

Bishop Otsuka's 2024 New Year's Letter

CREATING MY SYNODALITY, Part II

The Synod's "Way" and "Inn" Mission

Introduction

The 16th Ordinary Synod that began in 2021 will conclude with a second General Assembly in October this year. The purpose of this Synod is for the modern Church to rediscover synodality as its essence. Pope Francis has identified three elements as themes: communion, participation, and mission. The three are deeply interrelated and influence one another and so they need to be viewed as a whole.

In last year's New Year's letter, "Creating My Synodality," I called on those of us living in the coronavirus era to reflect on "communion with others," "participation in society," and "giving testimony of faith" in our daily lives, and to make synodality the basis of our lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted people around the world. Many became seriously ill, many died, and billions suffered financial hardship. Even amid the crisis, there have been countless people who reach out to those in need rather than looking only to their own or their nation's benefit.

This year as the pandemic is finally easing, I want to take the Synod as an opportunity to think about what kind of conversion is necessary for the Catholic Church in Japan to evangelize in the spirit of the Synod.

1. What is the mission that the Synod is aiming for?

The Second Vatican Council declared that the Church is an "instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (see *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 1). When we say that the Church is an instrument of God's plan of salvation, it does not mean that it unilaterally Christianizes the world. The Synodal Church seeks to be open to the world and to engage in dialogue with the world. In other words, God works on the world through the Church, but it is not a simple flow of [God \Rightarrow Church \Rightarrow World], but an interplay of [God \Rightarrow the world \Leftrightarrow the Church]. God sends the Church to interact with the world throughout history to save humankind who have lost their relationship with God through original sin. Therefore, the Synodal Church is not closed off from the world, but rather "journeys with it," looking at the reality of the world and constantly seeking new ways to fulfill its God-given mission through encounters and dialogues with people sharing its time.

Rather than trying to address the challenges of the Church in modern society by transforming the institutions, organizations, and involvement of believers, the

Synod aims to return to the ministry of the kingdom of God that Jesus showed us and explore the meaning and methods of today's ministry from that perspective.

2. Interactive Missionary Images of "Way" and "Inn"

In Chapter 2, "A Stranger on the Way," of his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis explains Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) from a modern perspective. I would like to explore the origin of mission by focusing on the "Way" and "Inn" in this parable.

On the "Way" down from Jerusalem to Jericho, there was a Jew who was attacked by robbers and left covered in blood. The priest and Levite who came along that "Way" passed on the other side when they saw the wounded man. Those who were expected to keep God's law and teach others did not try to help their brother. The "Way" became a place of callous bystanders.

When the Samaritan traveling the same "Way" saw the fallen man, he pitied him and could not overlook him even though he was a Jew. He washed the man's wounds with oil and wine, bandaged him, put him on his donkey and took him to the nearest "Inn." Then he gave money to the innkeeper and asked him to take care of the injured man, promising to return. The Samaritan did not just help the man, he also enlisted the help of another.

The "Way" became a place of unexpected events and encounters for the Samaritan, and the "Inn" became a place of solidarity for care. From a missionary perspective, the "Way" became a place to encounter God's plan and grace, and the "Inn" became a place of community to share God's love. In this way, the "Way" and "Inn" became symbols of God's work in the mission of the Samaritan.

3. Becoming a neighbor without limits

When Jesus asked, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" (Luke 10:26), an expert in the law, attempting to show off his knowledge, quotes a summary of the law and replies, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). However, the expert in the law, who was told by Jesus to do it, tried to justify himself by asking, "And who is my neighbor?" So, Jesus told of a man who became a neighbor.

The expert in the law thought his neighbors were only those who had the same faith as himself and kept the law as he did. For him, while there are people to be loved, there are also people who should not be loved. People who live righteously like himself are human beings whom God loves, and human beings whom God loves should love one another, but they need not love sinners whom God hates and casts off. He had no doubt about that.

However, Jesus did not seek neighbors after deciding who they were but became the neighbor of whomever he met. To love our neighbor is to become a neighbor. Jesus swept away the idea of limiting our neighbor by defining who is our neighbor.

Samaritans were discriminated against by Jews, so the Samaritan could have abandoned the man, but he empathized with the victim's suffering and decided to

transcend prejudice and defile himself. Jesus teaches us that to be a neighbor is to approach the person we meet on the Way, even if an enemy, a stranger, or a troublesome person.

4. The model of the Synodal Church is Jesus

The Way from Jerusalem to Jericho was a dangerous route through steep mountains with few people and notorious for frequent attacks by robbers. When one encounters an incident in such a place, there is no one to call for help, and one can pass by without worrying about anyone's attention. The priest and Levite prioritized their own safety and avoiding religious defilement, so they did not approach the fallen man and abandoned him.

So why, then, did only the Samaritan who had traveled the same "Way" feel pity for the fallen man? That is because Jesus compares himself to a Samaritan. The Samaritan's feeling of "pity" is a word used only for Jesus, the Greek verb *splagnizomai* ("to twist the liver"), which expresses God's deep mercy. The Samaritan is Jesus Himself, the embodiment of God's mercy. Underpinning all of Jesus' efforts to preach the kingdom of God was his love for his heavenly Father and his boundless mercy for people. The Samaritan, shunned by Jews but not caring about his own safety and interests while helping the Jew in front of him, was a prophecy that Jesus would be ostracized in Jerusalem and accept suffering and death.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan does not appear in any of the other Gospels, but this story symbolizes the life of Jesus the Savior. Jesus walked the "Way" from Galilee to Jerusalem to fulfill His mission from God. Along the way, Jesus met a variety of people and empathized with their suffering and hardships. He healed them and showed mercy like the Good Samaritan to those in need of God's love and grace.

5. The encountering Church is a field hospital

Pope Francis places the Parable of the Good Samaritan in the broader context of human relations, which he names "fraternity" and "social friendship" (cf. *Fratelli tutti*). It is about respecting human dignity and the common good, overcoming discrimination and exclusion, and promoting dialogue and cooperation.

From the very beginning of his ministry, Francis has emphasized that the Church must go out into society. "Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. ... I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security" (Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 49).

In today's liturgically centered Church, we do not pay enough attention to the realities of the world and we settle into a shell of our inner faith, cut off from real life. That is why we need to step out of our comfort zone (our personal life) and into the "Way," seeing those who are suffering, isolated, exploited, discriminated against, suffering injustice in society, and so on. The Pope calls attention to those

on the margins of society because it is there that the Holy Spirit works and God's love and mercy are shown.

The Pope also likens the Church to a field hospital. Rather than staying in our institutions and dealing only with those who come to us, the Church becomes that "Inn" that welcomes all those who suffer and face difficulties and provides them with material assistance and, above all, spiritual care.

What kind of Church do we want to be? A Church like the priest and the Levite that pass by? Or a Church that like the Good Samaritan becomes a companion?

6. Barrier-Free Evangelization

The "Way" we journey is a place where diverse people walk together. The people we meet there are not only those who live in the same area and society as we, but also people who have different cultures and values from our own. Prejudices arising from differences in culture, nationality, and ideology, as well as discrimination based on disability and gender, disrupt the peace and harmony of the Way and violate the dignity and rights of people.

The synodal Church becomes a neighbor to those who are marginalized in society, showing love and empathy. Becoming a neighbor means trying to respect and understand the perspectives and feelings of others, rather than clinging to our own interests and positions. The Synod journey is an opportunity for diverse people to learn to live together. In this sense, the Synodal Church aims to create a barrier-free society that transcends the boundaries of division and protects human dignity. Because all people are brothers and sisters before God, we must not compete with each other and live a self-centered life, but instead must help each other in suffering and hardship to create a barrier-free society.

Human beings instinctively protect themselves from those who attack them, but in doing so, they create walls in their minds along with physical barriers. They hate, discriminate, despise, bully, avoid, attack, exclude, and eliminate others. In addition, there are walls around us of which we are unaware. For example, people who use wheelchairs face obstacles and inconveniences that are invisible to others. By listening to their voices and putting ourselves in their shoes, we can create a fairer and more comfortable society. Barriers in society deprive people of their dignity and potential.

A "Gospel eye" is sensitive to social inequality and discrimination based on God's love and justice. A "Gospel ear" listens not to its own interests and comforts, but to the vulnerable and marginalized in society.

7. Missionary zeal

We have been baptized and joined the family of God, and through the sacrament of Confirmation, we have been given the vocation as disciples of Christ to proclaim the gospel to people throughout the world. Our faith is not meant to be kept to ourselves; it is to be shared with those around us. Evangelization is a grace from God and a service to God, and participating in mission deepens our own faith.

Mission in Japan faces difficulties in increasing the number of baptisms, but if you have the awareness that God has called you to preach, and if you have a passion for conveying God's love and grace to the people of Japan, you can take responsibility for fulfilling part of God's plan, dedicate your abilities and talents to God, and share the joy of working for God's glory.

From the postwar period to the present, many priests and religious have left their homelands to come to Japan as missionaries in the Diocese of Kyoto. They learned the difficult Japanese language and dedicated their lives to conveying God's love and saving grace in Japanese society where there is little Christian culture. Encounters with missionaries have given great inspiration for those of us who are less mission conscious.

In addition, foreign believers living in Japan play a missionary role by living God's love while maintaining the faith as nurtured in their native lands. They are a great blessing to the Catholic Church in Japan and bring new vitality. Through interaction with foreign believers, Japanese Catholics experience diverse expressions of faith, feel that they are members of a Catholic (universal) Church, and receive strength to live their faith in their daily lives.

8. What would it mean to be a Church that listens to the Word?

Jesus, who was sent to preach the gospel to the poor (cf. Luke 4:18), was born among the poor, walked with the poor, and served the poor. He taught that our attitude toward the poor is our attitude toward him (see Matthew 25). Evangelization must not be only a matter of words, but also of actions that reach out to the vulnerable and needy and share their suffering.

Jesus does not use the Parable of the Good Samaritan to teach the expert of the law how to obtain eternal life by loving God and his neighbor with all his heart and being neighbor to everyone he meets. Rather, Jesus is asking, "Are you really serious about what you know and are you living in that way?"

Do I understand the teachings of Jesus, but instead of trying to live by them, do I just fall into making excuses, justifying myself, and defending myself? It is important for the synodal Church to continue to listen to Jesus' question, to faithfully follow him, and to show the truth of our faith.

9. The synodal Church and imperfection

The modern Catholic Church faces a lack of missionary enthusiasm within the Church and a loss of trust in the clergy. Sexual abuse as well as scandals involving power and money have diminished the Church's ethical authority and social role. The Church is called upon to regain the trust of believers and society by acknowledging failures, apologizing to victims, promising to deliver justice, and showing a more inclusive and tolerant attitude.

A synodal Church is one in which its members humbly seek God's will together, take responsibility as parts of the body of Christ, and work together to fulfil the vocation of the Church. The synodal Church is also a place where members acknowledge, share, and accept their shortcomings and weaknesses

without hiding them. To this end, it respects diversity within the Church and emphasizes dialogue and mutual understanding.

A synodal Church also shows openness to the world outside the Church. Every day we seek God's mercy, respect one another, and seek to see how God's Spirit works in our lives and those of others. Personally, communally, and as pastors, we need to walk with an attitude of conversion and reform.

10. Mary set out and went with haste to the hill country (Luke 1:39)

True to the theme of the 2023 World Youth Day in Lisbon, we want to learn from Mary's faith, hear God's Word, follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit, be there for those in difficult circumstances, and share God's love and joy. Mary rushed to Elizabeth, who was elderly and pregnant. The two praised God's grace in each other and humbly accepted God's work, regardless of status or position. Like Mary, we who aspire to be a synodal Church want to seek God's will, participate in God's plan, and choose to live as God's children.

The proclamation of the gospel is not only imposed on the Christian community of the Church but is a mission for all of humanity to fulfill together. We have all received God's love and grace. That is the source of our obligation to share that grace with others.

It is time for the synodal Church to hasten on our journey, understanding the urgency of bringing the gospel of Jesus to our time. The synodal Church values both the "Way" and the "Inn" and works with the hope of the coming of the reign of God. The "Way" is involvement in people's lives and society and sharing faith through dialogue and exchange. The "Inn" is a where people come together, pray together, and grow together.

By sharing the blessings of our faith with people of all faiths, learning from each other, and embodying God's love, transcending barriers of generation, social class, ethnicity, and such in search of concrete encounters that embrace those who are different from us let us work for the unity and peace of the world.

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Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God
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