



JAPAN JOTTINGS



Japan Passionist Missions

10-1 Mefu Yamate-cho Takarazuka-shi
Hyogo-ken, 665-0854 JAPAN

Christmas 2009

It is hard to believe that we are almost 10 years into the 21st century already. We pray for all of our readers and supporters that the feast of Christmas, and Advent too are graceful, as well as all the days of the New Year of 2010. God is everywhere, so his love is at work everywhere, even before the birth of Jesus. But faith assures us that since his birth and death and resurrection, things have been changing. Some days are still mighty dark, surely lots of days are pitch dark for people involved in war or for those enduring famine. But the Gospel message at Christmas assures us that there is peace for those of good will. May that peace and good will spread throughout our world.

Christmas here in Japan has a good deal less of strictly religious tone than we might want. But I believe it has been changing for the better, on a deeper level than can often appear. Especially do I think this is so in the decades since the War. I feel that the manner in which the victorious countries made friends of their former enemies is a fantastic story of national forgiveness, whose Christian basis is often overlooked. It was not too many years after the War's end that we Passionists arrived here in Japan. But I cannot recall a single incident in those early years or later of meeting animosity of any sort. Personally, I cannot explain such a lack of bad feeling or action, after such an ugly War, except as the work of God's Holy Spirit of love.

These past hundred years our Catholic missionary work here has seemingly not been a huge success, if we are speaking only of numbers of baptisms or converts. But I think we should never make numbers the measure of determining progress. Pope Paul VI in his mission encyclical wrote that the goal of missionary activity in any land is the penetration of Gospel values into the society and culture. And by this measure of judging results I think the situation here begins to look better. Surely we don't have numbers: only about half a million Catholics. (Not counting the many more than half a million South American and Filipino Catholics who have immigrated here for work in the last 20 years.) But we do have tens of thousands of committed Catholic people, beside those many more good Protestant Japanese.

I would like to detail this a bit here for the record. Again it is quality I am writing of, not quantity! I will use the example of the Catholic people whom we serve in the parishes and in our retreat houses. I have worked with them for 50 years; so I feel

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confident in saying that they are as solid in faith as believers are anywhere. They are into their faith and daily effort to put it into practice on a good deep level.

I cite a group of a dozen men and women, mostly over 50 years of age with whom I have been meeting for the past 10 years. Every Thursday (excepting August) we come together at 10 A.M. in the rectory and begin Mass with a hymn. For the liturgy of the Word we are now using the book of Genesis as a basis of dialogue. For a whole year we used St. Paul's letters, though before that we were using some spiritual books written by Japanese Christians. And for a few years we were dialoguing on the Japan bishops' catechism.

I am always enriched, really, by the openness and mutual trust that permeates these dialogues. The participants often just speak of their daily life experiences, recalled by the text we are using. Often someone's experience prompts the remembrance of a similar one in someone else's life or reading. I sometimes ask questions to prime the memory pump, as it were, or to prompt comments on a point of sharing.

I am frequently made to wonder at how different this situation is from that of my youth, and even my early days as a priest. I cannot imagine my faithful, Catholic parents sharing in such a group. The men and women in this group are as ordinary as my parents were in their daily lives. But the grasp of the Gospel message is quite different. I'm sure that in many other countries today we can find similar sharing among our layfolk, because the conversation, the atmosphere of Catholic life has changed, even just in the past 30 or 40 years. The Sunday homilies are routinely criticized in the Catholic magazines and newspapers I read from America or England. But the context and the reason for critique is much more into the Gospel and Scripture in general than I experienced in my early days. People, like my parents, were good and faithful. But I believe their lives were less informed with the language and content of God's Word.

Another example... I am often struck by the faith of the people who make up our little support group in this Mefu retreat house where I live. They are not very numerous, but they are dependable. Some are folks from the two parishes in our area. A few of the men in this group actually were former Passionist postulants in the past, or even a vowed member, who have never lost their love for our Congregation of the Passion. This



Mr. Uesugi



Mr. Yoshimoto



Mr. Nakano



Mr. Miki

issue of the Japan Jottings sports the photos of some of our leaders over the years. The time and energy they give to support the retreat house and the annual Maple Leaf Festival we put on for the neighborhood non-Christians is a beautiful witness to their faith and loyalty to us.

You all might be interested in knowing about this yearly festival which we hold on the retreat house grounds in the fall, just as the leaves of our maple trees are turning into a riot of color. Until the autumn sets in we ourselves do not avert to how great a percentage of the trees on our property are maple. People from the neighborhood can only get a peek at the trees from the outside, but hesitate in typical Japanese fashion to walk into the gate. So once a year we distribute thousands of handbills to the surrounding area informing the people that they are welcome to visit and view the beauty of the trees, in a festival atmosphere.

I write "we distribute", but it is really our support group who does the work. They canvass the neighborhood making known not only the date and times of the Festival, but actually for a lot of folks just letting them know there is such a Christian retreat house nearby. Last year the committee counted over 3000 visitors, including the children. Each year since the 1st one held 9 years ago the numbers have increased. We always hope and pray that the changes in weather patterns do not upset the timing of the Festival and its enjoyment for so many. (Last year right in the middle we were visited by hours of heavy rain!).

Admittance is free to our visitors, but a dozen or more tents set up on the grounds sell delicious barbecued meat and hot dogs too, as well as roasted octopus! Some of the 8 or 10 parishes that help us also sell Christmas cards or potted plants or articles homemade by Brazilian or Filipino people who live and work in the archdiocese. One tent sells beer and soft drinks, another cookies. And the St. Paul brothers and sisters display their books for sale. Not much money is taken in, after subtracting the overhead. But a main purpose is to acquaint people of our presence and desire to welcome them any time. There are 3 separate times in the schedule when groups we lead follow the Stations of the Cross up the adjoining mountain. All and any are invited, as well as to the closing outdoor Mass. The Takarazuka parish provides the choir, and there are other musical events put on in the Passionist Nuns' chapel next door. These good sisters open their refectory to serve rice curry as well.

The history of this support group is not very long, twenty years at most since the humble beginnings. It was one of the faithful retreatants, now deceased, who suggested and took upon himself to begin it, Mr. Yuzo Fukada. He had been deeply impressed and influenced by our 1st superior, Fr. Matthew Vetter. Surely out of a



Mr. Fukada

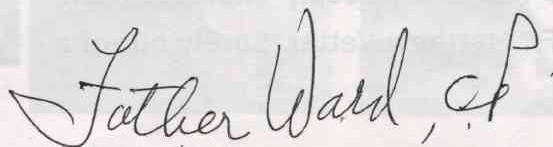
sense of gratitude to the Passionists Mr. Fukada recruited the original band of supporters. His photo and those of his successors are pictured here. We cannot include all of the team who spearheaded the work. But there are several women too who work behind the scenes, as secretary and treasurer.

A story of some human interest concerns the large, life-sized statue of Christ which stands at the entrance of the retreat house. It has stood there welcoming visitors for some decades now. But a former rector of the house some years ago felt that the outstretched arms of the statue looked more like the Lord was stopping visitors, forbidding entrance, as it were. So it was suggested to Mr. Yasuhiko Miki that something be done to correct that impression. With the greatest of confidence, based on zero experience of such work, Miki San proceeded to operate on the statue, sawing off the arms and lowering them to a welcoming position—matching the Gospel words inscribed at the base of the statue: "Come to me all you who are burdened and I will refresh you." The hands of Jesus were broken in the process, so new ones were created. On the pattern of whose hands? Mr. Miki's, of course. We leave it to the readers' judgment how well a job he did.

The laymen and women who form our support group work, each as he or she is gifted, to further the Passionist apostolate here. They are encouraged to see their work as cooperating in Jesus' own redemptive mission. We operate the retreat house convinced that the Holy Spirit is at work in the hearts of the many various groups from all over the country who come here. We are trying to further the memory of Jesus' Passion-love. Cooperating in the many different tasks of running such a facility is, we believe, cooperating with the Savior himself. Christ our Lord, we profess, is the Redeemer of the whole human race, who became God's Suffering Servant.

We hope that as the economy improves, little by little, our readers will find a way to share with us in our mission—an invitation of our Lord himself to join him in his mission, as you already do in your homes and parishes. May you be able to broaden your cooperation with him in his universal outreach to this other nation we serve. May God bless you.

Fr. Ward, C.P.



Before



After