

# Catholic Sendai Diocese Newsletter

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Catholic Sendai Diocese

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## Listen to the New Wind

### On the Occasion of the Ordination of Bishop Daisuke Narui

Fr. Shiro Komatsu



*Bishop Narui who was ordained on September 22, 2020 worked for 3 years as director of the Sendai Support Center after the Great East Japan Earthquake.*

Wind is a mysterious reality. We feel it but we cannot grasp it. It can be soft. It can be strong. It can be hot. It can be cold. It can bring the change of seasons. It can carry the Covid-19 or other viruses. Where does it come from? Where does it go? This is beyond our control.

The Bible says that God can make His presence felt through a gentle breeze. A breath of air and a breeze are appropriate images of the Holy Spirit. Recently, a new wind had blown with the

ordination of Father Daisuke Narui as the new bishop of Niigata. This wind carried a great grace for the Japanese Church. Hopefully, a similar wind will blow for the Sendai Diocese.

## Report from the Presbyterium of Sendai Diocese

Fr. Tsutomu Itagaki

Pope Francis accepted the resignation of Bishop Hiraga on March 18. Until a new bishop is nominated, Fr. Shiro Komatsu was appointed as the administrator of the diocese. When the resignation of a bishop becomes effective automatically, the presbyterian council and the pastoral council are dissolved. But in order to take necessary decisions an advising committee was formed to support the administrator. Nine priests are members of this committee: 8 pastoral district leaders plus 1 representative of the diocesan priests.

Since April, the advising committee meets each month to evaluate the situation of the diocese, to exchange views and to discuss about decisions which must be taken at the diocesan level, the pastoral district level and the parish level. The committee also exchanges information about priests working in the diocese to develop our pastoral ministries.

Until now, the main points of reflection were about the Covid-19, matters related to the diocese and the pastoral for foreigners. Concerning the assignment of priests, the ongoing policy is to make assignments only in case of extreme necessity.

Ten years have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake and the diminution of the number of priests, religious and faithful constitutes a great challenge which must be urgently addressed. The advising committee united in prayer continues the journey with the faithful towards the future in line with the entrusted responsibility.

## The Apostolic Nuncio in Japan, Archbishop Joseph Chennoth Passed Away

Sr. Masako Hasegawa, FSP

On September 8 at 1:29 a.m., Archbishop Joseph Chennoth died in Seibo Hospital, Tokyo. On May 8, he lost consciousness in the aftermath of brain hemorrhage. Archbishop Chennoth served as a Nuncio in Japan for almost 9 years since October 20, 2011. His funeral mass was celebrated in Tokyo St. Mary's Cathedral by Archbishop Mitsuaki Takami of Nagasaki, president of the



Catholic Bishop Conference of Japan. After the funeral, in accordance with the protocol for diplomats who die in Japan during diplomatic duty, a guard of honor dispatched by the Self Defense Force bade farewell to the Nuncio. The remains of Archbishop Chennoth were transferred to India, his home country.

## Safety and Spirituality: Youth Gathering in the Midst of Pandemic

Clarita "Claire" Sanchez

Probably, the byword in year 2020 is "social distancing". In this time of Covid-19 pandemic when we are asked to distance ourselves from each other, we crave for connection. This phenomenon brings a greater level of anxiety and difficulty especially for young people. The challenge of the youth ministry of the church today is, how do we connect with the youth without gathering?

There were some initiatives done on how to connect with others, like online meetings, lectures, and masses. Besides, you can find many resources online on how to keep the faith of each Christian alive in this time of pandemic. In spite of the different creative ways of making connections, the youth still feel the need to meet in-person.



Monica Ono, the youth leader of Sendai Church, together with Fr. Ferdie (Youth Minister of Sendai Diocese) and other members of the youth community gathered on August to talk about animating the faith of the young people in the midst of pandemic and thereafter. There were several suggestions and discussions. But the general sentiment of the community was to treat safety as equally important as spirituality. For the time being, the community decided to hold a monthly mass taking in consideration the precautionary measures (set by Sendai Diocese) to prevent the spread of Covid-19 virus.

On August 22, 2020, 4th Saturday of the month at 2:00 p.m., the youth community of Sendai church started the monthly mass. Singing was not allowed during the mass. Nevertheless, there were different musical instruments played like the saxophone, recorder and guitar.



*According to St. Augustine, "to sing is to pray twice" . But, listening to the saxophone, guitar, and recorder being played at mass was like praying thrice.*

The following month's youth mass, the number of participants has increased a bit. In the recent meeting, which was participated in by several foreign youth, the community felt the need to continue to discern on what else to do in the future to increase the number of youth member in the church, to strengthen their faith and to deepen their missionary call as Christian. For that reason, we came up with the following activities in the coming months: 1.) In October, the youth will celebrate the month of Rosary by doing the Vietnamese tradition of offering flowers to Mary. 2.) In November, we will offer the mass to our dearly departed. 3.) In December, we will celebrate Christmas Mass and meaningful gathering while keeping in mind the safety measures.

In this time of pandemic, one thing is certain, if there is going to be normal place for the youth, it should be their church.

### **Vietnamese Eucharistic Celebration in Sendai Diocese** Clarita "Claire" Sanchez

According to Statista Research Department (SRD), in 2018, about 330,000 Vietnamese were living in Japan. And, a good number of them are Catholic Christians.

Newsreports pointed out that the number of Vietnamese entering Japan in order to work as trainees or technical interns significantly increased in recent years. While some of them have fulfilled a better life, others have experienced challenges leading to death, crimes, and suicide.

One of the aims of the Sendai Diocese Support Center for Foreigners (SDSCF), which echoes the words of Bishop Stephen Fumio Hamao' s "Seeking the Kingdom of God which transcends difference in nationality" (March 1993), that these immigrants are brothers and sisters in Christ. This means that we do not merely welcome them, but strive to build up a community that respects differences, thereby witnessing to society at large the universality of the church. In this regard, the Sendai Diocese has initiated some steps in creating a welcoming environment for foreigners.



For the past years, Fr. Peter Maria Nguyen Huu Hien from Tokyo would come quarterly to Sendai Cathedral to celebrate Vietnamese Mass that are often attended by about 200 Vietnamese. This year, we are happy to welcome in our diocese Fr. John Tran Nam Phong, a Vietnamese priest from the Society of the Divine Word (SVD). Fr. Phong does not only presides Holy Mass at Sendai Cathedral. But he goes around the different parishes of the diocese to bring the Eucharist where the Vietnamese are present. Last August 23, he presided the mass in Nodamachi Church in Fukushima which was full-packed. The same reception was received by the Vietnamese parishioners in Morioka where he presided the mass in July 26, August 3 and October 15 and in Hachinohe in October 25. Though, it wasn' t the same in Hirosaki because of the sudden spate of Covid-19 infection in the area. Fr. Phong is expected to celebrate masses again in Morioka on November 3, in Fukushima Prefecture next year on January 24, 2021 in Koriyama, and other prefectures of the diocese.



The Vietnamese celebration of the Eucharist in different parishes of the diocese is a means to help the Vietnamese be part in the church community so that they will be freer to collaborate with the parish priest in their area. This is just a small step in bringing together the different nationalities to become one church. We still have a long way to go to realize "the Kingdom of God which transcends difference in nationalities".



## News from the Presbyterium



**Fr. Francis Xavier Kenji Yokojima** passed away on July 13, 2020 at the age of 81.



**Fr. Charles-Aime Bolduc, MEG** celebrated his golden jubilee of priestly ordination on May 24, 2020 but the celebration in Nodamachi and Matsukicho parishes were postponed until September 5 and 6 due to Covid-19.



**Fr. Setsurou Horie, SJ** celebrated his golden jubilee of priestly ordination on March 14.

## Patrick Castroverde, CICM

### Religious:

CICM (Congregation of Immaculate Heart of Mary)

### Birthday:

November 5, 1979

### Birthplace:

Oslob, Cebu

### Diaconate Ordination:

November 15, 2008 – Kurashiki Church (Hiroshima Diocese)

### Priesthood Ordination:

May 16, 2009 – Immaculate Conception Parish (Oslob, Cebu)



### Vocation Story

The first time I heard the word “priest” was when I was in grade 6. It was the moment during the priesthood ordination and reception of a Vincentian priest. I was completely unaware of what was going on why a large number of people gathering, making so many noises, and grandiosely celebrating with one another. Nevertheless, I found myself there until the end of the party. But when I curiously asked to one person and he replied: “it’ s an ordination, so let’ s celebrate!” It was only then I knew that the person, who was just ordained, happened to be not only my neighbor but my close relative as well. From then on, this memorable festivity kept flashing my mind until I reached senior high school, with a strong desire of becoming a “priest- like- him” . Before entering college, I had an ambition to work abroad in the future. Then, I thought: “if I’ d become a missionary, then I could go.” So, I decided to enter in CICM, a religious and a missionary congregation, at the age of 16. I was sent as an “Intern” to Japan in 2005. Now I am working in a widely situated 3rd district (Iwate Prefecture) of Sendai Diocese.

## Contribution to the Diocese of Sendai

As a missionary, I had given a chance to work in Hiroshima and Osaka Diocese. The most important thing I have learned in my experiences in the field is “journeying with the people” whether in times of joy and pain. This service of journeying is really like a gospel - “good news” to them that will certainly be felt in their hearts. With this, I will willingly share to the people the gifts and the mission that God has entrusted to me through my priesthood ministry. Having given an opportunity to journey and work with the people in my missionary life, I have realized that instead of teaching them, they are the ones teaching me a lot. For instance, I, together with some parishioners, opened up a course for the catechumens starting last year. As a result, there were 5 adults and 4 children who finally received the sacrament of baptism this year, despite the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. I believe that their support and efforts have really come to fruition and it seems that the “joy of the gospel” has circulated throughout the whole church. From now on, I want to journey more and work together with the people so that the fruit of evangelization may bear abundantly.

### Hope and vision for the Parishioners

I had been appointed as Osaka JOC collaborator for six years. “JOC” is widely known as YCW (Young Christian Workers). As a collaborator, I had the chance to attend many international and domestic gatherings. Through this gathering, I was able to encounter energetic young people and to see from my naked eyes their harsh situation and way of living. It is a pity that I could not still see the faces of young people in our church today. Sometimes, I murmur to myself when I look at the crowd without the youth and children during the holy mass, “what a lonely place” ! It is a fact that the foreigners, particularly the trainees from Vietnam, outnumber the local youth of the churches of the 3rd district I am presently working now. I feel that the spirit and energy of these lively young Vietnamese always overflow the church with mostly old people. I would say that through their religiosity and enthusiasm, the church has come to life. If possible, I will work together with the parishioners to find means and ways on how to contact and relate not only the young trainees but also the Japanese youth. Let us together build a “place” for them so they can feel at home in the church!

## Fr. Miguel Angel Varela Chavez, MG

### Vocation Story



I don’ t have a very striking vocation story. I happened to grow up in a devote Christian family. My father, who was deeply faithful, played an important role in molding my Christian values. We would go to Sunday mass regularly. At an early age, I thought that it was worth to work in the church. As a member of the acolyte (altar boys), one of the activities

was visiting different seminary congregations in the area. We visited the Guadalupe Mission Society and I was struck by a missionary priest who was assigned to Korea. While I was participating in the pre-seminary activities with the Guadalupe congregation, we had three-week mission activities to their different apostolate area. So, I decided to join the Guadalupe Mission., I entered the minor seminary at the age of 13 in 1965. I enjoyed the seminary life. In order for me to grow more as a missionary, I was sent to Japan in February 1976. I took Japanese language study with the Jesuit and entered the Catholic Seminary in Tokyo. But I was ordained as a priest in Mexico in 1982. I spent 4 years in Mexico to work for vocation. I came back in Japan in 1986. I have been in Japan for about 30 years. I have been assigned in different parishes in Fukushima prefecture for 10 years, Iwate prefecture for 8 years. Now, I am assigned in Hirosaki, Aomori Prefecture.

### **Contribution to the Diocese of Sendai**

I have been in Japan for 30 years and I have seen the growing consumerism and the advancement of sophisticated technology. In a way, this kind of development has created convenience in the Japanese society. However, the other side of this development is the strong sense of independence that brings into being an individualistic attitude. It is in this area where I want to emphasize the need to form a Catholic Christian Community. A community that is centered around the life and teachings of Jesus. A praying community that recognizes the presence of God' s grace and love in every moment of one' s lives through the sacraments.

### **Hope and Vision for Parishioners**

This is also my hope in the different parishes in Sendai Diocese that we will work interdependently to become one church. Let us create a diocesan community, not only the local church community. Let us try to go beyond our borders and embrace the differences of the others, especially now that there are many foreigners working in Japan. Let us try to make a community, be part of the community and be a community. Let us try to be creative in letting people be in touch with the church community that is centered on Jesus' life and teachings. Let us make these people feel proud of their faith in Jesus. I know that the diocese has started working together as one church community, we just need to strengthen it by cooperating and participating in building a Catholic Christian Community.

### **Fr. John Tran Nam Phong, SVD**

I am John Tran Nam Phong. I was born in 29th of July. I was ordained as a priest of the Society of Divine Word (SVD) on the 27th of December 2018. I was sent for mission to Japan in 2nd of May 2019. My motivation to become a priest started when I was junior high school. At that time, my parish priest was hospitalized for years due to some serious illness. So, we didn' t have any masses. Then and there, I thought I should have been

a priest so that I can celebrate the mass while our parish priest is not around. That desire to be a priest stayed in my mind until I became a missionary priest of the SVD. Thanks to the grace of God.



After a year of studying Japanese language at Nagoya City, I was assigned to Sendai Diocese. It' s been half a year since I arrived in Sendai. My first two months were spent during lockdown because Covid-19 pandemic. It was a good chance for me to get adjusted because everything around me was new. Like, in

Sendai Diocese, a priest is not assigned to a particular parish. The priests work as a team and live together as a community. But, with the help of my SVD confreres and the other priests in the diocese, I am getting acquainted with the pastoral ministry. This is a big opportunity for me to get to know more about the parishioner' s culture, belief system, challenges in life and their expectations towards the priest.

The number of parishioners in Sendai Diocese is decreasing and most of them are aging. Because of the decline, few children and youth are coming to church and participate in the church activities. I felt sad with my first impression. But when I started working, I recognized that the God of love is still working mysteriously in the church to make it more active and alive.

In the recent years, the number of foreign workers, students, and migrants are increasing rapidly. Many of them are Catholic Christians. I believe they are bringing the Japanese church a new perspective. This is an actual miraculous action of God happening.

There are many young Vietnamese Catholics living and working in Sendai whose age ranges from 20 to 30 years old. They are actively going to church. However, the issue I see among them is their difficulty to integrate in their local churches because of the Japanese language and culture. I hope that the parishes where they belong can help them integrate in the church i.e. how to adapt well to the local church culture and tradition and at the same time not losing the Vietnamese ways of practicing their faith.

As a missionary, I thank God' s grace for the opportunity in working together with the priests of Sendai Diocese, serving the people of Sendai. There are still a lot of challenges ahead of us especially we are facing the Covid-19 pandemic right now. But together as one church of the Sendai Diocese and as a people of God we can find comfort in the prayer of St. Teresa of Avila: *"Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing make you upset. Everything changes. God alone is unchanging. With patience, all things are possible. Whoever has God lacks nothing. God alone is enough."*