

## **Centenary of the Diocese of Fukuoka**

### **Mass Marking the Start of the Third Year of Preparation**

**Liturgy for the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**First Reading:** Isaiah 55:10-11

**Second Reading:** Letter to the Romans 8:18-23

**Gospel: Matthew:** 13:1-23

We are going to start the final year of preparation for the centenary celebration of the Diocese of Fukuoka. How has our journey been so far? What blessings have we received? Have we grown in our awareness of belonging to this diocesan community? We have walked these three years guided by the theme chosen for each year.

Has communion within the parish community been strengthened by our efforts regarding the first year's theme? In the second year, the theme was "building a church open to the future." Have we been able to hear the voices of children at our celebrations once again? They are a fundamental part of this "family of faith" that is the parish community. We are happy to see young people participating in various activities. Have we felt enriched by the presence of brothers and sisters from other countries and cultures? How has this contact helped us broaden our own horizons? The period of preparation for the centenary celebration is a time of grace. However, we must accept this grace that God grants us with an open heart and respond to it in concrete ways.

As stated in the Diocesan 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 encounter the Gospel, and we are therefore inspired to continue on our journey with **hope**. **Gratitude**, **passion**, and **hope** are the lights that guide us on our journey". These are three words I would like us to keep firmly in mind. These three sentiments are expressed in the prayer for the centenary we have been reciting for the past two years. Today, as we recite this prayer, I ask you to reflect deeply on these three points.

The Gospel passage proclaimed today illuminates our path. It is the well-known "parable of the Sower," which reflects Jesus' own experience. Beginning with chapter 5, the Evangelist Matthew describes Jesus' activities. He tells us how Jesus tirelessly proclaimed

the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, offered liberation and healing to many, and welcomed everyone with deep love—even those considered "sinners." Yet, the responses Jesus encountered varied. Many listened to his message with joy, and some followed him. The political and religious leaders, however, opposed Jesus and even plotted to kill him. We are also told that members of Jesus' own family tried to put a stop to his work. We can imagine that there were those who listened to Jesus' words but did not embrace the path he showed them. As the parable illustrates, there were seeds that fell along the path, seeds whose growth was hindered by weeds, seeds that withered quickly due to shallow soil, and also seeds that bore fruit. When Jesus withdrew to pray in secluded places, he surely reflected on his daily experiences, feeling both joy for the seeds that fell on fertile ground and sadness for those that were lost. Nevertheless, he never stopped sowing. Jesus was convinced that this was the Father's will and precisely what the people he met each day needed.

Upon their return home, the disciples asked for an explanation of the parable. It is not common in the Gospels for Jesus to explain parables. It is said that the background to this explanation lies in the experience of the early Christian communities. The community's witness and the missionaries' work did not always yield the expected results; the anticipated harvest was not always reaped. Consequently, the communities had to recall Jesus' words and seek the light they needed within them. Certainly, some sown seeds did not bear the expected fruit. Nevertheless, the early communities rejoiced to see many people experience the joy of salvation through their encounter with Jesus. Others, however, did not dare to take the next step for various reasons: a superficial understanding of the Gospel message, attachment to riches, fear of persecution, and other difficulties. Yet, the members of the early Christian communities **did not stop sowing**. Through the witness of the early Christian communities and the work of missionaries, many people received the Gospel message and embraced a new way of life. We can consider ourselves the fruit of that missionary activity.

In our current context, two thousand years later, we need to listen attentively to these words of Jesus. We may feel discouraged when we see that our activities do not yield the expected fruit. We must not lose heart; we are called to continue sowing the seed of the Gospel, sharing the grace of faith we have received. This is God's will and what people need. As stated in the first reading from the prophet Isaiah: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there without first watering the earth, making it fertile and causing it to sprout... so shall the word that goes forth from my

mouth be: it shall not return to me without result, but shall do my will and fulfill its mission." It is a message we cannot forget.

The theme for the third year of preparation for the diocese's centenary is: **"We want to be an outreaching Church sharing the journey with those who experience marginalization and striving to bear witness to and proclaim the Gospel to all."**

To achieve this, the Pastoral Plan outlines three priorities:

The first is: **"To meditate on and share the Word of God, which is the source sustaining the journey of an outreaching Church."** In other words, it is about deepening the experience of faith. If the fire of the Gospel does not burn in our hearts, we will never feel the desire to share its light. When we share the joy of faith, that joy does not diminish; rather, it grows and increases. I ask every parish and community to create a space for sharing the Word of God or a Bible study group. I ask parishes and communities where such groups already exist to try to increase the number of participants and deepen that experience. And I also ask parishes that do not yet have such programs to do their utmost to create them.

The second priority is: **"To create opportunities for others to encounter the Gospel."** While the witness of a Christian life on the part of each individual is fundamental, concrete efforts to proclaim it are also necessary. Especially in the modern era, there are many possibilities, including through digital media. However, I would like you to consider the following: Have you ever invited someone to the church? What prompted you to do so? What did you find difficult? Extending a concrete invitation to others is essential for evangelization. At the same time, both the priest and the community must be ready to warmly welcome those who arrive. Let us strive in this area during the coming year.

The third priority is: **"To work, through a wide variety of activities, to create a society that responds to God's plan for humanity."** While there are activities carried out in the name of the Church, our collaboration in activities organized by other groups working for human rights, peace, care for the poor, and so forth, is also very important. Both are significant. If we look at reality through the eyes of faith and relate to people with a heart like Jesus', the desire to create a society where every individual is respected as a child of God and lives in harmony with others will naturally arise within us. At the same time, it is natural to feel deep pain when we see the dignity of human beings—created in God's image—being trampled upon. We are called to support and act on behalf of those who

suffer in various ways in today's society. This is an important aspect of the Church's mission.

I would like each parish, group, or community to consider how it can address these priorities. Let us try to determine a concrete course of action. It does not matter if the initiative is small.

Our efforts may not yield the expected fruits but let us not cease sowing; let us fulfill the mission Jesus entrusted to us. This will prepare us to celebrate our centenary in a meaningful way. May this third year of preparation be a time of grace.