

In Dialogue with The Religions of Japan

A Report on a Seminar for Catholic Seminarians

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Since its establishment ten years ago, the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture has devoted most of its efforts to the exchange of philosophical, cultural, and religious traditions between Japan and the other countries of Asia and the West. In the rush and flurry of all the activity, however, the need for engaging the local Christian Churches more directly in these efforts has suffered a certain neglect. For some time we have been conscious of this fact and anxious to redress the imbalance. The regular exchange of international scholars, the organization of academic symposia, the publication of specialized materials, and in general the day-to-day life of an Institute like ours does not draw us deeply into the circle of normal Church life in Japan, even though we are located on the campus of a Catholic University and only a stone's throw away from a major Catholic seminary. We are—as most of our colleagues working in interfaith dialogue throughout Asia—still considered to be at the fringes of the Church's ministry and mission. The need to take positive steps to bring the Church into closer and more tangible contact with the work we are doing, to solicit collaboration and informed criticism, is obvious. It was against this background that we instituted the first of what we hope to be a long series of annual Seminars for Interreligious Encounter for Catholic believers.

I offer this brief report here in the hopes both that it may serve those of our readers contemplating similar projects, and that it may prompt reaction from those more experienced than we at introducing the work of interfaith dialogue into the ongoing life of the Church.

Preparations

Beginning in the fall of 1984 we began holding small committee meetings in the course of which a general plan for dialogue seminars gradually took shape around the following points:

1. *Purpose.* The focus of the seminars is to foster understanding of non-Christian religions through direct contact with representatives of other living traditions. Its aim is to provide a basic education for Church workers and leaders, to provide exposure at both the theoretical and practical levels, and thereby to promote a healthy attitude toward the place of these religious traditions in the mission of the Christian Churches.
2. *Organization.* Annual seminars of from four to six days should be held at a convenient time and in a suitably quiet location. Working in cycles of three years, the seminars should focus on the systematic study of Shinto, Buddhism, and the New Religions. They should consist of lectures (both in particular religious traditions and in Christian theology of religions), the practical experience (including visits to holy places and training in religious exercises), discussions, and reports.
3. *Beginnings.* A first seminar should be held, preferably in late summer of 1985, for four days at the Carmelite Retreat House in Uji City near Kyoto.
4. *Theme.* "The Japanese and Prayer" was decided on as the first theme. It was felt that this topic would both set the tone for the seminars in general and respond to one of the major preoccupations of Christianity in its encounter with other traditions. At the same time, it was felt that a recently completed documentary film on the subject could serve as a useful resource.
5. *Partners.* Lecturers should be invited from the Christian, Shinto, and Buddhist traditions.
6. *Participants.* Since this was to be the first effort, considerable concern was voiced that preparations be made very carefully and that the number of participants be limited to about fifteen Catholic major seminarians.

The decision to begin with a group of seminarians was taken less for the sake of the non-Christian participants than for the need to ensure a certain homogeneity of background and training among the Catholic participants. From the very beginning stages of the project the Director of the Institute, Jan Van Bragt, solicited the approval of Bishop Tanaka Ken'ichi, Chairman of the Japanese Episcopal Committee for non-Christian Religions and a longtime friend and collaborator. Together with his warm letter of recommendation, an explanatory letter was sent to all bishops of Japan asking their approval for the project. I then traveled to several seminaries from Tokyo to Nagasaki to make a call in person on the responsible parties. The positive reactions and helpful in-

formation I received assured us that we were on the right track and responding to a need that was not of our own making.

At the same time, we felt that the voice of the participants themselves should also be heard and their ideas reflected in the design of the program. Three theology students from the nearby S. V. D. Seminary generously offered to assist in the preparations. With their help, a formal letter of invitation was prepared in the spring of 1985 and sent to the rectors of the major seminaries where there seemed to be interest.

Meanwhile, Rev. Okumura Ichirō, a Carmelite priest and scholar of religion who had been invited as lecturer, visited Nanzan to discuss details of the seminar with the staff. I myself made visits to Kyoto and Ise to invite Rev. Hōzumi Genshō, a Zen Buddhist master, and Rev. Ōgaki Toyotaka, a Shinto priest, to confirm their participation and sound their opinions. In May 1985, the final touches were put on the schedule. By the time the date for registration had expired in late June, some sixteen seminarians from Tokyo, Nagoya, Fukuoka, and elsewhere had applied.

The Seminar

First Day: Sunday, September 1, 1985

The seminar began on schedule in the afternoon of September 1 at the Carmelite Retreat House in Uji. The announcement of a typhoon that had just landed on the island of Kyūshū caused some concern for those traveling from the south, but happily there was only one member whose arrival was delayed.

Fr. Okumura Ichirō, who resides in the retreat house, was available continually, assuring that things went smoothly and that no detail was overlooked. Two of the staff from the Nanzan Institute, Jan Swyngedouw and I, were also present, together with a small number of Carmelite friars from the nearby monastery who assisted in some of the sessions as observers.

After the evening meal all participants briefly introduced themselves and the Institute staff members gave some explanation of what could be expected from the seminar. At 8:00 a documentary movie on "Prayer" prepared by Rev. Mario Bianchin, P. I. M. E. was screened. It portrayed less the official observances of the individual Japanese religions as the religious behavior of the common people, drawing attention to the "Shinto"-like consciousness that runs deeply in the hearts of the people of Japan, whatever their professed belief.

Second Day: Monday, September 2

Although the original schedule called for a "religious service" at 7:00 a. m., either in Shinto or Buddhist style, it was felt that preparations were not adequate and the group assembled instead for a Catholic Mass. At 9:00 Rev. Okumura delivered the first lecture. He explained how necessary it is to have a clear idea

of our own Christian view of prayer before learning about prayer in the other religions. Making full use of his own experience of prayer, especially in connection with Zen practices, the lecturer stressed the importance of both one's state of mind and posture of body in prayer. A lively discussion followed.

Two two-hour Lectures were delivered in the afternoon and evening by Rev. Hōzumi Genshō, professor of Hanazono University and a renowned Zen master who has directed Zen sessions in different parts of the world. As one seasoned in ascetical practices as a Rinzai Zen priest from his youth, Rev. Hōzumi has also been a fervent participant at interreligious conferences. In 1979 he was one of the central participants of the "East-West Spiritual Exchange," in which a group of mainly Buddhist priests traveled to Europe and shared for a time the life of Catholic monks in several monasteries (see *Bulletin* 4, 1980, pp. 8-18). Rev. Hōzumi himself stayed for three weeks at the Trappist Monastery in Westmalle, Belgium. Referring frequently to that experience, he spoke of the importance of religious experience and the significance of Zen, expounding in simple language how the Buddhist and Christian religious traditions can come to mutual understanding through the practice of prayer. His accounts of his own ascetical practices greatly impressed on the assembly the austere dimension that can accompany the dedicated Zen life.

After the first talk, Rev. Hōzumi led the participants in the practice of *samu* or "work," which consisted of cleaning the house and the surrounding garden.

Third Day: Tuesday, September 3

Beginning at 7:00 the following morning, Rev. Hōzumi led a session of *zazen* in the house chapel. After a brief explanation the whole group sat in a meditative silence for about forty minutes, interrupted only by the gentle whack of the Zen Master's *keisaku*.

The lectures of the third day began later in the morning and continued in the afternoon. They were delivered by the Rev. Ōgaki Toyotaka, currently a priest at the Grand Shrines of Ise and director of its Department of Doctrine. Born into a Shinto priestly family, Rev. Ōgaki graduated from Kyoto University and later received training in religious studies at Chicago University where he acquired a deep understanding of Christianity.

Rev. Ōgaki built his talks around two documentary films he had brought with him, dealing respectively with "Seasonal Festivals at Ise" and "Shikinen Sengū" or the practice of reconstructing the Ise Shrines every twenty years. In his evening talk he also went more deeply into the meaning of prayer in the Shinto tradition, both in its ceremonial aspects and at the level of popular belief. In particular, he stressed the optimism characteristic of Shinto practice which made it difficult for him to appreciate the contrasting emphasis in Christianity on sin and the need for the saving mercy of God.

The two-hour period set aside for "practice" in the afternoon was devoted to an explanation and recitation in common of the *ōharae* or Great Purification

Prayer, one of the central ceremonies of Shinto. Rev. Ōgaki conducted this practice, in full priestly vestments, in the house chapel, which brought a sense of uneasiness to a few of the participants.

As on the previous day, late in the evening the entire group convened in the refectory of the retreat house for drinks and snacks. This setting provided an opportunity not only for asking more direct questions from the lecturers but also for the participants coming from various parts of the country for the first time to get to know one another better.

Final Day: Wednesday, September 4

The morning session began at 9:00 with a second screening of the movie on "Prayer," the idea being that after the talks and experience of the previous days the participants should really be seeing it with new eyes. Afterwards Rev. Okumura moderated a discussion in which each participant was asked to give his own impressions of the seminar. The general sentiment of the group was that the event had been successful largely because it had enabled them to come into direct contact with other religions, not through the written word but through direct encounter with practicing, believing representatives. Some of the group expressed the wish that a similar seminar be organized around other Japanese religious traditions such as Pure Land Buddhism. After a concluding Mass, the participants dispersed to head home.

Concluding Remarks

For our part, as the organizers, we attribute the success of the venture to two factors of equal importance: the good will and openness of the participants, reflecting a changing attitude that can only bode well for the future of inter-religious dialogue in the Catholic Church of Japan; and the enthusiasm of the lecturers whose own devotedness to the ideals of better understanding among religions was clear for all to see.

Subsequent correspondence confirmed the positive assessment of the seminar and encouraged us to make preparations for a similar workshop to be held late in 1986 at Mount Kōya, the spiritual center of esoteric Shingon Buddhism in Japan. At the same time, we feel the need to involve the participants more deeply in the preparations, and also to give further thought to how we might best maintain contact with interested participants to offer them further assistance or solicit their collaboration in future projects aimed at preparing future leaders of Japan's Catholic Church for encounter with the other religious heritages of their country.