EAST-WEST SPIRITUAL EXCHANGE
— A Report on a Project —

"A warm welcome to the Japanese delegation of people connected with religion, mostly representatives of the venerable traditional schools of Buddhism: Zen, Pure Land, Shingon, and Nichiren schools; and especially to the eminent leader of Japanese Rinzai Zen.

I thank you for coming to Europe for an East-West exchange on the spiritual level. I am glad that the interreligious dialogue moves on this basic level. I congratulate those among you who have been living in small groups in the great Christian monasteries and have shared fully their life of prayer and work for three weeks. Your experience is truly an epoch-making event in the history of interreligious dialogue. I hope that your experience has given you a better understanding of what Christ can mean for man and a deeper insight into what Christ means when he speaks of God, his Father.

I bless all those in Japan and Europe who by their efforts have made possible the realization of the project. I pray that the Spirit may further inspire the interreligious dialogue in Japan, especially that on the spiritual level."

I would like this article to be a presentation of a rather novel endeavor in interfaith dialogue, jointly undertaken by Buddhists and Christians in the late summer of 1979. The extremely encouraging words which Pope John Paul II addressed to the group of participants during the general audience of Wednesday, September 26, are not simply quoted here for the sake of captatio benevolentiae. It is hoped that these papal words may help lift this report from the level of faits divers to that of theological and personal questioning: Why does the Church encourage interfaith dialogue? And, what can I, from my standpoint and in my circumstances, do for it?

What does the Church expect from the dialogue? The question is hard to answer, since the theology of the dialogue has not outgrown its first pair of pants yet. I have, moreover, the suspicion that it is not the decisive question. In promoting the dialogue, the Church does not seem to be looking primarily for possible benefits to be derived from it, but rather seems to be taking up, in a positive way, an inescapable challenge of the times, or, speaking more spiritually, to be trying to obey the promptings of the Spirit, who is not bound to tell beforehand where his call will lead. If the word expectation is nevertheless used, as cannot be avoided, it might point in the direction of a fresh and critical look at itself by the Church through the eyes of the other, and of a less self-centered, and therefore more evangelical, attitude—besides, of course, the benefits of peaceful coexistence and active cooperation with other religions, so necessary in this pluralistic world of ours.

This report can only be a very provisional one. The long-range effects which are hoped for can, of course, not yet be evaluated at this point, and even the more immediate reactions are not sufficiently known yet. Not a single comprehensive evaluation from the European side has reached us as yet and, as for the Japanese side, although many very instructive evaluations by the Japanese participants have already appeared in various publications, a complete survey is still in the preparatory stages. Still, under this necessary proviso, it is hoped that a first account can already give us many hints.

The Project in Outline

Let me first present a bird's-eye view of the entire project:

Place: Western Europe, with Cologne-Bonn (Germany) and Rome as the two main focal points.
Organizing bodies:
- In Japan: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture; Sophia Institute for Oriental Religions; Hanazono Institute for Zen Culture; Unzenoke Tea Center.
- In Europe: Oostalen Institut, Bonn. With the collaboration of the Vatican Secretariat for non-Christians, the Japanese Cultural Institute in Cologne, the municipal Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst in Cologne, and several monastic organizations.

The Project covered four phases:

1. The Residence in European Contemplative Monasteries.

In small groups of from 3 to 6 people, 39 Japanese religionists resided for about three weeks in one or two monasteries to share, as fully as possible, in the daily life of the monks. During that time dialogue sessions were occasionally organized in the monastery. With three exceptions, each group was accompanied by a mentor-interpreter.

a. The receiving Monasteries can be roughly divided as follows:
1. Benedictine Monasteries in Germany: Maria-Laach, Meschede, St. Ottilien, Weingarten.
2. Benedictine and Trappist Monasteries in the Dutch-speaking world: Westmalle (Trappist), Slangenburg (Benedictine), Egmond-Binnen (Benedictine), Tildburg (Trappist convent), Brugge-Begijnhof (Benedictine convent).
3. Benedictine Monasteries in France and Italy: Camaldoli (Italy), St. Benoit de Fleury (France).

b. The visiting Japanese belonged to three groups:

**Group A:** 12 Buddhist monks, selected and invited by the organizers. They belong to the following denominations: Rinzai Zen (5), Sōtō Zen (1), Jodo Pure Land (2), Higashi-hongan (1), Nichiren (1), Shingon (1), Nishi-hongan (1), Nichiren (1).

**Group B:** 18 Japanese religionists participating on their own initiative and expense. This group comprised 2 Shinto priests and 10 Buddhist monks (Obaku Zen (1), Sōtō Zen (4), Rinzai Zen (4), Tendai Zen (1), Sōtō Zen (4), Rinzai Zen (4), Tendai (1)). The others were lay people of long-standing religious practice.

**Women's Group:** two Sōtō Zen nuns and seven lay practitioners of Zen.

II. Exposition of Zen Calligraphy (Bokuseki).

**Place:** Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst (Cologne)

**Time:** August 17 till September 30

III. Zen Do Demonstrations and Conferences.

Held in large European cities (Cologne-Bonn, Paris, Amsterdam-The Hague, Brussels, Munich) and in two Catholic centers (De Tiltenberg in Holland and Königstein in Germany)

**Speakers:** Omori Sōgen, Kadowaki Kakichi, Hugo Enomiya-Lasalle, Heinrich Dumoulin, J.H. Kamstra (Professor University of Amsterdam), Werner Kohler (Prof. at Mainz Univ.), Hans Waldenfels (Prof. at Bonn Univ.), Jan Van Bragt.

**Demonstrators:**
- **Shodo (calligraphy):** Omori Sōgen, Terayama Katsujo
- **Kyōdo (archery):** Suhara Köun
- **Kendo (swordsmanship):** Omori Sōgen, Terayama Katsujo
- **Sado (tea ceremony):** Chisaka Shōgaku, Kawasaki Yoshinori

IV. A Visit to Rome.

On September 25-29, all participants in parts I, II, and III gathered in Rome. Besides the general pilgrimage and sightseeing, the following points were on the program:

- **Audience with Pope John Paul II** (Sept. 26)
- **Reception by Cardinal Pignedoli,** Director of the Secretariat for non-Christian Affairs

**Reception by Father Arrupe, Superior General of the Jesuits.**

**“The Nemi Meeting”:** An exchange of views among the Japanese participants in part I, followed by a question and answer session with representative European monks - held in the S.V.D. house in Nemi on September 27.

**Birth and Meaning of the Project**

At first sight, this program may look like a composite of rather heterogeneous elements, and in a sense it was. It certainly was not a seamless tunic but, on the other hand, it never was mere artificial patchwork either. The title finally adopted for the total project, "East-West Spiritual Exchange," may be said to indicate a common spirit strong enough to unify the whole.

How was the infant born and which godfathers stood by its cradle? Strange enough for such a recent event, the tale tends to be told in different ways, but as I see it, it went somewhat as follows. In the years 1976 and 1977, on the occasion of his visits to Japan, Joseph Spa, at present co-director of the Chicago Institute of Theology and Culture, spoke about his dream of inviting Buddhist monks of different Asian countries for a stay in Christian monasteries.

The present author was one of the people to pick this idea up and to talk it over as a possible initiative for our institutes with Kadowaki Kakichi of Sophia University. The next thing I knew, the same Father Kadowaki presented to Johannes Hirschmeier, President of Nanzan University, the present plan, complete in its four articulations. What had happened in the meantime is partly described by Omori Sōgen Rōshi in the special issue of *Zen Bunka* dedicated to the present project.² In a free translation: "Two years ago, Trevor Legett of the London BBC, an acquaintance of more than ten years, all of a sudden appeared, saying he wanted to film my Kendō and Shodo, in order to introduce them in England and continental Europe. When I talked this experience over with one of my disciples in these disciplines, Terayama Katsujo, the words fell, 'How about the two of us touring Europe with sword and brush?' Soon afterwards Kadowaki Kakichi, who is also connected with our Zen circle, heard of this, and his reaction was: 'That is a great idea; let me work it up into a concrete plan.'

What becomes perfectly clear already at this point is that the catalyzer of it all was Father Kadowaki. Indeed, I have no written testimony for this but the idea of a European exhibition of Zen calligraphy evidently took shape in conversations between the same Father Kadowaki and Terayama Katsujo, professor of Shodo at the Nishōgakusha University in Tokyo; and the Roman finale does not require any special flight of the imagination.

From that point on, a committee was formed in Japan for the execution of the project, and contact was made with Father Alois Osterwalder, SVD, head of the Ostasiens Institut in Bonn, who promised his collaboration for the necessary organization in Europe and soon formed a parallel executive committee in Europe.

This is how the wind blew things together. If they fell into a pattern, this cannot be called fortuitous, however. Behind it all there was a dream, which took shape in the minds of the organizers as a natural outcome, so to speak, of the praxis of the interfaith dialogue in Japan. A dream has, of course, no sharp contours, but it may show some force lines which can be shared by different people, no matter how much their concrete images differ from one another. I shall now try to present two of these lines.

A dream of **mutual exchange.** One of the main foundations whereon the East-West dialogue rests is evidently the conviction that mutual understanding and enrichment between East and West is a matter of urgent necessity, not only for the sake of peaceful coexistence but also in view of the cultural future of the future. It should be clear by now that this kind of understanding can

² *Zen Bunka* is the magazine of the Hanazono Institute for Zen Culture. The special issue in question appeared in December 1979. Omori Sōgen is President of Hanazono University. His text can be found on p. 6.
only come about where the partners meet as equals, in a mutual recognition of their own need for enrichment and of the other’s riches. Only when both know that the other is eager to receive, in turn, the gifts they themselves have to offer, can they accept from each other without loss of self-respect. To say this in a negative way, real understanding is impossible in a one-way street, where feelings of superiority and inferiority form prisms whereby every beam of communication is blocked or refracted. Where different cultures meet there must necessarily be differences in technical or cultural proficiency. But, fortunately, when it comes to the deepest levels of human experience, the meeting with the Absolute, man everywhere is sorely deficient. Here there is no differences and complementarity may take on their fullest meaning, but the terms superiority and inferiority certainly lose their significance.

It must be recognized that, for several centuries, the West, in the arrogance of its material superiority, has rendered this kind of mutuality with other cultures next to impossible. In that atmosphere, the specific strong points of other cultures found it hard to even register on the retina of the West and, conversely, our cultures could hardly receive from the West without rancor. In the light of that history, the present interfaith dialogue can be considered to be the clearest sign of a new cultural attitude, or the most consistent recognition of a new balance of (Eastern and Western) cultures. Indeed, in my understanding of it, the dialogue implies, on the Christian side, a recognition that the Spirit is at work in other religions and cultures in a unique and irreplaceable way, so that we cannot rescue that particular illumination except through this others. This theoretical recognition, however, is still far from fully embodied in our existential attitudes. We still tend to feel that we already possess, in an immanent degree, everything that the other has, and that we are capable of subsuming the other without thereby really changing ourselves.

In the present endeavor, much thought has been given to the reciprocity of the conviction, that Eastern spirituality embodies values from which Western Christians can learn and the parallel belief that Christian spirituality has something equally invaluable to offer to the East — something which, despite a long history of mission, might only now be offered in such a way that its acceptance would not involve any loss of face for the other. As can be seen already from the bare outline, there is this balance, willied by the organizers, among the different parts of the project: the “pilgrimage to the holy places of Christianity” (parts I and IV) was undertaken “carrying Buddhist treasures” (especially parts II and III).

Further, the project wanted to be an exchange on the spiritual level. Let me try to clarify what was meant by these rather ambiguous words. First, it had to be a deep level, where not merely the surface of a culture is scratched but rather the very foundations and backgrounds of that culture are touched upon. If we really aim at mutual understanding, we cannot be satisfied with anything less. We must lay bare the roots of our differences, in the hope of encountering there, at the same time, the hidden sources of our common humanity. This is called here a spiritual level in the belief that, at the basis of all cultural endeavor, there lies what can be called a spirituality: a fundamental experience and spiritual interpretation of reality as a whole.

And a second consideration. Such a spiritual experience of reality becomes the inspiration of a culture, and finds, of course, expression in the religion and philosophy of that culture. It may, however, express itself more truthfully in art or in a style of life than in particular philosophical tenets or religious dogmas. In the Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Japan the conviction has been growing that, no matter how important the mutual comparison and discussion of religious doctrine, the dialogue finds its most genuine possibilities on the level of religious experience and practice. Here we rejoin ideas beautifully expressed by the American Trappist, Thomas Merton, in his Asi an Journal. To quote only two of his texts:

“True communication on the deepest level is more than simple sharing of ideas, of conceptual knowledge, or formulated truth. The kind of communication that is necessary for this level must also be ‘communion’ beyond the level of words, a communion in authentic experience which is shared not only on a ‘preverbal’ level but also on a ‘postverbal’ level.”

“Without asserting that there is complete unity of all religions at the ‘top,’ the transcendent or mystical level — that they all start from different dogmatic positions to ‘meet’ at this summit — it is certainly true to say that even where there are irreconcilable differences in doctrine and in formulated belief, there may still be great similarities and analogies in the realm of religious experience.”

It can now be said that the present project has chosen two domains of spiritual praxis, or again two areas where the spiritual foundations of Eastern and Western cultures become visible, and fashioned a concrete program in both of them. These two are the monastic life and the Zen ways.

At this point I’d like to leave all theory behind, but I fear I better answer more question... to the best of my ability: Why does Zen figure so large in this exchange program? Indeed, this project gives such a big place to Zen that some Japanese journalists have been tempted to present it as “a tour for the promotion of Zen in the West.” Let me state immediately that the organizers did not precisely have that in mind and that they certainly did not mean to suggest that Eastern spirituality (or Buddhist spirituality, for that matter) is the ends with Zen. There were, of course — as the origin story sufficiently suggests — personal and rather fortuitous circumstances that contributed to this preferential treatment. But, apart from that, the large place of Zen in our program was motivated by the following considerations:

1. Zen is, indeed, one of the finest flowerings of Sino-Japanese spirituality, and has much to offer, especially in the areas of objectless meditation and the unity of body and mind in spirituality. The fact that, in several respects, Zen is farther removed from Christianity than some other schools of Buddhism can make the encounter all the more challenging.

2. Among the Mahayana traditions, Zen seems to have conserved relatively most of what in the West is considered to be monastic tradition — to the point of sometimes being accused of Hinayana tendencies.

3. Zen finds its expression in many artistic forms and ways (do), which make it relatively easy to show Zen spirituality.

4. Misunderstanding of Zen and its Buddhism is rampant in the West. We wanted our project also to contribute to counteracting these ideas and fads.

At 9:35 on the sunny morning of August 31, flight JL 431 put down in Frankfurt a motley group of people that drew quite some attention even in that cosmopolitan milieu: some 55 people of all (adult) ages, mostly Japanese but with a sprinkling of foreigners, preponderantly men but with a saving quota of women. So far nothing unusual; the eyecatchers were, however, the robes and shaven heads of the Buddhist monks and nuns, and the odd shapes among the luggage. Film cameras (Yomiuri T.V. had sent a three-men film team along), swords, bow, etc. But before the onlookers had finished feasting their eyes, the group had boarded a chartered bus and taken the route to Schmitten, a quiet resort town in the Taunus mountains. They would stay there for nearly three days, in the friendly atmosphere of the family hotel, Ox, to overcome travel fatigue and time lag, and to get to know one another.

Then, on the morning of September 3, the group split into some twelve subgroups to scatter all over Western Europe, to the encounter of - it can be said without exaggeration for many of them - one of the decisive experiences of their lives. It was, of course, with mixed feelings of expectation and foreboding that these people took bus and train on that rainy September morning. Two days before, in his address to Fr. Notker Wolf the arch-abbot of Sankt Ottilien who had come all the way to Schmitten to welcome these of Cultural Affairs and other specialized bodies? And on this point, the organizers did a few things that sufficiently proved their amateur status. However, the rationale of this exhibition, as stated above, was:

"If Zen tends to feel that any worthwhile degree of spiritual unification inevitably tends to express itself in art. However, by itself, this would amount to a rather crass aestheticism, and Fr. Dumoulin is there to remind us that "not every religiously advanced person possesses the skills necessary for the creation of art works, and inner experience is not the only measure of artistic perfection." Still, "anyone who has witnessed a Zen master in a state of inner concentration form a circle or a Chinese ideogram with a single stroke of the brush will not doubt the intimate relation between Zen and art."

Through the efforts of the organizers - and specifically of Professor Terayama Katsuji of Hishogakusha University in Tokyo - this whole exhibition was geared to enabling the Western viewer to grasp precisely the above point and, maybe, to be challenged thereby in his own views on art and religion. I cannot go into technical detail here but, for instance, in order to show how the quality of the painting rises with the depth of Zen insight, clearly dated paintings by the same artist, Yamamoko Teeshi (1836-1888), were exhibited in a chronological order (before and after the enlightenment experience). Let me add that, during the time of the exhibition, live demonstrations of Zen shodo were regularly given in the museum, and that in these demonstrations, the one-stroke circle of which Fr. Dumoulin speaks played a big role. The question is then: Was the message of this exhibition tried to convey understood by the European visitors? This is, of course, hard to judge, but the Japanese Zen people certainly came back with a very positive impression. To quote only Professor Terayama's report:

"The exhibition was commented on by radio and television, and by seventeen different newspapers. During the 45 days, from August 17 till September 30, 15,722 people visited the exhibition - an average of 350 a day. Of the catalogue, which cost 13 DM (about 1560 yen), 1770 copies were sold. These figures were the highest for any exhibition since the museum's founding, and the director and members of the staff were highly pleased. It is a fact that there was something extraordinary in the popularity which this exhibition enjoyed with the German public, but the officials at the museum and those in the neighboring Japan Cultural Center as well declared that they could not explain it."

Interestingly enough, the same author also comments on the thorough way in which many German visitors not only viewed but studied the exhibits:

"Many came once, looked carefully, and came back later after having studied the art and religious experience."

I would like to explain this further, but the whole point is that, while this is relatively easy to show, it is devilishly hard to put into words. The best I can do is to refer the reader to some beautifully balanced wording by Heinrich Dumoulin in his Zen Enlightenment. I would be inclined to say that, in the Zen view, no worthwhile work of (sumie) art can be produced without a high degree of unification of the spirit, and this unification itself is seen as spiritual and religious. Nevertheless, "that does not mean that every masterful work of artistic accomplishment arises directly from a state of enlightenment, nor that these arts provide a sure access to religious experience." I could add that Zen tends to feel that any worthwhile degree of spiritual unification inevitably tends to express itself in art. However, by itself, this would amount to a rather crass aestheticism, and Fr. Dumoulin is there to remind us that "not every religiously advanced person possesses the skills necessary for the creation of art works, and inner experience is not the only measure of artistic perfection." Still, "anyone who has witnessed a Zen master in a state of inner concentration form a circle or a Chinese ideogram with a single stroke of the brush will not doubt the intimate relation between Zen and art."

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catalogue. They seemed to aim at a thorough understanding — which is not surprising maybe in the country that produces all these famous philosophers. What a difference with Japan, where many run through an exhibition and, by the simple fact of having gone to see it, gain the impression that they now belong among the cultured people.7

The Zendō Demonstrations and Conferences

One more method was used to show Zen spirituality: live demonstrations of different Zen ways or dō. Here, however, a certain reflection on these ways from a Christian point of view was also taken up in the program, mostly in the form of conferences.

The organizers consider themselves lucky for having been able to secure the collaboration of really first-class people. Their list is printed above, and many of these names are well-known enough not to need any comment. While the others performed only occasionally, the group that had taken upon themselves the strenuous task of traveling from place to place, of preparing, each time in a new setting, the scene of their demonstrations, and of bringing up after that the strong concentration needed for the demonstrations, consisted of (in alphabetical order) Chisaka Shūgaku, Kadowaki Kakichi, Ōmori Sōgen, Suhara Kōun, Terayama Katsujo (plus, most of the way, one of his German disciples, Wolfgang Höhn).

The leader and "star-performer" of this group was Ōmori Sōgen Rōshi, who has carved for himself quite a unique name in the world of the Zendō through his "Way of Zen by brush and sword." Chisaka Shūgaku is an eminent representative of the Ōraenseki school (Kyoto). Suhara Kōun, the specialist in Zen archery, does not catch the public eye very much, I believe, but he who has the privilege of watching his performance or of simply meeting the man, will not so easily forget him.

Enough echoes reach us from Europe to enable us to say that these demonstrations of Zendō made a tremendous impact, and the demonstrators themselves testify that they found in the European public far more interest and resonance than they had expected. Here is how Tea master Chisaka saw it:

"While I was preparing the tea, I felt — quick as a physical pain — the many fervent eyes riveted on me. The fever with which the audience sought, through Zen, 'the heart of Japan' moved me deeply. And what amazed me most was that young people in their twenties formed the majority of the audience. Even after the demonstrations were finished, these people kept a profound silence, and there was nothing of the commotion or outburst of emotion commonly seen after a performance. I was profoundly impressed by these figures returning home in silence as if they wanted to conserve forever in their hearts the depth of the experience they had tasted."8

The demonstration tour started in the framework of the bokusetsu exhibition in Cologne. It was an auspicious beginning. The hall of the Japan Cultural Center, with a seating capacity of 300 people, was filled every time by an overflowing crowd of up to 700 people. The program of these days may give an idea of how these sessions were organized:

7 Ibid., pp. 10-11.
8 Chisaka Shūgaku, "Sadō ni yoru reisi no kōryō," in Zen Bunka, no. 95, p. 20.

Friday, Sept. 7, 7 PM — Conference by Heinrich Dumoulin, The religious and artistic aspects of Zen — followed by demonstrations of Kyōdō and Sado

Saturday, Sept. 8, 3 PM — Conference by Ōmori Sōgen, What does Zen have to do with art? — followed by demonstrations of Shodō, Kyōdō, and Sado

7 PM — Conference by Kadowaki Kakichi, Similarities between Zen and Christianity — followed by demonstrations of Kyōdō and Shodō

Sunday, Sept. 9, 10:30 AM — Demonstrations of Sado, Kyōdō, and Shodō

7 PM — Conference by H. Enomiya-Lasalle, Comparison between Zen and Christian meditation

On their tour, the Zendō specialists had the occasion of demonstrating in a Christian church several times or as Suhara Kōun expressed it, before the crucifix. It is hard to say what happened there exactly, but it cannot be doubted that this circumstance made a deep impression on several of them and brought, as it were, a new dimension or fullness to their Zen way. After these demonstrations, Suhara Kōun was told by the others that his bows at beginning and end of his makiwarasharei (archery ceremony) had become considerably deeper than the regular 45 degrees. He could only answer that he had not been aware of it but that, before the crucifix, he felt an excess of reverence which "pulled his breast toward the floor." We have also the testimony of Terayama Katsujo:

"I too have the impression of having been gradually purified in the demonstrations before Christ. I believe that precisely in such experiences the real exchange has taken place.... Indeed, for me East-West exchange is not conceivable except through such a praxis.... When I let the full weight of what happened there strike me, I cannot but feel that it was not merely something planned by man but a demand of the spirit of the times."9

These experiences confront us again with the problem of the relationships of art, religious experience and Zen. These questions were taken up in a two-day seminar, which was organized as a first period of reflection for some of the participants in Königstein (near Frankfurt), September 19-21. In the above descriptions of the Zendō demonstrations, I have been using words like performance, public, etc. — words that evoke the atmosphere of an art performance, to which the audience spontaneously reacts with applause. From Chisaka Shūgaku we learnt, however, that in the case of these demonstrations, the response of the audience was completely different. In Königstein, the question was then formulated: What is it in these demonstrations that distinguishes them from other performances, and prevents people from clapping their hands? Tentatively, the following answer was then given: Art is not the right category for the Zendō ways. While art can be said to consist of inspiration and technique, in the Zendō there is something more. The everyday of human existence is transformed here into religion, so that the feeling of reverence, this point of connection with the transcendent, is most strongly evoked. And precisely this does not permit of any boisterous response.

9 Terayama Katsujo, l.c., p. 14.
Living with Trappist and Benedictine monks

We come at last to the center-piece of the whole Spiritual Exchange Program, the three weeks' stay in contemplative monasteries, and the question will, of course, be: What happened inside these walls? And can what happened there lay claim to the name of spiritual exchange?

Let us first remark that a decisive happening took place right at the beginning when, on the evening of September 3, the weary pilgrims knocked at the gates of the monasteries: the fact that these jealously guarded gates opened before them.

"When we arrived at the monastery, we were given 'the key of heaven,' a rather small key with a triangular hole in it. Without this key, it is impossible to get inside the walls of the monastery. Women are, of course, not permitted to enter and, in general, entrance is not allowed to outsiders. And we, people of another faith, were given a free pass! It must certainly be the first time in the monastery's history."10

This is how one of the Japanese participants expresses his amazement before the taking down of the no-entry sign before these gates - an amazement which befell all the participants at one time or other during their stay in the monastery.

The fact is that the Japanese visitors were received with open arms by the European monks. Nearly all of the Japanese participants commented on the extraordinary human warmth of the welcome given them by the Catholic monks. One even writes: "The loving care the monks showed us during the entire period of our stay is about the strongest concern I ever experienced in my whole life."11 And many saw in this the perfect realization of St. Benedict's rule "to treat each guest as if he were Christ himself." Surprising therefore is how many of them testified that they really came to "feel at home" in the monastery - a feeling which was particularly strong when they came back to the monastery after a short excursion. When one of them writes, "The feeling of relief, of having finally found what I had been looking for, unknowingly, must certainly be the first time in the monastery's history."10

Indeed, this open attitude of the European monks was the pivot on which the whole venture turned. The question, why and in what spirit did the Catholic monasteries open their doors?" Thus becomes very important. However, due to the lack of reports from Europe, a fully satisfying answer cannot be given as yet. Relying mostly on my own observations, I can only tentatively say the following.

For nearly all the monks, the taking in of Japanese religionists was an act of rather blind faith. Since in most of the monasteries, not very much was known about Buddhism (not to speak of other Japanese religions), the monks did not really know what to expect. Moreover, due to the many upheavals in the monastic life in the last 25 years, the monks did not at all feel the self-confidence which usually accompanies a time-honored life style. As we all know, the rapidly changing times together with the many theological questionings have made this last quarter of a century, for the contemplative monasteries also, into a period of doubt about old wisdoms and of far-reaching experimentation with new forms.

What then made these monasteries make this "leap in the dark?" I can not find a better word for it than faith: faith-expectation towards the Spirit who blows wherever He wants; faith-obedience to Vatican II, which had called for an openness to other faiths; faith-confidence - it could be added, with a dose of humble gratitude - in the word of the missionaries... and maybe a grain of that youthful spirit of adventure that is never completely absent from enduring institutions. It must be added that the decision in favor of the Japanese guests did not necessarily meet with the enthusiastic consent of every member of the community. Thus, to cite only one example, the abbot of Westmalle's Trappist monastery found it advisable to tell his visitors, right from the beginning, that several monks of his community were opposed to their coming and might possibly find ways of showing that disapproval. However, in the same chronicle it could be written that, as the days of the visit went by, that bulwark of opposition melted like snow, to make place for the most cordial relationships. Something had happened. ...15 But, before turning to the events of that
visit, we should have a look at the visitors.

Here I must repeat, first of all, that they formed a motley group, with a rich diversity not only in age, clothing, religious affiliation, monastic experience, but also in motivation and expectations. On the motivation of the Japanese participants, the survey, conducted among them by Professor Anzai Shin of Sophia University and now in the process of analysis, will undoubtedly throw more light. Here, I only want to draw attention to a few points. Firstly, as it turned out, the great majority of the participants stayed in the same monastery for nearly three weeks. The fact is, however, that many of them had hoped for an experience of several monasteries, and some had even envisaged something rather like a “guided tour of the monasteries of Europe.” This expectation gap – for which the organizers were partially responsible – may have colored the experience of several of the participants, but it must be said that nearly all of them adapted splendidly to the situation. And, secondly, a remarkable difference in receptivity, openness to the experience, could be observed among the participants. Every individual carried with him, of course, a certain image of the West and of Christianity, but the touchstone lay in the readiness to have that image challenged by the actual experience. While the great majority went with an open mind and with an eagerness to learn, if not from than at least about Christian spirituality, there were also some – very few indeed – whose minds were made up beforehand and who could, therefore, only find confirmation of their ideas – about the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity, about the (lack of real) spirituality of the West, and about the (non-)probability that Buddhism could have something to learn. A major factor therefore was, I submit, the degree of awareness of the malaise in Japanese religion and especially in traditional Buddhism.

Above I have expressed my appreciation of the hospitality of the European monks, and I can now report that the attitude of the Japanese guests was at least a match for that of their hosts, and earned the general admiration of these hosts. Theirs was a “discreet presence” – with a discreetness which in all probability only a Japanese can achieve, and with a ready show of gratefulness for every little attention bestowed on them. And they revealed themselves as “exemplary monks” from the very beginning: always on time for all exercises and always displaying a disciplined bodily attitude. But the most admirable thing was the wholeheartedness with which they entered into the spirit of the thing. They certainly never gave the impression of being mere observers or recorders of impressions, but really went all the way in their participation in all the elements of the Christian monastic life, up to the last bow and sign of the cross during the religious ceremonies. A moot question is what exactly this full participation in the ceremonies of a different religion meant for the Japanese religionists. It is certainly doubtful whether Catholic monks, in the reverse situation, could go to the same lengths.

It is clear, however, that, for the Japanese guests, this total participation, this eagerness to drink in Christian spirituality, did not entail a loss of self-identity. They were ready at any time to show or explain their own thing: zazen, the Pure Land way of praying, the tea ceremony, etc. And some of them mention in their reports the need they felt from time to time to pray in their own way. There were, it is true, degrees in the strength of the urge to reciprocate and to affirm their own identity. While some deliberately kept that need in check for the sake of maximum receptivity, others came back feeling that not enough opportunity had been given them to share their own spirituality. (In fact, that opportunity differed greatly from monastery to monastery.)

There is one last point on the attitude of the Japanese I want to mention: the little groups of Japanese guests staying in the same monastery were made up of people of different religious affiliations, and the relationships within these groups were remarkably smooth and cordial. It may even be said that this also was a novel and heartening experience for many of the participants, as one of them told me: “It is strange but wonderful. I had to come to Europe to really get to know and appreciate, for the first time, a monk of another school.”

**Exchange: letting oneself be challenged**

After these preliminary observations, we may be more ready to tackle the central question: Did something really happen in that meeting of East and West? Knowing quite well that these things are hard to gauge, still, from my own observations and from the many testimonies of the participants, I draw the confidence to say: Yes, indeed, something happened, something in the nature of a spiritual exchange. To borrow a term used by one of the Buddhist monks, there has been a real *hibiki-ai* (“mutual echoing”) on a very deep level. However, when asked to be more specific and to pin things down further, I do not feel so confident to give a few pointers.

Let me first remark that many participants testified, post factum, that this experience had marked them for life and that they could never be the same again. To quote only one of the Japanese guests: “From the monastery I received something precious that will control the rest of my life,” and there is the confession of the abbot of one of the Catholic monasteries to his guests: “I am very grateful to you. Your visit has made a lasting imprint on our community.”

Certainly it seems to me that, in this experiment, people of vastly different backgrounds were able to meet as human beings on a level of their deepest aspirations, beyond all differences of race and creed. This fraternal meeting, moreover, was not experienced as something made possible by a mutual “putting into brackets” of the respective religious commitment. On the contrary, on both sides, the feeling was strong that this meeting could only happen on the strength of their respective religious training (experienced as a common bond and horizon), and could reach such human depth only because it happened in the religious sphere and in a mutual recognition of the authenticity of one another’s religiosity. It could even be said that the meeting was lived by both sides as a mutual religious commitment. And precisely here lies, I could feel, the central happening of these three weeks.

Of course, if it is true that a person is changed by every meaningful encounter with a fellow human being, we must go further and ask: How were the partners changed and enriched? In a very tentative endeavor to define that change, we could speak of a “widening of consciousness,” and say that the religious consciousness of the partners had taken on a new dimension, precisely in that practiced recognition of the other. If each of the partners could heretofore practice his own religiosity in splendid isolation, after this experience each will have to live his religion “in the presence of the other.”
that the experience worked in many of the participants a certain conversion: a genuine, albeit limited, turning to another tradition, whereby a glimpse of God is caught in an hitherto unsuspected place. Father Eugen Rucker, one of the mentors-interpreters, formulated this beautifully: "Praying side by side with a Buddhist, and bowing together before the crucified Christ, gave me a new approach to the Father of all men."

By the grace of seeing oneself with the eyes of the other and letting oneself be affected and questioned by it, the relativity of one's own tradition is revealed but, at the same time, its limitations are broken through and its confluence on a deeper level with the other tradition — and thus its universality — intensified. By the recognition of the genuine character of the partner's spirituality, a desire was born to integrate, if possible, that spirituality into one's own. This, however, did not imply a turning away from one's own tradition but, on the contrary, a heightened commitment to one's own spiritual way with a clearer awareness and appreciation of its unique characteristics. Could we speak of a purer turning toward one's own tradition? Anyway, the consciousness was there that one can hope to rejoin the other only through the deepening of one's experience. Still, something of this kind must have been at work in the encounter. A Shinsho monk writes: "Through this experience I have, for the first time, understood the 'arigatasa' of the nenbutsu."

Concrete questioning

To round off the report on the stay in the monasteries, I would like to record the main impressions and questionings provoked in the participants by this exchange program. But, here again it must be understood that this report can only be partial and provisional. Since the impressions of the European monks have not sufficiently been communicated yet, I shall have to limit myself mostly to those of the Japanese participants which are rather well documented already. To start on a lighter note, I shall first pick up, rather at random, some of the more peripheral impressions to end with those that could lead to serious questionings on both sides.

Evidently, more than a few of the Japanese pilgrims had expected to find something rather forbiddingly dark and cold in its unworldliness. To their surprise, they discovered something full of ningenmi (the human touch), "austerity in warmth," "a life wherein one can smile," "people whose greatest pleasure seems to lie in making somebody happy" — to use their own expressions. While the orderliness of the life according to the rule of St. Benedict affects even the birds that live here.16

"Six o'clock. The birds start chirping and soon there is the sound of crows flapping their wings like pigeons often do. That signals the end of the meditation period. In the three weeks we passed in the monastery, there never was the slightest deviation from that succession."

And twice I heard a nearly identical remark from Zen people: "Ten days of this life brings me to the same kind of concentration and serenity as a sesshin (Zen "retreat")."

I. Meditation. Although the same word is often used for both, are not the Western and Eastern forms essentially different? Does the West have any practice or tradition of objectless prayer, imageless meditation — the only form of meditation considered to be full-grown and spiritually fruitful by the Zen tradition? The respondent conceded that the Western tradition may show a certain rationalistic tendency in the clinging to the object but, on the other hand, he stressed the authenticity and depth of the Christian practice of meditation. On this point, much has been written already by Christian practitioners of Zen, to which I can refer the reader. The question itself certainly indicated, on the part of the Japanese, the awareness of a fundamental difference that cannot be overlooked. But, at the same time, their monastic experience had made them aware of a possibly deeper similarity.

The Christian monastic life clearly struck the Japanese visitors as an authentic spiritual life. Many comment on the depth and the quality of the silence within these precincts, and on the pacifying rhythm of that always identical routine of prayer, work, and reflection.

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II. Christian prayer. Is Christian prayer a prayer of the adult man or does it rather betray the attitude of an irresponsible and naughty child? It is only

16 Okada Toku, I.e., p. 46.
natural that the divine office and its Gregorian chant, in its intimate combination of the religious and the aesthetic, came in for much admiration on the part of the aesthetically-minded Japanese. Strangely enough, it is precisely in this same office that several Japanese monks experienced their first sense of estrangement, from the moment they became familiar enough with the office to pay more attention to the contents of the psalms. In these prayers, God often appears as a jealous and irate God, over against whom man strikes the figure of a wretched thing that continually asks for benefits and forgiveness of sins. In his answer, the Benedictine monk conceded that this is indeed the appearance, but he indicated that Christian prayer, as practiced by the monks, essentially goes beyond the surface of the words to come to an inner confrontation with God, the Father — indeed in the attitude of a child. All prayer for gifts aims at the Giver himself, and thus contains an inner negation of the desire for gifts. At the same time, however, the prayer for gifts has a positive significance insofar as it is a desire for God in his gifts, steppingstone to the desire for God beyond the gifts. The continual prayer for forgiveness opens the human heart to the Heart of the God who is love and mercy. I only want to remark here that several of the Japanese participants, while having the above difficulty, were at the same time sensitive to the high degree of humility and the depth of reverence before the Absolute which that same attitude implies.

In the letter of thanks sent to the abbis primas of the Benedictine Federation in Rome, the Japanese participants declare: "We have come into contact with the pure love and humble faith of the monks and strongly felt that this corresponds to the Heart of Mercy in Buddhism."

III. Ora et labora: a unity or a duality? Pray and work is often said to be Benedict’s motto, and the work as practiced by the monks drew at least the same amount of comment and questioning as the prayer. What role does work play in the monastic spirituality, and what is its relationship to prayer? As to the first point, the Benedictine principle of self-support of the monastery and its concrete implementation were a great source of wonderment for the Japanese monks with their essentially mendicant tradition. For the rhythm it brings into the life of the monk, it is often compared to the samu (the "house chores") in the Zen hall, and it is also remarked that the work makes the monastery take roots in its regional environment and opens avenues for social service.

On the other hand, some Japanese monks had the impression they could observe here a fissure in the armor of Christian spirituality. Is not, after all, prayer as a spiritual activity more highly valued than work, that bodily activity? Is not this one of the points wherein Western spirituality shows its dualism, its lack of shinjin-chinyo (body and mind at one)? The Benedictine respondent fully conceded that Western anthropology, especially in modern times, certainly did not favor that unity, and that he expected much from the Buddhist influence on that point. Interestingly enough, the spiritual reading during the meals became the symbol of that lingering dualism. Indeed, this reading is prescribed "in order that, while the body is nourished, the spirit also may find nourishment." This stands in sharp contrast with the silent meals in the Zen hall where the act of eating itself is shaped into a spiritual practice.

This line of questioning is most strongly pursued by Fujioshi Jikai, Professor at Hanazono University, who finds here also the reason why the work of the monks does not lead to religious art. Let me add that, through the visit of the Japanese religiousists, this same question became again an existential problem also for the European side. I would say that, on the whole, the Catholic monks felt themselves being questioned first and foremost by the spirituality of the body of their guests. While it struck the Japanese that "the postures of the monks in the choir were rather sloppy," or that "during their meditation, the monks gave the impression of being immersed in sadness," the Europeans were impressed not only by the zazen posture — a meditation not determined by any object but first of all by a bodily attitude — but, more generally, by the unbelievable amount of spirituality and reverence the Japanese knew how to convey in their bodily behavior. The reflection was made a few times that the liturgy in the monasteries would be helped more by a course in sado (tea ceremony), for instance, than by any amount of spiritual theory.

IV. Monastic life and social responsibility. Is there any social commitment, service to the world, in that secluded monastic life? While the Bodhisatva ideal is characterized by bod-genjo (roughly: a rhythm of going up to nirvana and coming back to this vale of tears for the benefit of all living beings), and Zen insists that enlightenment gained on the mountain must prove itself in the return to the market-place, how do these monks, who stay forever on their sacred mountain, prove their love and contribute to human society? This objection, which often enough is formulated within Christianity itself, could not but come up among Japanese Buddhists.

In the answer, the historical role which the Christian monasteries played in European society was not stressed, but simply four possible elements of a social role of the monastery indicated: the existence and formation of spiritual people in itself beneficial to society; the monastery as a mini-society where people live together in mutual respect and love becomes a model of social life; collaboration with the local society through work; direct service in emergencies. The point was not brought up in Nemi but, in fact, this question is connected with a characteristic of Christian monasticism which undoubtedly made the most decisive impression on many a Japanese participant, namely, the fact that the monks essentially take up that way of life for life. The fact is that, notwithstanding the above objection, the Japanese reaction toward that life-long commitment was one of practically undivided admiration — admiration which, in some of the participants, turned into an explicit questioning of the Japanese Buddhist practice.

"The Zen hall has become a short-distance competitive race, a school to obtain a diploma." "This state of affairs, wherein one lives one’s whole life in community, without possessions, in great silence, and unmarried, reminds us of the ideal life of the sanyu in Sakyamuni's time. It is sad to see that in Japanese Buddhism this sanyu life has become only a passage in one's life, and this passage becomes shorter and shorter... If we do not renovate our shukke ("leaving the house") and return to the original form of the sanyu... our Buddhism will become an irrelevant superfluity in these present times." Or again, "If the Zen halls can bring renewal to Japanese Buddhism, it will not be because Zen people leave these halls to work in the world but, on the contrary, because out of society many people enter these halls."

18 Koga Hidehiko, I.e, p. 53.
My admiration for the openness and honesty revealed in these questionings is unlimited, and I can only hope that a parallel thing is happening in Europe. For me, they signify two things: one, that Buddhism is alive in Japan and, two, that something really happened during that quiet European September.

V. Monastic life and love. Is the monastery a place of love and is the monastic life an education to love? Is not the monastic life a life of mind and will, rather than a life of the heart?

For these last two questions I have to be short, partly for lack of space. Here again the respondent had to say that, at first sight, it may look that way, but then he went on to describe the role of Christ in the affective life of the monk and the characteristics of the life as brothers in the community. It may be sufficient to add that this question was rather a question “from the head.” In reality, the Japanese participants had sufficiently experienced the quality of the love present in these communities, and in their reports show how much they appreciated this.

VI. Letter and Spirit in the Rule of St. Benedict. The Japanese soon found out how much the details of the monastic life differ from monastery to monastery, and how, on several points, the present practice deviates from rules laid down by St. Benedict. It was explained to them, then, how all monasteries are essentially independent entities, only loosely joined in a federation, and how St. Benedict himself did not see his Regula as a rule to be followed literally. During their stay in Europe, most of the Japanese participants were given the opportunity to visit also one or more religious houses of other orders and societies, to gain some insight in the pluriformity of the religious life in Christianity.

The Roman Finale

It was only fitting that the Spiritual Exchange Program ended in Rome, the honzan of Catholicism. However, I have the impression that this pilgrimage to Rome became a highlight of their Christian experience for only a very small number of the group. The Roman fiesta in its massive setting could not compete with the sober serenity of the monastery.

Suffice it to mention two salient points. On the occasion of the visit to the Roman Secretariat for non-Christians, the total receipts of the sale of sumie paintings by Omori Sōgen Roshi in the different demonstration sites were handed to the director of the Secretariat, Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli, for the benefit of the charitable works of Mother Teresa. A splendid ecumenical gesture.

And then there was the papal audience on the evening of September 26. No special audience could be procured because Pope John Paul was too busy preparing for his imminent trip to Ireland and the United States. But, as it turned out, that general audience – on the gigantic St. Peter’s square filled with people of all races and nationalities, and a sea of umbrellas under the occasional showers – proved to be a bonus. Our group was given the place of honor right under the papal throne and, after the allocutions and benediction, the Pope came straight to us, to talk with Yamada Mumon Roshi and to shake hands with everyone of us. In the words especially addressed to us from the