

Bishop's New Year Pastoral Letter, 2009

Vocation

~ The Year We Begin 21st Century Vocations Promotion in Kyoto Diocese ~

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1. Looking towards the Fifty Two Blessed Kyoto Martyrs

As we enter the New Year I would like, with the blessing of God the source of life, to keep on trying to realize my episcopal motto, "That they may all be one", through the evangelical mission entrusted to the faithful of Kyoto Diocese. Once again this year I look forward to your cooperation.

November 24 last year saw the beatification of Peter Kibe and 187 other Japanese Martyrs at Nagasaki, and the 52 victims of the 'Great Kyoto Martyrdom' gained the title 'Blessed'. First of all I would like to give thanks to God, along with all of you, for this glorious grace which has been given to Kyoto Diocese. Then I would like to offer particular thanks to my predecessor Bishop Tanaka Kenichi, the 'Kirishitan Study Group' and all those faithful who spent great efforts for the beatification movement during a quarter of a century. I would also like to thank most sincerely all those who gave generously to the special fund-raising for Kyoto Diocese Memorial Activities. Thank you all very much. (1)

The Japanese Church is commemorating, through the shining example of the faith of the newly beatified, the marvelous missionary work begun in Japan and the great grace of this beatification is giving life to evangelization in our time. The missionary life we have undertaken by taking upon ourselves 'Present day Martyrdom' requires unshakeable resolve and the courage to make sacrifices. Kyoto Diocese is promoting collaborative ministry for mission and striving to become a missionary community and I believe that by looking to the blessed martyrs of the Great Kyoto Martyrdom, their spirit of faithfulness even to death, we will fulfill our call to bear witness to the gospel.

With that in mind I would like propose to you, as one of the objectives of Kyoto Diocese in promoting collaborative ministry for mission from now on, the promotion of vocations.

2. The 'Year we Begin 21st Century Vocations Promotion in Kyoto Diocese'

Vocation is an urgent issue for the Church today. In Japan the stream of vocations to the priesthood and religious life has decreased, if not altogether dried up. Every year the number of diocesan priests and of missionary priests and religious from overseas is decreasing and those who are already working here are becoming older and older. The cause of this may be a combination of low birth rate and aging which has taken hold in Japan, a diversity of value systems, a tendency to seek benefits in this world or the supremacy of the economy, or family breakdown.

John Paul II said that, “the crisis of vocations to the priesthood has deep roots in the cultural environment and in the outlook and practical behavior of Christians.” There is, therefore, an urgent need for, “the Church’s pastoral work in promoting vocations to be aimed decisively and primarily towards restoring a ‘Christian mentality’ built on faith and sustained by it.” (2) In other words, in order to promote vocations we need vigorously to consolidate the fundamentals of our faith.

From the beginning vocations to the priesthood and religious life have been a reflection of the Church’s true nature, an indispensable feature of the Church. (3) For this reason ‘Pastoral work for vocations’, which involves careful thought about the beginnings and nurture of vocations, is a matter which the whole Church must get to grips with. Through that we can be sure that we will gain new perspectives on the renewal and development of the Church and the activities we engage in as Church.

Vocations promotion is a key to increasing the Church’s holiness and certainly generates dynamism. We now realize this and to begin the necessary activity at diocesan level I designate this year as the ‘Year we Begin 21st Century Vocations Promotion in Kyoto Diocese’

3. A Vocations Promotion Movement

We can think of the expression ‘vocation’ or ‘call’ as meaning being called the priesthood or religious life. God freely chooses certain people and they freely respond to his call and choose to follow the path towards religious profession or ordination. God calls all Christians to follow a vocation. For that reason I would like to encourage all Christians – priests, religious and lay people – to think broadly about vocation and to take part in practical activities to promote vocations. Vocations promotion includes the following elements:

- ♦ ‘Knowing’ about vocations
- ♦ ‘Thinking about’, ‘discerning’ each person’s vocation
- ♦ ‘Praying’ for vocations
- ♦ ‘Working’ for vocations promotion

I will speak about each of these in what follows.

4. Thinking of Life as Vocation

The word ‘vocation’ connotes the relationship between God, who created us, and people, who are the recipients of His love. God made people in His own image, in the likeness of Himself (Cf. Genesis 1:26), and he invited them into a deeply loving relationship with Himself. The Second Vatican Council has this to say: “An outstanding cause of human dignity lies in the fact that people are called to communion with God. From the very circumstance of their origin people are already invited to converse with God. People would not exist if they were not created by God’s love and constantly preserved by it. And they cannot live fully according to truth unless they freely acknowledge that love and devote themselves to their creator. (Vatican II Documents, *Gaudium et spes*, 19) Vocation means the God’s revelation actively at work making in clear the truth of human existence. A person is someone who is called by God in love.

5. Dialogue in Vocation

Vocation is a dialogue between the love of God who calls and freedom of the individual who responds with love. Our lives as people called by God are a conversation with Him. Whenever or whoever it might be, when we ask ourselves 'How shall I live my life?' the question comes from God. So far as people are concerned vocation is accepting this dialogue with God. This dialogue is not one in which I speak first. God is speaking to me; I respond to Him. The important thing is accepting this dialogue. From the time before we were in our Mother's womb, before we were born (Cf. Jeremiah 1:4-5), each of us was being called by God but one day we become aware of this call and are prompted to respond to it. If we are to continue to mature according to our individual character as we progress towards the fullness of our lifetime, we must always make its foundation this dialogue with God.

6. I Want to Be a Priest!

On March 20 this year I will be celebrating my silver jubilee; it will be twenty five years since my ordination as a priest. As a middle school student I firmly set my resolve on becoming a priest and from the first year of high school I entered Saint John's Junior Seminary which Nagoya Diocese was running at that time. After graduating from University I entered the Tokyo Catholic Theological College and embarked upon the road towards priesthood in earnest. Now, after six years of the seminary and twenty five years as a priest if I ask myself, 'are you really happy you became a priest?', the answer is, 'Yes, certainly'. The reason why is that I know clearly which path is my response to God's love and I am following it. Vocation may not be a matter of responding to a call of God heard suddenly. In my case it was not. Vocation begins from a feeling within the heart, a longing to become a special disciple of Christ, which emerges when a person thinks seriously about their future and looks carefully at their career options. If this feeling within the heart becomes something which cannot be denied, if it becomes stronger with the passage of time, this is a sign that someone is waking up to their vocation.

7. Following the Will of God

"You did not choose me, no, I chose you" (John 15:16). Vocation is the special will of God for every single person, being chosen by God. Some people are chosen as priests or religious, others as lay Christians. It is an important duty of all Christians to find out what the God might want of them. When we are making practical life-choices, then, we should make them after carefully thinking about and understanding what God is asking of us.

God's choice is not something which is imposed on us from without. God is in our inmost depths. Following the will of God is acting according to one's deepest, truest self. The Holy Spirit is poured into the depths of our hearts and we are led to discover and accept ourselves; not our superficial selves, but our true selves as reflected in the eye of God. Grace and freedom are not in opposition. Because of this it is clear that we are not simply making our own lives, but that God is walking with us on our way through life.

It is, then, important that we are sensitive to the presence of God who is working in the midst of our personal histories. We can cast off occasional feelings of loneliness and, like Jesus, know that the Father to whom we can entrust everything about ourselves is accompanying us. The origin of Vocation is “God is with us” (Emmanuel).

8. Thinking about One’s Own Vocation

Vocation is already given, abundantly, to all people. God is waiting for people to cooperate, to take notice of their vocation and freely to respond to it. Let us all as Christians, the Christians of Kyoto Diocese, think about our own vocations. Whatever way we choose to live as Christians or have lived until now, consciously following our vocation always depends on each one’s positive and committed way of life. Thinking about vocation in terms of what kind of duties need to be fulfilled in the family, at work, in society or at Church, deepens one’s faith and is an opportunity to receive renewed strength and live with joy. When Christians think seriously about their own vocation they can acquire a realization and a responsibility that ‘I, too, am called upon to foster priestly vocations’.

9. To all Young People

“I am alive, yet it is no longer I but Christ living in me. The life that I am now living, subject to the limitations of human nature, I am living in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

There is still six months remaining of the ‘Year of Saint Paul’ which began on June 29 last year, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, and continues until the same feast day this year. Pope Benedict XVI has said, “...what most deeply motivated Paul was being loved by Jesus Christ and the desire to communicate this love to others.” (4) The motivating force for the missionary vocation is the love of Christ. I make and appeal especially to young people. When you sense the loving glance of Christ, listen carefully, with acceptance, to the voice of the Holy Spirit. If you are called to devote your life to follow unconditionally, answer Jesus with enthusiasm. When you wake up to how wonderful it is to work as a disciple of Christ, it is joy which nothing can change. In this one and only lifetime it is a treasure worth giving everything to possess. I take the opportunity to say this also to all the young people of other nationalities who have come to Japan, from Latin America and Philippines, Vietnam and other Asian countries. You, too, don’t hesitate to think about becoming a diocesan priest or a religious in Japan.

10. A Mind Open to Accepting a Vocation

Well, then, how do we set about accepting a vocation as love from God? First of all we have constantly to overcome ‘anxiety about faith’ which occurs in the midst of the way of repentance. We can gradually overcome this anxiety by the way we ascertain our vocation. First discover within oneself the indications of why ‘I don’t understand’ what God is asking. These are times when there are many dissatisfactions about yourself and other people, or when one is generally discontent with life, when

you tend towards pessimistic thoughts and positions, or when you are suddenly becoming irritated, overwhelmed by anger.

Our hardheartedness at times like these, when we are closed towards other people, shows there is no space for listening carefully to the voice of God.

On the other hand there are signs of when we can happily think about God's invitation. Times such as when even in adversity, we can feel peaceful, times of solitude when we don't lose sight of ourselves, times when we can find joy in little things, when we are willing to make sacrifices, when we are not afraid of losing things but feel ready to renounce. In other words, times when we feel that freedom to accept docilely that God is working within us. God loves us with great patience when we cannot respond to his call, when we are cowardly and sorry for ourselves, he purifies conceit and arrogant faith, and strengthens us in the midst of unshakeable trust and hope.

11. Working and Praying to Foster Vocations

As a Priestly, Prophetic and Royal people, through prayer and sacramental activity, evangelization, loving service, the Church fosters vocations to the priesthood and gives service to that end. Each Christian is called within his own Church community to discover his own individual vocation, to respond generously to it, and to work for its establishment and mission. We regularly recite during our common prayer in parishes and religious houses, as well as in our individual prayer, a petition asking for vocations to the priesthood. "The harvest is rich but the laborers are few, so ask the Lord of the harvest..." (Matthew 9:37). Prayer for vocations teaches us that a vocation is something which is initiated by God and brought to fruition by Him. As well as being an earnest prayer for the whole Church prayer for priestly vocations is, at the same time, a prayer asking for determination and enthusiasm in everyone following their individual vocation.

Priests and those in consecrated life need to demonstrate clearly and forthrightly what it means to follow a vocation in a modern context. For this reason they are called upon to live out their own vocation faithfully. As for the lay Christians, so that you can witness to the gospel through your families and work, so that you can have a strong awareness of the particular work of lay Christians in the Church based on the notion 'priesthood of all the faithful' and put that into practice, please continue to take an active part in the liturgy and other prayers, to familiarize yourselves with the Bible, to share your faith with one another and to learn about the faith so as to become an evangelist.

12. Praying for Vocations together with Mary

There can be no vocations to the priesthood without the grace of God. Whilst praying for priestly vocations let us hold fast to our belief that is giving vocations to the Church sufficient to her needs and to our hope that he will give us all the help necessary. The person who more than anyone else, lived out her vocation was the Blessed Virgin Mary. In order that we can imitate the example of Mary whose response was, "I am the handmaid of the Lord.

Be it done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38) we receive abundant graces. As Saint Paul said, we must never waste this grace. We accept that our own existence is of little importance. Nevertheless, whilst acknowledging our limited and deeply sinful existence, God called us with the challenge, “You are the light of the world”. This is not to say that we are to become light by our own power, but that we are to so by reflecting and passing on the light of Christ.

Once again this year we offer the progress of evangelization in Kyoto Diocese to God through the intercession of the Virgin Mary and through Mary the Queen of Peace continue to pray for Peace in this world.

January 1, 2009, Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God

Notes

- (1) A Confessional Room has been completed as the ‘Martyrs Room’ and a picture of the statue of Saint Francis Xavier in the Kobe Museum, a table of the victims of the Great Kyoto Martyrdom, and an etching of Saint Lazarus of Kyoto have been placed in it.
- (2) John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, ‘*Pastores Dabo Vobis*’ (March 25, 1992), 37
- (3) In current Canon Law what used to simply to be called ‘Religious’ are classified according to their membership of ‘Religious Institutes’ and ‘Secular Institutes’, which are collectively referred to as ‘Institutes of Consecrated Life’, or ‘Societies of Apostolic Life’.
- (4) Benedict XVI, sermon at first vespers of the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, June 28, 2008