

Bishop Otsuka's 2025 New Year's Letter

Let's join with all people as Pilgrims of Hope

Introduction

The Holy Year 2025 has begun with the theme of "Hope." This Holy Year is an important time for the Church to bear witness of hope to the world. In response to the confusion of today's world, Pope Francis quotes St. Paul's saying, "Hope does not disappoint" (Romans 5:5), and calls on Christians to become pilgrims who affirm their faith and hope and bear witness to hope to those around them.

In my New Year's letter last year, I sought the form of the Synodal Church, and explored the origins of our mission, focusing on the "Way" and "Lodging" based on Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). I believe that a Synodal Church will not be closed to the world but will be discovered as we "journey together" with the world, encountering and dialoguing with people who are looking at reality and living in the present.

In response to Pope Francis' call for the Holy Year, in preparing this year's New Year's Letter I have thought about where and with whom we should share our hopes, given the current state of "Ways" and "Lodgings" in Japan and the world. In a short Letter like this, I can only cover a limited number of topics, but I hope that as the people of the Diocese of Kyoto we will be inspired to become "pilgrims of hope" and continue our pilgrimage with Jesus Christ, the "gate of salvation."

1. Christ is hope's anchor

In most religions, hope is an important factor for believers, keeping them positive in difficult times and supporting their faith in the future. For Christians, hope means trust in God, who promises eternal life through the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As we move toward the fulfillment of the history of salvation, we look forward to the coming of the kingdom of God where justice and peace will be realized on this earth. It is because of this hope that we can overcome the hardships of this life. Christian hope provides both confidence in the future and support for life in the present. In the Holy Year 2025, Pope Francis presents Christ as the "anchor of the soul" (cf. Hebrews 6:19). Christ gives us hope that is an unshakable anchor that stabilizes our ship in the storms of life.

Hope is one of the theological virtues (virtues in relation to God) along with faith and love (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:13; 1 Thessalonians 1:3). St. Thomas Aquinas also had an insight into these virtues: "Faith initiates a relationship with God, hope makes it continue, and love completes it" (cf. *Summa Theologica*). In this order, out of faith comes hope, and out of hope comes love. In this Holy Year, let us spread the light of hope to the world around us through acts of love born of hope.

2. Eighty years after World War II, aiming for a world without nuclear weapons

This year, the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II, is a special time to pray for the abolition of nuclear weapons and the realization of a peaceful world without such weapons. In Nagasaki and in Hiroshima during his visit to Japan in 2019, Pope Francis called for a world without nuclear weapons and said that the use and possession of nuclear weapons is immoral. He criticized the possession of nuclear weapons as contrary to the maintenance of peace and the arms race as a waste of resources.

The bishops of Japan support the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Having experienced the destruction and suffering caused by nuclear weapons, Japan must humbly learn from the mistakes of the past and strive not to repeat them.

Let us, too, receive the special blessings of the Holy Year and renew our determination to end wars and conflicts around the world, to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons, and to safeguard world peace and human dignity.

3. Assistance for refugees from Ukraine

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Japan has hosted 2,718 Ukrainian refugees as of December 2023, and as of October 2024, the number of residents is 1,984 (Immigration Agency). Within the Kyoto Diocese, there are 62 in Kyoto Prefecture, 13 in Nara Prefecture, 20 in Shiga Prefecture, and 1 in Mie Prefecture. The government is providing livelihood support and Japanese language study assistance, but the protracted war has forced many young people to choose between returning home or resettling, and they are facing problems such as going on to higher education and finding employment.

We must hope for an early end to the war in Ukraine and stand in solidarity so that the Ukrainian people can have hope to rebuild their country. Many municipalities are providing various types of support to deepen exchanges with these displaced people. Let us continue to support Ukrainian families and youths by actively participating in fundraising and community support.

4. Support for the people of the Gaza Strip

As the protracted conflict in the Palestinian Gaza Strip spreads to neighboring countries, half of the population faces death or hunger, and urgent international humanitarian assistance is needed. Caritas Japan, the Japan Committee for UNICEF, the Japan Red Cross Society, UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) and others provide medical care, safe water, psychological care, and educational materials for children.

Given the long-standing tensions between the Palestinians and Israelis, long-term dialogue and negotiations are needed to forge reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. In this Holy Year, let us pray for a beacon of hope on the path to reconciliation and peace between those two peoples.

5. Together with the victims of the Noto Peninsula earthquake

One year has passed since the Noto Peninsula earthquake on New Year's Day, 2024. Since then, the people there were hit by a torrential rain disaster in September. The Nagoya Diocesan Support Center has been conducting support activities on the ground since immediately after the earthquake.

In the disaster-stricken areas, infrastructure is being restored and people are moving into temporary housing, but they continue to need our support to rebuild their lives and support their livelihoods. Pope Francis is often quoted as saying, "No one can rebuild alone." When we lose so much in a disaster and experience suffering, we can lose sight of God's love and mercy.

In recent years, Japan has experienced frequent damage from earthquakes and record-breaking heavy rains. Let us bear witness through prayer and action that Christ who bore the suffering of all people is always with us, and thus convey the hope that God will never forsake those who suffer.

6. For children who do not have a residence card

In 2023, the Catholic Bishops of Japan launched a campaign to ask the government for special permission for family members to stay in Japan on humanitarian grounds to support children with foreign roots who are at risk of deportation due to lack of parental residency status.

These children were born and raised in Japan and have the right to attend school, but because they do not have a residence card they do not have a health insurance card or the ability to work part-time, and so their living conditions are limited. It is reported that the government has partially revised its attitude toward special residence permits for 2024 and has begun issuing

such permits to children with foreign roots.

Among the purposes of the Holy Year is to look out for and support those who suffer inequality due to various circumstances and do not have basic rights and freedoms.

7. Assisting the wrongly convicted

In Japan, which has the death penalty, wrong convictions are an extremely serious problem. Besides the death penalty taking life, a wrong conviction can result in the execution of an innocent person. In 2018, Pope Francis revised the section on the death penalty in the Catechism of the Catholic Church to explicitly oppose the death penalty as an attack on human dignity and its inviolability.

Five death sentences have been overturned in retrials and death row inmates have been released. There is no clear information on the number of retrial requests for death row inmates, but DNA testing has shown that 18 death sentences were wrongful convictions.

It is not possible to fully compensate for the lost time and emotional distress of those involved, but now is the time to review the law to improve interrogation methods and prevent forced confessions and wrong convictions, as well as to improve the retrial system when wrong convictions are revealed.

As Catholics, let us pursue the hope of justice together with those who have appealed for a retrial, and call for the abolition of the death penalty and legal reform to prevent wrongful convictions.

8. Breaking down social barriers

It is important for people with disabilities to connect with society so that they can live independent and fulfilling lives. The Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities enacted in 2016 promotes the elimination of discrimination on the grounds of physical, intellectual, and mental disability. It encourages all citizens, disabled or not, to aim to realize a society in which people live in harmony with each other's personalities and individuality.

To this end, we are obligated to provide reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness and practice of the concept of D&I (diversity and inclusion) that respects people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives and ensures that everyone has equal opportunities. Specifically, we aim to create an environment in which various attributes of individuals such as gender, age, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and disability are accepted as valuable and their differences are respected.

To reduce discrimination, prejudice, and misunderstanding, and to eliminate barriers in society let us promote barrier-free access not only physically, but also in our minds and consciousness.

9. Pilgrimage with the elderly who adorn life

Pope Francis has always shown special consideration for the elderly. We make our pilgrimage of hope with those who were unable to come to church due to the Covid pandemic and with the elderly who are still unable to come.

In God's eyes, every person's life is precious. Seniors should continue to be proud of their lives. They may feel anxious and fearful about their remaining lifespan and declining abilities, but what matters is the sincere effort and countless acts of love they have accumulated in life.

On the other hand, the wisdom and experience of older people are valuable assets for families and society, and fostering a culture of respect and support for older people is an important responsibility for all generations.

In addition, the aging of foreigners living in Japan is progressing. In the fields of nursing care and medical care, they need our support to overcome language and cultural barriers. Let us share God's love and hope, especially to those who feel lonely, through events and gatherings that harness the power of the Church community.

10. Understanding and supporting eldercare providers

Caring for elderly people with reduced physical and cognitive functions is difficult. It is difficult to support family members due to the increase in nuclear families and dual-income households. Situations such as “care refugees” who do not receive appropriate care, elderly people caring for one another, the elderly with dementia caring for each other, elder abuse, and solitary death are not uncommon.

The love and effort of caregivers is valuable, but caregiving is not a burden to be carried alone. Pope Francis has said that caregivers make the hand and voice of God felt and put human dignity first. To reduce the emotional burden on caregivers, families and local communities can work together to support and bring hope to caregivers.

11. Support for students who do not attend school

In the Diocese of Kyoto, there is a free school in Maizuru city called Our Lady's Little School that supports truant students. I am an advisor to this school. The school is unique in providing individualized support for each student who refuses to go to school in an environment where they can be themselves and aiming for social independence. Collaboration with students' original schools ensures proper learning evaluations.

I have seen many children turn the experience of not going to school into a source of growth. They learn to overcome difficulties by facing themselves and improving their empathy and communication skills. Parents and guardians of students also learn to respect the opinions and feelings of their children by deepening dialogue between parents and children.

Let us see truancy as an opportunity for growth and support those who patiently support children while tenderly watching over them and delivering a ray of hope.

12. Love for young caregivers

As nuclear families become more common, it is difficult for children to receive support from grandparents or other adults. Some children are overburdened with caring every day for family members who are sick or disabled. Children in this situation do not consult with others because they do not want people outside their families to know about their situation or because they do not want to cause trouble, and so they are forced to become young carers without support.

Young carers are looking for someone they can talk with about their feelings of isolation and stress, as well as support at school and in society. Children who love their families and take pride in their role also have the right to live their own lives.

Every family has its difficulties and trials, but we hope that with the support and love of those around them, young carers will find hope in life.

13. Protecting children from family breakdown

It is necessary to protect children in homes that are unable to fulfill the basic role of the family due to conflict, abuse, and neglect. The Children's Shelter and Children's Cafeteria provide consultation services for family problems. Governments and NPOs provide expert advice and support by phone and face to face.

Pope Francis has made a strong case for support for children, especially those affected by war and poverty. It is the most important responsibility of humanity to ensure that children around the world grow up in a safe and loving environment and are protected as the bearers of the future.

14. Inequality in society and poverty among youth

As social inequality spreads in Japan, young people see the reality of being divided into

the wealthy and the non-wealthy depending on the social structure, and they reject the idea that they can become rich through individual efforts.

There is absolute poverty, mainly in developing countries, while in Japan and other countries we find relative poverty. In Japan, about one in six children lives in relative poverty. According to supporters of the Children's Cafeteria, some children who are unable to lead a normal life initially ask, "Why me?" but eventually give up, saying, "So what?"

To break the cycle of poverty it is essential for our entire society to prioritize support for the vulnerable and take measures to give hope to children and young people affected by inequality. Let us find out what we can do for the young people around us.

15. Supporting persons with addictions

Pope Francis has shown deep empathy for those struggling with alcohol, gambling, pornography, internet and other addictions, and has also sent messages to their families and supporters.

Using the network of churches, the Japan Catholic Committee on Addiction (JCCA) continues to support recovery facilities such as DARC in partnership with local communities. In addition, many churches provide space for gatherings of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous), a self-help group for recovering alcoholics that strictly protects anonymity and privacy.

Addiction is not a matter of willpower; it is a disease that requires treatment and counseling. Recovery is not a solo journey, but one with friends and family. Let us pray in hope for recovery and rehabilitation.

16. The invitation to integral ecology

Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* uses the expression "integral ecology" modeled on St. Francis of Assisi. This is a holistic ecology that does not exclude any aspect of human beings, but also includes our relationship with nature, the relationship between person and person, and between humanity and God. Christians address environmental issues through ecological conversion, review all the activities of our lives, and seek new lifestyles.

In 2024, the Catholic bishops of Japan published *Behold It Was Very Good* to deepen our understanding of integral ecology and invite us to put it into practice. In it, we view the earth as "our common home" and learn about the richness of creation and the diverse environmental issues.

The pilgrimage of the Holy Year is also a pilgrimage to protect the global environment.

17. Building the future Church with international believers.

Many parishes have already become synodal churches in which all members, including non-Japanese, belong to the parish community and share responsibilities, transcending various linguistic and cultural differences.

Migrants not only want to live a rich and fulfilling life with financial stability and a good living situation, but they also want to preserve their roots and religious culture and pass them on to future generations, even while living in another country.

In the Diocese of Kyoto, Catholics from Asian countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Korea, and China, as well as Latin Americans from places like Brazil and Peru have diversified and revitalized parishes. They have become a bridge for the Synodal Church. By having members from all over the world actively participate in church activities and fostering leaders from among foreign congregants, we aim to develop communities where diverse leadership can be demonstrated.

18. Mary, the Star of Hope

The Catholic Church aims to be open to all in the spirit of the Synod. In this age of artificial intelligence (AI), the Diocese of Kyoto can convey God's love in the form of hope by speaking the truth and promoting the spirit of justice and peace, love, equality and tolerance.

The ship of the Diocese of Kyoto, which is on my episcopal coat of arms, crosses the stormy seas of the world toward God the Father, guided by the Virgin Mary, the Star of Hope, in the mystery of the cross of the Lord, who is the A (Alpha) and the Ω (Omega), the beginning and the end.

In thinking about the future of the Diocese of Kyoto, it is necessary to understand and hope in the current situation. Even on a difficult journey, when we walk with hearts united in gratitude and trust the Lord is with us and encourages us.

Sisters and brothers of the Diocese of Kyoto, let us receive the blessings of the Holy Year and, confident of our missionary vocation, be pilgrims of hope for all.

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Bishop of Kyoto
Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God
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