

Toward the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops Summary of Responses from the Diocese of Kyoto

A. The Synod Experience♦

(1) Although gathering has been difficult in the Covid-19 context and there were responses from individuals, more than half of the submitted responses came from group sharing. There was obvious enthusiasm for devising ways to share themselves and experiences, and it can be said that an experience of walking together was created at that stage.

Eighty percent of responses came from parishes, and 40 percent of those (just over 30 percent of the total) were from foreign believers. Considering that until now most members of parishes had little opportunity for their voices to be heard, the fact that so many foreign believers found an opportunity to give voices was an achievement in itself.

(2) The low number of responses from young Japanese indicates that in the current situation there are too few opportunities for the voices of youth to be heard. On the other hand, the responses of foreign believers included the voices of relatively young people.

(3) While more than 10 percent of responses were received from institutions or organizations (educational, medical welfare, preschool, etc.) other than parishes, the number of such responses was small compared to the number from parishes.

However, in Japanese society where the vast majority are not Christians, facilities that routinely provide charitable services and examples of prayerful gratitude convey a Catholic spirit that is naturally accepted by users. It is noteworthy that even facility staff who are not believers are companions on our journey.

(4) Although less than 10 percent of the responses came from religious orders, they expressed a strong sense of crisis. They stressed a desire to be close to people in difficult situations, dissatisfaction at the lack of tackling social injustices, calls for the creation of evangelization programs for the elderly, and warnings against the hollowing out of the liturgy.

(5) The responses clearly show that the difficulties faced by the Church and its communities are greatly influenced by contemporary Japanese society. The Church cannot be unrelated to society, and there is potential for cooperation and solidarity with more people.

(6) Hearing the voices of those who did not answer and understanding their thoughts remains an issue. For this Synod to bring about change in the Japanese Church, it is necessary to encourage the laity, religious, and clergy who have not yet participated to understand that the Church and the Synod are synonymous, and to encourage them to feel that walking together in Japan's modern society will lead to fruitfulness through sharing.

B. Identification of Opinions

It should be noted that "Japanese Church" always includes people with foreign roots. Except in cases where differences in the way Japanese and foreign believers think and feel affect the content of responses the community to which the respondents belong is not specified. In addition, the words "foreigner" and "believer with foreign nationality" are used to mean "person with foreign roots."

♦ There were 45 replies from parishes and 30 from groups of believers of foreign nationality. Institutions (education, medical welfare, preschools, etc.) sent 12 responses while eight religious orders did so. There were 95 responses in total.

Some of the parish responses from individual respondents were compiled into one document. The number of participants is estimated to be about 800.

Question 1

(1) There is high interest in "people who are left behind" and this is an opportunity to think about their situation. We need an attitude of understanding and acceptance of Catholics who hunger for community but are unable to participate. For example, the comment was received, "Residents of institutions cannot attend Mass. They must refrain from inconveniencing non-believers and cooperate with the management of the facility."

(2) Many of the younger generation leave the church for no clear reason beyond feeling that there are few people of their generation in the community. A high school student commented, "There is nothing to attract me to the church."

(3) Responses indicated the extent to which interpersonal relations within communities are a source of problems. In addition, the child-rearing generation feels that its concerns are not heard. "Coming to church every week has caused division in the family," said one respondent. "I spend less time with my children, and they have started to shy away from church because they see how stressful it is for their parents."

(4) In some areas, parishes are international communities. While in some places there are difficult issues such as language and cultural barriers, in others the opinion is that cooperation is possible. A foreign respondent said, "Japanese parishioners will talk to you, give you information, and have a conversation, which helps in learning Japanese." However, a Vietnamese respondent said, "Technical intern trainees feel lonely due to the difficulty of dialogue in the workplace." Comments such as that were extremely common.

(5) In kindergartens and other institutions, relationships with non-Christian teachers, kindergarten children, parents, residents, and local communities are commonplace, and the feeling of walking with non-believers is stronger than it is in parishes.

Question 2

(1) A desire to listen carefully to the voices of those who have difficulty speaking out and vulnerable people is evident in many responses. One respondent from the Philippines said, "We must listen to people who are considered sinners or living immoral lives." There is not enough concern for those in the foreign community with problems like illegal employment or human trafficking.

(2) Responses like, "Listening or not depends on human relationships," indicated problems arising from people's being too busy or unable to overcome prejudice and intolerance. A frequent response was that people are asked to return home immediately after Mass due to the coronavirus, thus decreasing opportunities to deepen relationships.

Question 3

(1) Many responses from parishes indicated that minority Christians in Japanese society find it difficult to express Gospel values. Many people in rural areas indicated that being looked upon with antipathy or suspicion by neighbors can make living in a community impossible.

(2) Many people said that because they worry that they do not understand evangelical values well or do not understand the Gospel they feel "anxiety and reluctance to tell the wrong thing out of immaturity as a believer." Others said that more than speaking about faith, "living faith naturally and visibly is proclamation."

(3) Some religious commented, "It is not possible to present any challenge by holding onto fixed concepts and our silencing of the voices of vulnerable and suppressed people."

(4) Catholic kindergartens and institutions are conscious that they are places to convey Christian values to non-believers. They are places where charitable service is given to small children and people in need. There is an opinion that "Catholic educational institutions are

easily accessed and have a large influence on non-believers."

(5) A respondent from the Philippines said, "Adults are too busy to speak with their children." Another observed, "Jappino (children of mixed Japanese and Filipino ancestry) have a hard time speaking."

Question 4

(1) Some respondents said they were surprised to see prayer and liturgical participation described as "celebration." The current participation in liturgy lacks a sense of celebration. "One thing that is ruining liturgy is that the music has not been updated in half a century; we need to look at it." Another observer said, "The lack of harmony between the celebration and what springs from within people hollows out the liturgy."

(2) "I would like to see liturgical revision as an opportunity to reaffirm the essence of the liturgy," said a respondent. Another said, "If the Mass is to be elevated to a sense of 'celebrating,' it must be one that those who are excluded can 'celebrate.'"

(3) Sensitivity varies from community to community when there are various language users in a parish. It seems natural to respond to the diversity of the faithful, but there are also situations where it is difficult to keep up with changes. Filipino and Vietnamese respondents observed, "There are areas where there are no priests if we want Mass in our native language."

(4) Due to restrictions on the number of people attending Mass during the corona pandemic, many parishioners who had not been involved in the liturgy until now became involved. A typical comment was, "I was happy to be able to proclaim the Scripture readings."

Question 5

(1) Many respondents regard joint responsibility for the parish as a burden, and it is clear that various roles are assumed by a specific subset of people. While leaders desire to be supported and for everyone to take responsibility, even when people want to do so their living situation hampers them.

It is important to keep in mind that some parishioners find it difficult to go to church because of poverty. A respondent asked, "Is there a gap between those who come to church and those who do not come, between those who serve and those who do not? Are we making it unnecessarily difficult for them to come?" There is a strong feeling that efforts must be made to increase the number of parishioners even a little.

(2) The formulation and implementation of plans for faith education and service activities in society are very inadequate. Everyone understands the need for faith education, but "there is a lack of effort to communicate that the ideals of the Church are meaningful in modern society." Another comment was that "There is no support for parents who are struggling with faith education for adolescents."

(3) As for service activities, there had been ongoing efforts in each parish, but they were suspended due to the corona pandemic and there is currently little active movement toward resumption. However, in the Latin American communities, there was also a response that "calls for cooperation with local residents and external communities are unanimously approved and actively responded to."

(4) A high school student expressed the opinion, "You can meet people as equals even when you meet for the first time." Another young person said, "You can participate in volunteer activities with your friends. Claiming to not be involved because you can't do anything is just running away."

Question 6

(1) Many respondents said that in the past contact was common between parishes and society through participation in community events and inviting neighbors to parish events but it has become impossible due to the coronavirus.

(2) In some places parish grounds and rooms are lent out for community activities, and there are places where parishes support and lease space to addiction recovery support groups (though there have been cases where parishes have canceled this due to strong local opposition). In any case, there is general reluctance because of the practical difficulty of implementation.

(3) There are Latin American groups that promote community events for foreigners jointly with international groups and local governments, but foreign nationals need the support and cooperation of the community and society. The outgoing style of those ethnic groups helps to maintain good relationships. In Question 3, there is a difference between Japanese people and others regarding how much they distance themselves from society.

(4) There are religious who participate in the activities of various organizations in the field of social welfare. However, overall there is still little active response to the idea that "the Church is required to be open to modern society and act in response to social needs." Very many Catholics tend to limit their focus to matters within the church.

(5) There is almost no awareness of issues related to justice and peace or the Church's social doctrine found in the responses. A slight interest was expressed in the opinion of a religious who said, "I am interested in environmental and pollution issues, and will be close to people suffering from pollution like evacuees from Fukushima, etc." A response from a kindergarten said, "Through the bidding prayers of the children each day, we know the needs of local society and pray for those."

(Though there were efforts to solicit responses from secondary or higher education institutions there was no response.)

Question 7

(1) Ecumenical activities are limited to joint prayer meetings and other joint events. Most have been suspended due to Covid-19. A response from the Tanabe Church said that on the anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake, "local religious facilities ring bells and pray all at once."

(2) When attending a Protestant Communion service, a Catholic was told by the minister, "If you wish to receive, feel free to do so." It is difficult for individuals to resolve the conflict that there are things they cannot do even if they want to communicate beyond doctrine.

(3) Even though there are cases where learning through personal acquaintance (such as the problem of discrimination) and joint activities for a common purpose are carried out, for the most part, there is little expectation that many fruits can be achieved by collaboration. One of the few respondents said that in Tamba "groups from eight denominations frequently come together to join citizen's appeals." A religious said, "Involvement in Kamagasaki is wide-ranging, and includes relationships with staff and volunteers."

Question 8

(1) Because the phrase "joint responsibility" is used in Question 5, there seems to have been some confusion in answering. In this report, it will be taken to mean that the question asks whether there is "teamwork" in determining the process for setting goals and realizing them.

(2) In considering the conditions for teamwork, it is helpful to consider that in the process it is necessary to have a relationship of trust that can forgive no matter how much division may arise in a meeting. It may not be easy for members of a team to care for each other, but it is essential if the aim is to walk together.

(3) There is a problem in that congregations are aging and involvement in planning and execution is limited to specific people. At the same time, when new policies are created, the current situation is such that roles cannot be changed according to the new practices.

(4) It should be noted that there are believers who do not want to avoid participation, but who cannot realistically participate and not being able to do so makes them feel guilty.

(5) The majority of responses came from parishes, and so there is a tendency to perceive problems as parish matters, but there was an opinion that "it would be good if there were active community group sharing, service activities, and information exchange" beyond the boundaries of parishes. There are other groups that face similar problems: for example, medical personnel, religion teachers, etc.

(6) Cooperation with foreign nationals is progressing and may continue as an issue for the future. Comments from parishes included such as, "While foreigners study language with Japanese parishioners they share much else."

(7) There was an opinion that people must have an awareness of harassment and parishes must prevent sexual abuse and all forms of harassment.

Question 9

(1) Very few respondents mentioned the importance of making decisions "in prayer." Comments like, "I would like to think about the perspective of Jesus when he interacted with people, and then speak and make decisions in the community," and, "I would like to think that crisis issues such as the declining birthrate and aging population can be turning points," seem to have come from discerning experiences.

(2) "The premise of communal discernment is individual discernment; there is a need to know oneself through spiritual accompaniment, etc." "Praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, talking, listening, jointly discerning, and making decisions to reach consensus is an important process." Such comments indicate a need of spiritual guides and directors, and that there is a need to train them.

Question 10

(1) A large number of responses showed a high level of interest in personal formation and training. While there were voices that want lectures and such, even more said it is necessary to have a place or places where people can interact and share in order to be aware of the thoughts of diverse people.

(2) Referring to the experience of dealing with the Synod questions, a respondent said, "It is a great blessing that each of us has been able to think about the answers to the 10 questions and have a place to share them. I would like to experience walking together a little more deeply."

(3) "Ongoing training and faith development of laity and religious are important. It is important to have an interest in society, to recognize the necessity of self-development, and to have an attitude of learning and acting," in order to do God's will throughout life.

(4) It was commented that as a foundation for the growth of a community training is necessary to convey mutual respect and gratitude.

Other noteworthy responses

There were some who could not understand the rationale for restricting participation at Mass for the purpose of preventing infection during the pandemic and who felt that they were not welcomed by the church.

Even if a foreign layperson or priest speaks Japanese to some extent, there was a request

that native speakers try to express themselves in easily understood ways, and for both sides to not forget to confirm that they are being understood. Foreign nationals may hesitate to ask for repetition even if they do not understand.

C. Towards the Next Stage: Summary, General Review

(1) In order to become an evangelizing community in which everyone participates with "fellowship" as the basis of spirituality, since 2001 the whole Kyoto diocese has been engaged in joint missionary pastoral work. So, there is a certain degree of experience of synodality, and the awareness that the parish council is a place of decision making is now common.

Even so, the spirit and process of joint missionary pastoral ministry is still inadequate. Each person must receive formation to do God's will and prayerfully participate in the decision-making of the parish.

(2) Despite the difficult Covid pandemic situation, enthusiastic responses were received that transcend barriers of language, culture, and parish. In the process of responding to Synod questions, we shared many experiences of awareness, seeing what had not been seen, hearing what had not been heard, and uncovering factors that have hindered our progress. Older issues have become even more apparent in the corona crisis: aging congregations; youth leaving the church; diversity of languages, cultures, and values; financial problems.

(3) Gatherings in which believers are involved and support each other are challenging but also bring joy. Although sharing is effective for understanding and affirming each other, in reality there are major difficulties due to time constraints and language problems. The challenge remains to develop ways to continue a good experience of sharing in the future.

[Next steps: identifying further points]

(4) In response to the theme of this Synod, "For a Church Who Walks Together: Communion, Participation, and Mission," the many believers who responded are full of enthusiasm to transcend language and cultural differences to proclaim the Gospel. In the future we must foster such joyful participation so the Church will be a community where Catholics can feel gathering to be a joy rather than a burden. In doing so, we will identify what we must do, what we can do, and what we need not do in the current situation of the Church.

(5) Deepening communion in the Church community means faithfully following the basic principle of valuing people instead of being overwhelmed by structures and plans.

Relationships that prioritize diversity can be difficult. Even so, we will encourage each other with respect and gratitude, value practices that foster an ever-open friendship and develop into a community where we can share richly.

(6) We must share and learn from each other the richness of the Gospel shown by various languages and cultures. This requires good experiences of sharing, and they require formation in being able to transcend differences.

(7) To become a Church that cooperates with people who are interested in justice, peace, and social issues, we will stress community building and lifelong formation.

(8) We must deepen an understanding of ecumenism and think about collaboration.

(9) We want to use this Synod to relearn from the Second Vatican Council, the origin of the Synod, to face the question "What is the Church?" and think about the future Church.

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