

New Year's Pastoral Letter 2023

To be Open to Each Other and to Walk Together

January 1, 2023

Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Diocese of Niigata, I wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

What comes to mind when you look back on the past year? The sixth wave of the Covid-19 pandemic that began soon after the new year? The invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, which is still causing suffering and loss of life for many people? The fact that many countries are working on their military buildups? At the beginning of this year, as we celebrate the Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, and the World Day of Peace, I pray for the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary so that we might pray and act for the realization of a society in which all the people are cared for without exception.

On the other hand, the year 2022 was also a year in which our society, including the Church, resumed its activities in creative ways amidst the continuing Covid-19 pandemic. In the Diocese of Niigata, the ordination of Father Shuta Oka was held in May, the Priests' Assembly was held at Sagae, Yamagata in June, the Synod Report of the Diocese of Niigata was released in July, a gathering of Vietnamese youth was held in August, and in October, a letter requesting for a discussion in the parish communities for the formulation of a diocesan mission and pastoral policy was sent out. In the same month, a Diocesan Assembly which connected the faithful throughout the diocese was held, a new Mass rite translation was introduced in November, and a youth gathering was held in December. Rather than waiting for the so-called "post-Covid-19" time to come, let us continue to be creative and flexible in doing what we can now.

The Journey of the Synod

The 16th World Synod of Bishops, which began in October 2021, has completed its period of discussions in the dioceses, and the process is now at the continental level. In the

midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, each community in the Diocese of Niigata also held discussions in order to prepare a report as a diocese. I am grateful to the many communities in the diocese for their effort to share their opinions. The report is posted on the diocesan website, so if you have not yet read them, please do so.

From the answers you submitted regarding the 10 questions, we can see the challenges and dilemmas, as well as the joys and hopes that we face when trying to be a Church that walks together. In particular, the first part of the answer to Question 1 seems the reality which every community faces: "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." There are many things that need to be addressed, and we may find it difficult at times, but by continuing our discussions we can move forward on our journey as a church that walks together. This year, the Diocese of Niigata plans to formulate a mission and pastoral policy. Whatever the policy will be, it will certainly be one that we will work on as a church that walks together. I hope that you will not stop discussions after submitting the report, but will continue to take various opportunities to discuss the issues in relation to the mission and pastoral policy.

The Church that Walks Together

What do you imagine when you hear the words "the church that walks together"? I am reminded of the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15, where a man has 100 sheep and loses one of them. He leaves the 99 in the field and searches around until he finds the lost one, and rejoices when he finds it. I used to read this parable with the feeling that, while I appreciated the fact that he would take care of the lost one, it would be impossible to actually leave the 99 sheep alone to look for one that was lost. However, my visit to Mongolia more than a decade ago has given me a completely different understanding. Many families in Mongolia still live nomadic lives in tents on the steppes. One day I watched from a car as a boy on horseback took hundreds of sheep to a river. A local man told me that sometimes a sheep gets stuck in ditches while on the move, but it is usually the same sheep. At the time, I just thought, "Oh, really?" But later, I realized two things.

First, some sheep always end up in the ditch, some move slowly, some are faster, some are more curious, some are more timid, and so on. When we read the parable of the lost sheep, we tend to think that 99 of them are good and one is bad, but they are not good or bad, they all have their own personalities and are walking together as a group.

The second point is that the shepherd knows the personality of each sheep. "This sheep always gets stuck in the ditch at this spot". "This sheep has a trouble with its leg and is slow to go up the hill". "This sheep is timid and runs away when a stranger approaches". The shepherd knows all these and takes care of each sheep accordingly, and the sheep trust the shepherd.

Isn't the Church that walks together the same as this? Each of us has a different background and personality. We have good times and bad times. Some of us can get together at the Church and some of us cannot. It is not a matter of good or bad. Christ the Shepherd knows each one of us and nurtures and guides us accordingly. If we are lost, he will find us. If we are not doing well, he waits for us. In other words, He walks with us.

What is required of the Church community is not to eliminate differences or to avoid stumbling over problems, but to understand each other, to trust in Christ who walks with us in spite of our differences and weaknesses, and to continue our journey together.

In the midst of social change

By the way, I had an opportunity to listen to a Buddhist monk, who spoke the following: Buddhism has connected with the faithful through the "danka" system, which register families to a particular temple. But nowadays, family members live separately and do not often come back to their parents' homes. Naturally, they don't come to visit their ancestor's tomb, and their connection with the temple is weakened. The way of life of the people is changing, and temples cannot survive with the same system as before. We must connect with individuals in the neighborhood and create a community with them.

Indeed, the way people live is changing. I feel that many of the challenges that the Church faces as it tries to walk together are also related to the changes in the way people live. For example, Q4 of the Diocesan Synod Report mentions the "number of young people decreasing and some of them leaving the church". Yes, there are fewer young people than before, but what about "leaving the church"? Looking at their activities at the Diocesan Assembly in last October and at other events, I think that the youth in the Diocese of Niigata

are very much involved in the church activities.

Recently, I have listened to several Synod reports from overseas, and I heard the following comments: “The youth cannot participate in the journey of the Synod. The Synod sharing is not set up in such a way that the youth can be heard. Young people often have work on Sundays and their usual way of connecting with church friends is through the Internet, so they are not able to participate in the usual church activities on Sundays at Mass time. But by no means are they away from the church. They are gathering at other times and in other ways that are convenient for them, and they are getting together in creative ways. People say, ‘There are no youth in the church,’ but in fact the opposite is true: ‘Where the youth are active in the church, the usual church has not been there’”. This made me think. As society is changing and the people's way of living is changing, the way the church conducts its activities is also changing. In this context, it is important not to wonder who are the lost sheep, but to respect each person, to listen to those who find it difficult to walk together, and to look at the community from a new perspective. For everyone lives where they are as sheep cared for by Christ.

Let us believe that Christ, the Shepherd, knows and is with each of us so that we can be a community that is open to and walks together with God and the people. We are connected through Christ and form one body through Him.

Let us trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, listen to each other, and learn from each other, whether we are lay people, priests, or the bishop, and whether we are able to come to church on Sundays or not.

Let us work together on the mission that is common to all believers, to share the love of God.

I hope that the ongoing sharing for the formulation of a diocesan mission and pastoral policy will be an important step for us toward becoming a church that walks together. Let us be open to each other and live the Gospel together. May almighty God bless you abundantly throughout this year.

Paul Daisuke Narui, SVD
Bishop of Niigata