"Aiming for a Church that Walks Together" Becoming Pilgrims of Hope

November 3, 2025
At Nobeoka,
Holy Year Gathering

1. What about our Church now?

1) The State of the Catholic Church in Japan – Current Status (1973 ⇔ 2023) (Reference: Kathopedia 2004)
- Total Number of Faithful: 359,176 → 412,330 (actual number 368,814) ➡ 0.33%
- Priests: 1,260; Religious members: 7,175 → Priests: 1,234; Religious members: 4,239
- Number of Baptisms: 10,223 (children 6,004, adults 4,219) → 4,158 (children 2,058, adults 2,100)
- Seminarians: 436 → 39 (Major seminarians 32, Minor seminarians 7)
- Number of Dioceses: 16 → 15; Number of Parishes 812 ➡ 773

2) The State of Oita Diocese – Current Status (1973 ⇔ 2023) (Reference: Oita Diocesan Report)
- Total Number of Faithful: 4,791 → 5,587
- Priests: 50 (6 diocesan, 34 religious/missionaries) → 39 (20 diocesan, 19 religious/missionaries)
- Seminarians: 16 (Minor 10, Major 6) → 3 (Minor 2, Major 1)
- Number of Religious and Missionary Members: 229 (Men 53, Women 176) → 214 (Men 31, Women 183)
- Number of Religious and Missionary Congregations: 13 (+4) ➡ 13 (12 congregations withdrew)
- Number of Baptisms: 153 (Adults 72, Children 81) → 15 (Adults 9, Children 6)

3) Reasons Leading to the Current Situation (Factors)

A. Social Factors

1) Secularization
 (1) Material abundance (economic development) → weakening of spirituality → decline in seekers and low birth rate
 (2) Diversification of values → more choices → decline in vocations for priests and religious members

2) Rise of Individualism → emphasis on privacy

3) Incorporation of Catholic institutions → difficulty in preserving Catholic spirit; succession issues → closures

4) Social incidents involving new religious movements → Aum Shinrikyo sarin attack, Unification Church, Jehovah's Witnesses (Watchtower) societal problems ➡ distrust and caution toward religion

B. Church's Inward-Looking Attitude
- Organization by age group (St. Joseph group, Marian group, Youth Groups, Church Schools, etc.) → largely nominal, turned into social gatherings, became formalized and diminished
- District divisions and district meetings (home masses, etc.) — suspended or abolished (due to COVID-19? Privacy concerns?)

- Pipeline with Society — Dilution (Lifeline, soup kitchens, year-end street fundraising, Civic Christmas) and closure of various facilities.

Currently, our church is being exposed to the waves of secularization, and combined with the phenomena of declining birth rates and an aging population, the number of seekers, candidates for baptism, and believers is decreasing. We are so preoccupied with maintaining and managing the current church that we cannot focus on evangelization, and it seems we have reached a major turning point where it is difficult to envision a future.

I would like to share the current state and problems of today's church, which can be seen even just from the numbers, based on the above statistics of the Japanese Church and the Diocese of Oita.

*** "How do you perceive the above statistics and current situation of the Japanese Church and the Diocese of Oita? How do you see these as problems? What are the causes that led to this situation?"**

*** "How are your parish, religious community, or missionary society trying to respond?"**

2. Holy Year — “Pilgrims of Hope”

The late Pope Francis proclaimed this year's ordinary Holy Year theme as 'Pilgrims of Hope,' issuing the Holy Year Apostolic Letter stating 'hope does not disappoint.' This issue is not limited to the Japanese Church but is faced by the universal Church as well. It is because we need the 'virtue of hope' now.

1) What is most needed in today's world and society is to have a life perspective filled with hope.

We cannot deny that modern society is characterized by a loss of desire to pass on life → worrying low birth rates, anxiety about the future, lack of stable employment and proper social security… pursuit of profit → insatiable consumerism (Apostolic Letter 9). ⇒ 'Look to the future with hope' (ibid. 9)

2) The basis of that hope — hope in God as the foundation and eternal life

'I believe in eternal life.' This is our profession of faith, and Christian hope fundamentally rests on this belief. Hope is indeed 'a virtue directed toward God' (ibid. 19) ⇒ 'Hope will not disappoint us' (Romans 5:5)

3) Becoming 'Pilgrims of Hope'

The hope we possess is like a reliable and stable anchor for the soul… In the storms of life, if we entrust ourselves to the Lord Jesus, it provides stability and safety. We will not be swallowed by the storm (ibid. 25). Therefore, we are called to be 'yeast of true hope in this world, pilgrims journeying toward the new heaven and new earth… the promised land of the Lord' (ibid. 25).

3. Memories of becoming a "Pilgrim of Hope"

Since the seeds of the Gospel were sown in Japan by St. Francis Xavier in 1549, the Church in Japan has continued to keep the light of faith burning amidst severe oppression and persecution for 250 years, and has continued to walk the path of the Church as a "traveler of hope" and a "pilgrim of hope" to the present day.

A. The Early Period of Churches in Japan1)

1) Early Missionaries and Evangelism

In 1549, from Xavier's arrival, missionaries preached in Kagoshima, Hirado, Yamaguchi, and Kyoto using broken Japanese and interpreters. In particular, in Yamaguchi, there were 2,600 baptisms. (Reference: Takashi Gonooi, "A Study on the History of Japanese Christians") By 1614, when the Tokugawa shogunate issued the proscription decree, the number of believers was estimated to be 370,000.

2) Social Conditions in Japan at that Time

Japan was in the midst of the Sengoku period. The "Ōnin War" (1467–1477) devastated the regions around Kyoto, triggering political upheaval and marking the beginning of the Sengoku period. Peasant uprisings were frequent, and amid turbulent society, people sought salvation. Many also went on pilgrimages to Ise and various shrines. Buddhist monks often changed sects seeking new ways of life.
Missionaries explained their teachings using Buddhist terminology. As a result, Christianity was called "Tenjiku-kyo" and was accepted as a branch of Buddhism without seeming out of place. For example, the deity Deus was initially referred to as "Dainichi" following the chief deity of the Shingon sect, Dainichi Nyorai, but Xavier noticed this mistake and returned to the original term "Deus." The term "Deus" eventually came to be called "Tendo" → "Tenshu-sama" → "Tenshu-do."

3) Formation of Christian (Kirishitan) Faith

(1) Prayer and Catechism Books

Missionaries first taught believers the "Orasho" (prayers) necessary for their devotional life, having them memorize and recite them. The basic prayers called "Orasho" included **the Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary, and the Apostles' Creed.** A catechism book called "**Dochirina Kirishitan**" (12 chapters in total) was also used.

(2) Numerous Devotional Groups

Early missionaries noticed that Japanese valued organization and forming groups, and thus believers formed multiple groups.

① Rosary Group (Santa Maria Group)

This group nurtured the Word thoroughly and continued intensive faith education. Believers conducted activities based on catechesis using "Dochirina Kirishitan."

② Eucharist Group (Eukarisutia Group)

This group deeply understood and lived the sacrament of the Eucharist. It consisted of believers who continued acts of atonement and Eucharistic adoration. They were encouraged to frequently partake in the sacrament and prepare for receiving it.

③ The Misericordia Society (The Misericordia Society)

Like many other devotional societies, such as the Santa Maria Society and the Name of Jesus Society, the Misericordia Society first strove to improve its own spirituality, and then sought to help its neighbors with their spiritual, physical, and practical needs. This is perhaps why their service work was so effective in showing love.

***The activities of the "Misericordia Group" (Misericordia group)** can be broadly summarized into three areas:

(a) Physical and Life Support: Charity Hospitals, Leprosy Hospitals, Homes for the Aged and Widowed, Orphanages, etc.

(b) Spiritual Assistance: Giving advice to the doubting, teaching the ignorant, admonishing sinners, comforting the grieving, and forgiving offenses.

c) Love for the dead: Praying for the salvation of the souls and providing a respectful burial and protection for the bodies.

All of these activities addressed the social deficiencies of the time.

The "Misericordia Unit" was particularly active in Kyoto, Yamaguchi, Bungo, and Nagasaki. Its headquarters was in Nagasaki, but for a time it was overseen by the Blessed Takayama Ukon of Takatsuki Domain.

3) The Legacy of the Faith of the Kirishitans

As research on the Kirishitans has progressed, the common heritage of faith cherished by the churches and believers of the past has become clear. In particular, certain traits revealed by examining the commonalities among the martyrs before their martyrdom stand out in the following four points:

1) To embrace the Word and thoroughly cultivate one's faith.
2) To fervently seek the Sacrament of Reconciliation, bearing witness to faith and living out God's mercy.
3) To provide a place for those without a place of belonging.
4) To prepare for Holy Communion and live in the Eucharist.

4) "Funai Diocese" (Japan's First Diocese)

Under the patronage of Christian lord Otomo Yoshishige (Sourin), the Christian faith in Bungo grew, reaching over 30,000 followers at one point (around 1586). Christianity in Japan shifted its center from Yamaguchi to Bungo. Following the baptism of Sourin and his second son, Chikaie, many of his retainers were baptized. Believers spread from Funai to Usuki, Taketa, and Yufuin. This is evident from the numerous ruins that remain to this day, including a Christian cemetery.

In 1588, Pope Sixto V established a diocese in Funai and appointed Father Morales (a Jesuit) as the first bishop. Bishop Pedro Martín served as the second bishop. The third Bishop, Cerqueira, had his diocese at Misaki Church in Nagasaki and oversaw the Japanese Church for 16 years. The next Bishop, Diego Valente, was unable to enter Japan where Christianity was prohibited, and instead watched over the development of the Japanese Church from Macau. The Japanese diocese remained in Macau until 1633.

B. The Period of Persecution and Hidden Christians (Believers)

(1) Persecution and Oppression

In 1587, Toyotomi Hideyoshi's edict to expel missionaries and the Tokugawa shogunate's edict banning Christianity led to a long period of persecution and oppression for the Japanese Church. Many believers were arrested and forced to convert to Buddhism, resulting in numerous martyrs, both famous and unknown. In 1644, with the martyrdom of Father Mancio Konishi, Japan entered a difficult period in which there were

not even a single priest left. Believers gradually went into hiding, preserving and passing on their faith in secret. Under the "parishioner system," they publicly posed as Buddhists, while secretly continuing to practice their faith by offering prayers to Jesus and Mary. This led to the terms "Nantogami" (storage god) and "Maria Kannon."

(2) Transmission of the Faith of Hidden Christians

Anticipating the arrival of an era of severe persecution and oppression, missionaries taught the believers how to survive. For 250 years, without a single priest, the believers formed groups and established structures and roles to pass down their faith.

Three roles held by Christians

1. Chokata - The person responsible for deciding the holidays each year (liturgical calendar). They are the ones who pass on these secret teachings. The records they make are called "Ocho" or "Nikkuri" and serve as the basis for religious life.
2. Mizukata - The person who administers baptisms. There was one per village. They were the highest authority in the organization (the president of the congregation?) and were hereditary. They were also called "Ikeyaku."
3. Listener - The Mizukata's assistant. This was the name of the Mizukata's role, who checked to make sure the words of the ordination were correct during baptism. In Nagasaki, they would gather at the house of the "accountant," inquire about the "interaction day" (holiday) for that week, and then go back to inform each believer, so they were also called "contact people."

(3) The "Discovery of Believers" in Nagasaki

Due to the long ban on Christianity, oppression, and persecution, the Japanese Church seemed to have been eradicated from the land and vanished altogether. Then, in **1865,** a **"discovery of believers"** occurred in Nagasaki. This occurred at Oura Cathedral, which had been completed late the previous year.

It was the **"revival of the Japanese Church,"** which had been protected by believers for seven generations over more than 250 years. This was the **"discovery of believers"** in Japan. This astonished the entire world, including Rome, and was called a **"miracle" in the history of world religions.**

(4) Removal of the "Ban on Christianity" Signs (1873)

The Meiji government, which had just embarked on its journey as a modern nation under the banner of "State Shinto," ordered the "Urakami Village Exile." In two separate exiles, in 1868 and 1870, a total of 3,384 Christians were exiled from Urakami, Goto, and Iojima to 22 locations in 20 domains west of Kanazawa. This was known as the **"Fourth Urakami Exodus."**

Three years later, the Meiji government finally gave in to the unwavering faith of Christians, often derided as country bumpkins, who never gave in despite complaints from Western countries and the various domains that had entrusted them with Christians, threats and persecutions from state power, and the tragic deaths of family and friends. The ban on Christianity, which had been in place for 286 years since Hideyoshi's inception, was removed, and 1,930 Christians who had endured to the end returned home, injured and wounded.

The believers in Urakami and Nagasaki called this exile a **"journey,"** comparing it to the return of the former Israelites from Babylonian exile. They passed on this memory to their descendants as they set out to build their churches.

This is the memory that saw the church in Japan become "pilgrims of hope."

***Read Bull 4 and share the living testimony of faith of many martyrs and Christians amidst severe oppression and persecution.**

"Suffering produces patience; patience produces character; character produces hope" (Romans 5:3-4).

***As Bull 24 states, "The Mother of God is the greatest witness to hope," why was devotion to the Virgin Mary maintained and cherished among Christians?**

*** "What kinds of groups (committees, volunteer groups, circles) are currently active at your church or business?" (See "Decree 3 on Indulgences")**

10-minute break

3. The "Discovery of the Lay" at the Second Vatican Council

Regarding our journey as an "open church," some 60 years have passed since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). I believe that the Council's shift from calling the church the "mystical body of Christ" to the "new people of God" and the "wandering people of God," and its opening up of the path to the existence and apostolate of laity, who account for 90% of the church, was a groundbreaking event on a par with the "discovery of the laity" in Nagasaki.

Before the Council, laity were the subject of pastoral care as lay believers, and while they "participated" (Pope Pius XI) and "cooperated" (Pope St. Pius XII) in the church's apostolate, they were merely assistants to priests, and their own apostolate was barely noticeable.

1) What are the Lay?

While the Council used the traditional negative term "neither priests nor religious" (Lumen Gentium, no. 31), it also called the laity "the remnant of the People of God" (Lumen Gentium, no. 32), and emphasized that "the distinctive character of the laity lies in their secular nature," that they are engaged in worldly work, directing the sanctification and order of the world toward God, and serving in charity, and that they are collaborators in the Church's mission.

Lay people are no longer merely the subjects of pastoral care; rather, while living in the secular world and engaged in worldly work, they participate in three works of Christ: the work of sanctification through prayer and the Eucharist, and they are agents who seek to realize the Kingdom of God through works of service while aligning worldly values with Gospel values.

2) Mission of the Lay

(1) First, the mission of the laity is found in the family and in "living that bond." Lay people are given husbands, wives, and children by God, and are called to live in that bond. They bear a responsibility so profound that they can be described as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." Living this bond is

connected to the prayer of the laity. Without prayer, it would be extremely difficult for a couple to stay together until death or to raise children well. Sanctifying the family, offering prayer and Mass, and fulfilling and witnessing to our mission as a **"worshiping community"** can be seen as the mission of the laity.

(2) In society and in the workplace, believers must interact with others through the eyes of Christ and, from a gospel perspective, bring worldly events in line with God's direction. To do this, believers must first deeply understand the teachings of the gospel, transform the values of this world with the values of the gospel in their own way, and orient the world's order toward God. This requires believers to become familiar with (become thoroughly acquainted with) the events around them and in the world, use the light of the gospel to determine whether they have value in line with God's will (discern), and then direct (act) them in line with God's plan. This is truly a prophetic mission, and it becomes a **"witnessing community.**"

(3) During Pope St. John Paul II's visit to Japan, Emperor Showa expressed his gratitude to the Pope for the significant contributions the Catholic Church has made to Japanese society in the areas of education, welfare, and medical care. However, today, schools, social welfare facilities, and hospitals have been incorporated and are subsidized by the government. A lack of successors has put their very existence into question. Where in society should the Church seek its mission and service in the future? Mother Teresa has set us an example through her own example. This can be seen as the practice of **the acts of love**, underpinned by deep Catholic faith. Just as the Christians did in society at that time, it is important for us to understand the Gospel and the Church's teachings, remain unwavering in these practices, and demonstrate them as a **"community of service"** in areas beyond the reach of the state and private sectors, particularly in areas of dignity of life, human rights, and peace.

The above three forms of community (worshiping community, witnessing community, and serving community) represent the "Church Walking Together" of the "Evangelizing Community."

*** "Please share the three missions (evangelization) of the Church Community Walking Together."**
*** "Where do you seek a place of mission now?"**

4. The "Synodal" Church and Evangelization (See: Synod Handbook, Catholic Church of Christ)

1) "Synodality"

At the call of the late Pope Francis, the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (Synod) was held over a three-year period from 2021 to October 2024, comprised of representatives of bishops, priests, consecrated persons, missionaries, and laity. This form truly reflects the trend toward an "open church community" and a "traveling people of God" as advocated by the Second Vatican Council. If "synod" means "together," then this synod, unlike previous ones, is indeed called a "synodality" (a church walking together) of "God's people traveling together."

2) What is a "Synodal" Church?

(1) A Church Together: The Church of God's people is a church that exists together, transcending differences of gender and role. In other words, it is a church community that values "gathering" and

"fellowship."

(2) A Church that Shares: The sense of faith is a church that values shared responsibilities, that is, everyone sharing responsibilities together.

(3) A Church that Thinks, Prays, and Discerns Together: In order to respond to the needs of modern society, we are called to think and pray together. To that end, we are called to practice discernment that is not bound by past practices and arrangements. (Common Discernment)

3) Joint Discernment of the Spirit

Becoming a church that "walks together" requires a community of people, shared responsibilities, and joint discernment to discern the work of the Holy Spirit. It is important to engage in these activities through "conversation in the Spirit" at all times and in all circumstances.

(1) How to Discern: Pray about the problems and worries you face, become aware of them, and weigh your emotions. Then, receive the innermost feelings as a sign or invitation of God's will and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The criterion for determining whether or not something is the guidance of the Holy Spirit is either "**desperation**" or "**comfort.**" "Desperation" refers to feelings of discomfort, emptiness, restlessness, darkness, doubt, temptation, and self-centeredness, which can lead to the work of evil spirits. "Comfort" refers to a positive state of mind in which your heart is filled with joy, praising and serving God and wanting to help others. Here, you can discern the sure guidance of God and the Holy Spirit.

(2) "Conversation in the Spirit" is useful for creating a "pastoral plan." This "pastoral plan" or "evangelization plan" is established through the practice of "conversation in the Spirit" (prayer, silence, and active listening). It is also important to review the church's annual events and activities through "conversation in the Spirit" and develop new plans and initiatives.

4) "The Challenge of the Japanese Church Toward a Synodal Church" (Response to the Second Session of the Japanese Church)

"Toward a Church that Listens and Accompanies"

(1) Current Issues - Current issues include: people who are hurting in the church; uncooperative priests; isolation in leadership positions; the difficulty of listening when opinions conflict; harassment and bullying within the church, etc.

(2) The direction we aim for: "Accompanying," "Creating a place for people to belong," "Thinking together," "Working as a team," "The importance of speaking up," "The need for training in listening," "Respecting each person's sense of faith," "Allocating time," and "Becoming a listening church."

(3) Practical Methods: Acknowledging the current issues mentioned above, confirming the direction we are aiming for, and in order to become a "church walking together," we will promote and practice the "conversation in the Spirit" adopted at the first session of the Synod. In other words, we will make it a habit to "think, pray, and judge together" in prayer. This is not simply a methodology; it is through prayer that the Holy Spirit invites people into deep conversation and deep fellowship. To achieve this, it is important to "listen" in silence, listening to what others say. We will value the process of "walking together."

5. Proposal: What initiatives should the Oita Diocese, parishes, religious congregations, missionary societies, education, healthcare, and social welfare undertake?

1) Reassess relationships through "conversation in the Spirit" (listening and accompaniment). - Conversion of relationships

Relationships: Relationships with God, within the family, among believers, between districts and churches, between bishops and priests, between bishops/priests and laity, between men and women, between offices and authorities, between parishes and religious congregations, between religions, between churches and social groups, between immigrants and refugees, the vulnerable, and with creation. - **Reassessing relationships to become a synodal church**

2) Establish a path toward a "Pastoral Plan for Mission" through joint discernment. - Conversion of the path

Path: **1. Ecclesiastical discernment:** Listen to the Word of God, pray, listen to others, and, together with conscience, discern what the Spirit is telling the churches. - A missional perspective is necessary.

2.Decision-making process (path): Discern, reach a common sense, and make a decision. Decisions of bishops, the episcopate, and the Bishop of Rome

3.Building mutual trust and sharing responsibilities through the participation, accountability, transparency, reporting, and evaluation of those responsible for the Church. - Holding regular parish synods.

3) Becoming a "sign of hope" in society as a "pilgrim of hope." - Conversion of bonds.

Places: **1.Places of travelling engagement:** The Church takes root in families, parishes, dioceses, religious congregations, missionary societies, congregations, movements, and local communities with specific cultures and histories—places of encounter with God.

*** Responding to urbanization and digital culture—Networks of engagement.**

2. Bonds that shape ecclesial unity: Unity between the universal Church and local Churches, unity with bishops, and unity among Christians as they seek the apostolic mission of their journey. - **Exchange of gifts.**

3. Places of service to the community: The Church becomes a "sign of hope" like a "field hospital." In particular, as **"pilgrims of hope,"** we respond to the invitation to be a **"sign of hope"** for life, human rights, peace, the sick, the elderly, migrants, refugees, young people, and billions of poor people.

*** "Signs of Hope"**

The late Pope Francis reminded us, "In addition to drawing hope from God's grace, we are also called to discover hope in the signs of the times, which the Lord offers us" (Eccl. 7). Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has constantly sought to interpret the "signs of the times" in the contemporary world, revealing them in the light of the Gospel so that they may become a tangible **"sign of hope"** for our brothers and sisters living in difficult circumstances.

1. World Peace - A Call for Peace: "Blessed are the peacemakers..."

2. Possess a Hopeful View of Life

- In the face of disregard and discrimination for life and human rights, alarming birth rates, pernicious consumerism, and secularization, Christians support the need for social issues that inspire hope.

3. Reintegration programs, such as pardons and exemptions from execution.

- Abolition of the death penalty and release for those living in difficult circumstances and those imprisoned.

4. The sick - "Charity is an act of hope, awakening gratitude in hearts" (Ibid., Bull. 11).

5. Young people - Their very presence is a sign of hope; hopeless young people - unemployment, drugs, and hedonism.

"The Jubilee should be an opportunity to inspire young people in the Church" (Ibid., Bull. 12).

6. Migrants - Guaranteeing safety, employment, and educational opportunities and opening doors for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

7. The elderly - Their very existence is a treasure, bringing with it life experience, wisdom, and faith, and the passing on of skills.

8. Billions of poor - Indifference, the tide of poverty, and the need for basic necessities.

End.