

In Memoriam: Joseph J. Spae (1913-1989)

The Rev. Joseph Spae, well-known spokesman in interreligious dialogue in Japan during the 1960's and early 1970's, died of kidney failure in his native Belgium on December 8, 1989. He was 76, and died on the very day that the Oriens Institute for Religious Research was celebrating the 25th anniversary of its location at the present facilities in Tokyo.

Born in Lochristi, Belgium, on November 25, 1913, he was ordained a priest in 1936 at the unusually early age of 23, having already studied Buddhism under the illustrious Etienne Lamotte, Professor at the University of Louvain, and Chinese under Joseph Mullie. He set off on his missionary assignment to China in the following year.

After only one year in China, he was sent to Otani University in Kyoto, Japan, with a letter of recommendation from Professor Lamotte, to further his Buddhist studies under the direction of Yamaguchi Susumu and others. It was during his years at Otani that he wrote his well-received work on the 17th century Japanese Confucian scholar, Itō Jinsai, which he later reworked into a doctoral thesis presented in 1947 to Columbia University.

Fr. Spae was an imaginative, indefatigable worker. Besides his scholarly work, he was also fully involved in pastoral activities both during his studies in New York, and later while helping found a flourishing Catholic mission in Himeji, Japan. It was during his tenure as pastor of Himeji that he laid the foundations for the Oriens Institute of Religious Research, which was moved to Tokyo in 1959, where it was temporarily located at St. Mary's International School, thanks to the generosity of the Brothers of Christian Instruction.

His work in Oriens entailed many administrative and editorial tasks (in which work he was aided by many), and yet he immersed himself in the ecumenical and interreligious dialogue in Japan. During the Vatican Council, he was instrumental in introducing several prominent Japanese religious leaders to the Pope and various personnel of the curia. In the heady days immediately following Vatican II, he organized and partici-

pated in many interreligious meetings and congresses. His monthly articles in the *Japanese Missionary Bulletin* were later published in what came to be known as the Oriens Encounter Series. Volumes included *Shinto Man*, *Christian Corridors to Japan*, *Christianity Encounters Japan*, and *Japanese Religiosity*. Under different forms he also wrote and published many other articles and books such as *Buddhist-Christian Empathy*.

Despite his busy schedule in Japan, Fr. Spae found time to teach summer courses at his Alma Mater in Columbia during the early 1960's and later at Mundelein College in Chicago.

Not merely a pundit in scholarly affairs and interreligious dialogue, he took an active interest in the catechetical and other problems of his faith, taking part for example in the International Catechetical Congress in Eichstatt, Germany, in July of 1960. Again, in 1970, he was involved in the Theological Congress organized by Concilium in Brussels. Such exposure brought him to the attention of both the Vatican and the World Council of Churches.

In 1971 he was appointed secretary general of SODEPAX, the Committee on Society, Development, and Peace, headquartered in Geneva and jointly run by the WCC and the Vatican.

Fr. Spae's stint with SODEPAX effectively meant his physically leaving the Far East. However, upon terminating his duties in Geneva, he frequently travelled and lectured extensively, representing the Vatican Secretariat for non-Christians, for example, at the Twelfth General Conference on the World Fellowship of Buddhist in Kyoto and Tokyo in 1978.

His last years, from 1982 to 1989, saw him back in Belgium involved in research on China, his original missionary destination. During those years he edited and privately published *China Update*. His motto in that publication, taken from Mao Zedong, was "To learn truth from facts," but I venture to say that Spae's truth during these years was different from that perceived by the masters of the mainland and their Patriotic Church. Perhaps this confrontational interpretation of one's perceived truth is not only a fitting memento to Fr. Spae's life, but also a challenge to our ongoing interreligious dialogue.

—John Raymaker
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