

Year of Our Lord 2024

Co-workers of God in Sendai Diocese



New Year's Message
of
Bishop Edgar Gacutan
to the Laity, Religious and Priests
of the Catholic Diocese of Sendai

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I wish you all a very Happy New Year!

May God keep your days in peace, hear your prayers, and lead you to eternal life.

January 1 is also World Day of Peace. With a heart full of hope for peace in the world, I would like to reflect on the year 2023 and share with you the blessings we have received and the challenges we face.

As we begin the New Year, let us count some of the blessings we have received over the past year.

- On April 29, for the first time in 17 years, a new priest of the diocese was ordained. He is Father Kentaro Takagi. He is currently studying English in the Philippines and will return home this summer.
- Several brothers and sisters were baptized, and to some of them I administered the sacrament of Confirmation. On the feast of Pentecost, at our Cathedral, I confirmed five brothers and sisters; on October 8, at Yotsuya church (Morioka), five brothers and sisters of District II; on October 22, at Hachinohe Shiomachi Church, 21 brothers and sisters of Sanpachi Bloc (District I).
- Kuji Church, founded by missionaries of the Bethlehem Foreign Mission Society, celebrated its 70th foundation anniversary on November 18. Kuji Church, like 34 other parishes in the diocese, is a church without a resident priest. Like most parishes in the diocese, it serves as a spiritual home for many brothers and sisters who work as technical trainees at diverse industries in the area.
- Aomori Akenohoshi Junior College, founded by the Sisters of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, celebrated its 60th anniversary on November 1. La Salle Home, founded by the Brothers of the Christian Schools, celebrated its 75th anniversary on November 11. Koriyama Xavier Gakuen, founded by the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, celebrated its 90th anniversary on December 1.

I attended each anniversary celebration. With some members of the founding congregations, parishioners, faculty, staff, students, and parents, I gave thanks for God's grace and guidance showered upon these institutions from the time they were founded.

Attending those celebrations reminded me of the words of the Apostle Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 3:

⁵What is Apollos, after all, and what is Paul? Ministers through whom you became believers, just as the Lord assigned each one.

⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth.

⁷Therefore, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who causes the growth.

⁸The one who plants and the one who waters are equal, and each will receive wages in proportion to his labor.

⁹For we are God's co-workers; you are God's field, God's building.

Following the thought of Saint Paul, we may liken mission schools, welfare institutions, and parishes to plants. The soil in which these plants were planted had been cultivated by the founders and the plants have been tended by generations of successors. We give praise to God for making the plants grow, and we thank the planters, waterers, and the caretakers of the field. The fruits of these plants are you, brothers and sisters, and the graduates who serve society and the church as teachers, industrial or political leaders, musicians, artists, diplomats, writers, housewives, and social workers.

Schools and social welfare institutions introduce Jesus Christ at the forefront of society. Many of those who work there are not Catholics. They first learn about the Catholic Church and its mission at their workplace. In the past, priests and religious were directly involved in the management of these entities and had daily contact with teachers, employees, staff, students, and those cared for at social welfare facilities. Today, with the aging of priests and religious, their management has been entrusted to lay people and non-Catholics.

The Diocese of Sendai is God's field. While we are grateful for the abundant harvest of the field, we also need to acknowledge that our field is gradually shrinking or being converted. Just as in agriculture, the field in Sendai is becoming smaller and smaller, as parishes become quasi-parishes or are suppressed, and church buildings are torn down. Scarcity of workers, population outflow, aging population, and decreasing membership, among other reasons, make it difficult to maintain parishes and their buildings.

During the year 2024, let us talk about God's field in Sendai and how it should be tended and cared for. Who are the people who plow, plant, and water the field? How should we cooperate with each other now that we do not have as many workers as we did 50 years ago? Let us discuss these issues as members of the diocese.

Last year, in reorganizing the parishes of the Diocese of Sendai into the present districts and blocs, I was guided by the "Instruction" issued in 2020 by the Dicastery of the Clergy. Entitled "The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelizing mission of the Church", the Instruction reminds us of several things, such as the Apostle Paul uses the expression "house churches" many times in his letters (see Romans 16:3-5, 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15), and that with these "houses" we get a foretaste of the birth of the first "parishes". The Instruction further says that a parish is "a house among houses, a place of worship, and a sign of the permanent presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of his People."

One of the speakers at the celebration of the 70th foundation anniversary of Kuji parish said: "The church is like a lighthouse, a beacon to the people." This analogy fits the character of the parish quoted above. The parish is a sign of the presence of the Risen Christ, a light that calls people to come and feel such presence.

After two years of preparation, the First Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was held in Rome from October 4 to 25 last year. We, as a diocese, were supposed to participate in the preparation of this Synod, but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, only a few of us were able to give their opinions. Three participants from Japan attended the Synod's First Session. One of them, Momoko Nishimura, shared her experience as a participant with us priests of Sendai during our gathering held last November. In particular, she introduced to us the method of "conversation in the Spirit" used at the Synod. This method is included in the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the First Session and can be found on the Vatican website. While learning this method, let us follow the steps of the Synod as we converse about the future of our diocese and our Catholic Church.



Sincerely yours in Jesus Christ our Lord,

Edgar Gacutan

Bishop of the Diocese of Sendai

Sendai City, January 1, 2024, Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God