

Bishop Otsuka's 2023 New Year Letter
Living Faith in the Corona Era, III
CREATING MY SYNODALITY

Introduction

The 16th Ordinary Synod began with an opening ceremony in October 2021 and the General Assembly will be held in Rome in October 2023 and 2024. The Synod is called the World Synod of Bishops, but in fact the word Synod comes from Greek and is formed by *syn* (together) and *hodos* (way, journey, life) and means "to walk together" or "to live together." Synodality is "to walk together," "a way to walk together," and "to live together."

The purpose of this Synod is to allow the modern Church to rediscover synodality, the essence of the Church. Pope Francis has said that the Synod will be a place where everyone among the faithful can feel at home and participate throughout the process. He hopes that this will be an opportunity to listen to the hopes and difficulties of our brothers and sisters and be reborn into a Church that is close to them.

Synodality has three dimensions: Communion, Participation, and Mission. All Christians participate in the Church which is derived from the communion of the triune God and carry out the mission to proclaim Christ and the Kingdom of God.

This year's New Year's Letter, in line with the 10 questions in the Synod questionnaire, reflects on "communion with others," "participation in society," and "giving testimony of faith" in our daily lives. As we live in this Corona era, let's make synodality the basis of our lives.

1. Who are the friends with whom I walk?

As Christians, we walk with God. Let's start with this question: With whom have I walked during the Corona disaster which is entering its fourth year? In order to answer this question, I need to not only think about the people I interact with in my daily life. I must also ask myself whom I care about, where I direct my concern. While people of all generations have struggled to balance infection control and social life, have I been able to be a little closer to those who needed help and those who were suffering? Or have I prioritized my personal safety and security so much that I avoided interacting with other people?

Let's think about the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). The Jewish priest and the Levite avoided the dying man who had been attacked by robbers. Protecting their status was their priority. On the other hand, a Samaritan saw the man and felt pity, approached him, and cared for him. He drew close to the suffering of another and thus built a new relationship.

Unfortunately, regardless of whether there is a pandemic disaster or not, there are people in the world who are indifferent to the suffering of others and think only of their own interests. On the other hand, there are countless people who are willing to sacrifice and lend a helping

hand to those who suffer. We owe gratitude to dedicated healthcare and other essential workers. Where face-to-face contact is not possible, people are making efforts to connect people through new means such as social networking and the Internet. In this way, when we seek contact with others and live with a heart of mutual love and mercy, new human relationships are born. This is the basic spirit of synodality

2. Alive in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit

Synodality begins with listening to the voices of those who walk with us. Fellowship is born when we listen to each other. Let's start by encouraging people to talk to one another at church. It is lonely to come to Mass and leave without talking to anyone. It would be a shame for the greeting "The peace of the Lord be with you" at Mass to be a mere formality. Today, encounters in the church with people with foreign roots are commonplace. It is natural that communication is difficult due to language differences. There are people such as technical intern trainees from the Philippines, Vietnam, and other Asian countries who are frustrated because they do not have time to learn Japanese. We can make many excuses for not even saying hello. We don't have the courage to talk to each other, we don't have the emotional leeway to spare, we just don't have time, etc.

But the fellowship of the Church we seek is not for the sake of human intimacy or for the convenience of having companionship. It is fellowship as a part of the body of Christ. It is the fellowship of the parts connected as one body by the one Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12). The Holy Spirit opens our hearts to others and creates a fellowship of love. If I can listen to someone, it is not simply on an individual level, but as a Church community. If we can share someone's problems and anxieties in the community, we can become friends who support each other to solve them. And it doesn't stop in the Church. Our week is filled with opportunities to harness the Holy Spirit's gift of "listening" anytime, anywhere, in our homes and society. But the biggest challenge in listening is learning to listen to the silent voices of those who cannot speak for themselves both in the Church and in society.

3. Becoming the voice of the voiceless

St. Paul says: "For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (Romans 12:4-5). Believers' sharing is a gift of unity from the Holy Spirit. That's the reason we value sharing our thoughts with each other. It is a right and an important duty for the laity to express their opinions for the benefit of the Church community. However, it takes energy and courage to open one's heart to others, and some people are not skilled at sharing. There are also times when the struggle to make a living or the lack of emotional freedom prevent people from being actively involved with people around them. Those who feel even more alienated cannot even raise their voices. Therefore, in order to build community, those who are able become the voices of those who cannot speak out. They become the voice of those who are away from the Church.

We must also pay attention to the silent voices of those on the margins of society and those who feel excluded. The world faces a wide variety of crises including pandemics, war in Ukraine and other regions, natural disasters caused by climate change, refugees and migrants, and racial discrimination. Behind them the cry of "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5:6) springs up from the edges of society. This cry is the voice of the voiceless, and the Holy Spirit is at work in this cry. The Church interprets this as a "sign of the times." As we strive for synodality, we must not be indifferent to the suffering and desires of the needy and must not forget the important duty of heeding the voices of the voiceless.

4. Sharing the joy of celebrating life together

In the responses to the Synod questionnaire, I was surprised by the description of participation in the liturgy as "celebrating" (in English, it is called celebrating the Mass), and I realized that I participated in the liturgy without feeling that I was celebrating. Foreign congregations such as those from the Philippines, Vietnam, and Latin American countries said, "We want to enliven the Mass in Japanese." I suspect that means that for them there is no sense of celebrating together at a Japanese Mass. The purpose of the liturgy question was to see if the community's hearing the Word and celebrating the Eucharist stimulated life and mission.

When we say "celebrate" in Japan, we associate it with shrine festivals. A shrine is a place where gods descend and are present, where people visit gods. *Matsuri* (festivals) are held to facilitate these encounters. The matsuri is organized by the local community and becomes a place to share people's hopes and joys, and to pass on the bonds of the community. Although matsuri share some characteristics with Christian liturgy, the primary feature of the Catholic Mass is the sacramental realization of communion and unity between God, man and life through the sacrament of the Eucharist. A lively Mass is not something experienced by the effects of songs and actions but is a liturgy in which all participants are united in their hearts, give thanks for fellowship and unity with God, and celebrate joyfully. The restrictions on Mass participation due to the pandemic have made us keenly aware how important the Mass is for our religious life. As we get used to the new Mass rite of the Japan Church that we began using in Advent last year, I hope it will deepen our prayer through our truly celebrating as a community.

5. Sharing responsibility for "A Church that serves the poor"

Pope Francis' dream is that we become a Church that listens to and serves the poor and those on the margins of society just as Christ walked with the least ones. Therefore, the Church is called to go out into society. We do not believe in God in isolation nor do we live in isolated fellowship with Him. Our faith inevitably includes living in community with our brothers and sisters, parts of the body whose head is Christ.

The purpose of this Synod is for each of us to have a dream about the Church, to share this dream with the Church community, and for all members of the Church to serve the mission of

the Church. Missionary work is not just a task for a special group, such as clergy. In our daily lives, all believers participate in evangelization through their lives shaped by the Word of God and their service of love. Service is an expression of love that is willing to give oneself and one's time, effort, and material means. Thus, through the synodality of living in love, a Church that serves the poor can grow into the one body of Christ.

Granted, it is true that the Church faces a number of issues such as the aging of believers, the departure of young people, diverse values, and financial problems. Even if everyone agrees that something must be done and has the spirit to support one another, we can fall into a sense of resignation that there are no solutions. It is precisely in times like these that we must pray to the Holy Spirit to empower clergy, religious and laity to support each other in the spirit of synodality to tackle challenges.

6. Making a livable, barrier-free society

Today, division, discrimination, and disparity are accelerating around the world. To remove the various barriers against the poor, the sick, the disabled, tax collectors, Gentiles, Samaritans, widows, women, and others who were despised and ignored in the society of his time, Jesus associated with those people, bearing practical witness to God's mercy that is poured out beyond all barriers. Today, we should search out the barriers around us and approach them. For example, if there is an elderly person nearby who needs nursing care, consider the hardships the family might face in giving care. Visit the elderly and sick who live alone and see what service can be provided individually or as a Church group. Where there are young people with emotional or truancy problems, you may become familiar with the problems facing modern youth and be drawn to activities that support them.

Synodality means taking an interest in what's happening in front of me, meeting people, and starting to act concretely. This connects and builds new bridges between people. For example, there are the people who started a children's cafeteria, showing compassion and faith in small things, acting for the happiness of others. There are people who have noticed that there are others waiting for someone's help or involvement and have voluntarily started to provide support. In addition to our daily duties, the practice of synodality might include participation in local service activities such as neighborhood cleaning, mowing grass, eco-activities, and volunteering for community welfare activities.

7. Promoting dialogue based on love and truth

There are many difficulties in walking with people with different ideas and beliefs, including religion. In Japan, if you are the only Catholic in your family, you may face a lot of difficulty at home, but all believers, no matter what the family environment, should remember that the home is the primary place of mission. The home is not a place to encourage conversion, but a place to share God's love. "Those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen" (1 John 4:20). The basis of faith is the practice

of love. Let us generously share the joy and healing of God's love with our families. The home is a fundamental place to nurture synodality.

The Church of Japan engages in ecumenical activities in which Christian denominations aim for mutual unity. In addition, there is interreligious dialogue with Shinto, Buddhism, Islam, and other religions. Dialogue is not about changing the other person's thoughts and opinions. It means to draw close to others, recognizing the conscience of those who receive the Gospel message, respecting their freedom of judgment, choice and decision in response to the call of the Catholic Church. Regarding the announcement of truth, Vatican II declared the principle that truth itself has a gentle, strong, and penetrating power that cannot be forced except by itself (cf. *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, 1, Preface). We Christians seek to find unity by learning about each other's religious differences through interfaith dialogue and by working together for the universal human values of justice, peace, equality, and freedom. This is also an important synodality.

8. A path to walk with all people on Earth

That the natural environment around the world is deteriorating is a fact reported every day, but we can act as if that were not so. However, even if we think that the destruction of nature in some far-off place has nothing to do with us, natural disasters caused by abnormal weather are now occurring frequently and our daily life and economy are damaged. Far from being invisible, it is becoming more and more harmful. As Pope Francis has warned us, so long as humanity is all in the same boat with the coronavirus pandemic, actions by individuals, societies, and international politics that prioritize utilitarianism and selfishness sound the alarm for all humanity.

In today's society where protecting ourselves seems paramount, voluntarily choosing to walk together with everyone instead of acting in self-interest can show that our Christian faith will not be separated from society and we can participate evangelically in changing the world. God expects each of us to work throughout history. Pope Francis has said that the way we walk with the inhabitants of the earth will be the path of the Church as God's pilgrims and missionaries. We are on a long path to becoming a synodal Church. It is not a path laid out in detail by the institutional Church, but a path that each of us will proactively follow in our daily lives and actions. If we do so, our synodality will become the lifestyle of the Earth.

9. Believing in the discernment of the Holy Spirit

This is an essential condition for synodality, to be able to own the suffering that is happening in this world. In the story of the Rich Man and Poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the rich man saw Lazarus in front of his house and cast a glance of indifference every time he passed in front of him. He did not want to get involved. This story teaches us that the way to salvation lies in returning to the true human form in which man is made alive by the grace of God. Today, we too must listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit telling us how to live with Lazarus

at our gates. As St. Paul says, spiritual gifts are given for the good of everyone, not for ourselves alone, and he teaches us how to use them for all (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). Therefore, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). This is not a metaphor, but a fact that we can empathize with the suffering of others as our own.

Because God saves the world through history, God sends "signs of the times" in the events and phenomena of the world. The Church interprets them through "discernment of spirits," discernment by the Holy Spirit. Even if the word "discernment" is unfamiliar to you and does not ring a bell, we are actually doing "discernment by the Holy Spirit" when we pray in response to God's call and come into contact with God's Word, the Holy Spirit who works to guide our efforts. The steps of discernment through community sharing, analysis, evaluation, judging reality, and deciding the course of action by consensus guarantee the legitimacy of the synodality. Even when we have differences of opinion and sensibilities, the Holy Spirit guides us through the Signs of the Times to decide to hear and obey Christ, the head.

10. Let's go! Now is the Time of Salvation, the Time of Grace

Finally, let us remember the Virgin Mary, exemplar of synodality. As soon as Mary received God's message, she visited Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56). At the wedding feast at Cana, she was sensitive to the troubles of those around her and voluntarily approached Jesus (John 2:1-12). Mary's hymn (Lk 1:46-55) sings of the strength to stand by the poor and weak, to live as a poor person with a resolute attitude in the face of social injustice.

Even if the coronavirus pandemic subsides, the history of past pandemics proves that there is no way for the world to return to its former stability. When this affliction ends, something new will be created. Now is our chance to change, to make the whole world a little better than it is now. Now is the time of salvation, a time of grace (2 Corinthians 6:2). It is an opportunity to review the priorities of what we value and what we seek, and to courageously begin a new walk in our daily lives. Let us follow in the footsteps of Mary, since walking together with the people we meet at home, at work, and in our daily lives is our synodality as believers.

In order to deepen our fellowship and taking the opportunity presented by this Synod we will not just leave things to the institution and plans for community building. We will also value contact between people. We will enrich our understanding of the Gospel through various languages and cultures. We will be willing to share. Let us create My Synodality by walking together with the poor and weak as Mary did.

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Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God
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