

CENTENARY OF THE FOUNDATION OF THE DIOCESE OF FUKUOKA

INAUGURAL MASS TO PREPARE FOR THE CELEBRATION OF THE CENTENARY

Dear brothers and sisters,

It is with great joy that we begin today the journey of preparation for the celebration of the centenary of the founding of the diocese of Fukuoka. I would like it to be for each of us a time of deepening our own faith and, for the diocese of Fukuoka, an opportunity to renew the commitment to witness and proclaim the Gospel in this region.

I want to briefly remember the beginnings of our journey as a Christian community in this region. I will do so basically by quoting the description offered to us in the brochure of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan.

“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28: 19). Inspired by these words, St. Francis Xavier came to Japan in 1549 to preach the Gospel. It is said that in 1557 a church was built in Hakata.

St. Francis Xavier is known as the patron of the mission in Japan. For 450 years Japan’s church went through many different stages. Special mention has to be made of the period of the “hidden Christians” and of the miraculous resumption of the evangelization in the early Meiji period (1868-1912). As a result, the Gospel of Jesus Christ has reached us today. During that time some of our brothers and sisters in the faith bore witness to their faith through martyrdom. We cannot forget their testimony. Their martyrdom is the solid foundation on which our diocese is built upon.

After the suppression of Christianity for a period of approximately 250 years, priests began to be sent to Japan by the Paris Foreign Missions Society in 1854, when Japan was opened to the rest of the world. Two years after the so-called “Discovery of Christians” in 1865 at Oura Church in Nagasaki, the Christians of Urakami Church discovered hidden Christians in Imamura in 1867. Once the ban on Christianity was lifted shortly after the start of the Meiji Period in 1873, missionaries from the Paris Foreign Missions Society further developed the churches at Imamura, Amakusa, and Madara Island, and the churches in Fukuoka, Kokura, Kurume, Saga, Kumamoto, Hitoyoshi, and other locations were established and grew.

From around 1889, Sisters from the Congregation des Soeurs de l’Enfant-Jesus de Chauffailles, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres, and other missionaries

were sent to the diocese. Their contribution through social welfare and educational activities was extremely relevant.

The Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (currently known as the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples) established the Fukuoka diocese (including the five prefectures of Fukuoka, Saga, Oita, Miyazaki, and Kumamoto) on July 16, 1927. The first bishop was the Most Rev. Fernand Thiry, a member of the Paris Foreign Missions Society. At the time there are thought to have been approximately 7,900 Christians in the diocese. In the following year, 1928, Miyazaki and Oita prefectures were separated from the Fukuoka diocese and constituted as an apostolic prefecture.

Since that moment 97 years have passed. During these years, through the work of lay people, religious, priests and bishops, the church has grown, and the light of the Gospel has shined in this region. I am sure that many of you will remember various moments of this history. We have received a precious inheritance. We feel deeply grateful to those who have starred in this history. As indicated in the Pastoral Plan: We look back on the road traveled by the community of the diocese of Fukuoka with **gratitude**. We are encouraged by the **passion** that is communicated to us when we are touched by the Gospel, and that inspires us to look at the future with **hope**. **“Gratitude,” “passion,” and “hope”** are the lights that will guide us on our journey. These are the words that I would like all of us bear in our hearts during our three-year journey.

The readings we have just heard reach our hearts. I would like to receive them as words of Jesus addressed to each one of us. Jesus sends his disciples. It is a fact that all the gospels record. Jesus' words were deeply imprinted in the hearts of the disciples. Jesus gives “power” to his disciples, but it is not a power to dominate, but to free people from the power of evil, from “unclean spirits” as it is literally said. To do this they don't need to own many things. All that is needed is a deep trust in God and a great love for the people.

Fidelity to these words of Jesus has made possible the growth of the church and its expansion throughout the world. Both the missionaries and those who received baptism did not hesitate to reach out, like Jesus, to the people sharing their joys and sufferings. Through this sharing many people experienced God's love and found healing and hope in it. Together with the other members of the community, they participated in the thanksgiving prayer, and found in each one of them a brother and a sister. As Saint Paul writes, “God the Father has blessed us in Christ with all kinds of spiritual blessings.”

However, we must also recognize that, along this path, there have been moments in which, moving away from the Gospel, we have assumed selfish attitudes, we have made decisions based only on our own interests, we have not been able to look at those who were marginalized or, there have even been occasions when we have wounded other people. We want to ask forgiveness from God and from those who were negatively affected by our attitudes and decisions and implore the necessary strength to be faithful to the Gospel. Our journey of preparation for the celebration of the centenary of the founding of the diocese has also a penitential dimension.

Full of gratitude for having encountered Jesus, let us follow the path of the Gospel. Let us share with other people the joy with which we have been graced in the encounter with Jesus. There are those who think that they are not qualified to do it. We should meditate on the response of the prophet Amos to those who wanted to stop him of doing his mission: "I was no prophet, neither did I belong to the brotherhoods of prophets. I was a shepherd and looked after sycamores. But it was the Lord who said, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel'."

The Lord also calls us and sends us. He calls us to live as true disciples of Jesus and entrusts us with the mission of proclaiming the Gospel. Let us respond to this mission supporting each other. Today we will pray together with all the brothers and sisters of the diocese of Fukuoka the prayer for the centenary. Let us ask the Lord to bless our journey.

Merciful Father,
we thank you for having sustained
the journey of our diocese during these 100 years.
Confident in your love and guided by your Spirit,
we want to continue bearing the light of the Gospel.
Bless us and guide our journey.
We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.