful has decreased from 7,500 in 2000 to 6,600 in 2023. The number of priests has gone from 36 to 30, and the number of sisters from 100 to 48. What has not decreased is the number of churches: from 2000 to the present, there are

37 churches, including quasi-parishes. Inevitably, each church community has to work with fewer people, and the priests have to travel to several churches for Sunday Masses. Distribution of roles between priests and laity in the church community has been promoted. This is not because there are not enough priests, but because it is appropriate for the church to be “our church” and “a church which commits for mission together” for all people, whether priests or laity, elderly or young, Japanese or people from overseas, and no one is a guest.

### **Changes in society**

I would like to mention one thing that is related to the changes in society. In the past, the Church was organized and active in local communities such as parishes and dioceses, but in today's society, people move frequently, participate in Church activities not only in the parish and district levels but also beyond them, even crossing the border of the diocese, and also deepen their fellowship regardless of geographical location via the internet. The final document goes on to say, “These social and cultural developments challenge the Church to reconsider the meaning of ‘local’ in its life and to review its organisational structures so that they can better serve its mission. It is essential to understand ‘place’ as the real and actual setting in which we come to experience our humanity, without denying that there is a geographical and cultural dimension to this as well” (paragraph 114), and it urges that the Church should be recognized as a platform which provides an environment for people to meet, deepen fellowship, and walk together to do mission work.

As I announced last November, this year the Catholic Church will celebrate a Holy Year. The theme for this Holy Year is “Pilgrims of Hope”. Let us work together throughout the year. May we, the Diocese of Niigata, continue walking together for mission by placing our hope in the Lord. May our presence and actions be a witness of the hope of salvation from the Lord. May God bless you abundantly and guide you always.

Paul Daisuke Narui, SVD  
Bishop of Niigata

English version of the final document of the Synod  
<https://www.synod.va/en/news/final-document-of-the-xvi-assembly.html>