

New Year's Pastoral Letter 2024

A Church Community in Communion, Mission, and Participation

January 1, 2024

Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Diocese of Niigata, I wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! As we enter the new year, I pray for God's abundant blessings upon you and for peace in the world.

This year, two major new initiatives will begin in the Diocese of Niigata. One is the Mission and Pastoral Policy and the other is the new district assignments. In this New Year's Letter, I would like to introduce both of these new initiatives.

Mission and Pastoral Policy

The Diocese of Niigata has been focusing on the three priorities listed in the Diocesan Mission Statement issued in 2012 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the diocese. Many of you may have a card which address these three priorities with a space to write down your own efforts. More than 10 years have passed since then and in that time society in general and the Church have changed drastically. I am sure you are well aware that the Diocese of Niigata is no exception. In order to respond to these new circumstances, it was decided that in 2021, the Diocese of Niigata would create a Mission and Pastoral Policy. At the same time, the journey of the Synod began in all the churches of the world, and the formulation of the Mission and Pastoral Policy was carried out in parallel with this process. The communities of the Church and the consecrated life reflected on the priorities of the past and shared in the creation of a Mission and Pastoral Policy based on the current situation. The results of which were discussed by the Mission and Pastoral Council. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to many of you who worked on it, even though it was in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. I am confident that this policy, borne from your sharing, will be a good tool for us to walk together.

This Mission and Pastoral Policy is an expression of our commitment as a community to the three essential ministries of the Church: proclaiming the Word of God (mission), celebrating the sacraments (liturgy), and exercising the ministry of charity (service) (Encyclical "Deus Caritas Est" 25). This attitude is expressed in the Synod's theme, "Communion, Mission, and Participation," which are the three pillars of the

Church community's walk together towards God.

1. A community that values communion together

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.

2. A community that goes forth together for mission

We share the gospel of Jesus with people and walk together for the realization of a society which God desires.

3. A community that is linked and participates together

We aim to be a community where everyone lives the gospel in their own place and in their own way, and participates flexibly in the life of the church.

For more details, please refer to the Mission and Pastoral Policy booklet, which explains the basic understanding of each of these pillars and gives examples of concrete initiatives that you have contributed. The examples are not something that must be done in every community, but are examples only. I would like to ask each community to begin this year by reading the Mission and Pastoral Policy, sharing what is important to you, and creating a plan of action tailored to your own needs. In 2027, three years from now, we would like to review our efforts at the level of parishes, communities of consecrated life, districts, and committees.

We have prepared a booklet, a card, and an A4 version of the Mission and Pastoral Policy. Please make the booklet and cards available to all the faithful. The card version and the A4 version are designed to make the Policy accessible to everyone. The card version has a column to fill in your own efforts, so please make use of it. I also ask that you post the A4 version of the Mission and Pastoral Policy at the entrance of the church or in the parish hall at all times. The Mission and Pastoral Care Policy can be downloaded from the diocesan website in English, Vietnamese, Japanese with furigana, and regular Japanese. I ask that you print and distribute it to those who need it.

New designation of districts in the Diocese of Niigata

In the past, the districts of the Diocese of Niigata were assigned as follows: the Akita and Shibata Districts were assigned to the Society of the Divine Word, the Yamagata District to the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, the Nagaoka District to the Order of Friars Minor, and the Niigata District to the diocesan priests. However, the Shibata District is now served by diocesan priests, the Yamagata District is served by a member of the Society of the Divine Word in addition to the

Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, and the Nagaoka District is served by diocesan priests, with the exception of the churches in Joetsu. In addition, due to the consolidation of cities, towns, and villages, there have been some inconveniences in the past district assignments. For example, former Tochio City, where Tochio Church in the Shibata District is located, was merged with Nagaoka City in the Nagaoka District. In 2016, the former ordinary, the then Bishop Kikuchi, sent a letter to the three districts in Niigata Prefecture asking if some sort of reorganization was necessary, and discussions were held in each parish and district, but since Bishop Kikuchi was appointed as the Archbishop of Tokyo the following year, the discussions did not proceed. Therefore, this time, through the sharing for the formulation of the Mission and Pastoral Policy, we again received your opinions on the role of districts and the assignment of districts, which were discussed at the district and Council of Priests meetings. Based on the feedback I received, I have decided on the roles and assignments of the districts.

Roles of the districts

In reorganizing the districts, the most important thing was to clarify the roles of the districts. Although the districts began as pastoral areas for religious congregations and diocesan priests, they must share a common role in order to move forward together as one diocese. Therefore, based on the feedback from your discussions, I can define the following three main roles for the districts of the Diocese of Niigata.

Formation: formation of lay leaders such as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, catechists, general lay formation, parish community building, etc.

Communion: district assemblies, pilgrimages to churches in the district, district children's camp, etc.

Cooperation: Priests taking turns to preside at Masses, joint holding of retreats, joint Sunday schools, etc.

In the past, some districts have been managed only by priests, but from now on, I would like to request that priests and lay representatives be involved in the management of the district, just like the parish councils, in the spirit of the Synod.

New district allocation

Based on the above roles, current administrative districts, and transportation accessibility, I have changed the allocation of the districts of the Diocese of Niigata as follows. The Akita and Yamagata Districts remain unchanged, but Niigata Prefecture is

reorganized into three districts: Kaetsu, Chuetsu, and Joetsu. Each district contains a large community, namely Niigata, Nagaoka, and Takada. I understand that it will be difficult to change the relationships and organizational structure that we have nurtured over the years, but I hope that we can work together in a positive manner to tackle this new district assignments, which will begin amid changes in society and the church. The new district assignments will take effect on April 1, 2024, and new district superiors will be appointed accordingly.

Akita District: Odate, Kazuno, Noshiro, Tsuchizaki, Akita, Honjo, Yokote, Uwashuku [Mission station].

Yamagata District: Sakata, Tsuruoka, Yamagata, Shinjo [quasi-parish], Yonezawa, Nagai [quasi-parish].

Kaetsu District: Shibata, Murakami [quasi-parish], Niigata, Sado, Hanazono, Toyano [quasi-parish], Aoyama, Terao, Shirone, Niitsu, Muramatsu [quasi-parish], Kameda

Chuetsu District: Kamo, Sanjo, Mitsuke, Tochio, Nagaoka

Joetsu District: Tokamachi, Kashiwazaki, Naoetsu, Takada, Myoko [quasi-parish], Itoigawa

Cooperation between neighboring churches

In asking for opinions about the role of the districts, we received opinions about cooperation in smaller areas and cooperation between neighboring churches. Now that the number of children is decreasing, there are churches that hold Sunday schools together with neighboring churches. We sometimes hold parish retreats during Advent and Lent with neighboring churches. Fellowship and cooperation with neighboring churches could lead to new ideas and activities. There are also increasing efforts to have several priests taking turns to celebrate Masses in multiple parishes. In this context, a proposal has been made to establish a new "block" group of two or three churches within the district, but I would like to discuss this proposal after we deepen fellowship and cooperation between neighboring churches for the next two years until the end of 2025. I will ask for your opinions in 2026.

In hope

At the end of the Mission and Pastoral Policy booklet, I have included a message of hope. Hope is born when we trust in the work of the Holy Spirit and take small steps together. In the midst of a rapidly changing society, let us not be afraid to change, let us not be afraid to fail, and let us take a step forward.

This year we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the 32 martyrs of Akita. As we begin a new journey, let us follow in the footsteps of the martyrs and renew our trust in God and our commitment as a community to serve others. I pray for God's blessings. In addition, a Prayer for the Diocese of Niigata has been newly created and posted in the Mission and Pastoral Policy document. Please pray it individually and at various gatherings.

“O God, who created all things and invites us to salvation, we thank you for the gift of life.

Unite us in your love even as we live in the various regions of Akita, Yamagata and Niigata. May we, who have received your gospel, praise you as a community that communes together, proclaims the gospel together, and participates together, and be in harmony with creation and witness to your love among the people.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Paul Daisuke Narui, SVD

Bishop of Niigata