

**RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH IN JAPAN FOR THE
XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS**

August 15, 2022

Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan

I. THE DIOCESAN PHASE: GATHERING OPINIONS IN THE DIOCESES OF JAPAN

With the global COVID-19 pandemic that began in the spring of 2020, Japan's Church was severely affected, including the cancellation of public Masses and the cancellation and downsizing of activities. Preparations for the Synod began in October 2021 and provided all 16 dioceses the opportunity to discern the current state of the Church, providing hope and great encouragement for the future. We thank God that the General Assembly of the Bishops in July 2022 was able to approve this response for submission.

The situation of each diocese in relation to the Synod

- A. About half of the 16 dioceses have reviewed their missionary policies in the past few years, either by holding diocesan synods or by formulating missionary policies using synod-like methods. So, many people in all dioceses have experienced a synod-like walk, and it is gratifying that the gathering of opinions by the Synod this time has given impetus to the progress of each diocese.
- B. Many commented that this was a great opportunity to deepen their understanding of synodality and the synodal Church. Each believer realized the importance of regularly sharing their "feelings for the Church," looking back on the origins of their own faith and experiencing the importance of reviewing the way the Church should be based on their own life experiences.
- C. In gathering opinions, each diocese prepared its own questionnaire according to the local situation rather than using the 10 questions presented in the *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*. However, in this Summary Document, the answers of the dioceses are arranged according to the questions in the *Vademecum*.

Challenges and difficulties

- A. Under restrictions on gatherings due to Covid-19, opinion gathering could not take place in actual meetings but relied upon questionnaires. It was difficult to create the sort of new awareness among participants that would have emerged from the dynamism of actual encounters.
- B. In the run-up to sharing, the difficulties faced by the Church in modern Japan were discussed. These include a decline in the number of priests and religious and their vocations, a decline in the number of laity and an aging population, the absence of children and young people in the churches, parishes exhausted by conferences and events, lack of funds, Catholic institutions with few Catholic staff, disagreements within the Church, and declining public awareness of the Church. These issues vary in degree depending on the diocese and region but are common to the Church in Japan today.
- C. Although it became clear that the small number of members of the younger generation attending church did not create opportunities for young people to have a voice, on the other hand, it was notable that responses from non-Japanese believers included a comparatively young generation.
- D. Time constraints on the diocesan phase in many places were overcome by devising various methods, but the fundamental issue remains gathering the voices of those who did not respond this time. In addition, it is very difficult to gather the voices of people who even if they come to church do not want to speak.

New materials for community building and evangelism must be found. All the dioceses share a missionary interest in believers who have distanced themselves from the Church for some reason.

II. OPINIONS FROM THE WHOLE COUNTRY ON THE 10 QUESTIONS

(1) Companions on the Journey

Those who are left on the margins

- A. Although believers can list "people in need" with whom they should "walk," namely the elderly, the sick, the needy, foreign nationals, the homeless, people with various disabilities, addicts, crime victims, inmates, LGBTQ people, divorced and remarried people, single-parent households, etc., it cannot be said that in general we actually walk together.
- B. In the process of gathering opinions, there was a growing understanding that it is important for all who have received the blessing of baptism to walk together, sharing and discerning the guidance of the Holy Spirit who calls them. There was a deep realization that in the synodal Church walking together is the way to become a missionary Church. This is the result of efforts by the Synod Secretariat in each diocese to create and explain various useful materials.

The difficulty of "Walking Together"

- A. In fact, believers find it difficult to "walk together." There are "salons" within parishes, exclusionary tendencies toward new people, concerns about weakening relationships among believers, troubled relationships within the church, backbiting, discrimination, confrontation, strife, and judgmentalism. There were also voices that said they cannot afford mentally and financially to actively engage with people around them since they have their hands full with their own lives. The Covid pandemic has made these obstacles worse, making it even more difficult for people to socialize.
- B. It should always be noted that even though it is called the Japanese Church it includes people with foreign roots. Differences in the way Japanese and foreign believers think and feel affect the content of their responses. Many people feel that there is a lack of interaction with foreign believers. On the other hand, in many churches there is cooperation with each other through such activities as Japanese language classes and children's religious education. A major problem in recent years is that due to Japan's policies communication with parish communities has become more difficult for so-called "technical intern trainees" from Asian countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam because they only have relatively short-term (three-year) stays and thus are unable to acquire the Japanese language.
- C. Sexual and other forms of harassment by clergy and others in the Church was pointed out. Of course, each diocese has set up a point of contact for response, but the Church's response has been hampered as major changes in society's understanding of harassment are happening. As a result, there are sometimes suspicions from inside and outside the Church that the organization is engaging in cover-up. Given the historical prevalence of clericalism, there are calls for those responsible to strengthen the relationship with laity in the formation of priests and religious.

Those who are separated from the Church

- A. Many people are heartbroken over the number of those who have left or been

driven from the Church. There is much concern for people who have left the Church for a variety of reasons such as relationship troubles, to escape the heavy burden of Church activities, or being unable to come to Church because of work or illness. Many believers in the missionary land of Japan are pained that people who have been invited by God to be bound to the Church are driven to leave.

- B. Similarly, many people are pained by the separation from the Church of children of those who converted to Catholicism. There are voices of remorse for not being able to fully convey the attraction of the Gospel. In addition, young people find no peers of the same generation in the Church, and their sense that the Church is unappealing has deep roots.
- C. Many spoke of the importance of ongoing formation after the baptism of adults. Activating the role of godparents, it is necessary to encourage participation in parish activities, and the entire parish must unite to cultivate the faith of new believers.

(2) Listening

Being a "place" (*ba*) to listen

- A. Within the Church, many voices reflected the opinion that there is not enough "place" to "hear" the voices of lonely people, those who seek God, those who have difficulty speaking out, and those in vulnerable positions.
- B. To encounter people outside the Church, in some places private houses are rented or street spaces are secured to listen to the voices of the general public. In addition, many believers are engaged in activities in cooperation with civic groups to prevent suicide and support people living alone.

Difficulties in listening

- A. Individual attitudes such as self-centeredness, arrogance, prejudices, intolerance, indifference, the Church's sense of privilege, aggression, listener fatigue, fear of being hurt, closedness, passivity, lack of mental space, etc. were pointed out as sources of difficulty in listening. Other reasons cited included shaky relationships, lack of time, and a desire to be listened to oneself. Overcoming these difficulties requires a cultural transformation from a "talking" Church to a "listening" Church.
- B. As *Laudato Si'* calls for, the Church must aim to be a "common home" for all that can prayerfully and gratefully listen to all without discrimination and in solidarity.

(3) Speaking

Being a "place" to speak out

- A. Within churches, a variety of activities are carried out, such as Masses, weddings, funerals, reception windows, outdoor bulletin boards, lectures, concerts, and other public relations activities, as well as online and social media, and the sending of letters and newsletters. Parishes also invite the local community to gatherings on major holidays such as Christmas and respond to local needs by opening parish facilities to community activities.
- B. Outside the churches, more non-believers can be reached at Catholic kindergartens and nurseries, schools, universities, Boy Scouts, social welfare and medical facilities, and Catholic bookstores. In these places, by communicating faith through Christian life and action, we can serve an encounter with God who does not impose. In addition, neighborhood activities such as cleaning and grass cutting, children's cafeterias, and eco-activities are also places to meet. There are

also ways that parishes can support individual believers who are personally involved in the community.

Difficulties in speaking out

- A. Attitudes such as indifference, self-centeredness, closed-mindedness, emphasis on efficiency, and lack of courage have been cited as difficulties in "listening."
- B. In Japanese society, there is a sense that religion is something to be feared. There is a "religious allergy," a resistance to belonging to a religious organization. Christians can easily be looked upon with antipathy and suspicion. In this situation, there is a sense of isolation as believers and a reluctance to do face-to-face evangelization. For the Catholic minority to raise their voices in public and make statements that challenge society it is necessary to cultivate a missionary consciousness and lifelong faith formation.
- C. Foreign nationals are often placed in a vulnerable position and discriminated against, making it even more difficult for them to speak out to the public.

(4) Celebration and the Reality of the Liturgy

Reaffirmation of the Mass as the source

- A. Restrictions on Mass participation due to the Covid pandemic have reminded us of the importance of the Mass as the source of religious life and evangelization. There is a universal conviction that to fully experience this, study and formation in liturgy and prayer are necessary. Increased active involvement in liturgy by laity is needed.
- B. As society becomes more multinational, many people advocate praying together across nationalities and cultures. There are many challenges, such as developing prayer resources in multiple languages, sharing devotions from other countries such as novenas, and developing a more energetic liturgy in response to complaints that the Mass in Japan is "too sedate."

Lack of "celebration"

- A. The tranquility of the church and cherishing the clean and beautiful church space are expressions of Japanese spirituality. However, prayer and participation in the liturgy are primarily described as "celebration" and participation in the liturgy lacks a sense of "celebrating." There are also reflections that the liturgy has become obsolete and hollowed out. More than half a century has passed since the liturgical reforms of the Council, but if there are places where the liturgy does not resonate in the hearts of believers, revitalization is needed.
- B. Issues raised by respondents included the decrease in the number of priests, lack of preparation by priests, a decrease in the number of Mass participants, a weakening sense of solidarity, the busyness of the laity, inadequate lay formation, the limitation of lay roles to certain members of the community, and the prioritization of hobbies, work, and school over Mass participation.
- C. The laity demands that preaching at Mass be improved. The significance of anniversary celebrations such as the dedication of a church was pointed out. More use of online tools for prayer and the creation of opportunities to pray with non-believers are needed. With fewer children and young people, more effort is needed to devise liturgy focused on them.

(5) Shared Responsibility in Mission

Places of Mission in Japan

- A. In Japan, there are many interfaith families and there are many cases where only

one member of a family is a Christian. Reticence toward non-Christians may lead believers to distance themselves from the Church, or on the other hand there may be problems when the Christian gives priority to the Church and creates a rift within the family. However, such believers are also aware that the home is a place of mission, and they seek enthusiastic support from pastoral workers and warm involvement of the parish community.

- B. In Catholic kindergartens, schools, and institutions, relationships with non-Christian teachers, children, parents, residents, and neighbors are commonplace, and the feeling of walking with non-believers is more conscious than in parishes. Through prayer time, non-Christians come into contact with Christianity, and in medical and social welfare facilities where they are involved in issues of life, old age, illness and death there are many places where they feel Christian spirituality. In a missionary country like Japan Catholic institutions give effective testimony to the Gospel.
- C. Christians must respond to non-believers who visit the church and to catechumens. The warmth with which newcomers are met is also necessary for young people. There is a great need to create a system for evangelization and to provide opportunities to receive formation for that purpose. There is a desire to learn more about Scripture, mission, liturgy, prayer, and the martyrs. It is also important to present courses on Christianity that do not presuppose baptism, and to use public facilities other than churches for Bible courses, etc.

Difficulties in turning to mission

- A. Many people hesitate to engage in evangelization because of indifference, negligence, a desire for comfort, lack of study, weakness of faith, and a feeling of being imposed upon. Because of their reliance on priests and religious, many believers are reluctant to evangelize. Lay believers are aware of the importance apart from church activities of evangelizing through their lives in the community and at work, while proclaiming their faith to those around them, but the reality is that things are not going well.
- B. There are cases where clergy prevent lay participation. If mutual support among priests, religious, and laity is weak, the Church will not turn outward. Due to the aging and declining number of believers, there is a shortage of Church workers, and in many places faith formation and community service activities have regressed considerably.

(6) Dialogue between the Church and Society

Various Social Issues

- A. In Japan's Church there are many believers who place importance on dialogue with society. They engage with socially vulnerable and marginalized people, such as the needy, disaster victims, the elderly, the sick, the mentally ill, the addicted, domestic violence victims, migrants, people without residence status and immigration detainees. They also take part in efforts to address environmental issues. In various places parishes work with civic movements and local governments. In recent years, understanding of gender, LGBTQ, and other issues has deepened within the Church. However, there are differences in the level of involvement in political issues among the laity.
- B. In Japan where Christians are a minority the presence of Catholic schools and institutions is important. Therefore, ongoing training of non-Christian faculty and staff to share the Gospel with students and users is essential.
- C. Improved coordination between Catholic schools and institutions with dioceses

and parishes will promote dialogue with society. The revitalization of peer groups beyond the boundaries of parishes such as those for medical personnel or teachers can also contribute to this.

- D. The Catholic Church's teachings on divorce, gender, and bioethical issues sometimes differ from Japanese society's values, but we must continue to engage in dialogue with society on these matters.

Declining Church presence in local communities

- A. Unfortunately, as the population ages and declines among pastors and laity, cooperation among parishes, religious orders, lay groups, educational institutions, etc. is weakening. Information sharing with believers from various activities is insufficient, and individual activities tend to be isolated.
- B. Although there is more talk about social issues within the Church than in the past, the awareness of environmental issues, social justice, and the social teachings of the Church has not yet deepened among some. There is apathy and passivity, and the Catholic Church's ability to communicate is not fostered.

(7) Connections with Christian Denominations

Ecumenism through concrete activities

- A. Christian Churches, which are a minority in Japan, can gain recognition for Christianity itself from Japanese society through ecumenical activities. The Catholic Church works with other Christian denominations at the diocesan and parish levels in joint services such as community Christmas celebrations, joint prayer such as Morning Prayer Meetings, and prayer gatherings in the Week of Prayer for Church Unity. In addition, cooperation in social service activities like support for the homeless and social issues (peace movements, discrimination against *Buraku* outcasts, support for refugees, etc.) are also carried out in various places.
- B. By getting to know others through concrete activities, denominations and their members learn that there are different confessions of faith, and thereby provide an opportunity to re-examine their own faith. There have been cases of Catholic parishes renting Protestant churches during the construction of parish churches.
- C. On 21 July 2022, the bishops held a roundtable discussion and joint prayer service to hear opinions on the Synod from representatives of the Japan Episcopal Church, Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Japan Christian Council (NCC).

Limited experience

For lay people who have never participated in ecumenical activities, opportunities for fellowship with other Christian denominations are limited. Some Catholics are indifferent, critical, or reluctant to associate with other Christian denominations, often depending on the understanding and attitude of their pastors.

(8) Authority and Participation

Rebuilding the Church's decision-making process

- A. The quality of decision-making in dioceses and parishes is gradually improving. Diocese-level committees and economic councils have established a cooperative posture among priests, religious, and laity in many dioceses. Increasingly, priests and laity are collaborating on annual goals for parishes, diocesan and parish missionary and pastoral councils are becoming multinational, and the process of gathering opinions is being activated. The current situation and financial

condition of dioceses and parishes is becoming more public, and their operations are becoming more transparent.

- B. Foreign-language Masses are sometimes held in different churches each week, so for foreign nationals there is often a weak sense of belonging to a particular parish. This is a situation that must be overcome in order to make joint decisions.

The consciousness of the laity overall is still priest-centered

- A. Apart from laity who become members of parish councils, etc. the spirit of shared responsibility between priests and laity has not permeated the entire community. Decisions are left to the priests, and many of the laity are indifferent. The cause of this is the fact that the believers involved in decision-making are always the same, and there is a bias toward the opinions of the outspoken. Terms of office are important, but there are also worries that there are no replacements. There is also the dilemma of laity who want to take on a role in the Church but are unable to do so due to work or family circumstances.
- B. There are also priests who have a strong clericalist consciousness, so it is necessary to foster a willingness to cooperate with the laity. Sufficient dialogue between priests and lay men and women is essential for cooperation, but confusion can arise in cases where some laity seek absolute equality and unnecessarily oppose the hierarchy.

(9) Prayer and Unity

Asking for the help of the Holy Spirit to become the community that Jesus seeks

- A. In Japan, the term "discernment" is generally unfamiliar, and it is difficult to say that discernment has become established. First, we need to learn what discernment is. On top of that, there is a need for spiritual companions to help the discernment of individuals, and the training of those spiritual companions is required. In some areas, spiritual connections between contemplative orders and the laity are a great support.
- B. With regard to shared discernment by the laity and discernment by the parish community it is necessary to learn through practice although the reality is that clericalism remains and there are few laity who can take leadership. To do discernment with foreign believers it is necessary to devise measures such as overcoming language barriers.

(10) Synodal Growth and Self-Formation

Activating the movement of the Synod

- A. To stimulate the synod's movement to deepen sharing and explore spiritual discernment in each church, it is important to comprehensively train in topics such as Scripture, sharing, dialogue skills, contemplation, joint prayer, and discernment. The passion to learn more is everywhere in the country. This makes it important that we continue the Synodal journey in dioceses and parishes.
- B. Nurturing Catholics throughout their lives requires that we not forget those who tend to be placed on the periphery of the Church, such as foreign nationals, people with disabilities, and people with other difficulties. Digital technology can be used to overcome various challenges for formation, but consideration must also be given to the generations who cannot use IT.

III. LOOKING AHEAD

In the future, in order to live even more abundantly the "synodal nature" of the Church, it will be necessary to regularly make opportunities for exchanging opinions

such as those held this time. What follows are some points for consideration.

Evangelizing as a Minority in Japan

- A. The estimated number of Catholics in Japan, including foreign nationals, is about 0.72% of the population. We have our own missionary path as an open faith community living in an internationalizing Japanese society with the background of the traditional spirituality and psychology unique to Asia and the East. The universal church should understand this.
- B. In Japanese society where Christians are a minority, Christian denominations want to promote mutual exchange and become one in order to disseminate the Gospel message, continue open dialogue with society, and contribute to the evangelization of society.

Spiritual Support to "Journey Together"

- A. We must reaffirm that our faith is nurtured through our communities. Therefore, we, including the clergy and religious, must cherish, care, encourage and help each member of the community of faith. Growth as such a community requires persons who support the faith community, spiritual companions.
- B. In addition to spiritual support for our older brothers and sisters, in particular spiritual support for foreign nationals and their families living in Japanese society is essential.

Deepening the Bonds in the Faith Community

- A. Some focus their approach on those who are baptized but for a variety of reasons are distanced from the Church. It is an urgent task to meet the needs of the younger generation, which tends to leave the Church, and nurture the next generation.
- B. Across the country, Japan is becoming multinational. We must take this opportunity to coexist across language and cultural differences as a blessing. Aiming to become a multicultural Church by journeying together, the Church in Japan can persuasively communicate the true value of religion and Gospel values to Japanese society.

Progress of Synodality on a Nationwide Scale

- A. Hearing the voices and thoughts of those who did not respond to Synod questionnaires remains a challenge. For this Synod to bring about change in the Church in Japan, we will encourage laity, religious and clergy who have not yet taken part to understand that Church and Synod are synonymous, and through sharing to realize that journeying together in today's Japanese society will lead to fruition.
- B. The efforts in each diocese to respond to the Synod have been remarkable. We must continue this journey of the Synodal Church across dioceses and throughout the country. It is important that the bishops and dioceses not see this as an end to this effort.