

November 11, 2021

Dear members of the Diocese of Niigata,

Reflections on the Synod questions and the priorities of the Diocese

The General Secretariat for Synod of Bishops issued a statement on May 21, announcing that the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will be held at the Vatican starting in October 2023 under the theme "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission".

According to the website of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Japan, "Synod" is a Greek word meaning "to walk together," and refers to an assembly of bishops who meet at certain times. It is held to deepen the relationship between the Pope and the bishops, and to assist the Pope with advice for the defense and improvement of faith and ethics, and for the observance and strengthening of discipline. It will also study issues related to the work of the Church in the world."

What is unique about this Synod is that it is a "journey together," not only with those who will be at the Vatican in 2023, but also with the laity, religious and priests, who will reflect on their own experiences at the parish level to see how they can practice communion, participation and mission together. To this end, from October 17 this year until next April, discussions related to the theme of the Synod will be held in dioceses around the world, and the reports will be compiled by the bishops' conferences and sent to the Holy See.

In the Diocese of Niigata, the Pastoral and Mission Council held a meeting in April to discuss the pastoral and mission policy of the diocese, and it was decided to review the diocesan priorities of 2012 and to consider new issues. However, since the timing of this review coincides with the Synod process in each diocese, which will begin in October, it was decided to combine the review of the Synod with the review of the diocesan priorities in order to avoid confusion.

What is important is not to answer the questions themselves, but to think together about how we can grow as a church that walks together and moves forward. In that sense, answering the questions is not the end of this process, but rather the beginning of the journey.

By answering the Synod questions and reflecting on our past efforts to address the priorities of our diocese, let us seek a new direction of pastoral and mission initiatives.

I hereby send you questions for the Synod and for the priorities of the Diocese, which we ask you to discuss in your churches and religious communities. Please send back your answers by e-mail to the Diocesan chancellor (cancelnig@ne.ncv.jp) by March 22, 2022. This document will

also be posted on the diocesan website. If, for some reason, it is difficult for you to give your opinion in your community, you may send your response directly to the Diocesan chancellor's office as an individual. The Diocese of Niigata has appointed Father Koichi Otaki as the person in charge of preparing the Synod process. If you have any inquiries regarding the questions for the Synod and the priorities of the diocese, please contact Father Koichi Otaki, the Diocesan chancellor.

Paul Daisuke Narui, SVD
Bishop of Niigata

Questions for the Synod

The preparatory document for the Synod explains the Synod in the following way.

“This journey, which follows in the wake of the Church’s “renewal” proposed by the Second Vatican Council, is both a gift and a task: by journeying together and reflecting together on the journey that has been made, the Church will be able to learn through Her experience which processes can help Her to live communion, to achieve participation, to open Herself to mission. Our “journeying together” is, in fact, what most effectively enacts and manifests the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God.”

For such reflections, the General Secretariat for Synod of Bishops at the Vatican has prepared a fundamental question. And, to answer this question concretely, the General Secretariat has a set of ten questions. Although time is limited and it is difficult to meet freely in the Covid-19 pandemic, I ask that members of church and religious communities exchange their views on these ten questions, compile their opinions, and send them to the Diocesan chancellor's office. Please note that some questions may not be suitable for some communities to answer. You can select the questions that is suitable to your situation.

Every session of the Second Vatican Council began with the prayer *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus*, the first word of the Latin original meaning, “We stand before You, Holy Spirit,” which has been historically used at Councils, Synods and other Church gatherings for hundreds of years, being attributed to Saint Isidore of Seville (c. 560 - 4 April 636). As we are called to embrace this synodal path of the Synod 2021-2023, this prayer invites the Holy Spirit to operate within us so that we may be a community and a people of grace. Below is the simplified version of the *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus*. Please pray this when you begin your reflections.

We stand before You, Holy Spirit,
as we gather together in Your name.

With You alone to guide us,
make Yourself at home in our hearts;
Teach us the way we must go
and how we are to pursue it.
We are weak and sinful;
do not let us promote disorder.
Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path
nor partiality influence our actions.
Let us find in You our unity
so that we may journey together to eternal life
and not stray from the way of truth
and what is right.
All this we ask of You,
who are at work in every place and time,
in the communion of the Father and the Son,
forever and ever. Amen.

The fundamental question:

A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together.” How is this “journeying together” happening today in your local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together”?

Ten questions

1. The Journeying Companions

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

- ① Do I walk together with the others? Do we walk together?
- ② With whom do I (we) walk?
- ③ Are there people I have neglected, forgotten, or abandoned to walk with?
- ④ Who are those people whom I am not walking with? Why can't I walk together with them?
- ⑤ Do others walk with me (us)? How do I make them walk with me (us)?

2. Listening

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

- ① Sometimes God speaks to us through a voice we do not know. Who am I (we) listening to?
- ② Is there someone I (we) am not listening to?

(e.g., women, youth, vulnerable people, neighbors, people with different opinions, the poor, the marginalized, the excluded, refugees, etc.)

- ③ Why are we failing to listen to these people?
- ④ How can we listen to those people?
- ⑤ Are they listening to me (us)?
- ⑥ How can I expect them to listen to me?

3. Speaking out

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

- ① Do I (we) make a clear statement of my (our) faith? If not, why?
- ② Are there opportunities in the church and in society to speak out courageously, openly, responsibly, and clearly? If not, why?
- ③ Do you actively use the means available to you for evangelization? (e.g., printed materials, books, television, radio, SNS, internet, etc.)
- ④ Do you have any ideas for evangelization?

4. Celebrating

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

- ① Do the Mass and liturgy make me (us) and my (our) life alive? Why is that?
- ② What do you want to do out of the motivation that comes from the Mass and liturgy?
- ③ What kind of participation do you think is the best?
- ④ Do I (we) pray together?
- ⑤ What do you try to do when you read or serve at the altar?

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.

- ① Are all Christians aware that they are protagonists in the mission?
- ② To whom are we trying to proclaim the gospel, or to whom do we need to proclaim?
- ③ Is there an area or field where we are neglecting from working on mission?
- ④ What hinders the faithful from being active in mission?
- ⑤ Do you leave the mission to someone else? How can we work together to share the mission? How do you think can you commit to the mission together?

- ⑥ In what ways do you evangelize (social welfare, political action, scientific inquiry, education, promotion of social justice, advocacy for human rights, environmental protection, etc.)? Or in what ways do you hope to evangelize?
- ⑦ How does the Church community support the faithful who serve society in various ways?

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.

- ① Do you engage in dialogue with people who disagree with you, with people of different faiths? Are we trying to engage them in dialogue?
- ② What are the opportunities and means of dialogue in our church?
- ③ How do we promote collaboration with neighboring dioceses, local religious communities, lay organizations and movements?
- ④ What issues in the Church and society do we pay particular attention to?
- ⑤ What experiences of dialogue and collaboration do we have with believers of other religions and with atheists?
- ⑥ How is the Church interacting with and learning from other sectors of society (politics, economics, culture, civil society, the poor)?

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.

- ① Do you pray, share, and walk together, especially with non-Catholic Christians?
- ② How do you plan to walk with them?
- ③ What fruits do you get from walking together?
- ④ As we move forward together, how can we take the next step?

8. Authority and participation

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

- ① Do you know the goals of your diocese?
- ② Are you working together to achieve those goals? How can we work together?
- ③ When you arrange the team members for church activities, do you also discuss how to include mission perspectives?
- ④ Do I express my opinion? Is my opinion being heard?

- ⑤ How are the apostolate and responsibilities of the laity, especially women, promoted?
- ⑥ Are the diocesan bodies (parish council, mission and pastoral council, priests' council, etc.) functioning in a "walking together" way?
- ⑦ What kind of participation and leadership is desirable for the Church to "walk together"?
- ⑧ Have you ever had the experience of "walking together" at the diocesan level?

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.

- ① Do you begin your meetings with prayer and Bible reading, conduct your meetings according to the Word of God, and take action?
- ② Are we aware that the Lord is with us and that the Holy Spirit is leading us as we act?
- ③ How do we participate in decision-making within the hierarchical church (pope, bishops, priests, religious, lay people)?
- ④ Do we begin our decision-making process by listening to the entire people of God?
- ⑤ What is the relationship between consultation and decision-making? How are we practicing that relationship?
- ⑥ What ways and procedures are we using to promote transparency and accountability in important matters?
- ⑦ What can we do to enable spiritual discernment together?

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.

- ① What should be done to achieve "walking together" as we work on the Church activities on mission, liturgy and other issues?
- ② What kind of formation is being done to promote discernment and the exercise of authority in a "walking together" manner?

Reflections on Diocesan Priorities

In his apostolic exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel", Pope Francis states in paragraph 11 "Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world. Every form of authentic evangelization is always "new".

The gospel -the good news that God has shown his love through Christ's death on the cross and resurrection always renews us, gives us joy, and impels us to make it known to others. How is God inviting us to live and share this Gospel in our present life?

When we celebrated the centennial anniversary of the establishment of the Diocese of Niigata in 2012, we have revised our priorities for the Diocese and have been working on them to this day. However, society has changed drastically during this period, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic that started last year. After nine years, we need to reflect on our efforts to address the priority issues, evaluate our activities, and review the issues we need to address in the present time. Therefore, I would like to take the following steps to create a policy for the evangelization and pastoral care of the Diocese of Niigata based on your experiences and opinions.

First step:

March 22, 2022	Responses to Synod questions and reflections on diocesan priorities will be emailed to the Diocesan chancellor's Office.
Late April 2022	Mission and pastoral council will make a summary of the answers to the Synod questions.

Second step:

March and April, 2022	Prepare a summary of the review of the diocesan priorities, discuss at the priests' council, mission and pastoral council, and exchange ideas for preparing a discussion guide for the creation of a policy for evangelization and pastoral care.
July, 2022	Prepare a discussion guide for the creation of a policy for evangelization and pastoral care. Send to parishes and convents with a summary of the review of the diocesan priorities.
November, 2022	Parishes, convents, and districts discuss the policy for evangelization and pastoral care, prepare responses, and send them to the diocesan chancellor's office.

Third step:

April, 2023	The diocesan office consolidates the answers. The Mission and Pastoral Council prepares a report on the policy for evangelization and pastoral care and submits it to the bishop.
June, 2023	Publication of the policy for evangelization and pastoral care.

At this moment, I would like to ask you to reflect how we have implemented the 2012 priorities.

- a. To build “our Church”, one which is filled by joy and compassion through overcoming differences created by age, nationality and cultural diversity.
- b. Realizing the responsibilities of the Catholic Church in society through exchanges of information within the diocese, districts and parishes.
- c. 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.

In relation to these three priorities, please discuss the following questions in your parishes and convents and send your answers to the diocesan chancellor’s office along with the answers to the Synod's questions.

- How have you addressed these three issues in your community?
- What changes have you seen in your community as a result of your efforts?
- What kind of evangelization and outreach to the neighborhood have taken place as a result of your efforts?
- What have been some of the difficulties in working on this priorities?
- Are there any new challenges that have emerged over the past nine years?