

God's Call and My Response

Appointment by Pope St. John Paul II

My appointment as bishop was dated March 3, 1997. I learned of it in early March when Archbishop William Aquin Carew, then apostolic nuncio to Japan, asked me to come to the nunciature and told me to accept the appointment. I was totally bewildered as the archbishop explained in English for more than 30 minutes the process leading up to the appointment. I was panicking, but I concentrated on grasping the English lest I miss some important points. When the archbishop finished the explanation, he asked if I would accept. When I hesitated, Archbishop Carew repeated the explanation from the beginning. I knew that once this second explanation ended, I would once again be asked to accept, so I was thinking of reasons to decline.

The second explanation ended, and the archbishop again asked if I would accept the appointment. I was only 42 years old, so I managed to stammer out in English, "I-am-too-young." Archbishop Carew countered that he was already aware of my age, and it was not a valid reason to refuse. Then, showing no sign of letting up, he launched into the explanation yet a third time. I began to worry that this pattern would repeat forever and realized that I would finally have to respond.

As the archbishop wound up this third explanation, he added something new. When preparing to appoint a bishop, he said, the pope always prays to the Father before making the decision. When I heard this, in my mind's eye I saw the pope kneeling in prayer and realized that this appointment was God's choice.

God's Choice and Call

When I was a boy, I wanted to be a priest. And so, I entered the path to the priesthood and received the grace of ordination. But the calling to be a bishop was a complete surprise. It was like the calling of prophets in the Old Testament, especially Jeremiah who could not get away with the excuse that he was young.

When I was ordained a priest, I promised to serve the Lord for life. So, when I heard from the nuncio that the pope had prayed over the decision, I thought that refusing the appointment would break my promise. I replied that I would accept it.

It all took about two hours. I still vividly remember this scene, and every time I hear of a new bishop's appointment, I recall that time and wonder if God's strange choice was similar for each of them. This has led me to think that God's call takes two forms. God gives a man a desire to be a priest, but God can sometimes suddenly give him a further mission.

The Lord makes the choice

The ecumenical Japanese translation of Mark 3:13-16, the call of the Twelve, says that Jesus climbed the mountain and brought along those whom he had picked. The Franciscan Bible translation has "people he wanted." These translations give the impression that many disciples were examined and from among them some were chosen as apostles. Looking at the original text, there seems to be a nuance such as Jesus desired the person, without reference to their qualities, because it was good for the chosen one.

When the appointment was announced, someone told me that Jesus clearly loved me. I found it hard to agree, but as I continued to be a bishop, I began to agree. The Lord calls someone not because he or she has certain qualities, but because Christ loves them. Whatever God's choice, it is made from unconditional love. "You did not choose me, I chose you" (John 15:16). Because I was chosen by Jesus to be a priest, I did not pursue my own wishes, but instead followed Him. The Father commanded me, and I am convinced that if I do what the Father has told me to do I will be able to bear fruit and that fruit will remain.

Gratitude for twenty-five years

My appointment as bishop was announced at the Vatican at noon on April 1, 1997, Rome time. April Fools' Day. In Japan, a fax was sent out at 7:00 p.m., the diocesan office received calls that said April Fools' hoaxes were flying around. Personally, I was the one who hoped it was a joke. The ordination took place on June 15 in the borrowed auditorium of Rakusei High School. Twenty-five years have passed since then.

People often ask me if I am happy to be priest, but no one asks me if I am happy to be a bishop. I am sure they realize the weight of a bishop's ministry.

My deepest gratitude now is that I have been blessed with and supported by the priests who work in the Diocese of Kyoto. The senior priests at the time of my ordination as bishop sensed that they had a responsibility to support their young bishop in the smooth management of the diocese. I was really immature when it came to that, and they supported and encouraged me.

The bishop decides priest's assignments, and from the example of my appointment as bishop, I think deeply about how I am not only giving each priest an assignment, but also asking for a part of his lifetime. It is a process I always decide in prayer to the Lord.

The Lord has called me with my faults and weaknesses to be His tool, but I have yet to fully accept His unconditional love. I ask for your prayers for me, your bishop of the Diocese of Kyoto and servant of the Lord.

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