



New Year's Pastoral Letter 2022

## To walk together

January 1, 2022

I wish you a merry Christmas and a happy new year! I pray for God's abundant blessings and guidance on your journey this year. I also pray that we may walk as communities which are rooted in love.

### Reflecting on the past year

The Covid-19 pandemic, which began in the spring of 2020 quickly spread around the world, and for the past year or so, the number of new infections per day in the world has been hovering around 500,000. For the past two years, we have been hearing every day, "Today, we have X number of new infections and X number of deaths. It's not about the number of people, it's about each person's life. We have to tell ourselves about this every day, otherwise we will lose our senses.

Although anyone can be infected with Covid-19, the social strains of the pandemic particularly affected those who are ordinarily the most vulnerable in society. Many temporary workers have lost their jobs. The number of suicides among women in the workforce increased by nearly 30% in 2020. The number of suicides among children increased by over 30%. The impact on parents and children in single-parent households is very serious. In addition, many foreign workers have lost their jobs and homes, and also faced a situation where there were no flights to take them back to their home country.

In this context, the continuation of the self-quarantine lifestyle has reduced the opportunities to meet and talk with people, making it difficult to see what is going on in society. Pope Francis has called us not to be infected by the "virus of selfish indifference". Christians are invited to be connected with others in some way, to help each other and to live together, precisely in difficult times like the present.

I have visited 32 churches and all the convents out of the 37 churches and 7 convents (now 6 convents) in the Niigata Diocese in the past one year and three months since my installation as bishop. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I have had to change plans many times, and I have not been able to visit some parish communities, especially those in the Akita Prefecture. I feel sorry for the parish communities about the inconvenience caused by the measures to the pandemic. The countermeasure efforts are not simply to avoid the spread of infection in the church, but rather to protect ourselves, our community, and our neighborhood. I sincerely appreciate your cooperation on this. During my visits to parishes, I heard the stories expressing that some churches are unable to pray aloud, cannot sing, or have taken a break from bible sharing sessions or having tea. I also heard that some elderly people have not been able to come to Mass since the start of the pandemic, and that some technical interns and medical and nursing care workers have been prohibited from coming to church.

In such situations, some creative initiatives have emerged. The Nagaoka district held its assembly through a Zoom online meeting. A diocesan youth gathering had about 30 people each connected online, with Vietnamese and English interpretation. Some parishes use their newsletter for sharing. There are also activities such as donating to the food bank. How are you doing in your parish? It is expected that Covid-19 related restrictions will continue for some time, so I hope that each parish will be flexible in their response. Also, let us not be indifferent, but let's be involved with people who are having difficulties, with a mind to do what we can to help.

## **To walk Together**

The theme of the Synod journey that began last October in dioceses around the world is "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission" (the original meaning of the Greek word [Synod] is "walk together"). I hope that this initiative will be an opportunity for the Diocese of Niigata to grow into a more "together" community, a synodal church community.

At the end of last April, the Diocese of Niigata established the Mission and Pastoral Council. This council is to promote unity, cooperation, and exchange among the laity, religious, and priests, and to consider various matters for the promotion of mission and pastoral services throughout the diocese, in consultation with the bishop. The members are chosen from each

district to represent a rich variety of age, gender, and national origin, and in this sense the Mission and Pastoral Council is truly a Synod-like assembly.

The first meeting of the Council was to review the priorities of the Diocese of Niigata which were formulated in 2012 and how to develop a mission and pastoral policy that would respond to the changing situation of the Church and society. Shortly after this meeting came the announcement by Pope Francis about the Synod. It is indeed a blessing for us in the Diocese of Niigata to have a Synod to deepen our "walking together" at a time when we are reflecting on our diocesan priorities and creating a mission and pastoral policy.

### **A year of sharing**

As I wrote in the "Reflections on the Synod questions and the priorities of the Diocese" sent to each parish and convent last November, we will take less than two years to develop a mission and pastoral policy for our diocese. Parishes and religious communities will be asked to share in two steps, and the results will be reflected in a mission and pastoral policy that will be released in the summer of 2023. I feel that the process of creating the policy itself will be a "synodal" step for the diocese.

The two sharing sessions in parishes and religious communities take place over the course of a year, which started last November. In other words, this year will be a year of sharing for the Diocese of Niigata to reflect on the past state of our communities and our efforts to address priority issues, to grasp the current state of the Church and society, and to think carefully about what kind of mission and pastoral structure we will put in place in the future.

### **Guided by the Holy Spirit**

In order to take this step, we must first and foremost trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The community we build is a community that lives God's will, and the mission and pastoral work we do is an activity that does God's will. In order for this to be so, we need to be guided by the Holy Spirit to move forward and make progress in the new state of affairs, just as the disciples were strengthened by the Holy Spirit after Jesus' resurrection, and were led by the Holy Spirit to go out into the square and preach the gospel. The Holy Spirit descended on the Gentiles who heard the gospel from the disciples, and they became members of the community. The disciples decided not to impose on the Gentiles the Jewish law that they had been following. In the same manner, guided by the Holy Spirit, we move forward and change

ourselves so that we can live and share the Gospel more appropriately in new circumstances.

Pope Francis has often referred to the principle “time is greater than space”. In a passage from paragraph 222 of *The Joy of the Gospel*, he uses this principle to teach about the importance of long-term commitment rather than ad hoc responses or actions with immediate results. By placing ourselves in the flow of time that continues into the future, we will have the patience to endure difficult situations, the flexibility to change plans, and the willingness to work together with the people we meet. As we move forward in our discussions this year, we will need to place ourselves in this long timeline. How can we carry on in Akita, Yamagata, and Niigata the work that has been going on for 2000 years of living and sharing the gospel together, in our current society and into the future? What is absolutely certain is that no matter how small our deeds or how short our prayers are, they are definitely an important step toward the coming of the Kingdom of God. Just as we are here because of the prayers and deeds of our elders in the faith, God will freely use our prayers and deeds to bear fruit in future generations.

There is an African proverb that says, “If you want to go fast, walk alone. And if you want to go far, walk with others.” Let us walk together as a community, trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit on this long and distant journey.

This year, Deacon Shuta Oka is scheduled to be ordained as a priest. I would like to congratulate Deacon Oka for his sincere efforts in the formation program. I would also like to thank all of you for your prayers and support. Please continue to pray that God's love will be shared with many people through Deacon Oka.

The Church commemorates Mary, Mother of God, on the first day of the year and also celebrates World Peace Day. Let us pray through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary that we will be able to make it a year of peace, taking care of those around us with love even in the midst of difficulties.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Daisuke Narui SVD". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Paul Daisuke Narui, SVD  
Bishop of Niigata