



JAPAN JOTTINGS

Japan Passionist Missions

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



Christmas 2012 and Vatican Council II

Season's greetings to you all on the feast of God's Incarnation. Our Pope has called this astounding mystery "a break-through in human history": the eternal God plunging into our world as a human, to redeem it, to change its historical course forever. Jesus is God's crowning achievement.

As the old year draws to a close and the Christmas feast comes near we find Bethlehem cribs and mangers in our churches and even in our store-windows. Church history tells us that this custom began with the humble St. Francis of Assisi who arranged to have live sheep and a cow and donkey in that first Christmas crib. He himself proclaimed the Nativity Gospel.

I have a picture of the saint which shows him standing by the cross, reaching up to return the embrace of Christ, whose right arm is detached from the cross to invite the saint closer. But what is often missed there in the picture is a small symbolic globe of the world, nestled at the feet of Francis. It signifies the universal global influence the saint has had for almost 800 years now.

I'd like to recall his memory as we celebrate the 50th anniversary this year of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. The Pope has made the anniversary a year-long event by designating it a year of faith renewal and missionary zeal. The saint of Assisi, I suggest, can lead us into a deeper understanding of what the Council was all about. Especially he can show us how to deepen our faith in the Incarnation.



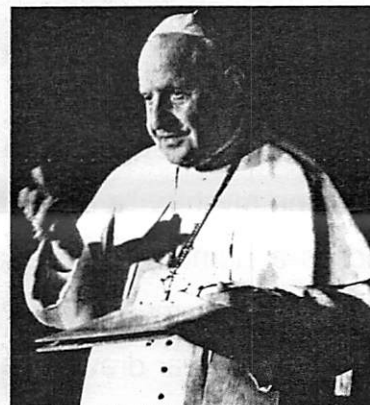
St. Francis

I recall the morning I awoke to learn the news that we had a new pope. That was in the fall of 1958. I was in my 2nd year of Japanese language study in Tokyo. In the Japan Times I saw a photo of the new pope, John XXIII, 78 years old. I had been hoping for a young, vigorous leader to guide the Church in the modern era. I was soon to learn a valuable lesson

on judging by age!

John XXIII was born and raised in a rural family on a farm not too far from Venice. He had a great sense of humor, besides a big fund of common sense. But what is more, he was attuned to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. According to his own testimony, it was by such an inspiration that he determined to call an ecumenical council, less than three months after his election as pope.

Pope John knew from his years as Vatican representative in Bulgaria and Turkey, as well as that of papal nuncio in France, that the Church was often not respected and her mission in the world greatly misunderstood and thwarted. The purpose of the Council, he said, would be to determine how best to make the Church and her Founder Jesus be understood and her message grasped by people everywhere. He opened the windows and doors of the Vatican and invited representatives of other denominations of Christians as well as non-Christians to come



Pope John XXIII

and observe what was being said and done in the Council by those more than two thousand Catholic bishops. Pope John, by his warm and smiling welcome, won the trust of the world. He literally turned the Christian world on its head, and gave a new image to people of the age-old Catholic church.

Assisi's St. Francis and Bl. Pope John have in common a very humble attitude and simplicity that has proved to be a most supple instrument of the Holy Spirit. It has also proven to be powerfully missionary in its effects on world opinion.

At Christmas time we are busy perhaps thinking of what to give whom as a Christmas gift. This year, proclaimed as a year of faith, was given a missionary direction. We are encouraged to deepen and widen our faith by trying to share it with those around us who do not appreciate our beliefs.

So we ask: How do we share our faith in this 21st century? We no longer think of standing on a busy street corner and speaking of the Gospel message. Such was the method used until quite recently (and even now?) in London's Marble Arch by the Catholic Truth Society. Instead, the Pope writes about a "new" evangelization. The symbolic globe at the feet of St. Francis reminds us of Jesus' words to the apostles: "Go to all nations and teach them what I have taught you."

Recently in Rome at a synod of bishops the archbishop of Manila, Cardinal Luis Tagle, spoke movingly to his fellow bishops "We must become humble, simple and silent," he said.

He was referring to a humble, silent listening to people around us who do not appreciate our words about faith in Jesus. At times these folks are put off by our "know-it-all" attitude or condescending way of trying to share our faith. "The Church must be a place where people can meet God", another Asian prelate remarked. This is perhaps the "new" element we need to concentrate on in our missionary activity.

Have we really tried to listen to our non-Catholic friends who have maybe been put off by our inability to listen, silently and humbly, to what they think about our Church and our faith. I recall those words of Emerson quoted as remarking to his friend: "What you are is so loudly thundering in my ears that I can't hear what you are saying". Does our conduct "thunder loud" in people's ears reminding them of Jesus? Or does our attitude as we meet daily with the many "others" around us put them off? We are called to reflect Christ and his love.

God's love can't stand being self-enclosed. By its very nature it is outgoing and communicative. Toward creatures who are made in God's image and have everlasting intelligence, divine love is compelled by itself to seek communication. So we have God's revelation, self-communication of all kinds. I think this is what Christmas is all about: God's ultimate self-revelation. It is God's very own Son and Word speaking in human language and human flesh.

What a break-through! The Bible is great literature, and what it tells those who have faith is an overwhelming message of love: God in the flesh come down to earth to redeem the human race. If we grasp that message of love we can be people of peace and good will toward all.

In the words of Vatican Council II God establishes a unique solidarity with our world: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs, anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their heart."



Vatican Council II

Way back in the 20th century Lech Walesa in Poland energized his fellow workers to form a solidarity to oppose the Communist movement. His compatriot, Bl. John Paul II, built on this in his position as pope to help free the Polish and other peoples as well from oppressive government. This was a solidarity movement. But it was rooted in God's own solidarity action in the Incarnation of his own divine Son Jesus. He became one of us.

Our celebration of Christmas should be based on our realization of this great mystery of God-in-the-flesh. Our thoughts are led beyond Bethlehem to Calvary. Jesus' mission in this world is solidarity with everything truly human. And that means for Jesus both pain and resurrection. The manger points to the cross on which God's solidarity with the world came to its most tragic point. That is why St. Paul of the Cross used to place a crucifix in the hands of the Infant in the manger. Later rugged John the Baptist would cry out: "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world". Or as Paul of Tarsus put it in his letter to the Church at Corinth: "God made him who knew no sin to be made sin out of love for us" (II, 5:21) Unthinkable, were it not God's revelation.

I have been strongly nudged of late to ponder those words of Scripture that St. Paul wrote in a number of letters that God's decision to become man is eternal: it always was so in God. Recall the letter to the Ephesians chapter 1: God's merciful, forgiving and saving love for us has always been so. My conclusion is that God's love therefore has always been "incarnational". It became visible on earth 2000 years ago, but it was like that always and eternally. His love has been a "servant love", so to speak, as St. Paul expressed it. The Bible scholars tell us those words of Paul were a quote from a hymn composed by the early Church. It is another instance where the Council teaching is rooted in the age-old faith of our fathers, and mothers.

So maybe our Christmas celebration and its liturgy this year can help us go a little deeper into the Incarnation mystery of God's eternal love. And thus our faith may grow and take on a freshness that will raise a question mark in the hearts of believers and unbelievers alike: How come? Where does this joy in believing come from? Please God, it will make us more committed to our divine Savior. We Passionists in Japan are praying for all of you, our benefactors. A Merry Christmas to you all.

Sincerely, Fr. Ward Biddle C. P. Mission Procurator

Fr. Ward, C.P.