

# **Catholic Diocese of Niigata Synod Questionnaire Responses**

## **1. Introduction**

The Synodal path of the Diocese of Niigata began on Sunday, October 17, 2021, with a Mass celebrating the opening of the Synod at the Niigata Cathedral and in all parishes, religious institutes and convents. Since preparations for the formulation of a new mission policy for the Diocese of Niigata were already underway before this step began, the discussions on the ten questions posed by the Synod Office was conducted in parallel with a review of the mission priorities that had been addressed by the diocese to date.

The letter calling for comments on the synodal questions was sent to each parish and religious institute on October 27 of last year, and was also posted on the diocesan website with versions in Japanese, English, and Vietnamese. Responses were due by March 22 of this year, and each community was asked to hold discussions, compile their opinions as a community, and submit their responses. Separately, for those who are unable to participate in the community discussions, a form was also created on the diocesan website which they could submit online.

Because of the Coronavirus pandemic, it was difficult for some communities to provide opportunities for discussion, and the responses received included some opinions that were solicited through a questionnaire. Unfortunately, no responses were received through the website form.

This report is a proposed draft prepared based on the opinions received from each parish and religious institute, and finalized after consultation with the Niigata Diocesan Council on Mission and Pastoral Care held last April 29.

## **2. Responses to the 10 Synod Questions**

### **Question 1: The Journeying Companions**

“In the Church and in society, we are side by side on the same road.”

#### Responses

From the responses received from the parishes and religious institutes, there was no one who did not know with whom we (the Church) must walk. However, very few feel that they are truly walking with the Church. There are those who are unable to attend church due to old age or illness, those who have

left the church for various reasons, those who are mentally ill, those who are in need, and foreign nationals who are staying in Japan. The reality is that we do not walk with these people even though we feel the need to do so. In this situation, the presence of sisters who are unable to engage in specific activities due to aging but practice "walking together in prayer" is a reassuring support for the Diocese of Niigata.

This sense of not being able to walk together also exists even among those who meet and greet each other at Mass. This may have something to do with the fact that for a long time the focus has been on the faith of each individual, with little awareness of the connections with others (congregations, society, etc.). From this point of view, there are those who sense a further disconnect between the church and society. It can be said that the reality is that the Church, which tries to preach the gospel, has been cast aside and is not being walked alongside with by the society at large.

## **Question 2: Listening**

“Listening is the first step, but it requires having an open mind and heart, without prejudices.”

### Responses

Although the believer has the attitude of listening to God's word, this is not coupled with a willingness to listen to the unspoken voices, the voices of the people they encounter at church, and the voices of those around them. While they feel that they do not have the time and the space in their hearts to listen to the voices around them, they are seeking a presence that will listen to them.

## **Question 3: Speaking out**

“All are invited to speak with courage and parrhesia, that is, integrating freedom, truth, and charity.”

### Responses

Where there is no willingness to listen, no voice can emanate. While there are those who find comfort in interactions among believers, the relationship of listening and speaking up within the Church has not yet been fully established. Outside the church, there is a widespread sense of wariness toward religion in Japanese society, a sense that "religion has a stink," and a resistance to face-to-face proselytizing on the part of both the minister and the recipient. The Internet,

which can be freely chosen according to the needs of the recipient, is particularly effective in disseminating information via SNS and copyrighted materials. For the local parish community, there are many possibilities, including cooperation with kindergartens, childcare centers, and social welfare facilities based in the church, volunteer activities to support pandemic victims, opening church facilities to the community, and rethinking the Catholic funeral service as an important missionary occasion.

#### **Question 4: Celebrating**

““Journeying together” is only possible if it is based on communal listening to the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist.”

#### Responses

The question here is whether the liturgy supports the "journey together". Certainly the Mass is a force that supports the life of faith of each individual. The experience of the cancellation of public Masses due to the Coronavirus pandemic made us even more keenly aware of this. Some communities realized that the Mass in one place is a force that supports their walk together.

With the declining birthrate and aging population, the number of elderly people who can no longer attend Mass is increasing, with number of young people decreasing and some of them leaving the church. In some parishes with multi-national congregations, not only are Masses held in different languages on a regular basis, but also both Japanese and other nationalities attend Mass together, and in addition to those serving at mass, readings and joint prayers are offered in their respective languages. These are important attempts to become a parish that walks together.

The experience of the time when public Masses were cancelled and communion was not available due to the Coronavirus pandemic made us realize the importance of experiencing the Word of God. In addition, regardless of the Coronavirus pandemic, there are communities where only bible services are held on the Lord's Day due to a lack of priests. It seems necessary to place importance not only on holy communion as in the past, but also on sharing the Word of God together.

#### **Question 5: Co-responsible in the mission**

“Synodality is at the service of the Church’s mission, in which all her members are called to participate.”

## Responses

Traditionally, there was a view that mission was a mission entrusted only to priests and religious sisters. Although a departure from this view has emerged in some quarters, there is still a strong tendency to leave mission to the priests and religious sisters. It has been pointed out that there is a lack of unity or shared understanding of the responsibility for individual mission and the responsibility of mission as a community. The call that all believers are proclaimers of the gospel may cause confusion within the congregation as to whether mission is an individual or a communal task.

Even under these circumstances, there are communities and parishes that are seeking partnerships with church-based kindergartens, childcare centers, nursery schools, and other social welfare facilities for the sake of mission, as well as groups working within and beyond parishes to support the victims of the Great East Japan Earthquake and the needy due to the Coronavirus pandemic. The activities that have been publicized in parishes are supported by donations and other forms of cooperation. There are also others who participate in support activities on an individual basis, but in many cases, information is not shared as a parish, and these activities tend to be seen as something that individuals do (or like to do) on a personal basis.

## **Question 6 Dialogue in Church and society**

“Dialogue is a path of perseverance that also includes silences and sufferings, but which is capable of gathering the experience of persons and peoples.”

## Responses

With regard to dialogue, there seems to be a major challenge both within the church and with society. This is because, as we have already pointed out, the relationship of listening and speaking up within the Church has not yet been fully created. In this context, some parishes have said that the sharing about the questions of the Synod was a good opportunity for dialogue. Although the Coronavirus pandemic has led to extreme restrictions on gathering, it will be possible to gradually increase the opportunities for dialogue in the future. But even more than that, it is first necessary for each and every priest, religious, and lay person to learn the attitude of dialogue.

While some communities are discussing at parish councils and other meetings the important issues facing parishes, such as the declining birthrate, aging population, and multi-nationalization of the congregation, there are still

some churches where the parish councils are not fully functional yet.

With regard to society as a whole, some efforts have been made to interact with the local community through participation in events of local self-governing bodies and to open church bazaars to the community, but this has not led to dialogue. Some parishes are seeking collaboration with kindergartens that are attached to parishes and are holding dialogues with teachers and staff. Some parishes are considering the possibility of creating a free space within church facilities and opening it up to the community as a place for dialogue.

### **Question 7: With the other Christian denominations**

“The dialogue between Christians of different confessions, united by one Baptism, has a special place in the synodal journey.”

#### Responses

Some areas have held joint prayer meetings and other joint events during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and other occasions, but the scale of these events has been reduced due to the aging of the population, or they have had to be canceled due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Although there is no longer any resistance to dialogue with Protestants as a result of efforts made since the Second Vatican Council, there has not been an increase in awareness of the need to actively promote exchange and understanding. In the future, we will cherish opportunities to pray together at joint prayer meetings and morning prayer meetings, such as during the Christian Prayer Week, etc. At the same time, some have suggested that we could cooperate in volunteer activities for pandemic relief.

### **Question 8 Authority and participation**

“A synodal Church is a participatory and co-responsible Church.”

#### Responses

As indicated in the response to Q5, we believe that the participation of the laity in the work of mission is gradually progressing, although there remains a view that mission is the role of priests and religious, and the laity are simply collaborators who follow their instructions. In the Diocese of Niigata, each parish has been working on establishing a parish constitution since 2016, and almost all parishes have completed that process. Although the situation differs considerably from parish to parish, in those parishes that have actually begun

to operate their churches in accordance with the statutes, the parish priest does not make all decisions based on his own ideas, but rather the laity share responsibility for the operation of the church with the priest.

In this consultation with parishes, we were reminded of the role and participation of women in churches. Some parishes have small communities where all parishioners, regardless of gender, participate in the management of the church. Although the majority are women and play many roles, many of the positions of responsibility are filled by men. This is a challenge for the future in order to become a "Church that Walks Together.

### **Question 9    Discerning and deciding**

“In a synodal style, decisions are made through discernment, based on a consensus that flows from the common obedience to the Spirit.”

#### Responses

The parish constitution mentioned in the answer to Q8 was introduced to clarify the method of decision-making in the parish. The council is organized to discuss the direction of the mission and pastoral care of the parish. The parish priest, who is ultimately responsible for the parish, the council members, who are representatives of the laity, and the religious belonging to the parish exchange opinions to identify important matters. Finally, they make decisions with the approval of the parish priest. Although it has been pointed out that the opinions of the laity are, at times, not fully taken into account, this step has just begun, and trial and error is required so that the priest, the laity, and the religious can cooperate and the decision-making process outlined in the parish constitution can take root in the future. In doing so, it is necessary to gather the opinions of each member of the congregation through various opportunities for dialogue and fellowship within the parish so that the matters discussed at the council meetings do not become the opinions of the council members alone.

Finally, we would like to add that one parish has commented on the sharing that took place for the Synod, saying that they feel that they had a communal discernment experience in which the Holy Spirit was at work.

### **Question 10:    Forming ourselves in synodality**

“The spirituality of journeying together is called to become an educational principle for the formation of the human person and of the Christian, of the families, and of the communities.”

## Responses

As the theme of this question suggests, we are convinced that the effort to "walk together" is itself our formation. "Walking together" includes taking on joint responsibility and joint discernment. For joint discernment, we believe that it is necessary to make use of the parish council to make decisions on important matters related to missionary pastoral care, but as a precondition for this, it is essential to engage each community to "listen - to give voice to their own thoughts". It was also suggested that in order for joint discernment to become a spiritual discernment, there needs to be an opportunity to learn what spiritual discernment looks like.

### **3. Summary**

The current state of "Journeying Together" for the Diocese of Niigata is clearly expressed in the answers to each of the ten questions. Both within the Church and beyond the Church, "Walking Together" still faces many challenges for the Diocese of Niigata. The sharing of opinions during this consultatory sessions highlighted that the community of priests, religious, and lay people has not yet fully developed a relationship of "listening and voicing one's own thoughts". The discussions for the formulation of a mission policy for the Diocese of Niigata, which began in parallel with the Synod, will help to deepen this relationship. It is also about preparing the environment for the Holy Spirit to work because this process is an attempt to know how to share responsibility together and also how to engage in discernment together.

I hope that the "Walking Together" will be further deepened by addressing the missionary and pastoral issues of the diocese and the specific issues in each parish in accordance with the new mission policy, which will be decided and announced after several processes have taken place.