

Japanese Missionaries Abroad

Finding the Good News Together

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THE CHURCH IN JAPAN is small, and in some respects it enjoys the mobility of a small church on pilgrimage. In the last few decades, there has been a marked increase in the number of Japanese Roman Catholic priests and religious working abroad. This is an interesting phenomenon since until quite recently Japan has been regarded as a "land of mission." The first half of this article presents data on the numbers of Japanese Roman Catholic missionaries and the countries where they live and work. This is an attempt to detect any trends in the way Christians work for or seek God's Kingdom together across cultures and national boundaries. The second half of the article is a personal reflection on my short experience in Mexico.

A TALE OF TWO CONGREGATIONS

There are several factors that contribute to a determination of the where, when or who of the distribution of Japanese Roman Catholic missionaries. I have drawn some conclusions from the scarce and approximate data, but my observations may be no more than obvious deductions. I will deal first with two religious orders and some aspects of their missionary activity, then from a more general point of view, with other aspects of Japan's recent mission outreach.

Among Japanese missionaries working abroad, women far outnumber men. Two

women's orders are particularly outstanding: the Miyazaki Caritas Sisters and the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. Based on interviews with sisters from each of these orders, I will briefly describe some aspects of their missionary activity.

The Caritas Sisters of Miyazaki

The Caritas Sisters of Miyazaki (CSM) were founded in Japan in 1937; and ever since its first mission to Korea in 1956, the order has been sending a steady stream of missionaries to various countries. In 1993, there were forty-eight sisters working in five countries (see table 1).

TABLE 1
CSM MISSION WORK

COUNTRY	YEAR INITIATED	PERSONNEL
Bolivia	1964	9
Brazil	1966	15
Germany	1980	11
Peru	1982	6
Italy	1984	7
Total		48

The order's ministries originated in response to the needs of Japanese immigrants or people of Japanese ancestry living in these countries. An important area of work was the religious instruction of Japanese immigrants who had converted to Roman

Catholicism, often to better adapt themselves to the culture of their new country. A second type of mission endeavor was Japanese language schools for second-generation Japanese people. Whereas the first groups of sisters in each of these countries were sent in response to requests for help in ministries chiefly related to the Japanese-speaking populace, after several years the sisters moved on to ministries more directly involved with the countries' nationals, such as an international residence for university students (Germany), a parish youth center (Italy), a school for local children (Peru), and catechetical programs for the local people (Bolivia).

This transition and expansion is particularly significant because these communities of sisters are almost entirely Japanese in membership. This illustrates the readiness of the CSM missionaries to take on new kinds of activity more directly related to the local people as well as the people's trust in asking these sisters to undertake ministries that would ordinarily be undertaken by local congregations. That mission groups made up almost entirely of Japanese members could collaborate with local congregations is a clear sign of internationality, in the sense that people of different cultures and countries work together in response to the needs of the local people to further God's Kingdom. This was the result of many years of learning the language and culture and earning the trust of the people. Fundamentally, simple accompaniment is the service that these sisters offer and are most appreciated for.

The Franciscan Missionaries of Mary

The Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM) were founded in India in 1877 and first arrived in Japan in 1898. As a missionary religious institute, its Japanese members have worked in many countries throughout the world. The statistics on the FMM are noteworthy, not only for the number of Japanese

personnel working abroad (forty-one in 1993) but also for the total number of countries where they work (twenty-one). (The next most active order has personnel in only six countries.) These statistics are obviously a reflection of the missionary thrust of the FMM (table 2).

TABLE 2
FMM MISSION COMMITMENTS

YEAR INITIATED	COUNTRY
1938	Italy
	China
	Philippines
1958	Brazil
1961	U.S.A.
1964	France
1965	Lebanon
	Pakistan
1967	Korea
	Algeria
1969	Taiwan
	Egypt
1970	Germany
	Vietnam
1973	French Guiana
	Madagascar
	Singapore
1975	Jordan
1976	Tunisia
	Libya
1978	Israel
	Angola
	Senegal
	Morocco
1979	Canada
1980	Ghana
1981	Zaire
	Burkina Faso
1982	Chile
	Congo
1985	Paraguay
	Mauritius
1989	Peru
	Kenya
	Ethiopia

The first group of Japanese FMM missionaries was sent to China in 1938 and 1941 (five

members). They were among their order's first group of Japanese novices. A second group of five missionaries went to Brazil in 1962; two more were sent in 1968, followed by one each in 1973, 1975 and 1978 and two in 1979. The first Japanese FMM missionary went to the Philippines in 1960 and was followed by one each year in 1972, 1976 and 1978. In the post-Vatican II period, Japanese sisters were sent to Korea (one in 1967, two in 1970 and one in 1975), Taiwan (two in 1969 to the mountain region and two in 1973 to urban centers), Vietnam (two in 1970 and one in 1971) and one to Singapore in 1973.

Japanese sisters have also been sent to Italy and France at different periods for formation, administrative work or care of elderly sisters. There is one Japanese FMM member in each of the countries of French Guiana, Chile, Paraguay and Peru. Other than Japanese missionaries to North America and three countries in the Middle East (Lebanon, Jordan and Israel), the largest group of Japanese FMM sisters work in the nations of Africa. The first one went to Algeria in 1967 and was followed by a constant flow of missionaries to fourteen African nations. At present, thirty-five Japanese FMM sisters work in Africa.

The very lifestyle of the FMM involves living in international community. Besides the fact that sisters from one country go in small numbers to live in another land, their community itself becomes a place of international experience. Upon arrival in a new country, each sister automatically becomes a member of the congregational province of that area. There the sisters of different cultures meet, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in friction. The difficulties of international community life often help members search for and recognize the more basic elements of the "good news." The small community itself thus becomes a reflection of the possibility of international reconciliation and peace and a sign of the biblical vision

that all nations and cultures live as the one people of God. In a world filled with conflict, these small communities are signs of hope both for the members themselves and for the people on the outside who observe their community life.

RECENT STATISTICS AND TRENDS

The decade 1973–1984 saw a rapid increase in the number of Japanese Roman Catholic missionaries (table 3). Following Vatican II, various religious orders carefully examined mission abroad with a view to respond to the mounting challenge. In Latin America, particularly Brazil, the invitation initially came from people of Japanese ancestry, but eventually the ministries spread in an attempt to meet the needs of other segments of the countries' population. Calls also came from Asian countries. Interestingly, church awareness of the need for "solidarity with Asia" grew at a time of mounting discontent and criticism of Japan's expanding economic presence in Asia. The presence of Japanese missionaries in North America and Europe was also significant. Christian values were being re-transmitted to Western cultures where people were finding it difficult to identify themselves with the church (table 4).

In the decade 1984–1993, there was a wide range of Japanese missionaries in African nations and a steady increase in the number of nations to which more and more Japanese missionaries were sent. In 1987 there were thirty-seven Japanese missionaries in nineteen African countries; by 1993, there were fifty-three missionaries in twenty-three countries. Although this increase in personnel accompanied the church's growing concern for the countries of Africa, other factors contributed to an increase in the numbers of Japanese missionaries in Africa. Between 1960 and 1970, powerful freedom and independence movements secured the

TABLE 3
COUNTRIES SERVED AND NUMBER OF PERSONNEL BY REGION

REGION	1973	1984	1993	1973	1984	1993
Asia/Oceania	4	14	9	12	83	97
Latin America	4	8	10	74	116	129
Europe/North America	6	8	72	11	10	73
Africa/Middle East	3	18	23	3	37	53
Total	17	48	49	110	346	352

TABLE 4
TYPES OF MINISTRY AND NUMBER OF PERSONNEL BY REGION

MINISTRY	ASIA	AFRICA	LATIN AMERICA	EUROPE/NORTH AMERICA	TOTAL
pastoral	26	15	67	23	131
medical	7	15	7	3	32
social work	14	3	26	1	74
formal education	21	10	33	17	81
formation/ administration	24	7	13	38	82
studies	7	—	5	57	69
other	3	—	—	10	13

end of European colonialism in a large number of African nations.

Many of these nations had a long history of colonization, and their political independence was often followed by dictatorship or single-party government. A multi-party political system was slow to take root. Moreover, unending economic, religious and tribal conflicts have resulted in an untold number of refugees on the African continent. Because of their history, African countries have a deep and long-standing aversion to anything that smacks of colonialism. White European colonialism brought Christianity. With such a history, it seems less difficult for African peoples to accept Japanese missionaries who do not carry the stigma of a former colonizing

nation. Japanese missionaries often serve as a buffer between the people and the church.

SUMMATION

The above data show a steady increase in the number of Japanese missionaries in recent years, reflecting the fact that expatriate missionaries and nationals in these various countries are experiencing more opportunities to share; together they live and proclaim the mystery of Christ's resurrection. Many factors that draw on past history, the local culture or present international relations have strongly influenced the shaping of the relationship between missionaries and national peoples and determined the kinds of ministries undertaken. These are the ini-

tial factors, but they are by no means the definitive ones.

The type of ministry seems to change and expand along with the degree of the missionaries' inculturation, openness and understanding of the people. The ministries develop into ones more closely involved with the local people and free from historical and social antecedents. The struggles experienced at a more personal level demonstrate that the presence of foreign missionaries often serves first to nurture an awareness of difference. Often, through cultural frictions, the community is led to discover the relevance of the good news that encourages us to walk together as the one people of God. Mission today does not seek to bring a set of foreign values, techniques or structures to a country. A missionary arrives in a culture with its indigenous values and system, and by falling as a drop into an ocean, he or she becomes a witness to Jesus who chose to live with us and hand over his life to us.

ARRIVAL IN MEXICO

From 1990 to 1992 I had the rewarding experience of living in a tiny village on the southern isthmus of Mexico. I spent one-and-a-half years living in a small community of my own order, the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and working with basic ecclesial communities. The time frame covered the period immediately prior to and after my Final Profession of Vows. Because of the time period, I sense that I may eventually come to define this experience as a well from which sprang the call of discipleship to Jesus.

I had lived in Colombia from the age of eight to eighteen, when I returned to Japan for college, so I had fond memories of Latin America. My last years in high school coincided with the beginning of many changes in the Latin American church. In high school we avidly read *Populorum Pro-*

gressio, the major social encyclical of Pope Paul VI, and the documents that emerged from the second meeting of CELAM, the association of Latin American bishops' conferences, held in Medellín.

With this childhood experience, I was more than happy to go to Mexico. I felt sure that I would suffer no culture shock because Mexico City is the kind of Latin American city I was familiar with. When I arrived in the area of Tequisistlán, however, I was faced with another reality entirely. I knew the language, the customs, the music and the food of the cities, but after a twelve-hour bus ride, I arrived in a strange land. It was the reverse side of what I thought I was familiar with. Here another linguistic system prevailed; the customs had developed during centuries of struggling to survive the onslaught of a more dominant way of life. Indigenous music and food had survived in hiding for many centuries. Contrary to my initial expectations, life in Tequisistlán was totally foreign to me.

The Parish of Tequisistlán

Tequisistlán is one of thirty parishes in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tehuantepec. As a diocese, it had clearly aligned itself with the poor, so pastoral agents, priests and religious worked together as part of a commission organized around a diocesan pastoral plan. The basic ecclesial communities focused on five main areas: health, common work, catechesis, youth and Bible sharing. The parish included eleven tiny villages. Each of us on the parish team visited the communities for which we were the link to the larger parish. Our responsibilities included communicating parish activities, encouraging local animators and, most important of all, sharing and appreciating the life of the people. This often meant that we did not know where we would spend the night or whether anyone would invite us for a simple supper. The Lord

never failed us; he always walked before us, and we were never left without food or shelter.

New Images of God and the Kingdom

The time I spent with the people in Tequisistlán opened a new path for me, a new way to follow the Lord. I was taught how to walk with God along the path of a "small pilgrim church." There were moments of wonder along this path, and unexpected moments in which I recognized that Jesus was truly present. At times, I merely gazed in admiration; at other times, I tried to do as Jesus would have done. I felt a burning inside me, an enthusiasm that prompted me to give the extra measure or take the extra step and forget myself. Following Jesus along the path of this tiny pilgrim church touched my life in various ways.

The pathway opened my mind to a new image of God. One night as I left the house of Senora Gabriela, she gave me a hug. She was very thin and tired from tuberculosis. Inside her hut made from sticks, I could see the small fire in her kitchen. It was all that could be seen in the abandoned darkness against the deep silence and the smell of parched land. Just then I happened to look up and see the sky filled with stars. I was standing between heaven and earth, between the beauty of creation and a misery threatening to destroy life, and I felt so helpless. The life of the simple folk is poor. Days stretch consecutively with deprivation, sweat, humiliation or fatigue. But like the consecutive beads of a rosary, they become a plea and a prayer. And I knew then that God sheds tears at the sight of the misery of those created in the divine image.

As I followed along this path, I also discovered what an adventure it is to work for the Kingdom. A few lose their lives in this work, but for each of us it is sometimes conflictive and unsettling. We risk losing in many ways. Although I was only in the

shadows, I too felt a part of this adventure and I lost some of the security that had previously been mine. After I entered the life of the people of Tequisistlán, the qualities or qualifications that had made such a difference to me in Japan meant nothing. It did not matter that I spoke Spanish. Neither could I use Japanese or English to communicate with the people. Teaching certificates meant nothing. Instead of knowing a lot, I was ignorant, and my ignorance in the face of the wisdom of the people was a lack that I became grateful for. Because of my ignorance, I had to depend on the goodness and care of the people. I found myself receiving most of time—a piece of tortilla, a cup of coffee, a place to spend the night, company, a piece of fruit and the love of the people. I gave, but I also let others give to me. In learning how to receive, I learned something very fundamental about helping and appreciating another human being. The intention is not to elevate or prosper the other person. The dignity of others is affirmed when their presence or help is sought, so it is important to let the other person know that she or he is capable of giving.

Very slowly, without my realizing it, my understanding of mission and ministry was changing. Quite often I felt useless, but I sensed that the people appreciated my presence. Obviously my ministry was not a "profession" but rather whatever I was able to do, as prompted by some inner urge. The prerequisite was an open heart. I was to be a student of the wisdom of the people. This wisdom is not the kind derived from books or conferences that leads to a world of clean abstractions. It is the wisdom born of real life and a lived faith, free but with the smell of sweat and earth. It is a broad and welcoming wisdom that works at a very different level from the logic of a consumer society. It is like an open wound, and it tells of kinship, humility, generosity and poverty. Wisdom poses questions about kinship: it

asks me if I am truly able to call sister or brother a poor woman or man whose life is more humble than any I have ever imagined. In humility, I am obliged to honestly admit that I do not understand what it is really like to live in such misery every day, all day long. Generously, I must welcome the generosity of those who have welcomed me in my ignorance, encouraging and nurturing my faith. Poverty is so complex, with causes far removed from the people it affects; but its effects are so close, threatening the lives of friends. The threat of poverty is deeper than just the lack of material things. Its real threat is the message that people are being denied material goods because they lack value as persons, so it is not worthwhile listening to them or setting aside time for them.

Poverty

My experience in Tequisistlán affected my understanding of the vow of poverty. The religious vow of poverty has always attracted me, but I had not really been able to look at poverty as the companion of my life. However, after spending time visiting and making friends, sharing their anxieties and joys, feeling the anger or sadness at being impotent, poverty took on a new meaning. It was a way of life, the outcome of ties made with people. At times, sharing the life of the people became an obstacle and hurdle too high to climb because it meant such things as bathing in a swamp, sleeping outside in a hammock while the mosquitoes feasted on me, or allowing myself to be treated with local medicine. Soon I learned that the first obstacle to sharing the poverty of the people is overcome through God's grace. If I only walked the path before me, I found that the people welcomed me into their huts, served me a bowl of coffee or offered help that I was too helpless to refuse. I entered into the life of the people, not through my own efforts alone, but with

the help of divine grace. The whole process can be compared to a coconut. Its shell is so hard, but it must be broken before one can taste its cool, sweet milk. It is as if Jesus takes a machete and gently but firmly breaks the coconut shell to quench a thirst. Joy in sharing the life of the people is the milk of the coconut.

Walking this path, I experienced what seemed to be endless time spent waiting—waiting for buses, waiting for messages, waiting for people. At times I was no longer sure if I had given up or was still waiting for someone to come, and several times I felt that it was a grace to wait because it is a beautiful thing to let time pass and keep believing. One can believe in many things. I think I learned to believe that people do change; it is God's work. The only thing we need to do is to be present. We must accompany them and give them time. It is a faith experience because it allows me to discover the goodness hidden in the other. Sometimes I discover something I did not know existed in myself. Those were the times when I too was changed by the work of God. The people accompanied me in this path; they gave me the opportunity and the time.

A Farewell

The evening before I left Tequisistlán, I visited Maria Sibaja for the last time. She and her family had been like a family to me; they often said, "You have come so far for us when you could have lived comfortably with your family. We want to take care of you." As we embraced in farewell, Maria said, "Perhaps we will never meet again because we are poor. But because we are poor, we will be together in heaven." Her words have remained in my heart. It is again the wisdom of the simple people who see the double face of poverty: poverty is a deprivation that threatens to take away, tear and prevent life and love from growing; and poverty is the

grace that brings us closer to each other in the love and presence of the Lord.

The one-and-a-half years I spent in Tequisistlán was certainly a short time, but it was an important time—for it takes only a moment to fall in love. My time in Mexico touched my life in various ways. The Lord waited for me in Tequisistlán, amid the dry and barren heat. In that “desert” God seduced me and I fell in love with Him and His people.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Drawing from the available data, I have traced the recent mobility of Japanese missionaries and thereby have identified two factors involved in missionary activity: the call and welcome of the missionary by the people and the missionary's response. The interactions of these two factors gives birth to a new approach to mission. In turn, the quality of the approach to mission shapes the relationship between the people and the missionary. It is a reciprocal process. Moreover, this process can be a revelation of the figure of Jesus, who was sent by God to become one of us and who in turn sends us to proclaim the good news to each other. However, the people are not the objects of evangelization; they are the subjects. The

role of the missionary is to accompany and assess the seeds of the gospel as well as the initiative and work of the Kingdom already begun in the subjects. Together we learn the goodness of God and learn to live in hope.

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