

New Year's Pastoral Letter 2021

Together, always for the Gospel

January 1, 2021

Dear members of the Diocese of Niigata,

I wish you a merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

How was the year 2020 for you? With the visit of the Pope at the end of November 2019, I suppose many of you may have decided to live out your faith, spread the Gospel and build a society that respects life. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has interrupted not only our plans, but also of peoples all over the world, and we have begun an uncertain life that no one has ever experienced before. We can no longer gather in churches, and when we do, we can only have short conversations through masks, and we cannot hold events or have tea together. It must have been a very difficult year, especially for the elderly and those with health concerns. It has also been a difficult year for those involved in education, medical care, nursing, and other services that support people's lives. However, through this experience, I think we were able to reaffirm how important it is to do things that we don't usually pay much attention to, such as smiling, greeting, accompanying or caring for others, as well as prayer, the value of life, and trust in God.

Under these circumstances, I would like to thank you once again for preparing the episcopal ordination with all your heart and for warmly welcoming me, who came from a faraway land. Although there is still no bright prospect for the future, let us walk in the joy of the Gospel, trusting in the hope that shines brightly in the darkness, namely our Lord Jesus.

Motto: " Together, always for the Gospel"

This motto expresses what I would like you to understand and consider important. I hope you will keep it in mind as we move forward in our activities in the Diocese of Niigata.

Gospel

Good News is another word for the Gospel, the good news from God. It is the Good News

that the Kingdom of God began with the coming of Jesus, that the power and thoughts of God have been revealed and communicated through Jesus in our world. The power and thoughts of God mean that He has the power to overcome all authority in the world, even death, and that He loves all of the people profoundly.

Mark tells us in his Gospel in chapter 1 verse 14:

"Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

This was the first message Jesus said when he began his missionary work after being tempted in the wilderness. I believe these are among the most heartfelt words that Jesus wanted to convey through his activities. I hope that, we too, can accept the same gospel and the same feelings, make them our own, and pass them on to others.

Gospel is also used to refer to the very existence of Jesus. In the beginning of the Gospel of John, we read the following:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him... And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us"

Jesus was the Word of God incarnate in the world, and that incarnate Word stayed among the people. This is not an event that just happened in the past and is no longer relevant to us. The incarnate Word still dwells among us, just as He promised that "I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). And as Jesus Himself said, "whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:40), we can encounter this incarnate Word especially among those who are vulnerable, poor, and marginalized in our society.

The Gospels give us a vivid picture of the person of Jesus. By reading the Bible, attending lectures, and reading commentaries, we can cultivate this whole picture of Jesus, who is the Good News himself, so that we can share the Gospel in our own words with others and apply it in our daily lives.

Always

The Diocese of Niigata is made up of a diverse group of faithful. The different colors of the two hands holding up the Bible on my coat of arms represent this diversity. Generational

diversity: children, youth, adults, and the elderly. The diversity of positions and way of life, such as laity, religious, priests, and bishops. Diversity of origin, culture, and language: in the prefecture, outside the prefecture, and overseas. People of different genders, infant and adult baptisms, unmarried and married, baptized and unbaptized, and the people who are different in many other aspects, who are living in Akita, Yamagata, and Niigata, invited by God to the path of the Gospel. This motto does not contain a verb, because I want these different people to do what they can for the Gospel. A small child may be able to play well with friends. People who are overwhelmed by their jobs can show a smile at a difficult time. Those who are sick in bed can pray. We can share the Bible at gatherings. We can always live the Gospel in our own unique way. I hope you will nurture your involvement and commitment to the Gospel in your daily lives.

Together

It is difficult to witness and share the Gospel alone. This is not because of a lack of courage, knowledge, or skills. The Gospel, as I mentioned earlier, is God's feeling for the people, His love for them. Love cannot be expressed by one person alone. It requires a partner. Think about it. If Jesus did not take disciples and went around preaching by himself, would God's love have been transmitted to us? Would God's love have been conveyed to us if the Gospels only contained the teachings of Jesus, with no mention of his interactions with his disciples or the people he met on his missionary journeys? We can sense how much Jesus loved his disciples and the people by the way he taught them, admonished them, rejoiced in the fruits of their ministry, when he asked them to pray with him, and ate with them.

In this way, it is important for us to be with people when we share the gospel. Or, when we interact with believers or non-believers in our daily lives, it is important to keep in mind, "Let the love of God be expressed between this person and me". The gospel is spread when we show love between peoples.

Another thing I want to emphasize is the importance of working with people from different cultures and backgrounds when we do things "together". All over the world, the differences between generations, between immigrants and locals, between values, etc., have become so great that it has become difficult to build a single community. In such situations, the Church has been making efforts to form a community of faith "together". The Japanese church is no exception, and these differences will undoubtedly become even greater in the future. In this situation, there is a growing number of international congregations and dioceses with many immigrants that are striving to form communities with the keyword "Interculturality". This

is the concept of understanding one's own personal and cultural background, then striving to understand the personal and cultural backgrounds of others, accepting them with the courage to change oneself by relating to them, being changed by each other, and growing together. When Jesus met a Syrophenician woman, this woman asked him to cast out the unclean spirit from her daughter. Jesus used a parable, "it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." saying that he was sent to the Jewish people. But the woman persevered and said "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's scraps." Jesus then says, "Since you say it like that," and casts out the daughter's demons (Mark 7). In this dialogue, we can sense the love of the mother for her daughter, the mother's faith in Jesus, and the love of Jesus, who is moved by the mother's love. Our God is one who is willing to let Himself be influenced by love, so that great love is shown. It is my hope that we can follow Jesus' example and actively keep company with people from different backgrounds and grow together.

About this year's plan

This year, the Diocese of Niigata will form the Council of Priests and the Mission and Pastoral Council, two advisory bodies to the Bishop composed of priests and lay people representing each district, to begin considering issues that need to be addressed in the diocese. As we move forward in this process, I would like to ask not only the council members but also everyone in the diocese to think and talk about the issues that the Diocese of Niigata needs to tackle in the future, and to share them with the council members. I think it would be helpful to reflect on the three items of the 2012 Mission Statement that we have been working on in the Niigata Diocese.

1. To build "our Church", one which is filled by joy and compassion through overcoming differences created by age, nationality and cultural diversity.
2. Realizing the responsibilities of the Catholic Church in society through exchanges of information within the diocese, districts and parishes.
3. To continue to nurture and deepen our faith, so that we may be witnesses of the Gospel both through our words and deeds in the midst of contemporary society.

Pope Francis has designated the Year of St. Joseph starting from December 8 last year till December 8 of this year, and has called on us to trust in the intercession of St. Joseph and to live by the example of the simple faith of the saint. Whatever impact the Covid-19 infection may have on society this year, let us live out our faith while taking appropriate measures. Also,

if there are people in need inside or outside the church, let us support them together.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake. As neighbors of the affected diocese, let us commemorate this milestone together through prayer and deeds.

This year, Mr. Shuta Oka will be ordained a deacon. We thank you for your prayers and support, and ask that you continue your prayers for him especially at this important stage.

I pray that God may guide and give His blessing to each and everyone. Please pray for me as well.

Paul Daisuke Narui, SVD

Bishop of Niigata