

A Message from the new Bishop of Saitama

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Episcopal ordination: 24 September 2018

"May we become one body, one spirit in Christ"
(The Third Eucharistic Prayer)

1. First of all, thank you from all my heart! And I ask for your blessing for me.

I am very happy to be able to communicate with each of you through this letter. As Pope Francis did in his first greeting from the balcony of St. Peter's on the night of his election, 13 March 2013, I also ask each of you for your prayer for me and for my part I send you my blessing. From today on let us not stop praying for each other.

In this first letter from me as Bishop of Saitama, I would like to share with you my brief and yet complex history that the Lord of life has been weaving throughout my 62 years of life. I will try to do it with a biblical key of the Exodus, that has been for me the access door to understand the Sacred Scripture incarnated in the history of humanity.

I have been basting this narrative with my friends and acquaintances in Argentina where I have lived for 33 years (1964-1997). Also, my Spanish has typical expressions of the Argentine mountains and plains, but I desire this sharing will be well conveyed to everyone who reads its translation of different languages.

2. A life forged by its exoduses

In life we have exoduses that furrow and mark our existence. In my case the first one was in 1964, when I was 8 and a half years old, when my parents decided to emigrate to the other side of the globe from Japan, taking along me and my four younger brothers, among whom the youngest was only a year and a half old. The second was, no doubt, in 1997, when I returned to Japan thinking my stay would be only for one year, but it has continued to this day. And the third exodus is about to begin now that it throws me into a broader ecclesial horizon as a Salesian bishop: with fear but trust in the mercy of God I'm stepping forward.

2. 1. First exodus: together with my parents and brothers (Gen. 12:1)

After quite a long walk as a priest since my ordination on December 21, 1984, in San Juan, Argentina, I read a small book entitled "Abraham and Sara" by Carlos Mesters, a Carmelite missionary in Brazil, who made me understand what it is that I had moved, and above all, that my father had undertaken such a crazy adventure to emigrate to Argentina when the situation in Japan was already stabilizing. In the face of opposition from all the relatives, only Don Cesare Secchi, an Italian missionary, told him: "If it is the will of God, go with trust in the protection of the Virgin Mary".



I remember what my mother has shared several times with me, especially the dark moments when my family lived in the second town to settle, Media Agua. From there you could see the Andes Mountains with its highest peak, Aconcagua. My mother told me: "Your father is a man of faith. I believe in the strength of God who acts in him. I trust his dream to live and raise you children in Argentina. It is also God's dream for our family." This was told to me by my mother several times.



And what was the core of the faith that had moved my father to emigrate to such a distant land? It was nothing less than an experience similar to that of Abraham when he heard the voice spoken to him: "Get out of your land and go to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). And so with a very big utopian vision in mind we left the Port of Kobe on 31 May 1964, stopping by at Yokohama and Los Angeles, passing through the Panama Canal, steering a course along Venezuela, Brazil and Uruguay, and reached the Port of Buenos Aires on 21 July of the same year.

Mafequín (Córdoba, 1984-1991)

I received the priestly ordination at the Cathedral of San Juan on 21 December 1984, and was sent to the post-novitiate community of Miguel Rua as a catechist. While teaching theology there, I visited a neighborhood of the San Juan Bosco parish called Mafequín every weekend. Since there was no chapel at that time, thanks to the principal of the school we used its classrooms and courtyards for catechesis and mass. There I learned to be a shepherd of people ... so many stories to tell ... for example, the oratory on

Saturday and the snacks, masses in the inner courtyard as well as outside because sometimes the people did not fit, the processions on neighborhood streets and small altars in front of the houses (I even had to get on a horse because a donkey had escaped!), the gift of lands for the grotto and the chapel, and the names of those boys who are now at least 35 to 45 or 50, others who have already passed into eternity ... All have been my good brothers, fathers and mothers and also children ... I have a great dream to go back there one day to be with them even for a few hours to give thanks to God for the time that he made me spend in Mafequín, to pray for those who already rest in eternal life, to embrace each one of them, and to pray together a Hail Mary in front of the grotto ... to cry together with joy for the beginning of the community "Mary of Nazareth" ... Yes, if you make a list of all of them for me, even if it turns out to be several pages long, I'd like to read out their names and present them to the Lord in the Mass that I will be celebrating from now until the episcopal ordination.



Of course, we do not have five-star hotels in the diocese of Saitama, but we do have "a-thousand-star" houses that they all fit, even if they are like sardines in cans, with some sleeping bags for the Salesians, the diocese wants to be a house with open doors ... also with the screen windows to keep out mosquitos ... well, if they are bitten by mosquitos, then they cannot return to Argentina, because these mosquitos transmit a great love for Japan and Saitama ... well, they will always be welcome.

In La Plata and Buenos Aires (1991-1997)

In 1991, halfway through the year, I had to move from Córdoba to La Plata because the Salesian provincials of Argentina and Paraguay (6 provinces in total) had thought that I could succeed Fr. Agustín Radrizzani, novice master, who had just been appointed bishop of Neuquén as successor to Monsignor Jaime De Nevares.

The following year we began the novitiate by moving to the former novitiate at Ramos Mejía, in Buenos Aires Province. It is in José Vespignani House, next to Wilfrid Baron School where Pope Francis boarded in his sixth grade in 1949.

In mid-year 1996 I began to feel a voice to come back to Japan, but without having anything clear ... Besides, in 1986 I changed my nationality from Japanese to Argentine, so I thought that the return to my homeland would be only for a year as what we call "sabbatical year".

3. 2. Second exodus: emigrant immigrating from Argentina to Japan

The second exodus, I think, was my return to Japan on 27 February 1997. I was 42 years old. I took the first steps into Japan as an Argentine with a Japanese face. You can imagine how perplexed the Japanese felt about hearing me speak Japanese so badly... It was a slow death, not entirely, to my "second self" conformed in Argentina. I remember very well that I had to answer a question as I was about to finish the one year stay at my home province of Oita: do I have to go back to Argentina? Everyone told me, "It's up to you." When the year passed, I got a three years of visa at the immigration office. In this time of desert I would sing "Wayfarer, there is no way. Make your way by going farther" written by Antonio Machado, and read the book by Carlos González Vallés, a missionary in India whose books in Spanish were widely read in Argentina, and whom I myself heard directly at the Marist Hall in Buenos Aires: "As we walk, we make our way. The art of living the present."

Then throughout these 20 years in Japan I was retrieving the deep resonances in me through reading various Argentine authors such as Mamerto Menapace, Castellani, Atahualpa, Leopoldo Marechal, José R. Pérez with his thesis on "Faith Seeking Understanding," as well as listening to the guitar music of Eduardo Falú and the bandoneon of Astor Piazzolla.

Among the philosophers' works are the booklet titled "The Methodical Realism" by Etienne Gilson, "The End of Modern Times" by Romano Guardini, "Only Love Is Worthy of Faith" by von Balthasar, spiritual writings of Karl Rahner, "The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church" by V. Messori, the little booklet of E. Schillebeckx, "Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God", and "Jesus Today" by A. Nolan, etc.

And the books translated from Japanese into Spanish: novels, stories, essays, theses ... I've been devouring them throughout these 20 years. I started with Endo Shusaku, then read Oe Kenzaburo, Kawabata Yasunari, Mishima Yukio, Natsume Soseki and ... even Murakami Haruki. On the occasion of the beatification of Takayama Ukon I obtained the essays that investigate how was Japan was in the 16th century during the Age of Exploration starting from Iberian Peninsula, etc. They are a wonderful treasure, but unfortunately almost inaccessible to me in the original Japanese language.

2. 3. **Third exodus: "To be a shepherd with the smell of sheep" (Pope Francis)**

When I was called a few days ago by the Apostolic Nuncio, the Most Reverend Joseph Chennoth, I thought that he wanted me to take care of someone from overseas as I did with the visit of his family from Kerala the week before.

As soon as he saw me with his usual smile, he asked me how the work of the Salesian province in Japan is going. I commented that we were in full reorganization with much effort to face difficulties. Then he told me that from now on I have to assume another service for the Church, that Pope Francis has appointed me as bishop of the diocese of Saitama, which has been without a bishop since the middle of 2013 due to the resignation of Bishop Tani and administrated by Archbishop Okada as diocesan administrator. The Nuncio reminded me of the Gospel passage we had read at the morning Mass: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" And he repeated it twice as if he were Jesus himself. At the end, he gave me 4 blank pages and asked me to write the acceptance of the appointment to the Pope. The Nuncio would return in 10 minutes to receive the signed letter and send it to Rome.

While the Nuncio was speaking to me, I received a special strength, thanks to the open shutters of the window that overlooked the garden: I saw the white statue of Mary Help of Christians donated by Don Aldo Cipriani when he was either the provincial or a treasurer. I asked for her protection with all my confidence and began to write to the Pope:

"Dear Holy Father, Pope Francis"

... I am nothing but a son of Don Bosco who immigrated to Argentina as a child in 1964. I became a naturalized Argentine citizen in 1986 so I could officially teach at schools. While I was in Ramos Mejía after 1992, I only knew your name, especially your presence in San Cayetano (Liniers, Buenos Aires) where you went as archbishop on 7 August every year to be with the people who made long lines to ask for work at the holy site; and above all, I heard of your visits to the Basilica of Mary Help of Almagro; I was told by my colleague at the novitiate, Fr. José Repovz, who was the pastor of San Carlos parish until his death on 20 April 2014, and I know about the letters that you sent to Fr. Cayetano Bruno several times ... They were conversations with the Holy Father sharing spontaneously and asking for his blessing to the whole world. In the end, I feel totally unworthy of this pastoral service, but if it is your wish, your blessing is enough for me to humbly accept this



work as a shepherd.

4. **An extensive, wonderful, and unknown field for me**

The Salesians have no presence beyond the north of Tokyo, therefore neither in the diocese of Saitama. But there are undoubtedly not a few Salesian alumni and friends there. In addition, I have never lived in any of the four prefectures that make up this diocese: Saitama, Gunma, Tochigi and Ibaraki. The total population is a little over 14 million, and the number of Catholics totals 21,593, that is to say, it represents only 0.15% in the area of 22,647 square kilometers. But to our surprise, if we count the number of foreigners living in the diocese, thinking that most of them are Catholics, the number could exceed 100,000; and even more, if we include those who are Buddhists, Shintoists and believers of other religions and in some way live the Gospel values, being supportive and merciful as Jesus sends to us, the number of Christians could increase considerably more.

217 consecrated persons (priests, permanent deacons, seminarians, religious men and women) are members of the Catholic community of Saitama Diocese. And among the consecrated and lay people there are people of different nationalities: Japanese, Koreans, Brazilians, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Peruvians, Americans, Indonesians, etc. Some non-Japanese people have lived in these prefectures for 20 years, 30 years, or more. Therefore, some of their children hardly speak their mother tongue. The number of trainees who have come to Japan as the Land of promise is also growing, and despite their many efforts they are suffering and going through very difficult times. As Pope Francis asks, we have to be a more "Samaritan Church" to immigrants, the elderly, and children who have difficulties in family and at school. We also have to be a Church that attracts young people living in Japan.

In this diocese there are 54 parishes in 11 blocks served by 51 priests and 5 permanent deacons. We have 4 religious orders and missionaries for men and 17 for women. There are 29 religious communities in total. As a Church that evangelizes by education, we have 19 kindergartens and day-care centers, 4 junior and senior high schools, 5 welfare facilities for children, 2 nursing homes and 5 retreat houses, etc. Therefore, my wish in the first year as bishop is to try to visit all the parishes and religious communities, not via e-mails but directly, "face to face," and to have updated photos that help me memorize the faces and their names as soon as possible .

In the prefectures that make up the diocese there also are many Buddhist temples that are places of prayer and pilgrimage, Shinto shrines inserted in

the depths of nature as well as in the villages; there are Protestant churches, too ... They are all no doubt very valuable wealth spiritually, religiously and ethically that we must share fraternally.

In this diocese there are internationally famous cities such as Tsukuba with Tsukuba Space Center for scientific space research, Hitachi which is a symbol of the creation of electronic systems that continues to dazzle the world, and Nikko with its Shinto shrine visited by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims and tourists from all over the world.

5. Conclusion: Be witnesses to the Risen Jesus as a community of believers

Some of the messages the Nuncio emphasized in our conversation have been kept in my heart: in the diocese of Saitama, 75% or more of the whole Catholic population are migrant workers and many of them have been working in Japan for 20 years or more. And lately the "trainee workers," who come for a 3 to 5 year contract through agencies, are growing in number. The most numerous are Vietnamese. Another challenge is the vitalization of the charisms of the religious congregations that have already prophetically enriched the diocese and are seeking new vocations locally and internationally. And another great challenge is the dialogue with the ecclesial movements and their possible integration under the guidance and authority of the local bishop.

The diocesan community possesses the greatest treasure in the plurality of its members. Just as Pope Francis insists that "time is greater than space" ("Evangelii Gaudium" 222), in the vast geographical field of the diocese it is necessary to exercise the discernment of signs of the times that God gives to us, so that we are authentic witnesses to the Risen Jesus in the midst of Japanese society. Just as the first Christians lived and gave witness with joy in a world that did not know Jesus or Christianity, so we also live in this time as "Witnesses to the Risen Jesus," forming a community open to the poor and the most needy in this society.

Let us remember the testimony that the Acts of the Apostles left for our vision: "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all

the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2: 42-47).

May Mary, Mother of the Church and also ours, always protect us from the destructive forces of evil and may Saint Joseph, her spouse, guide us in the exercise of service, especially in the care of children, young people and the elderly.

Papa Renato,
Mama Cecilia,
And Brothers :
Rafael, Alfonso.
At Media, Aqua,
Argentina, 1978.



After the First mass together with my parents and brothers (Fr. Angel and Rev. Fidel.).

Cordoba, Argentine, 1984.



Nine brothers with Mom Cecilia.

San Juan, Argentina, 2004



International Festa. Hamamatsu, 2012

