

# The Catholic Approach to Evangelization: NICE

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THE NATIONAL INCENTIVE CONVENTION for Evangelization (NICE) is one of the new movements that has developed within the Japanese Catholic Church in the past decade. It is a movement that is slowly changing the direction of the church in Japan and its way of being in mission. Unfortunately, it is not yet very well understood by the majority of Japanese Catholics. Many of those who have heard the term understand NICE primarily as a series of national meetings convened by the Catholic Church. The use of the word "convention" may contribute to this misunderstanding, but it is important to understand that NICE is primarily a movement or a process and not a series of meetings.

To take an everyday example, Japan and many other countries have a program to encourage and promote safe driving. This program to promote safety-consciousness is an ongoing one and not just a one-time event. Over a period of years, the safe driving program endeavors to change drivers' consciousness. Within this overall program, specific annual campaigns are held to emphasize anew the objective of safe driving. Although the annual campaign may be referred to as "Safe Driving Week," it does not imply that safe driving is of concern for only

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one week. In one sense, NICE is similar to this kind of program. It is an attempt to change the Japanese Catholic consciousness of what it means to be Christian, to be church, and to be missionary in present-day Japan. As a movement NICE began in 1984 with the establishment of the long range goal of changing the consciousness of the entire Japanese Catholic community within the next twenty to thirty years. Gatherings or meetings are to be convened every five to six years in an effort to boost and support this ongoing process of change.

The first such national meeting was held in Kyoto in 1987 and is now referred to as NICE I. The second, NICE II, is to be held in Nagasaki in 1993. The third meeting, still only a dream, is likely to be held sometime around the year 2000.

## THE ROOTS OF NICE

In 1984 at their annual meeting, the Japanese National Catholic Conference of Bishops discussed ways of inspiring Japanese Catholics to build a Christian community that was truly evangelizing and that looked outward into the broader Japanese society. There had been many positive efforts in the past to reach out to Japanese society, but an honest assessment of the situation forced the bishops to conclude that the Catholic Church in Japan was very inward-looking.

The church had focused most of its energy and resources on strengthening the faith of Japanese Catholics. Responding to those in

need, witnessing to Christ by supporting struggling people, speaking words of hope, these aspects of evangelization were only of secondary importance. The challenge that confronted the bishops was how to bring about a change in focus for the Catholic community. It is against this background that NICE can be seen as a movement for the renewal of the Catholic Church in Japan.

Renewal can be understood in many different ways. It may be helpful to use an analogy drawn from everyday life to understand the type of renewal that NICE is aiming at. When a person is ill, he or she will usually consult a doctor for advice. In Japan, a physician will often prescribe various medications to aid recovery. Occasionally, the course of treatment and prescribed medication do not work and the patient's condition worsens. If, when the patient returns for further consultation, the doctor's response is to blame the person for not using the medicine properly, the patient would probably consult another physician. The doctor was not willing to consider, even for a moment, that the medicine prescribed was not having the desired effect. The doctor assumed that the medicine should have worked while the patient was saying that it had no effect in the way and dosage prescribed.

In many instances, the attitude of many Christians towards Japanese society has been similar to the hypothetical doctor's approach. Even before we understand the particular needs of an individual or society, we prescribe a remedy—the Good News of Christ. Like the doctor in the above analogy, Christians have to first learn to listen to the experiences and needs of people in Japanese society and then, perhaps, we will be able to present the Good News in a way that better corresponds to the situation at hand. In prescribing a solution before we even grasp the reality involved, we end up with two different worlds disconnected from each

other. This is the key to understanding how we have operated as Christians. The way the Good News has been presented has been too disconnected from the ordinary life and concerns of people.

It would be a great disservice to distort the Good News of Christ and dilute it so as to make it more acceptable to society. We do need, however, to hear and understand the particular needs and concerns of Japanese society and its members. Then, and only then, will we be able to present the gospel in ways that truly respond to peoples' concerns.

Many of the Catholic bishops at that 1984 meeting felt that to a large extent this was the way in which the Catholic community had been trying to present the Good News here in Japan. They also felt that as a community we needed to learn to listen more to the desires, concerns, and problems of ordinary people, and from that knowledge find ways to present the gospel.

#### BUILDING AN OPEN CHURCH

Because the bishops realized that Christian faith and society were operating on two different levels, they began to hold public hearings to listen to what ordinary Catholics thought about the church and what they were critical of in the church. They wanted to learn how the church did or did not speak to the people's situation, to hear the people's ideas on how to more closely unite faith and daily life, and to discover the people's hopes in regard to the future of the church in Japan. At this initial stage, the bishops placed emphasis on listening in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of what the Catholic community was actually thinking.

Public hearings were held in Tokyo, Osaka, Nagasaki, and Fukuoka with three to four bishops present at each hearing. From these hearings, a very large volume of information was gathered.

The second step was the creation of a preparatory committee to sift through all the information and the main themes and problems. From these deliberations, three main pillars emerged that were identified as the essential foundations for building an open church more in harmony with the actual life situation of people. These pillars were articulated as:

1. Building a church that participated in Japanese society.
2. Developing a Christian faith that was rooted in daily life.
3. Building a church that looked outward and truly served society.

#### NICE I

The First National Incentive Convention for Evangelization (NICE I) was held in Kyoto on November 20-23, 1987. About three hundred people attended, including all the Catholic bishops of Japan and representatives of the laity, religious, and clergy. The chief objective of NICE I was to formulate a concrete plan that would enable the Japanese Catholic Church to realize the vision enunciated in the three pillars. Participants offered concrete suggestions for accomplishing this.

After extensive work by the participants and committees of the first NICE Convention, an official report of the Convention was submitted to the Japan Bishops' Conference for their consideration of the proposals contained therein. The Bishops' Conference sent a copy of the report, along with the bishops' response to the proposals, to all parishes in Japan.

#### THE BISHOPS' REPORT<sup>1</sup>

The Convention's proposals were grouped around three topics: participating in society, nurturing faith in daily life, and evangelizing through the parish. What follows is the Bishops' Report to the parishes, which in-

cludes the Convention's proposals and rationale and the bishops' response to those proposals:

#### *Participating in society*

Relying on the Bishops' call to review how we are to live the faith on the basis of life's realities and to evangelize in response to societal givens, we submit the following proposals that the Church might truly be in step with the needs of society.

*Proposal 1:* That the Church strengthen its apparatus so that its guiding principles for solving problems by the light of the Gospel can be communicated both within Church and society. However, the Church must first analyze and accurately grasp the problems of life and society before it can shed the light of the Gospel on them. To put it concretely:

1. Secure the cooperation of Catholics active in their various fields.
2. Specifically, secure the cooperation of groups and study centers already established and active in various fields of society.
3. Upgrade the bishops' networks for studying problems in depth and the means (such as *The Catholic Weekly*) for diffusing information.
4. Set up a fund for this purpose.

*Rationale:* The society in which we live does injury to human dignity, and allows corporate policies to gain control over people's personal and even family lives. In such a society the environment is being gradually destroyed, peace is threatened, and a true sense of solidarity with the world and especially with the people of Asia is easily ignored.

Participants of the convention had it pointed out to them that in such societal givens, bishops, priests, religious, and lay people become confused, perplexed, incapable

of action, and at times some even stray away. Analyzing such a situation we avidly sought ways in which the Gospel might enlighten us in coming up with relevant answers.

We believe that the above proposals are geared both to the Church's true vocation and to its fulfilling this task of evangelizing Japanese society. On this point we call for the bishops' strong leadership through the entire Japanese Church.

*Bishops' Response:* Participants in the convention gave the most support to this proposal, and indicated they strongly expected the Bishops' Conference to take the initiative in this matter. In order to take up the issue we have set up a project team, and shall seek the cooperation of various people. The project team's mission will be to set up means of enlisting the cooperation of existing persons, organizations, and groups to become resource persons for the Bishops' Conference. These resource people will not depend exclusively on groups of scholars and experts, but will rather listen very closely to what is in the hearts of people actually living in society.

*Proposal 2:* Set up ongoing formation programs for laity, religious, priests, and bishops.

1. These programs should be established on a permanent basis.
2. They should be conducted through exposure programs, especially with the help of other Asian peoples.
3. Conduct a comprehensive review of theological, liturgical, and catechetical programs stressing human dignity.

*Rationale:* (1) Until now our Church's formation efforts have been lacking in emphasis on social implications. We came to reflect on the fact that this lack has isolated the Church from society, and the faith from daily life. We therefore concluded that there is a need to set up programs that would train

people to actively participate in the building of a new society, share in the sufferings of people, and be society's conscience. (2) Concrete involvement with people who are discriminated against or oppressed is what constitutes the individual Christian's as well as the entire Church's true development. For it is by sharing in such people's pain, their sorrows, prayers, and real conditions, and in the actual process of trying to better their lot that the Gospel comes to life anew. There is a need of ongoing formation motivated and supported by this Gospel.

*Bishops' Response:* The trend toward life-long ongoing formation is an important topic. We think there is a need of setting up an overall plan. We have set up a project team to deal with this item also, and we will ask them to apprise us of concrete ways of implementing the plan. This plan includes the education of seminarians. The help of existing formation teams and program members will be sought.

*Proposal 3:* Consider anew the actual state and problems of Catholic schools.

*Rationale:* Catholic schools are one of the most important forums for radiating the light of the Gospel. But given the complex nature of the educational system in Japan (such as the fierceness of competitive exams and the difficulties in running schools), many tangled problems do arise. It becomes necessary to look into these problems together with the concerned parties.

*Bishops' Response:* It will be necessary to examine this problem together with the concerned parties. We will devise a plan mainly in consultation with the Education Committee (i.e., a standing committee of the Bishops' Conference).

*Proposal 4:* Set up centers (such as places offering consultation and counseling services or even sanctuary) so that we might become effectively involved in remedying the social environment and structures that

cause the plight of the underprivileged people, and do this in solidarity with them.

*Rationale:* At present, the Church's posture for reaching out to the underprivileged in society is deficient; no thoroughgoing remedy is possible unless people get actively involved with the problems of the environment and the structures of society.

*Bishops' Response:* We will try to deal with these issues principally on the local level, asking that in each diocese, appeals be made for help from parishes, religious orders, and volunteers. Whenever supra-diocesan efforts are deemed necessary, we shall create networks for this purpose.

*Special Proposal:* Thoroughly review anew the pastoral, canonical, and other points of view in regard to the ways of dealing with the divorced and remarried (those canonically bound by another marriage), trying to find solutions in keeping with Gospel teaching.

*Rationale:* For the Church to be a genuine participant in our society, and to be the Good News toward the afflicted, it is imperative that it thoroughly review from psychological, social, theological, canonical, and pastoral considerations how it approaches these problems.

*Bishops' Response:* Since there already exist various possible ways of coping with these problems, we, as a Bishops' Conference, will spell out policies as to how to apply these existing ways pastorally through further reviews of those charged with these problems. We will give special attention to the matter of "trying to find solutions in keeping with Gospel teaching."

#### *Nurturing faith in daily life*

Relying on the bishops' call to review how we are to live our faith on the basis of life's realities and to evangelize in response to societal givens, we submit the following proposals

that we might nurture faith in daily life.

*Proposal 1:* That a basic policy be implemented so that in areas of work, in parishes and families, and in various locales, "places for human sharing" be set up according to type of occupation and age groups, so that we might develop the practice of nurturing one another's faith.

*Rationale:* In leading our daily lives as family members, as workers, and as Christians, vexing problems and difficulties do crop up. It is a fact that there are but precious few "places for sharing" about such problems. We find it necessary that, at places of work, in parishes and families, and other areas, either "places" be set up for sharing according to type occupation and age group, or "groups" be formed for that purpose. We are convinced that it is not by arbitrarily predetermining who is going to nurture whose faith, but by having friends sharing together that faith will be formed.

Here we list some special aspects of that sharing:

1. The sharing must be that of *honne*, from one's heart, not merely expedient.
2. In order to do this, efforts must be made to find solutions together with those people weighted down by various problems (family discord, sent away to work alone far from home, the moral issues such as abortion or divorce, etc.). Such people should not be judged, neglected, or ignored, but should rather be approached by their fellow members in helpful and sharing ways.
3. For such sharing, daily prayer is indispensable, for it is prayer that binds faith with life. People must therefore pray or learn to pray in ways that closely link their manner of living and believing.
4. As to the content of the sharing, it should address such issues as to how young people and working people are to

find Christian solutions to their daily problems and hardships in their homes or work places. This will include not only active listening, but might sometimes even require personal involvement.

*Proposal 2:* In order to promote and support the feasibility of such nurturing of the faith in people's daily lives, the Bishops' Conference should issue and implement specific guidelines in the following areas:

1. The pastoral concerns of training leaders in the how of sharing, of encouraging the development of leaders and active participation of women and the youth, and of fostering group activities.
2. Issuing practical handbooks, catechisms, prayer books (especially addressing prayer in the home), and hymnals for incorporating faith in daily life.
3. Ethics, especially sexual ethics.
4. Organizing and erecting locales where people can share about their work, families, and parishes according to age groups or work specialization.
5. Canon law practices.
6. Sacramental practices.
7. Allocating the personnel who will facilitate the practice of mutual succor and support.
8. Expressing the Church's stance and role toward society.

*Rationale:* Unless the efforts to nurture faith in daily life, which we envision in Proposals 1 and 2, receive the Bishops' Conference approval, they will in fact remain but the vain appeals of a few concerned individuals acting in a more or less private capacity.

*Bishops' Response:* We thought it best to consider these two proposals jointly. In principle we fully endorse their tenor. Concretely speaking, we bishops will study these problems. Let us begin by doing whatever is possible in each area. There already exist catechisms for adults and prayer books

that deal in part with the problem areas. But in these books also the tenor of the proposals should be addressed.

*Proposal 3:* Develop the organizational means within Christian communities so that when young people encounter the problems of today's world, they can be encouraged in collegial and positive ways as to how they too can find their own vocation in rendering service.

1. Respect and trust young people's personal autonomy, and provide places where they can take action and express themselves.
2. Upgrade faith education for children.
3. Provide the concrete means of helping teenagers find solutions to questions of love and sex and other problems they are likely to encounter.

*Rationale:* Young people are strong and are a source of our hopes. However, the Church at present is not attractive to youth and our ways of educating them are deficient. Young people realize that many of the problems they encounter in today's life have been caused by the society of their elders. We should not treat youth as if they were a source of the problems, rather we have to be their co-leaders in the search for solutions to the problems identified by them.

*Bishops' Response:* Measures such as strengthening diocesan and parish youth committees are called for.

#### *Evangelizing through the parish*

Relying on the bishops' call to review how we are to live the faith on the basis of life's realities and to evangelize in response to societal givens, we submit the following proposals that parishes may become true evangelizers.

*Proposal 1:* In order that the Church minister to society (in the local area), its stance

must change from that of being an introspective entity to that of participating and serving that society.

*Rationale:* We think that we need to change the type of thinking that tends to consider the Church (i.e., the parish) as being a sort of private club for its members. It is incumbent upon the faithful that they attend to all people living in their area, and that they minister to those who come to them as to people loved by God and also called to live by the Gospel. We must change from being an introspective, self-serving Church to being an outward-reaching, service-oriented one; the starting point for this is to have contact with and to participate in the local community. Changes in thought patterns and actual behavior are all important.

*Bishops' Response:* This calls for a change in attitudes and thinking. We will emphasize the point on many occasions.

*Proposal 2:* Develop liturgies that will appeal to people's hearts, such as liturgical celebrations that impel one toward society, providing the stimulus for evangelizing, liturgies easily understood even by non-Christians (for such occasions as Christmas and weddings). [Develop] Church calendars and liturgies based on the traditional customs of Japan, and thus easy of access (such as for New Year's and children's celebrations, and for funerals). [Develop] liturgies which are not translations but true expressions of our faith life.

*Rationale:* Our current liturgies are difficult for Japanese to understand, and fail to motivate them to spread the Gospel. We would like to have liturgical texts richly geared toward evangelizing. We would also hope to have liturgies based on our customs and easily understandable even by non-Christians.

*Bishops' Response:* The liturgy is an area where the Bishops' Conference has to take

the initiative. The [convention] Report called for a type of liturgy that will be a source of strength for evangelizing. The questions will therefore be taken up in consultation with Episcopal Commissions on Evangelization and Pastoral Work.

*Proposal 3:* Implement measures to increase women's participation, both in ministries (such as serving Mass) and in the management of ecclesiastical affairs including decision making processes.

*Rationale:* The Church is now a male-centered one. To correct this situation and to build a Church open also to women, we should give women's energies a large sphere of action and responsibilities.

*Bishops' Response:* This is primarily a matter of organizational bent, which has repercussions on the level of the Bishops' Conference, as well as on individual dioceses and parishes. Women's participation in planning and decision making processes is to be encouraged, but it would be better under present circumstances to confront our institutional tendencies by supporting concrete initiatives on the local level, rather than have the Bishops' Conference fix upon this or that as being within women's purview.

*Proposal 4:* Insure that within the Church there exist structures facilitating cooperation. To do this, the following are necessary:

1. Clarify the roles and functions of laity and clergy.
2. Foster dialogue and interchange between lay people and priests, and among priests.
3. Nurture pastoral outreach teams made up of priests, religious, and lay people.
4. Create opportunities and situations in which both laity and priests can be trained for the task of evangelization.
5. Educate priests to have a real sense of community.

6. Give a proper encouragement to lay people's involvement in society.
7. Establish joint pastoral action and cooperative ventures between parishes.

*Rationale:* For parishes to be truly open and agents of the Good News, it is indispensable that they adopt attitudes of cooperation both within and outside their boundaries. To do this, dialogue must be fostered.

*Bishops' Response:* This question is not unrelated to that of formation, and it is one where the dioceses ought to put in a lot of effort. So, we refer it to diocesan initiatives. As a Bishops' Conference we can assure the cooperation of the foreseen sub-committee on Priority Items.

*Proposal 5:* Examine the question of a radical overhaul of our parish system.

*Rationale:* The present system of territorially determining parishes creates rather confusing states of affairs given, for example, the trends toward huge agglomerations, modes of traffic, and their attending alienation. It becomes necessary that neighborhood parishes' experiment in interchanging, in small communities such as basic communities, or even at times in restructuring should not be done merely with a view towards homogeneity, but should consider the distinctiveness of each parish.

*Bishops' Response:* "The system" seems to be called into question here, but isn't it truer to say that the problem lies more with a parish way of being and what it does? These matters also touch on Proposal 4 and should be taken up by the individual dioceses.

*Proposal 6:* Plan for inter-diocesan personnel activities and interchange, and financial cooperative measures (such as pooling systems). Review Japan's structure of sixteen dioceses.

*Rationale:* For the cooperative network to be efficient it must be extended beyond the diocesan to the national level. We would like

to consider Japan with the broad panoramic of putting the right person in the right place.

*Bishops' Response:* We as a Bishops' Conference do feel inclined to take up this problem, but we feel we should first hear what priests on the local level have to say. We should add that Proposals 4, 5, and 6 included problems that should be dealt with in a comprehensive way.

#### THE EFFECTS OF NICE I

Five years have passed since NICE I was held. The proposals are very ambitious. It has only been in the intervening years that the bishops and involved Catholics have come to a deeper understanding of just what a huge undertaking we have begun.

Even after five years, many of the effects of NICE I have still not filtered down to the lives of ordinary Catholics. Despite this, changes have slowly begun to take place which give great reason to hope that over the next ten to twenty years the influence of this process will be much more greatly felt and ordinary people will come home to a much greater realization of being a Church called to be of service to others.

Concrete examples are difficult to give, but there is definitely a greater feeling that bishops, priests, religious, and laity are working together in the search for solutions. People are much more willing to listen to one another in order to accomplish this. Listening to one another and treating each other as equals are certainly the first steps in building an open Church.

#### PREPARATIONS FOR NICE II

Preparations have already begun for a second national Convention. It is now slated for 1993 and will have as its theme "The Family". This second convention is not intended to come up with a description of the ideal family and how to achieve it. Rather, its pri-



mary purpose is to attempt a better understanding of the present-day reality of family life in Japan and how to better develop and live a healthy Christian faith within that context. A second purpose is to discover the hope Christians can offer to the wider society in respect to the problems of family life.

The process for achieving these objectives involves four steps. The first is to come to a deeper understanding of the influences that society, culture, and economics have on family life. The second is to look more deeply at the strengths and weaknesses of these influences. The third step is to look for the Gospel values present within the present family situation. Finally, the fourth step will look at concrete ways of animating and strengthening these Gospel values. This last step will, of necessity, include isolating the obstacles to these values and outlining concrete ways of overcoming them.

#### HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

NICE I and II have not and will not bring about any sudden changes. However, I firmly believe that by persevering in this process a much more outward-looking church will begin to emerge—a church that truly speaks from and to the experiences of ordinary people. In this, we ourselves will come to a keener awareness of how God is even now working in Japan to offer new life and hope to people. By becoming more aware of the areas of God's activity, we will be able to cooperate more effectively in bringing about God's reign in service to people.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This section is a translation of the report the bishops sent out. It was written by John Raymaker and first published in *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* (Spring 1988).