

New Year's Pastoral Letter 2026

Communion in Christ

January 1, 2026

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 this year, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, I pray that God's abundant blessings may be upon you all and that the peace of Christ may spread throughout the world.

Looking back on the previous year

Last year, the Catholic Church celebrated a Holy Year. This observance originates from the Jubilee Year described in Leviticus 25—a year when captives were freed, debts forgiven, lost lands returned, and society was restored to what it should have been in God's eyes. Throughout the past year, we have journeyed to restore harmony in our relationships with God, with one another, and with nature. This journey does not end with the close of the Holy Year; rather, strengthened by its grace, it continues forward. In a world marked by division, conflict, and fear-mongering among peoples, we wish to begin this new year reflecting on how God intends this world to be.

Centered on the Mission and Pastoral Council

The Mission and Pastoral Council is a synodal gathering involving priests, consecrated persons, lay representatives from each district, and representatives from various diocesan committees. Starting last year, we decided to hold the Mission and Pastoral Council meeting in November. This allows us to reflect on the diocese's activities over the past year and plan for the coming year. At the meeting, we first shared how God had guided the Niigata Diocese throughout the previous year. We then discussed plans for this year, deciding to establish an annual goal for the entire diocese from now on. This aims to connect the scattered church communities across the vast diocese, enabling them to learn from each other and walk together by sharing the same goals. Many were of the opinion that this year's goal should be communion, the first pillar of the Mission and Pastoral Policy of the Diocese.

2026 Niigata Diocese Annual Goal

Based on the opinions raised at the Mission and Pastoral Council, we designate "Communion in Christ" as the Niigata Diocese Annual Goal for 2026. Furthermore, the annual goal for 2027 will be "Mission" and for 2028, "Participation." As mentioned earlier, the annual goal is intended to help the Niigata Diocese grow together through connection and mutual learning. It is not a target to be achieved like scores during school exams. Therefore, after dedicating a year to

"Communion," we should not simply move on to the next goal of "Mission." Rather, we should continue our efforts toward communion and build upon that foundation as we engage in mission. Church communities may also set their own annual goals. The Niigata Diocese's annual goal is the very essence of our Mission and Pastoral Policy, so it will not conflict with the goals of individual churches. Please value both your own church's goals and the diocese's goals.

The Synodal Journey

The 16th Synodal Assembly that began in 2021, continues to follow the path that was established after the conclusion of the second session of the General Assembly in October 2024:

- June 2025 - December 2026: implementation of synodal initiatives in each Diocese
- First half of 2027: evaluation meetings in Dioceses
- Second half of 2027: evaluation meetings at Episcopal Conferences
- First quarter of 2028: continental evaluation assemblies
- October 2028: Ecclesial Assembly at the Vatican

As announced in the 2024 New Year Pastoral Letter, the Diocese of Niigata will conduct an evaluation of its Mission and Pastoral Policy initiatives in 2027. Since this coincides with the diocesan level evaluation of the Synodal Process, we intend to conduct them together. Furthermore, 2028 is the year of the Diocesan Assembly. The Diocese of Niigata's annual goal of "Participation" will help make the Diocesan Assembly more meaningful.

What is Communion in Christ?

We are all invited through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ, into communion with God, with nature, and with peoples. As we engage in this communion, we wish to keep this truth ever in mind. The section on "Communion" in the Mission and Pastoral Policy states the following:

We aim to be a community where all the faithful and followers of Christ are respected as members of the community which Christ has gathered.

1. We deepen our awareness that we live in communion with God, nature, and people (church and society).
2. We are all members of a community united by Christ, regardless of generation, nationality, role, length of membership, or ability to come to church. We learn from one another in dialogue, transformed by one another, and grow together.
3. The Sunday Mass is the center of communion of our church community. We attend the liturgy with an emphasis on communion with God and with others.

Communion with God

Baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we all live a new life in communion with God. Invited into the communion of the Triune God, we participate in the

Lord's death and resurrection through the Eucharist at Mass, becoming a persons who live in Christ. And as we receive Christ's body, we are made one body, one community, through Christ. " Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:17). Thus, communion with God extends into communion with the people.

Communion with People

Through baptism, we are united with Christ, and without exception, every person is an irreplaceable member of the church community. The church is "our church" for all believers, regardless of background; no one is a "guest." The synodal church trusts in the fact that the Holy Spirit is at work in all believers, inviting us to discern and follow the Holy Spirit's guidance by listening to one another. We desire that people from different cultural backgrounds, through communion, come to know and respect each other's culture, and on that foundation, grow close as individuals. According to the Gospels, Jesus did not always side with those who could keep the law, but rather stood with those who, for various reasons, could not keep it. To practice communion, it is important, for example, to approach things from the perspective of those who cannot come to church.

Communion with Nature

God created this world as exceedingly good. Not only is every single thing that exists in this world exceedingly good, but the very structure and relationships within this world—where all life depends on other beings to live—are also exceedingly good. Jesus looked at the wildflowers and the birds of the sky and felt God's nurturing of life. We, too, want to praise and give thanks for God's work of creation. And so, let us also build a good relationship with nature, seeing it through the same eyes as Jesus.

Specific Calls Regarding Goals

In addition to the "Examples" section under "Communion" in the Mission and Pastoral Policy, please undertake any of the following that suits the situation of your respective communities.

- a) Each church community should read the "Communion" page of the Mission and Pastoral Policy and share about their past efforts. Each church should send details of their efforts and other reflections to the diocesan chancery by the end of May. The diocesan chancery will compile the reports and send them to each church community. Each church community should learn from the efforts of other churches and apply this learning to their own practice.
- b) Pray for the community, especially for those unable to attend church. Explore ways to connect with them, such as home visitations.
- c) To get to know and learn from one another, each church community can hold gatherings to listen to the voices of the elderly, foreign nationals, younger generations, children

and their parents, and others.

- d) Express gratitude for God's creation through gatherings to pray or celebrate Mass and pursue initiatives that value the natural environment.
- e) Increase opportunities for communion with the local people, such as neighbors and those connected to Catholic facilities (e.g., through events like Christmas Masses and bazaars).
- f) Diocesan committees and district councils shall strive to deepen communion within their respective fields and location. Particular attention shall be given to sharing information.

The Final Document of the 16th General Assembly of the Synod summarizes the meaning of "synodality" as follows:

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. (28)

Let us remember that both communion and participation are not meant to strengthen internal unity within the Church. It is for mission—to make Christ's light shine in our neighborhood.

When we hear about setting goals and walking together, the thought of "more things to do" might inevitably come to mind. In small group sharing sessions at the Mission and Pastoral Council, multiple groups expressed the view that "the joy of faith" is crucial. Whatever we do, we want to engage in it not out of obligation or because it is a rule, but from the joy of having received Christ's Gospel, and the joy of living and sharing the Gospel. Isn't "communion" precisely about sharing the joy of faith with others?

May God bless our journey and walk with us. Together, may we share that joy with others.

Together, always for the Gospel

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Bishop of Niigata