

# I N M E M O R I A M

Johannes Hirschmeier

1921-1983

On June 16 at 5:30 a.m., Johannes Hirschmeier, President of Nanzan University and Founder of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, was found lying dead on the streets of Nagoya, struck down by a heart attack during an early morning walk. The waves of shock and disbelief spread quickly, first to his religious community who noticed him missing at morning prayer, then to the staff and students of the University, and by mid-morning had reached the radio waves. The evening news in central Japan honored him with top coverage in its newspaper and television reports; telephone calls and telegrams of condolence began to pour in from all directions, from the Churches and the world of religion, from scholars and educators, from leaders of the business and political community, from friends and acquaintances inside Japan and abroad. In spite of his long and impressive record of achievements as missionary, as teacher, and as administrator; in spite of a massive cardiac infarct he had suffered five months previously, forcing him into a strict regimen of recuperation and relief from his presidential duties; his name had become so synonymous with presence and vitality that those who had lived and worked with him found themselves totally unprepared to start thinking of him in the past tense, *in memoriam*. And even those who knew him only from a distance could hardly have failed to feel the shadow of tense and almost stifling silence that hung over the nearly two thousand people crowded into Nanzan Church for a funeral service two days after his death to bid a final, reverent "sayonara" to an extraordinary human being.

Many of those who read these *Bulletins* are already familiar with his name and know well enough how much those of us who work at the Institute owe to him. All of those who met him on visits to Nanzan will surely appreciate that he was too rich and many-sided an individual, too complex and widely known a personality to hold captive behind the prison bars of type on paper. Different people will find different ways to remember him and judge his accomplishments—all of which would no doubt make him smile and shake his head if he could listen in. Were it not for the great affection I bore him as a friend and the personal gratitude I feel for having first come to Japan and Nanzan at his invitation, I should do the wiser thing and lay my hand across my mouth.

It was back in July of 1972 that Father Hirschmeier joined a committee of six to pursue the concept of founding of an institute at Nanzan University whose aim would be to promote the encounter of religion and culture East and West, in his words, "to complement what is lacking in each, and to experiment both in the theoretical realms of scholarship and in the practical realms of personal interchange with ways to erect bridges across the divisions that cripple and impoverish the great religions of the



**Johannes Hirschmeier**

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| 28 October 1921 | Born in the town of Heinrichshof, then in the German state of Silesia (now Poland).   |
| September 1945  | Began philosophical studies at St. Augustin, Major Seminary of the Divine Word Missionaries near Bonn.  |
| 27 August 1945  | Ordained to the Roman Catholic Priesthood in the Society of the Divine Word.  |
| September 1952  | Came to Japan.  |
| September 1954  | After completing two years of language study, traveled to the United States to study economics at the Catholic University in Washington, D.C. |
| July 1955       | Entered the doctoral program in economics at Harvard, and by the following year was appointed as teaching assistant.                          |
| September 1959  | Received into Tokyo University as a Research Student in order to carry on research for his doctoral thesis.                                   |
| April 1960      | Appointed Lecturer at Nanzan University, Department of Economics.   |
| 16 June 1960    | Awarded Ph.D. in Economics from Harvard University.   |
| September 1962  | Appointed Associate Professor at Nanzan University.   |
| September 1967  | Raised to Full Professor at Nanzan University.  |
| September 1969  | Named a Member of the Board of Regents of the Nanzan School Corporation.  |
| April 1971      | Appointed Vice-President of Nanzan University.  |
| April 1972      | Elected President of Nanzan University.   |
| 16 June 1983    | Died of a heart attack, 5:38 a.m., aged 61.   |

world." As a priest and religious of the Society of the Divine Word, the Catholic missionary organization that had founded the Nanzan School Corporation to which the University belongs, he was convinced that it was time to broaden the Society's mission in Japan beyond traditional educational and parochial boundaries to include a more constructive dialogue with the religious diversity of Japan. The idea itself had already been in circulation for several years under the inspiration of Father Albert Bold, Chairman of the Board of Regents of the Nanzan School Corporation, and under his leadership had survived attempts to have it sidetracked into other less adventurous concerns. But it was due to Father Hirschmeier that the dream actually began to take shape in reality. From the time the Institute was officially inaugurated in November of 1975, he supported its presence to those unconvinced of the value of such an undertaking and made every effort to keep informed of its activities and publications. It is of course in the nature of a research institute to test the frontiers of conventional modes of thought, and Father Hirschmeier never weakened in his defense of that right, even when opinions expressed were opposed to his own way of thinking. The freedoms we enjoy we owe in large part to the strength and persistence of his initial vision.

One of the side-effects of his founding of the Institute was that it was the first time he was led into extended contact with the business world of Japan, in order to seek out the necessary funds to make his dream a reality. A theoretical economist by profession—and indeed widely reputed as an authority on Japanese business—he had always preferred to approach matters through the familiar tools of the academic world and found the thought of mixing with the concrete realities of big business unsavory in the extreme. Once he found himself pushed into that world, however, he not only succeeded in achieving what he had set out to do but became a popular figure in the very circles he had once shunned. This new range of associations widened his view of Japan and its people tremendously, and added new dimensions to his academic work as an economist. At the same time, it provided him with a public forum in which to promote the ideals of "internationalization" with which his name has come to be associated not only in Nanzan but throughout middle Japan. Aside from the many essays, interviews, television appearances, and public lectures that filled his years as President, perhaps the single greatest testimony to his success in this area is his reception of the Chūnichi Cultural Award just a few weeks before his death.

Among some of his long-time associates he had been tagged "Hirumeshi-mae," a Japanese pun on his name playing on the fact that he did most his his work early in the morning and in fact was regularly the first one at the University each day. But more than his hard work, it was his ability to inspire others with his enthusiasm and impatience to see plans made into realities that was most characteristic of his career as President. Several of the secretaries and clerical workers at the University who had known him for many years referred to him affectionately as "the fire truck." Ideas would smoulder inside of him and then all of a sudden combust. There was a certain tone in his voice when he spoke to you at such times, a certain wrinkle would darken his brow and it seemed as if he had squeezed his whole soul into his eyes when he looked at you. In no time one could hear the sound of sirens blaring. It was inevitable, I suppose, that he would pull his share of false alarms; but more often than not,

projects that would have withered away in some committee or become strangled in the inevitable red tape of the bureaucracy were accomplished with remarkable speed. A simple glance at photographs of the campus before he stepped into the President's chair compared with what it looks like now tells as much.

Both as an administrator and as a person, he always thought of history as something to be *done*, not as something one observed from the wings. He found a childlike fascination in new ideas like few people I have known. Something interesting would come to his attention and he would rush to have a look at it, like a young lad at work in the fields who hears a whistle in the distance, drops his spade on the spot, and races out to the railway tracks to watch the train pass by. If he decided that it was headed in the right direction, he would hop on and by the time it reached the station be sitting in the cab chatting with the engineer, leaving someone else to dig his potatoes. That was the way he lived.

One might say that was also the way he died. Sometime after waking up in the hospital from his heart attack last January, he decided that it was time to review his life and rearrange his concerns, and he did so with the same passion and intent he had done everything else. He spoke of dreams he had seen and visions he had been visited with. He began to question the ultimate importance of whole areas of his life and work, to doubt the value of many things he had worked so hard to accomplish. It was only natural that those who lived and worked with him would begin to talk about a "conversion." Although glimpses of what he was experiencing crept into his conversation and his correspondence, I doubt there was any one single person in whom he attempted to confide everything he was going through. Communicative and direct by nature about every new notion that would come into his head and always eager to hear criticism from all sides, informed or otherwise, he nevertheless seemed to maintain an atypical reserve about his interior life, speaking of his feelings only indirectly and elliptically, rarely inviting outside judgment.

I remember one occasion on which he had called me into his office to talk about an inmate in a sanatorium in Southeast Asia who had swindled him out of donations on false pretences for several years. Crestfallen and angry, he fought off the obvious impulse to skepticism by talking to me for the better part of two hours about the Christian principles he was trying to live by. He did not ask for sympathy, just someone to try and listen between the lines. This was also the way those around him had to view his "conversion," though one could sense in him a new struggle to find words for things he was not accustomed to saying out loud, words that came easier to him in prayer than in conversation.

For whatever reason, many of us struggle now to find the words to satisfy our experience of him these past months. I am reminded of the story told of Gotama the Buddha that once, after his enlightenment, he climbed atop a mountain with a group of disciples when all at once a fire broke out in the town below. His followers were thrown into commotion, wondering what to do, but the Buddha turned to them and said, "Do you think it is only the town that is burning? Not only the town but you who see it are burning. Everything is burning..." The same image is recalled at the time of his death when the Buddha attempts to console those who mourn his passing by asking why they should weep for a man who is rushing to get out of a burning house. The

whole burning world that had once offered Father Hirschmeier such an endless source of particular challenges had abruptly lost its appeal; he seemed to want nothing more in his final months than to find a place to park his fire truck, to let go of the life he had lived and walk a calmer path towards a higher life.

Those who lived with him remarked how bare they found his room when they went to dispose of his things after his death. One of them compared the way he had tried to simplify his life to the young Elisha who, hearing the call of the prophet Elijah, took the yoke of his oxen, slaughtered them, and cooked them on a fire built of his own plow, in order to free himself for what lay ahead. It was not merely a question of "burning his bridges behind him," but of offering up everything that had once provided his life with meaning as a sacrifice and then trusting in the unknown. Outwardly, he began to spend more and more time in prayer and meditation. He began to appear in public in a Roman collar instead of the tie he had worn as a professor and as President for many years before. He strained for a gentleness and selflessness that were almost chafing for those who had worked closest to him and indeed to many seemed "artificial." In one sense, his turn to a pietism that reached back to religious practices of his youth did not suit him; but perhaps there is also another sense in which it was the best way for him to cut loose from all he had done and at the same time to point a finger to the One in whose service he had always wanted to do it.

Among his papers was a letter from a mutual friend in Europe, passed on to me to answer. I quote it anonymously because I think it puts his last months in the kind of perspective difficult to gain when one is too close to the situation: "If a human being is something, he is definitely first of all a child of his time, and as such you have become not only a man who has developed all the contemporary features of rationalization, of hard work, of efficiency and purposiveness into traits of your own character, but also a man who has shown these characteristics as an adult Christian in an agnostic culture, so that they can be understood as signs of dedication, care, and compassion within that culture."

It is hard to unsnarl the tangle of feelings and judgments so sudden a departure shocks us with. Hard, and really still too early. But of all the memories his name conjures up, one will surely survive the others: in everything he did when he was with us, Johannes Hirschmeier was bigger than life. It is only right that those of us left behind to write about it draw him bigger than death.

James W. Heisig