

CHRIST & ASIA

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by

**Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ
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SHUSAKU ENDO:

The fascination of the cross

Japan and Christianity

Christianity was brought to Japan by St. Francis Xavier who stepped ashore at Kagoshima in the year 1549 with two Jesuit companions and a Japanese interpreter. Within a few months of his arrival, he had fallen in love with the Japanese whom he called “the joy of his heart”. The people whom we have met so far he wrote enthusiastically to his companions in Goa “are the best who have yet been discovered, and it seems to me that we shall never find another race to equal the Japanese”.

The real architect of the Japanese mission was Alessandro Valignano. When he arrived for the first time in Japan there were already 150,000 Christians (1579) and Valignano, anxious to entrust the infant church to a local clergy, set about founding seminaries, colleges and a novitiate. In the meantime Japan, who had been always divided into different fiefdoms, was brought together by the *shogun* Hideyoshi who started becoming suspicious about the links of the missionaries with their European countries.

In February 1597 the first martyrs: 26, Japanese and European, were crucified on a cold winter morning. Today, not far from Nagasaki station, there stands a monument to commemorate the spot where they died. The persecution became systematic from 1614 onwards, with the appearance of the English and Dutch protestants who became influential councilors at the court of the *shogun*, Hideyoshi's successor, Ieyasu. Many were the forms of torment, but most famous the “Hanging in the pit” (*ana-tsurushi*), by which the victim was hung head downwards from a gallows into a pit which contained excreta and other filth.

The form of apostasy consisted in trampling on the image of Christ (today at Ueno Museum in Tokyo we can still those *fumie* rubbed flat and shining by the hundred of feet that ached with pain while they trampled on someone whom their hearts loved. The first apostasy was of the Jesuit Provincial, Cristovao Ferreira in 1632.

Yet Christianity's root had gone too deep for the faith to be completely eradicated. Besides the martyrs (estimated at some five or six thousand for the period 1614-40 alone), thousand of Christians kept their faith and they expected the return of the missionaries. In 1865 when the first European missionaries entered Japan, they found the descendants of the first Christians who had kept their faith.

But the mass conversion never happened ... Like a sudden frost burns the buds on the trees, the long persecution congealed the expansion of Christianity which therefore remained, up to the present time, the faith of a very small minority of the Japanese.

And yet, Christianity, and Catholicism in particular, is perceived as something profound and serious to which the seriousness of the Japanese character which has shown its depth and breath, not only in its ancient, original culture, but also in the impressive creative assimilation of western science and technology, almost spontaneously sensed the dramatic nature of the Incarnation and of the Christian message.

To this seriousness of perception has certainly contributed the high profile of the figure of the last Popes and the way the Catholic Church, especially with the 2nd Vatican Council, has involved itself with the problems of modern humanity.

All the same, it is a remarkable sign of the depth of the Japanese Catholicism that an outstanding figure of writer, thinker and artist like Shusaku Endo could not only appear but be accepted and his books become so popular both in Japan and abroad.

Endo has an over riding interest, almost an obsession: the relationship between the Japanese mentality and Christianity. This relationship has constantly occupied his thought and imagination; it underlies everything Endo has written and is at the bottom of every character and story outline of his fiction.

He researches the tension existing between Christianity and Japanese culture and mentality and looks for the reasons at the bottom of it in the circumstances of their encounter in history; he makes hypothesis about it in the different vicissitudes of the unforgettable fictional characters of his novels set in the XVI-XVII century (*Silence* 1966; *The Samurai*, 1981).

The impact of a masterpiece

In a cell of one of the prisons of XVII century Japan, a young Jesuit priest, Fr. Rodrigues, is tormented by his present predicament and by the grim prospect of the future. He has entered Japan few months before, secretly, to care for the Christian communities scattered by the fierce persecution and, with his sacrifice, to redress the apostasy of the Jesuit Provincial, Fr. Ferreira, who has succumbed to the torture of the pit and has denied the faith.

Very soon, Fr. Rodrigues had been captured and tortured, but he has so far resisted. While recovering from his ordeal in the privacy and quiet of his prison cell, during the silent hours of the night, he is disturbed by a mysterious, insistent moaning.

Set on edge by the noise, he asks the guards what it is. “It is your Christians” they answer “who are tortured because you are stubborn and do not want to deny the faith”. Fr. Rodrigues feels proud of their courage and faithfulness; but he is quickly disillusioned by the guards: “Your Christians” they say “have already denied Christ a hundred times; they have trampled on the face of Christ, but they will not stop being tortured, if you do not tread on Christ’s face yourself”.

Fr. Rodrigues is shattered. In front of his ordeal, God does not speak. It is this silence of God that has given Endo’s novel its title – the silence of a God who does not respond to prayers, to torture. Still, in the end, the silence is broken. Christ speaks to Fr. Rodrigues – not however the beautiful, haloed, and serene Christ of his devotions, but the Christ of the twisted and dented *fumie*, the trampled upon, and suffering Christ.

And what this Christ says to the priest shocks him to the marrow: “Trample, trample ... It was to be trampled upon by men that I was born into this world; it was to share men’s pain that I carried my cross”. And the novelist writes: “The priest placed his foot on the *fumie*. Dawn broke. And far in the distance the cock crew”.

The novel, published in 1966, was an instant bestseller not only because of its dramatic power but also because of the controversial nature of its content. The interest the novel *Silence* evoked in Japan was less historical than contemporary. The two foreign apostates (Ferreira and Rodrigues) were taken as symbols of a Christianity which in Japan has failed. “Father, you were not defeated by me”, says the victorious persecutor, Inoue, “You were defeated by this swamp of Japan”.

Japan is a swamp because it sucks up all sorts of ideologies, transforming them into its own self, and distorting them in the process. It is the spider’s web that destroys the butterfly, leaving only the ugly skeleton ... This “Japanese mud swamp” is also present in the writer ... His novels are the expression of the conflict between his Japanese sensibility and the Christianity that has been given to him. If this Christianity had been less western, could possibly things have been different?

The novel *Silence* caused a lot of indignation among the Japanese Catholics who thought that Endo had been less than fair to the indomitable courage of their heroic ancestors. But, obviously, Endo did not mean to say that what Fr. Rodrigues does is good; he only wanted to show the infinite largeness of Christ’s heart in his understanding of human vicissitudes.

Endo had already expressed this in the short story: *The Final Martyr* (1959). He believes that this boundless understanding and compassion, endowed as it is with a touch of femininity, of maternity, would make Christ more acceptable to the Japanese soul, steeped as it is in Buddhism which tends to allow more room for human weakness. This is what Endo openly advocates in *A Life of Jesus*.

Even “the failure of Christianity” was objected to: if the Japanese cannot understand Christianity, how is it possible for Endo to write such a novel?

The missionary significance of the Cross

Endo’s paradoxical novel has also a missionary valence of a great present day importance.

In the suffering Jesus, God embraces the suffering of the world for the sake of humanity. In Christ, God does not necessarily save us from suffering, but in and through it. As Fr. Rodrigues discovered, Christ suffers when we suffer. The pain people suffer is the pain of Christ himself. Christ identifies himself with his followers; what is done to them, is done to him also.

It is in not saving himself that Jesus reveals the fundamental character of the true God. It is at this point that the missionary significance of the cross emerges. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me” (Mt 6:24).

The missionary is usually given a Crucifix, in the ceremony of commission ... This missionary cross or crucifix is no mere ornament depicting Christianity in general. Rather it is a vigorous commentary on what gives the Gospel its universal appeal. Those who receive it possess not any a symbol of their mission but a handbook on how to carry it out.

The fascination of the cross is the center of yet another major historical novel that Endo published fifteen years after *Silence: The Samurai* (1981). It is a much larger canvas, and the characters and the story, notwithstanding all their realism, have nothing controversial from the Christian point of view.

It is the time of the powerful *shogun* Hideyoshi Tayotomi, who unified Japan and even attempted to conquer Korea and China. This expansionist ambition was frustrated by the resistance of the Koreans.

His defeated army was forced to retreat, but not before they killed one hundred thousand Koreans and sheared off their noses as

trophies. In the ancient city of Kyoto, on a quiet back street near the National Museum sits a large earthen mound, known as *minuzuka*. It is said to contain the hacked off noses of the Koreans.

It was Hideyoshi who started to oppose proselytizing by the Christian missionaries; but, for the sake of commerce, he tolerated their activity. His successor, Tokugawa Ieyasu, persuaded that the missionaries were the vanguard of the European nations for the conquest of Japan, gave way to an all out persecution of the Christians which lasted two hundred years.

In *The Samurai*, Rukuemon Hasekura, a traditional Japanese warrior in the service of a powerful feudal lord, is chosen as one of Japan's envoys to the Viceroy of Mexico and Pope Paul V. The emissaries set sail in 1613 in the company of Father Velasco, an ambitious Franciscan missionary, who intends to bargain trading privileges with the West against the right for his order to proselytize in Japan.

The journey lasts four years and the Japanese travel from Mexico to Rome, where they are persuaded that the success of their mission depends on their conversion to Christianity. In reality, however, the journey has been futile since the start – Hasekura returns to Japan to discover that in his absence the political tides have shifted.

The authorities are pursuing an isolationist policy and ruthlessly stamping out all Western influences. In the face of disillusionment and death, the samurai's only support and solace comes from his reluctant commitment to a new spiritual Lord.

Wherever he had gone in his journey, in ships or houses, the tragic figure of the Crucifix had confronted the samurai, evoking in him mostly revulsion or lack of understanding. But on the point of being taken away, his old, faithful servant Yozo, who is a Christian, tells him: "From now on, He will be beside you ... He will attend to you".

So, the samurai goes to his place of martyrdom where he is joined by Fr. Velasco. Both are crucified on the seashore, on a brisk winter morning.

The swamp of the metropolis

But all that is only one aspect of Endo's research/drama. What he has tried to unravel in history is still very much present in the relation between Christianity and Japan in our time and especially in the writer's personal history. It is always tricky to try to discover what is autobiographical in a work of fiction because the imagination of a creative writer has usually an oniric quality: i.e. as in dreams, elements of the everyday experiences of the dreamer associate freely and unforeseeably, giving origin to new situations and images and feelings, in the same way different influences combine creatively in the writer's imagination.

It is anyway not difficult to see this relationship if one consider the totality or quasi totality of the work of an artist or writer. In Shusaku Endo's work, it is not difficult to see that his enquiry about the relationship between Christianity and the Japanese mentality and culture passes from the historical to the contemporary and from the general to the personal. Especially, in my opinion, it passes from the more contingent problem of the enculturation of Christianity to the more basic and fundamental problem that Christ's message and example is foreign, i.e. different, and therefore challenging, in relation to any culture.

It requires a conversion that is outside the parameters of any culture. It confronts everyone with a vocation that is embodied in the person of Christ who is co-extensive with no culture and comes "natural" to no person, but challenges us all the time in the same way as he challenges all our cultures themselves.

The "mud swamp" which represents the traditional Japanese mentality according to *Silence*, and which is considered responsible for the inability of the Japanese to become Christians, in the present day Japan, is the world of the urban jungle, the outskirts of Tokyo. There a suffering humanity falls victim to the cruel competition of the capitalistic society with its relentless drive for money and for success.

In this grim context, Christ like figures like the strange French drifter Gaston, "*The Wonderful Fool*" (1957) or the girl Mitsu (*The*

girl I left behind” (1964), irresistibly attract the attention of the writer and represent unusual models of a contemporary Christ. Gaston cannot settle into the asphyxiating atmosphere of the life of modern Japan and falls victim and literally disappears into the swamp and yet his presence makes the people open their eyes on their condition of oppression and draws the best, even if for a moment only, from their humanity.

On her part, Mitsu is a poor, simple girl who has come from the countryside to search her luck in the suburbs of Tokyo. Abandoned by her boyfriend, she drops her dream of marriage and goes voluntarily to join the outcasts, the lepers. She spends her life serving the patients in a leprosarium where eventually she dies. Her pathetic, humble figure, together with that of the “wonderful fool”, renews the sense of surprise and wonder in the writer at the supernatural, moral power of Christ, the Crucified.

Thirty years after the publication of *The Girl I left behind*, Endo revealed that he had drawn inspiration from a real story which he had picked up when, during his student’s days, he visited a Catholic leprosarium as a volunteer: a girl of a well-to-do family was wrongly pronounced a leper and segregated in the Catholic leprosarium at the feet of mount Fuji. Cleared of leprosy after a second, more accurate test, she was instinctively overcome with feelings of relief and joy and left the hospital for the station, planning to catch the train back to her native Kyoto. It was at the station that she made a life-changing decision. Returning to the leprosarium, she devoted the rest of her life to the care of lepers.

“Through the medium of this novel, I sought to portray the drama of “the Jesus I left behind”. Mitsu can be seen as modeled on Jesus, abandoned by his own disciples; she is modeled on the Jesus whom all Christians are guilty of abandoning on a daily basis in their everyday lives. Mitsu has continued to live within me ever since and can be seen reincarnated in my novel, *Deep River*, in the person of the protagonist, Otsu. It is my profound wish that my readers will acknowledge the connection between these two novels”.

The obscure drama of a writer

As we have seen, Sushaku Endo has spent, we can say, his whole life as a writer in trying to express the impact of the crucified Jesus on the Japanese culture and mentality.

Towards the end of his life, he went back to the topic of the Passion of Jesus and he brought to bear on the problem of the reason why it was necessary for Jesus to suffer and to die, the feelings and the dark movements of his psychology of aging person.

In his short story: "*A 60 years old man*" (1983), he speaks of a writer who is a convert to Christianity and who has written in his youth a "*Life of Christ*". Now, as he approaches 60, he feels the weight of years, he experiences the gloomy prospect of aging with the dimming of the senses and the lessening of strength. He is now revising the *Life of Christ* for a new edition. He follows his daily routine. He walks in the park with his wife; he goes to his office to write. There he creates the right atmosphere: he lowers the blinds, sits on his favorite chair, takes up the pen and produces the amount of words he has decided, according to his writing habit ...

He is not happy; he is restless: a somber mood seems to dominate him. He resents the fact that his energies are diminishing, his health is deteriorating ... His instinct of survival seems to rebel against the inevitability of his destiny. One day, while resting on a bench in the park, his attention is caught by the figure of a girl who laughs and plays with her companions ... She is unrefined and somehow vulgar, a creature of the slums, not without a kind of wild beauty, but especially giving out, emanating a certain animal vitality. He looks at her and fantasizes about her and feels a potent attraction to the girl. He goes back to the park without his wife, by himself, and befriends the girl ... The girl makes him understand that she is available. She thinks that he is one of the rich, dirty old men who lust after younger women. She is ready to take advantage of the situation...

In the meantime, the writer has reached the revision of the Passion and he is not satisfied by the traditional reasons brought to justify the people's rejection of Jesus and their murderous will to do

away with him... He feels that there is a deeper reason, but somehow he cannot see it clearly... And then he dreams of the girl happens. It is a nightmare... In his instinct of survival, in his refusal to accept the decay of his aging flesh, in his jealousy for the girl's youth which now escapes him, he dreams of assaulting her and raping her and putting his fingers like claws around her neck to choke her... Then he awakes from the nightmare, very disturbed, but at the same time with a sense of relief that everything was only a dream and he now seems to understand why Jesus was killed, the real reason for the hatred of the crowds. Jesus represents the love of God in the powerlessness of those who suffer... We do not want to accept our mortality, our dependence and the need of going out of ourselves... The writer now understands.

At his side, his wife sleeps peacefully. She represents the simple faith, untroubled, childlike.

This short story is extremely significant of the evolution of Shusaku Endo in his approach to Christianity. With it the drama is no longer Christ's impact on the general Japanese mentality or the fact that a Japanese who accepts Christ has to do so without the support of a Christian culture and tradition as it is in the West.

These problematic matters are explored by the writer in his historic novels; they have even been applied to the contemporary scene with the other novels we have mentioned. In all of them, however, the writer is still an observer, one who looks on somehow from outside.

Now no more. The "mud swamp" that represents the Japanese culture, this ambiguous reality, this sinister combination of egoism and tolerance that tends to suck in any novelty and little by little to drawn it into its gray and indeterminate nature, is now within the individual person, within the spiritual history and condition of the writer himself.

It is not anymore the question of the enculturation of Christianity. It is much more. It is now the eternal spiritual fight between the demands of Christ, the crucified lover, the one who represents all the oppressed, the sufferings, the losers, and the instinct of survival of the ego with its possessive urges towards sex and violence.

In the end of the short story, Endo writes: “I thought of the manuscript of *A Life of Jesus* that lay on top of my desk. Amidst the crowds mocking the captured Jesus, I locate the figure of one old man. Jesus is meekly led away, covered with grime and blood. He offers no resistance. His eyes are downcast. But when He stands before the old man, He lifts his head. The eyes that gaze on the old man are clear, as clear as the eyes of a young girl. The old man flinches when faced with one whose purity will never diminish. That provokes the old man’s envy. Without thinking, he spits upon Jesus, just as I had done in my dream, attempting to defile at least the physical manifestation of that purity”.

At this point, I think, it was irresistible for Shusaku Endo the urge to develop the theme of the short story: *A Sixty Years Old Man* into a novel. And it actually became his last major novel: *Scandal* (1986). In it, the main character, Seguro, is an aged writer who converted to Christianity in his youth and has gained international acclaim with his novels about the impact of Christianity.

The outline of the novel follows the pattern of the short story mentioned above. The conclusion is in the same line. Seguro has gone through the temptations of lust and violence and also through the threat of being exposed for what he now realizes he is, deep down in the dark realm of raw instincts.

In the meantime: “It was Sunday after Easter and the church was more crowded than usual. Beyond the altar the emaciated man spread his arms wide, and his head drooped. Powerless to resist and soaked in blood, he had dragged his weary legs towards the execution ground. Along the way the crowds had jeered at him, hurled stones at him, and reveled in his torments. Seguro had not given any thought to

that mob before. But he could not be at all certain that, had he been present, he would not have stoned the man and taken delight in his agony”.

The conclusion of the book *Scandal* is indeterminate: it is as if Endo wanted to say that the two realities: Japan and Christianity have now grown impermeable to each other. Christ remains the insuppressible, divine point of reference of a life view which is essentially different and superhuman; but the “mud swamp” of the human heart may continue without taking any notice of him, as the masses of the contemporary Japanese who are going on with their lives as if that disturbing Presence were not there. And paradoxically again that is precisely what Jesus is for: to be trampled upon, to be left behind.

Endo in his own words

With *Scandal* Endo draws the last notes of the musical suite that is his lifelong search about the relationship between Christianity and the Japanese world. Of this world, in the end, he himself is the representative both in his personal history and, especially, in his fictional twins, the protagonists of his stories.

For all his attraction, Christ remains always a kind of foreign element in the equation.

And yet He cannot be eliminated or ignored, as we can gather from some declarations given on different occasions by Endo himself: “There were many times when I felt I wanted to get rid of my Catholicism, but I was finally unable to do so. The reason for this is that it had become part of me after all. The fact that it had penetrated me so deeply in my youth, was a sign, I thought, that it had, in part at least, become coextensive with me. Still, there was always that feeling in my heart that it was something borrowed, and I began to wonder what my real self was like. This I think is “the mud swamp” Japanese in me. From the time I first began to write novels even to the present day, this confrontation of my Catholic self with the self that lies underneath has, like an idiot’s constant refrain, echoed and – re-echoed in my work”.

Endo was born on March 27, 1923, in Tokyo but grew up in Dalian, in occupied Manchuria, where his father worked in a bank and where he attended primary education. The disintegration of his parents' marriage affected him deeply. Left with his mother, he returned to Japan. Soon afterwards, his mother converted to Christianity and it was through her influence and that of the devout aunt with whom they shared a home that Endo became a Roman Catholic.

After a brief period of military service during the II World War, he became one of the first Japanese student to be awarded a government scholarship to study abroad, and in 1950 he sailed for France. In the University of Lyon he specialized in the work of the Catholic novelists George Bernanos, Julien Green and Francois Mauriac. He returned to Japan and embarked in the career of journalist and writer.

Endo was dogged by ill health: he spent more than three years in hospital wards. Once, during one of his many operations, his heart stopped for a few minutes, but he did not die. He survived with the help of his wife and lived in Tokyo with her and one son. He never allowed his ill health to affect his good humor and his cheerful acceptance of misfortune. He died in 1996 at 73.

One aspect that concerned the writer is the realization that to be a Christian in Japan is to lack the support of a Christian culture which is the natural heritage of the people of the West even when they are no longer believers.

The West is informed by the Christian faith; the East, on the other hand, is informed by a kind of pantheism ... Pantheism knows no tension of opposites – between good and evil, flesh and spirit, God and the devil – such as is at the heart of the Christian life view.

Endo chose not only to try to portray precisely this form of conflict but to set this conflict against the calm passivity of pantheism that he sees as the dominant Japanese religious mood. He writes:

“For a long time I was attracted to a meaningless nihilism and when I finally came to realize the fearfulness of such a void I was

struck once again with the grandeur of the Catholic Faith. This problem of reconciliation of my Catholicism with my Japanese blood... has taught me one thing: that is, that the Japanese must absorb Christianity without the support of a Christian tradition or history or legacy or sensibility.

Even if this attempt is the occasion of much resistance and anguish and pain, still it is impossible to counter it by closing one's eyes to the difficulties. No doubt this is the peculiar cross that God has given to the Japanese”.

But what has inspired him most is the depth of humanity that is evoked by the Christian view of human nature and human destiny. Endo compares it to a symphony. In this he reflects the experience of other Catholic writers like Graham Greene and those he made object of his study, in his university days.

They all express amazement at the depth and breadth that the Christian life view draws from the human person: something very much appreciated by a novelist. Endo writes: “If I have trust in Catholicism, it is because I find in it much more possibilities than in any other religion for presenting the full symphony of humanity. The other religions have almost no fullness; they have but solo parts. Only Catholicism can present the full symphony”.

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ON THE ROADS OF INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE

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2001 is the year dedicated to the encounter of civilizations. At the heart of the different civilizations there is the religious experience.

Different religions are put on the occasion of meeting and reacting on each other by the widespread condition of pluralism in our societies.

This is the story of two pioneers of Inter- Faith Dialogue: BEDE GRIFFITHS and THOMAS MERTON.

In their different destinies, the English and the American Monks show remarkable similarities in the spiritual adventure of discovering the wisdom of the East, of Hinduism and Buddhism. They are exemplary of the journey of encounter between different faiths that is the challenge of the future.

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The dossier contains the following articles:

- 1. WHERE EAGLES DARE** (*Thomas Merton and Bede Griffiths: Pioneers of Dialogue*);
- 2. THE MARRIAGE OF THE EAST AND THE WEST** (*The spiritual adventure of Bede Griffiths*);
- 3. RETURN TO PARADISE** (*Thomas Merton and Buddhism*).

WHERE EAGLES DARE

(Thomas Merton and Bede Griffiths: two pioneers of Dialogue)

When Religions speak to each other

Some years ago, the great British historian Arnold Toynbee declared that when the historian of a thousand years from now comes to write the history of our time, he will be preoccupied not so much with the Vietnam war, nor with the collapse of communism, but with what happened when for the first time Christianity and Buddhism began to meet and penetrate one another deeply.

We can now realize more and more how the above remark is not only profoundly interesting, but especially very true. In connection with this, William Johnston wrote with enthusiasm: "Christianity and Buddhism are penetrating one another, talking to one another, learning from one another. Even the stubborn, old Catholic Church, in a flush of post-councilor humility, feels that she has something to gain by sitting at the feet of the Zen *roshi* and imbibing the age-old wisdom of the East. Surely this is progress".

Now, the communications revolution is throwing peoples and cultures together. This is increased by the extraordinary mobility of population that is taking place in this beginning of the XXI century. Physical contact, however, does not mean by itself understanding, esteem and cooperation. This is why thinking people are promoting a conscious and deliberate effort to make the different civilizations meet.

At the heart of this encounter of civilizations, undoubtedly there is the meeting of the different religion traditions. A widespread and profound process of secularization marks our age, yet the understanding, tolerance and mutual acceptance of the great religions is perceived by many as vital for the peaceful coexistence of tomorrow's humanity.

The German theologian Hans Kung has dedicated the last decade of his research to the study of the major non-Christian

religions, convinced that, in the future, peace shall depend on the good relationship between the different religious traditions and their capacity of dialogue.

A model of Dialogue

Of this we find already an outstanding model in Pope John Paul II who on October 27, 1986, with the inspiration of a prophet, invited the leaders of the world religions to pray and fast for peace at Assisi. Those who were present speak of the humble demeanor of the Dalai Lama, the major Rabbi of Rome, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Mother Teresa and many others as they entered the small chapel where St. Francis died on the bare ground.

All prayed in silence for a short time before dispersing to twelve different locations in Assisi, where they prayed according to their own unique traditions. In this way the unity and diversity of the world religions shone forth clearly. And so, throughout the town of Saint Francis, arose prayer and meditation inspired by the Vedas, the Sutras, the Koran, the Avesta, the Psalms and the Gospel, with incense, flowers, water, fire and peace pipe.

In five Catholic churches in Assisi crowds prayed before the Blessed Sacrament, while throughout the world men and women interceded for peace on earth. “The challenge of peace transcends all religions”, said John Paul.

What pope John Paul did on that occasion has become a point of reference, but it may never have taken place if it had not been prepared by the work of other trailblazers like Thomas Merton and Bede Griffiths whose life and work we present in this *dossier*.

Two different destinies

The year 1968 has a striking importance in the life of our two prophets of dialogue, Bede Griffiths and Thomas Merton. It is the year when the American monk saw his dream of traveling to the East become true. He had the opportunity of meeting in person people and reaching places about which he had read and studied and reflected for

years, especially the Buddhist world. We have the echoes of this enthusiastic encounter in his *Asian Journal* and other writings.

And yet, because of an unexpected twist of destiny, that very journey marked the end of his life. Thomas Merton, as it is well known, died electrocuted in Bangkok when he was only 53. His personal encounter with Asia and Buddhism represents a spiritual pilgrimage that, because of its sudden conclusion, never fulfilled its great promise.

On that very year instead, Bede Griffiths arrived at Shantivanam and found in Saccidananda Ashram the eagle's nest where he would nurse his growing community, develop his thought but especially embody in his monastic life and figure this encounter of religions.

While the spiritual and intellectual search of the two trailblazers was developing, Asia was pouring into the West at an ever-increasing pace. Hundreds of mosques and dozens of Buddhist and Hindu places of worship mushroomed in the West to cater for the millions of immigrants from the East and the thousand of Western empathizers.

This fact makes their pioneering search more relevant. They are among the few who started giving an answer to the questions: Is the meeting of civilizations really possible? Is the dialogue between religions, which is at the heart of this encounter, ever to grow beyond mere tolerance and become a reality? What can humanity expect from it and what are the paths through which it will take place?

This may well be the problematic of a future that appears still distant. At present, in many parts of the world, tolerance and a peaceful coexistence is still an ideal beyond reach. Many places are torn apart with religious strife as never before. Especially Christian minorities, in many parts of the world, have become the target of a rabid and violent intolerance that has multiplied the number of martyrs.

Dialogue between religions or, as it has come to be known among Christians, "Inter-faith Dialogue", is limited to the initiative of Christians and something that affects only a limited number of people.

A personal quest

Both Thomas Merton and Bede Griffiths responded to a personal inner urge when they engaged in their life long search. For Bede it was the humanistic formation that gave him the intuition of the unity among religions. His books have the flavor and the vision of a poet more than the accuracy and the scientific analysis of a philosopher and a theologian.

He was searching for the other part of his soul. It was India that made him break loose from the carapace of his Victoria formation and gave him a mystic, tolerant and peaceful wisdom approach to religions, in particular to Christianity and Hinduism.

One may find too simplistic and schematic his conclusions, too influenced by his Jungian outlook, but his vision was never meant to be the final word, the exact, scholarly explanation, but only the expression of an intuition that was the fruit of a humanistic and mystical approach.

Bede's conviction that there is a fundamental unity among the great religions, beyond the diversity of dogmas and symbols, may arouse the fear of a dangerous confusion. But he never meant to abolish the differences. He only intuites the unity of the experience of prayer. And it is interesting to notice that John Paul II in *Redemptoris Mission* writes that "every genuine prayer is done in the Holy Spirit".

What Bede Griffiths has accomplished in his long life is to have approached the alien world of Hinduism with deep empathy and reverence, recognizing the traces of the Spirit of God in it and showing the willingness to learn from it.

As for Thomas Merton, *Zen* Buddhism meant for him the ideal of overcoming the excessive preoccupation with the ego. It was something that Merton felt deeply because it challenged the incessant self analysis that is witnessed in his writings.

The enlightenment of *Zen* Buddhism he saw as the long awaited and desired freedom from the tyranny of the ego. It is a negative conquest, undoubtedly, but one which opens the way for a contemplative and fresh approach to reality and to God. He found in

the teaching of *Zen* something which made him appreciate more the tradition of Christian monasticism.

As with Bede also with Thomas Merton the optimistic intuition of the positive and genuine nature of the Hindu or Buddhist religious experiences as perceived in the contemplation of their religious art assumes the character of a personal discovery.

But aren't they projecting their own expectations and needs on the non-Christian religious traditions, seeing in them what is not there or at least in the way they think it is there? Were they not too quick in drawing conclusions that may not be the real ones?

Already other scholars have entered into the intricacies of inter-faith dialogue with more subtle instrument of analysis: already the serious approach to the study of the great religions is bringing to the fore the need of harmonizing them with the uniqueness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. This is a target for the future.

Different ways of dialogue

Moreover, both our prophets impacted more the people of the West. They had very little influence on Easterners. Especially Bede Griffiths seemed singularly unsuccessful in convincing any relevant Hindu about the goodness of what he was doing.

Swami Devananda, A Hindu fundamentalist even accused him of spiritual colonialism, of wanting to convert the Indians to Christianity and abusing the Hindu symbols and concepts: "You abuse and pervert our symbols and traditions to your own motivated missionary ends. You have not transcended religion and you have no intention of doing so, whatever your pious declarations. You have an overriding ambitions to subvert and subsume us with your own spiritual concepts".

It was a malicious accusation without real foundation, but it pointed out to a more fundamental objection that was directed first to Abhishiktananda by the spiritual head of the Ramakrishna order. Why was he trying to be a Hindu monk, the Hindu asked? Why not

just be what you are, a Benedictine? If a Ramakrishna monk were to live in Rome, should he dress like a Benedictine?

Christians do not need to imitate Hinduism to show their appreciation of it; all the Hindu want is that Indian symbolism and tradition are accepted as a way to reach God.

Different is the experience of dialogue represented by Fr. Franco Sottocornola, a Xaverian Father, who in 1987 founded a center of prayer and religious dialogue, called *Seimeizan* and located within a Buddhist ground in the island of Kyushu in Japan. The Christian prayer center has existed for the past fifteen years and Fr. Sottocornola and venerable Furukawa Tairyu, the Buddhist leader in charge of the Buddhist center, have shared prayer moments daily and enlightened both groups about their respective religions, without looking for a common ground or hiding or watering down the beliefs of their respective faiths in order to please.

This attitude of clarity and sincerity has made the initiative endure and grow in as much as neither part feels short-changed or cheated, taken for what it is and in great respect and reverence and the desire of mutual knowledge. Inter-religious dialogue is not the comparative study of different religions in order to find a common ground or minimum common denominator. True inter-religious dialogue happens among people who belong to a faith and a community of faith and within this tradition come forward to meet with other people themselves being people of faith and belonging fully to a faith. The meeting will be in prayer and in mutual knowledge.

At the beginning of a gigantic enterprise

Often the so called inter-faith dialogue is marred by a relativistic position by which under the pretext of pluralism, in reality it puts all religions on the same footing, propounding a leveling of all differences into a minimum common denominator which practically destroys all religions. This ends in relativism : everything is the same or in vague irenism: let us be friends and live in pace.

This is why Fr. Sottocornola finds extremely important and timely the declaration *Dominus Jesus* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith that helps to dissipate facile and inappropriate approaches to dialogue. True, serious inter-faith dialogue instead is a religious reality that does not like to be short-circuited by a superficial or hurried approach. This may be the danger of the theologians who work with abstract concepts...

This is not the writing off of the reach experience of the two pioneers considered in this *dossier*. It only means to show other perspectives that must also be taken into account.

In reality we are faced by very complex situations. There are no shortcuts to a true and vital dialogue. It is the dimension of religious experience of the faithful that must be taken into account and brought to bear on the similar, parallel experience of the faithful from another religion. This type of dialogue must be made with a profound respect, with sensitivity, with meekness and humility.

These were in fact the attitudes that guided the two monks that we have made the object of our consideration. Besides and beyond their concrete achievements, their example constitutes an asset for the Church and for Humanity.

Monks have been the religious entrepreneurs of early Christianity. With Thomas Merton and Bede Griffiths, they again emerge as innovators in an era of infinitely greater inter-religious information and diffusion. Their spiritual legacy is enormous, yet we are still at the beginning of a gigantic enterprise that will occupy the minds and hearts of the people not only of this century, but possibly of many centuries to come.

[illegible]

THE MARRIAGE OF THE EAST AND THE WEST

(THE SPIRITUAL ADVENTURE OF BEDE GRIFFITHS)

A sannyasi in India

“I sit here on the veranda of my cell, watching the sun setting behind the trees, and recall the day, nearly fifty years ago, when I watched the same sun setting over the playing fields at school.

My cell is a thatched hut surrounded by trees. I can listen to the birds singing, as I did then ... I have traveled a long way, both in space and in time since then ... I have made my home here in India, in the Tamil Nadu, by the banks of the river Cavery, but my mind has traveled no less far than my body”.

It was 1976 when Bede Griffiths wrote these lines. He was then the renown English Benedictine monk, who dressed as a Hindu *sannyasi*, one of the pioneers of inter-faith dialogue.

He had already lived for sixteen years as an Indian among Indians, following Indian ways of life, studying Indian thought, and immersing himself in the living tradition of the Indian spirit.

But for him the point of arrival of his long and painstaking search had been the year 1968 when, by a clear act of divine Providence, he had been sent to Shantivanam, at the Saccidananda Ashram.

“My end is my beginning”

This is the story of one of the XX Century’s great spiritual thinkers. Bede Griffiths was a man of great charisma and has been described as “translucently holy”. His often-troubled life was one of continual intellectual and spiritual exploration.

He was born Alan Richard, on 17 December 1906, last of four children, from an English, middle class, Anglican family. He grew up in the spiritual and intellectual atmosphere of the British society between the two wars. His personal search took him in succession to God, to Christ, and eventually to the Catholic Church.

This was also the journey of other outstanding figures of thinkers, artists and writers of that time like Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Alec Guinness, Siegfried Sassoon and before them Christopher Dawson, G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, to name but a few.

It was the reaction to the materialism and the incipient secularism of their society. Also the Anglican confession received in its fold, among others, the prominent figure of T. S. Eliot and the very popular writer C. S. Lewis who was Alan's tutor at Oxford and his life long friend afterwards.

What was peculiar of Alan is that he found God through the mystical experience of Nature to which he felt a deep, enduring attraction, far from the confusion of city life. When he finally arrived at accepting Christ and the Catholic Church, he made his discovery in the context of his already pronounced asceticism that made him fast often and spend hours in meditation.

He was fascinated by the monastic life at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire and it was there that he was received into the Catholic Church in December 1932. There, after only two months, he became a postulant of the Benedictines, and successively a monk, master of novices and Prior.

In the more than two decades that he lived in the monasteries in Britain, God's Providence was preparing him for the very special vocation, within the Benedictine vocation, which he was developing in his heart and to which he will remain faithful through the ups and downs of his very long life: the call to be a bridge-builder between religions.

He was almost fifty when he was sent to India and to the most exciting and unexpected spiritual adventure that will make of him a symbol of the encounter of the West with the East.

This is how he describes that special moment in his life: “When I wrote *The Golden String* (1954), telling the story of my search for God, which led me to the Catholic Church and to a Benedictine monastery, I thought that I had reached the end of my journey, at least as far as this world was concerned ... But now I have been led in a strange way to retrace the path I had taken and to make new discoveries about God, about Christ and about the Catholic Church.

It was as though I had been climbing a mountain, and having reached the peak, discovered further ranges beyond, with new peaks, opening up a new horizon”. The door to this new horizon was India.

The discovery of India

Bede Griffiths arrived in India in 1955 and assisted Fr. Francis Mahieu in the foundation of Kurisimala Ashram, a monastery of the Syrian rite in Kerala. It was only in 1968 that he came from Kurisimala to Saccidananda Ashram, where he will be abbot until his death and where he will enjoy the maturity of his relationship with India, his search for God and his fame as a *guro* or spiritual master for the thousands who, especially from the West, will visit him.

The years at Kurisimala were the years of his discovery of India. Going to India came to him as the fulfillment of a wild dream: “For years I had been studying the *Vedanda* and had begun to realize its significance for the Church and the world. Now I was given the opportunity to go to the source of this tradition, to live in India and to discover the secret of the wisdom of India.

It was not only the desire for new ideas that drew me to India, but the desire for a new way of life. I remember writing to a friend at the time: ‘I want to discover the other part of my soul’. I had begun to find that there was something lacking not only in the Western world, but in the Western Church. We were living from one half of

our soul, from the conscious, rational level and we needed to discover the other half, the unconscious, intuitive dimension.

I wanted to experience in my life the marriage of these two dimensions of human existence, the rational and intuitive, the conscious and unconscious, the masculine and feminine. I wanted to find the Marriage of East and West”.

Since the beginning, the search for India meant for Bede the search for his true self, his complete self. There might be something too contrived in his distinction between conscious and unconscious, as if Bede is applying the categories of Jung’s psychology in too simplistic a way; but the fact is that he gave his remaining years to India and he loved her passionately, and dedicated his life to the formidable task of bridging the gap between Hinduism and Christianity.

It was the beauty of India that captured his soul; first of all the beauty of the people: “It was not the poverty and the misery which struck me so much as the sheer beauty and vitality of the people. On all sides was a swarming mass of humanity, children running about quite naked, women in saris, men with turbans, everywhere displaying the beauty of the human form. Whether sitting or standing or walking, there was grace in their movements and I felt that I was in the presence of a hidden power of nature”.

Then it was the beauty of Indian religious art that influenced the imagination and the feelings of this Benedictine monk who had the formation of a humanist: “In the Indian culture, there is a profound awareness of a power beyond both man and nature which penetrates everything and is the real source of the beauty and vitality of Indian life.

I realized this most clearly when I visited the cave of Elephanta outside Bombay ... and the great figure of Siva Maheswara – the Great God. It is colossal and overwhelming at first, but when you look into the front face you see that it is in deep contemplation. There is absolute peace there, infinitely distant yet infinitely near, solemn, benign, gentle and majestic. Here carved in stone is the very genius of India and the East. This is what I had come to India to find, this

contemplative dimension of human existence which the West has almost lost and the East is losing ... Here was the secret I had come to discover”.

Again the personal involvement. India is the target of a personal search for meaning as if Bede was embodying in his own soul the thirst for meaning and for spiritual values that is starving the West. This attitude is certainly dangerous from the critical point of view. One may say that he is seeing in India what he wants to see and interpreting India's life and manifestations according to categories that may be only subjective and respond more to the needs of the researcher than to reality. After all, one may always find what he is looking for, even if it is not there.

But beyond the theory and its interpretation, which in the few years that have passed already show limitations and biases, there remains the life that Bede gave to India. His efforts to continue the existence of a Christian ashram deeply acculturated into the Hindu symbols, cultural heritage and way of life; his dedication to the formation of his novices and young monks and the care and concern for the thousands of people who passed through the ashram, attracted by the example and the fame of holiness of the Christian *sannyasi*: all these aspects have more value than Bede's theories contained in his books that may already be made partly obsolete by a more scientific and sophisticated approach.

Saccidananda Ashram: the beginnings

Shantivanam means 'the forest of peace'. With the sacred river Cavery meandering gently along the boundary, there is a deep, enveloping peace. It is not hard to see why it gladdened Bede's heart, when he reached there, or why, in the first place, it was the choice of the two Frenchmen, Father Jules Monchanin and Father Henry Le Saux, who settled there in 1950.

These two remarkable priests, who became Swami Paramarubyananda (The Bliss of the Supreme Spirit) and Swami

Abhishiktananda (The Bliss of Christ), were pioneers in the dialogue between Hinduism and Christianity, following the path once started only by Robert De Nobili in the seventeenth century and Brahamabandhad Upadhyaya, a Brahmin convert to Catholicism, at the turn of the XIX century.

They called it Saccidananda Ashram (the Hindu name for the Godhead, from the Sanskrit words *sat* 'being', *cit* 'awareness', *ananda* 'bliss'), the implicit message being that the Hindu quest for God, enshrined in this ancient word, finds a parallel in the Christian Trinity.

In the early 50s, before Bede and Fr. Francis had settled in Kurisumala, the two French monks were already wearing the *kavi* habit of the Hindu *sannyasi*, going barefoot, living in utmost simplicity in small thatched huts, sleeping on the ground and eating with their fingers. They worshiped in a little chapel built in the style of a Hindu temple, using both Sanskrit and the local Tamil, along side the Latin of the Roman liturgy.

In their attempt to live as Christians in the tradition of the Hindu *sannyasi*, entering deeply in the Hindu thought, they were making the boldest experiment yet in monastic life in India, but it was far ahead of its time to meet with any real success and not a single Indian found his vocation in their way of life.

In 1957, when Fr. Monchanin died, the experiment virtually came to an end and eventually Abhishiktananda decided to retire to Himalayas, where he wrote several books of quite extraordinary insight. Though the two monks had not realized their dream in the sense of forming a new community, the seed of a new life of the Church in India had been planted in Shantivanam's soil. Their remains now rest, together with those of Bede, in the little cemetery of the ashram.

The blossoming of Shantivanam, "the house of peace"

When, in 1968, Bede Griffiths, with other two monks from Kurisimala, arrived at Shantivanam, the place had been abandoned for

some years and was in disorder and overgrown with weeds. It didn't take much to clear the ground and to make it viable for the simple needs of the three monks, but it took some years before the community was formed and the place acquired its name as a point of reference for the soul in search of God.

Bede's ideal was for Shantivanam to become a center where people of different religious traditions could meet together in an atmosphere of prayer and grow together towards the unity in Truth that is the goal of all religions: "A Christian ashram, if it is to be worthy of the name, must be a place where a meeting can take place in 'the cave of the heart' between the Christian experience of God through faith in Jesus Christ and the Hindu experience of 'Brahman' the One 'without a second', the Ground of all creation and the 'Atman', the Spirit, dwelling in the heart of everyman.

This meeting has to take place in the depth of contemplative experience, which is only possible in a life dedicated to the search of God, the quest of the Absolute, that has always been the goal of monastic life".

The dream was becoming a reality. But it was the person of Bede, his spiritual profile that attracted the continuous stream of pilgrims from every walk of life that were flocking to Succidananda ashram. Bede was now an old man, but he looked transfigured in his tall, lean frame, white beard and long hair, dressed in the simple saffron robe of the *sannyasi*.

He divided his time between the care of his monastic community and the many visitors and the long tours that he took to Northern Europe, Australia and especially the States where his name was becoming more and more famous and his teaching was in high demand also as a consequence of the few but highly successful books that he had written to share his Indian experience and to expound his views about the meeting of Christianity with Hinduism and more broadly, the meeting of the West with the East.

He believed that Eastern and Western religions could enrich each other and wanted to develop a Christian theology drawing on the resources of Eastern spirituality.

He both loved the Church and was deeply critical of it yet he never strayed from his unshakable belief in Christ and Christianity. He was open to all paths by which people seek God and thought that they all pointed to a primordial, universal tradition known as “the perennial philosophy”.

An immense spiritual legacy

As Bede Griffiths aged, so he became a man of profound wisdom and holiness, emanating unconditional love. He was regarded by many as a prophet, a sage, a mystic, even a saint. He died on May 13, 1993, the day of our Lady of Fatima, at his ashram at Shantivanam, peacefully, at the age of 86, surrounded by his monks, the neighbors and the many people who were hosted at the ashram at that moment.

Two people, whom he had met a little before, in the last of his teaching tours, express the universal appreciation of the extraordinary spiritual adventure that was his life: “We can only stand in admiration for the ways in which Dom Bede Griffiths, throughout his life and holding all in his prayers, explored the origins of all religions. He is a source of inspiration and encouragement for many all over the world, since he was a mystic in touch with absolute love and beauty” (*Card. Basil Hume*).

“His vision has guided him to open the hearts and minds of mankind to gain understanding and acceptance of all the major religions with respect and dignity, to gain a sense of peace and unity to further the cause and good will of all people” (*The Dalai Lama*).

Bede Griffiths’ spirituality and his emphasis on meditation are of great appeal in our contemporary world, especially for the young and for those who seek God but cannot find him in traditional churches. He shows that it is possible to live a Christian mystical life and remain within the Church. He left behind an immense spiritual legacy whose importance has not yet been sufficiently recognized and was among the initiators of a movement of inter-faith dialogue that

will occupy the minds and hearts of the coming generations for many decades or even centuries to come.

Explorations of the mind

It was at Shantivanam that Bede Griffiths refined his thought and gave shape to it in his near legendary books like *Return to the Center* (1976) and *The Marriage of the East and the West* (1982). They are a joyful celebration of India, its life and religion. For Bede Griffiths, as we have seen, the East embodies a feminine principle of non-violence, intuition and sympathy. The West is masculine: aggressive, rational and dominating. Both aspects have been refined in the respective religious traditions-the Vedic and the Judaic.

The Christian tradition, if it is to speak meaningfully to the heart of humankind, must try to marry East and West once again, as it did in the beginning when as a religion born in the East, it assimilated the Western patterns of thought in a winning synthesis that enlightened centuries of reflection.

These are Bede's words: "Christianity was born, as all the other great religions, in the East, but has become a Western religion. Its theology is Greek, its organization Roman, its cultural expression European. This was immediately evident to me in Bombay. The churches are either Gothic or Baroque; the statues and pictures are from European models; altars and candlesticks and stain glass are often imported from abroad. Everything is done to make the Church appear foreign to India.

Yet the people of India somehow manage to transform even these artificial buildings. They swarm everywhere, pressing up against the altar rails and through the doors and windows, overwhelming the Victorian propriety of the churches with their spontaneous vitality. Yet this, of course, is on a superficial level. The Indian Church has to undergo a radical transformation, if it is ever to respond to the needs of the Indian people. It has to rethink its theology in Indian instead of Greek terms, and to adapt its organization to Indian instead of Roman models... to learn what

Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism have to teach. Then only will the “marriage” take place in the Church as in the world between East and West”.

His perception of the fundamental goodness of Hinduism and Buddhism and the value for the world of their heritage of spirituality vis-à-vis the spreading of the secular mentality represents the beginning of a change of approach in Missiology: “People speak of Buddhism and Hinduism as world-renouncing religions, and then they are surprised to find that these world-renouncers built temples of fantastic beauty and covered the walls of the caves, which they hollowed out, with paintings of infinite refinement.

But this is precisely because they were detached from the world. When you are detached from the world, you see everything coming from the hands of God, always fresh and beautiful. Everything is a symbol of God. The modern age has banished God from the world and therefore it has also banished beauty. Everything has become “profane”, exiled from the sphere of the “holy”, and therefore everything as lost its meaning. For the holy is the source of truth no less than of beauty. It relates the world to the one, transcendent Reality from which the world derives its existence, its meaning and its loveliness”.

Even his mission stance is affected by the new approach: “Our task in India is not so much to bring Christ to India (as though he could be absent), as to discover Christ already present and active in the Hindu soul. After these centuries of preparation, Christ awaits his birth in the Hindu soul. It is for us to recognize his presence, to enter with deep sympathy into the movement of Hindu thought and experience which is leading it to Christ; to make contact with the Hindu in that inner depth of his being where he has so constantly sought God, and there to act as a midwife, in the manner of Socrates, to the birth of Christ”.

This he declared in 1962, almost at the beginning of his Indian experience. When he was an old man, his outlook became even more open and tolerant. He was opening a way of dialogue whose implications only the future can show.

One day, when he was describing his visit to a big Benedictine monastery in the Mid-West, he began to grin. He said they had showed him a lot of workshop and machinery and printing presses. He got the impression that they were more absorbed in printing than they were in praying. This is how the young Thomas Merton came in touch for the first time with the wisdom of the East.

But Thomas Merton's most vivid memory concerning the young Hindu monk is that he was the one who advised him to read St. Augustine's *Confessions* and the *Imitation of Christ*, saying: "There are many beautiful mystical books written by Christians. You must read those books".

A solitude open to the world

The influence of the East, however, was to develop later in the life of the American trappist monk. Born in 1915 from American parents, both artists, Thomas grew up in France and then in England, following the transfers of his father Owen who was a landscape painter and was always looking for new sources of inspiration.

Thomas himself was of a creative nature but was more inclined to writing. He came back to America after the death of his father (his mother had died when he was a small boy) and having completed his education, started teaching in a Catholic University.

He converted to Catholicism in 1938 and entered the trappist monastery at Gethsemani, Kentucky, in 1941. Thomas Merton became internationally known with the publication of his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) that became an instant bestseller. Its success determined Merton's destiny as a monk: he was first allowed to write, then sometimes invited to write. Then he was compelled to write by what was evidently a vocation within the monastic vocation. Eventually, he became addicted to writing.

His moral and intellectual stature makes him undoubtedly the most famous Christian writer of the XX Century in the United States. He was converted to the line of Vatican II in an emotional experience which he describes in *The Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1965) and since then he was involved in the intellectual battles of the sixties

with ever growing participation, embracing the cause of pacifism, ecumenism and taking part in anti-Vietnam war, anti-nuclear, anti-racist campaigns.

It was the time when Merton felt the need of plunging into the social and political battle of the American youth. He believed that Vatican II had given a new orientation also to his solitude; that his solitude as a monk made sense if it was a form of complete involvement and not an escape from the problems of the age.

The interest for the non-Christian religions in Thomas Merton is part of this post-conciliar opening. It touched briefly Taoism and Sufism, but eventually it focused on Buddhism and especially on *Zen* Buddhism. It is symptomatic that the only two occasions in which Thomas Merton traveled away from the monastery was in 1964, to New York, to meet with the Buddhist scholar Daisetz T. Suzuki and then in 1968 when he embarked in the extensive trip to the East that had as its destination the Abbots' Conference in Bangkok.

That trip was the occasion for visiting other significant places especially Tibet and meeting people like the Dalai Lama. Asia and Buddhism impressed Merton very much. He wrote: "We need the religious genius of Asia and of Asian culture to inject a dimension of depth into our aimless threshing about. I would almost say an element of heart, of *bhakti*, of love".

These impressions are recorded especially in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (1973). Merton had read extensively about Buddhism and was struck by the similarity between Buddhism and a specific orientation in Christian spirituality: the way of negation or apophatic way the best representative of which is St. John of the Cross..

In a sense, it happened with Buddhism what had happened with Bramachari: it took the influence of a non-Christian witness to make Merton realize the richness of the Christian tradition.

The discovery of Zen

But Merton had a more personal interest in *Zen* Buddhism: it was something connected with his spiritual quest and especially with

the tension that had dominated Merton's life between his urge to write and to write about himself and the call to silence, asceticism and renunciation which as proper of his trappist vocation.

Writing was not, in itself, the cause of Merton struggle, but its subject: Thomas Merton continued to write about Thomas Merton. There was an element of obsession... It was not egomania: there was as much humility as there was pride in wanting to complete the project of exploring the mystery of self in its concept of 'false self' and 'true self' and yet the attention was on the self.

In Merton's dialogue with Suzuki a striking image is taken up: "mirror polishing", where the mirror is the ego.

If the image of wiping the mirror in order to see better is the symbol of discursive meditation, conceptual inquiry and self-analysis, the conclusion of the paradoxical *Zen* approach is that there is no mirror to wipe. The tendency to explain goes against the substance of the mystery. "*Zen* is not attained by mirror-wiping meditation, but by self-forgetfulness in the existential present of life here and now".

Again, the advice of the *Zen* Master to the disciple is: "Even if, in the course of your meditation, you meet the Buddha, kill him", the idea being that the Buddha is not there to be met. What the disciple is likely to encounter will be only the false Buddha of his own imagination.

These apparently negative illuminations remind Thomas Merton of the sentence of the Christian mystic Diadochos: "The abyss of faith boils if you examine it; but if you look upon it in simplicity, it becomes once again calm. The depths of faith do not bear to be looked upon with indiscreet reasoning. Let us therefore sail upon its waters with simplicity of thought in order to reach thus the harbor of the Divine Will."

Zen Buddhism came to enlighten Merton's own problems and gave him a measure of inner clarity, even if it didn't change substantially his compulsive approach to writing. Merton was an impulsive type and the sudden death did not give him the time of sorting out all the trends of his thought and personality.

Wisdom in Emptiness

As we mentioned above, Thomas Merton met with Suzuki in 1964 in New York: two long conversations in which he had to speak slowly and loudly because the *Zen* Master was already ninety-four. As the *Zen* master from the East and the monk from the West said goodbye, Suzuki tried to sum up the spirit of the discussions. “The most important thing is love”, he said.

Merton gives an account of this encounter in the extensive article: “Wisdom in Emptiness. A dialogue by Daisetz T. Suzuki & Thomas Merton” in the book: *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968).

In the dialogue with Suzuki, Merton is enthusiastic about the similarities between the *Zen* masters and the monks in Egypt. But he points out two significant differences. One is that, while in the Christian path the notion of personality is highly developed and stress is laid on the uniqueness and richness of each individual human person, this notion seems to be unknown in *Zen*. Merton concludes that the strongly personalistic tone of Christian Mysticism seems to prohibit a full equation with the *Zen* experience.

The second difference is more important. For the Christian monk the recovery of Paradise is not the journey’s end but only the beginning. The desert father John Cassian distinguishes between an intermediate end and an ultimate or final state in the life of the monk. The intermediate end is purity of heart and inner poverty, together with a deep sense of God’s presence known through unknowing – that is to say, through the abandonment of conceptual thinking.

This is the innocence lost by Adam and in some measure found by the monk. On the other end, the ultimate and final state lies beyond death, in the resurrection and the eschatological realities of the Book of Revelation. We must return to Eden through self-forgetfulness, and enjoy its luscious beauty. But we should not stay there. We will only reach the fullness of enlightenment through death and resurrection.

Beyond Emptiness

So *Zen* Buddhism suggested a way also for Thomas Merton and then, when he had the chance of going to Asia, it was the first-hand impact of the experience that suggested a new appreciation of Buddhism. That was substantially the warm, sympathetic intuition that what appeared as a negation in Buddhism was not nihilism but the preparation, the purification for a deep vision of reality that was good, life-giving.

In front of Kanchenjunga, the Tibetan mountain where he was hosted, he seemed to experience the Buddhist *Sunyata*:

“Yet in the evening – the bare trees against the metallic blue of the evening were incredibly beautiful: as suspended in a kind of Buddhist emptiness. Does it occur to anyone that *Sunyata* is the very ground of life?”

“Emptiness” (*Sunyata*) involves a sense of nothingness that can only be thoroughly confused and confusing if *nirvana* is taken as nihilism or a nihilistic state. *Kenosis*, one of Merton’s favorite words, is the Greek term meaning “self-emptying” that describes the famous attitude of Jesus in the letter to the Philippians. It describes the classic Christian approach to the quest for God which is called the apophatic school of theology and spirituality that has St. John of the Cross as its best representative. Obviously, Thomas Merton tends to say that *Sunyata* and *Kenosis* tend to the same end.

On December 2, 1968 Merton visited the Buddhist reclining statues at Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka, and he was very much impressed by their beauty and the sense of calm and peace that they expressed.

He experienced there in an intuitive way the message of Buddhism and it was like a breakthrough that gave sense and meaning to all the studies and interest in this wisdom of the East that he had pursued in the last part of his life.

This is what he wrote in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*: “When looking at these figures, I was suddenly jerked clean out of the habitual vision of things, and an inner cleanness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident, obvious. The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no

“mystery”. All problems are resolved and everything is clear, everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. The voices of silence.

I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity fusing together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Polonnaruwa, my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and has justified itself – I mean I *know* and I have seen what I was obscurely looking for. This is Asia in its purity, not covered over with garbage (Asian or European or American) and it is clear, pure, complete. It says everything – it needs nothing. And because it needs nothing, it can afford to be silent, unnoticed, undiscovered”.

At Polammaruwa, an esthetic experience becomes a spiritual experience. In this sense the parallel with Bede Griffiths is striking: both were moved by the contemplation of the masterpieces of religious art and they had the intuition of how much life affirming the religions that produced such masterpieces must be.

They had a kind of mystical experience and they felt that they had found what they were looking for.

Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ
Calamba, May 7, 2001

PRAYER: West and East

Many people in our world look at the East for their spiritual needs. Transcendental Meditation, Yoga and Zen have already been in vogue, often reduced to a fashion or fitness fad. Christians however were asking seriously if it was possible for them to avail of the riches of oriental spirituality while remaining committed to Christ and to the Gospel. Some forerunners have believed it possible and have blazed the trail. We all have inherited the fruits of their efforts.

- Meditation: only a fitness exercise?
- Christian Meditation facing East
- Learning from the East
- Yoga
- Zen
- JOHN MAIN: the single minded mystic
- ANTHONY DE MELLO: wisdom in the fragment
- WILLIAM JOHNSTON: an oriental at heart

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MEDITATION: ONLY A FITNESS EXERCISE?

Stars do it. Athletes do it. Judges in the higher courts do it. A path to enlightenment that winds back 5,000 years in its native India, yoga has suddenly become cool, fashionable. In the U.S., yoga now straddles the continent. From Hollywood to Washington, Americans rush from their high-pressure jobs to the mellow voice of their yoga instructors. Or they sit in meditation.

Fifteen millions Americans include some form of yoga in their fitness regimen, twice as many did five years ago; the majority of health clubs offer yoga classes. As for meditation, it is now offered in schools, hospital, law firms, government buildings, corporate offices and prisons. There are specially marked meditation rooms in airports alongside the prayer chapels and Internet kiosks.

In a confluence of Eastern mysticism and Western science, doctors are embracing meditation because scientific studies are beginning to show that it works, particularly for stress-related conditions. As usual, what happened in USA, also in this field, is has been quickly adopted by the rest of the developed world.

Today yoga and meditation are demystified and mainstreamed and their methods have been simplified. There's less incense burning today, but there remains a nugget of Buddhist philosophy: the belief that by sitting in silence for 10 minutes to 40 minutes a day and actively concentrating on a breath or a word or an image, you can train yourself to focus on the present over the past and the future, transcending reality by fully accepting it.

Unfortunately, the success of yoga and meditation in the consumer societies, is an ambiguous one; it may only mean that they have been assimilated to the prevailing commercialism and have lost their depth and original religious meaning.

[illegible]

CHRISTIAN MEDITATION FACING THE EAST

A considerable number of modern people are practicing meditation and find themselves drawn into deeper states of consciousness that are ordinarily called mystical. Beginning with the repetition of a mantra, or awareness of the breathing, or the savoring of a phrase from sacred Scripture, they feel drawn, beyond thinking and reasoning, to a consciousness wherein they rest silently in the presence of the Great Mystery that envelops the whole universe.

As a mass movement it started in the sixties. The sixties are a decade of change: Vatican II, the students' revolution, the Beatles. At that time the great meditation movement which subsequently spread to the whole western world was in its early phase. Transcendental meditation and yoga and Zen were already in vogue. Christians were asking if it was possible for them to avail of the riches of oriental spirituality while remaining committed to Christ and to the Gospel.

The research and the experimentation of those years have now passed in the mainstream and the novelties are taken from granted, but it is all the same interesting and formative to explore the articulations of that discovery. The Catholic world that was committed to a serious dialogue with the East by means of giants like Bede Griffiths and Thomas Merton, produced also those who acted as guides in the journey of prayer: John Main, Anthony De Mello and William Johnston.

Pathways of an encounter: The Forerunners

John Main is a clear example of cross fertilization between the religious traditions of the East and the West. It was his encounter with an Indian monk which inspired him in his personal quest for contemplative meditation and eventually made of him a master of a form of meditation that is the fruit of the integration between the eastern influence and the rediscovered western tradition.

The bridge was the calm, continuous repetition of a single word or phrase throughout the time of meditation as a way of bringing our

chronically distracted human mind to attention in God and developing poverty of spirit. He wrote: "In contemplative prayer we seek to become the person we are called to be, not by thinking of God but by being with God. Simply to be with God is to be drawn into being the person God calls us to be".

He taught people to pray from a theology of the indwelling Spirit and the inner Christ which opens a new possibility for prayer in our era of secularism. He illustrates the intimate connection between scripture and the prayer of the heart. The universal call to holiness invites a personal contemplative practice in daily life.

John Main saw that the modern search for deeper interiority required a simple contemplative discipline that could be practiced daily. From this developed the worldwide community of meditators, the network of Christian Meditation Centers and the weekly meditation groups which practice his recommended discipline of two daily half-hours of meditation.

In Anthony de Mello, the best currents of the East and the West flow naturally together. As a native of India, he was culturally equipped to understand the followers of Oriental religions. As a Jesuit, his own spirituality was formed largely by the Spiritual Exercises as well as by the theological and psychological studies which he pursued for so many years in Europe and the United States. His little book: "*Sadhana, a way to God (Christian exercises in eastern form)*", published in 1978, was a breakthrough when it came out and it still remains a classic of modern spirituality.

In it, the author aims to teach interested readers how to pray, through a series of practices drawn from the Church's tradition, St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises, oriental techniques stemming from sources such as yoga or Zen Buddhism, and modern psychology. To it, de Mello added books of short stories representing the wisdom of the East in the fragment. They made him immensely popular.

The Mysticism of Silence

In his later works he develops his theory of contemplation as awareness. The concept of Christian revelation makes him recall the

sentence of Lao-tse: "Silence is the great revelation". He knows that we are accustomed to think of the Scripture as the revelation of God. And so it is. But he wants us to discover the revelation that silence brings.

He writes: "In exercising an awareness of our bodily sensations, we are already communicating with God", a communication that he explained in these terms. "Many mystics tells us that, in addition to the mind and heart with which we ordinarily communicate with God, we are, all of us, endowed with a mystical mind and mystical heart, a faculty which makes it possible for us to know God directly, to grasp and intuit him in his very being, though in a dark manner.

But this intuition, without images of form, is that of a void: "What do I gaze into when I gaze silently at God? I gaze at a blank." And thus one arrives at "the seemingly disconcerting conclusion that concentration on your breathing or your body sensations is very good contemplation in the strict sense of the word". Interior enlightenment is the true revelation: "When you have knowledge you use a torch to show the way. When you are enlightened you become a torch". This mysticism of stillness and silence recalls the parallel experience of "the dark night" of Saint John of the Cross.

Anthony de Mello however did not realize that he was been carried away by his enthusiasm of learning from the East to the point of overlooking the revelation of God in Christianity. This is why, after his death, the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith published a letter which put in evidence the dangers of de Mello's position.

Well aware of these dangers was instead the other Jesuit, William Johnston, who spent most of his life in Japan and, as a scholar of spirituality, was better equipped for this demanding task. He is the author of the book: *"Christian Zen (A Way of Meditation)"*, published in 1971, which is also a classic. His enthusiasm for the dialogue with Zen Buddhism became a long life commitment.

He writes: "Christians might not only avail of the riches of oriental meditation but they should become leaders in a movement of which Christ would be the center – a meditation movement which humbly learn from Zen. I have told Japanese Christians – and I believe it is true – that they have important role to play in the

development of Christianity. Their vocation is to renew meditation within the Church (because of their Zen tradition) and interpret it to the West”.

The best example of the truth of this vision is the life experience of a Japanese Dominican priest, Fr. Shigeto Oshida who died last November at Takamori. He was a convert from Buddhism and a Zen practitioner when he met Christ in the witness of German friend, during the war.

Fr. Oshida was used to share his spiritual journey: how following the noble silence of Zen he had easily believed in the Man who died on the cross proclaiming universal forgiveness. “Forgiveness is silence within silence” explains Fr. Oshida, “To keep silence is to enter the womb of God. Christ is in the heart of Zen”. Fr. Oshida’s death has been the best illustration of the Christian potentialities of Zen mysticism.

In the convent of Takamori, in the last days of his life, he spent long time contemplating the way autumn dresses the surrounding hills in colors. Looking at the leaves falling gently on the ground, he uttered the words that will remain on his lips until the last breath: "God is marvelous! Amen, Amen!" His face in death was radiant with beauty and peace. &&&&&&&&&&&&&

LEARNING FROM THE EAST

Praying with the body

We will analyze the contributions of the East to the western concept of prayer and meditation, guided by William Johnston. Asian meditation is holistic. It stresses the role of the body and teaches us how to sit, how to breathe, how to eat, how to fast, how to sleep, how to watch and how to relax.

Balancing Body and Soul: this is the tradition and teaching of Yoga. Yoga has been experiencing a resurgence, thanks to media images. Yet media images of sophisticated bodily postures send false messages that yoga is an alternative to weights lifting and aerobics and merely a fitness fad. Western mentality tends to take the *asanas* (yoga postures) out of context from a lifestyle that values the balance of body and soul.

Yet Yoga is not equivalent to exercise. Its basic premise has to be upheld. The premise is that we are a whole and spiritual being. The body is only a part of our wholeness. Yet the spirit or soul manifests itself through the body.

Asan is a Sanskrit word for “seat”. To take one’s seat means to enter into a state of rest. This involves moving towards a resting position and controlling your breath. The yoga postures are meant to facilitate meditation.

Inner Stillness

Consider the words of Jesus: “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on” (Mt. 6:25).

When one sits down to meditate, the first thing is to let go of one’s anxieties. And that may include reasoning and thinking together with preoccupation and planning and all the rest. One must let them go. And this is not easy. For, as we all know, the human mind is restless. It looks to the future with fear or anticipation; it looks to the past with nostalgia or with guilt. Seldom does it remain in the here and now.

Yet Jesus tells us clearly to drop anxiety about the future in order to remain in the present. “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day” (Mt. 6:34)

In all the great cultures life is symbolized by breath. It is precisely in experiencing your breath that you experience your life. So just sit quietly with your back straight and become aware of your breathing. As time goes on, the breathing of its own accord become deep and abdominal.

The Sino-Japanese tradition has always taught that life and energy well up from the *tanden* the point which lies about an inch below the navel-which is expressively called the “ocean of energy”. And *tanden* breathing is basic not only to meditation but also to judo, fencing, archery, calligraphy, flower-arrangement and the tea-ceremony. One does not attain to awareness of breathing overnight. It takes time.

But if one perseveres one gradually comes to realize that this breath is not only the life that fills the body from head to toe. It is more. It is a sharing in the breath of the universe: a cosmic force which penetrates all things. As for Hebrews, they believed that their breath was the breath of God whose presence gave them life. For Christians the breath, like the wind, symbolizes the Holy Spirit who fills all things with his love, giving wisdom and joy and peace.

Receiving the love of God

William Johnston writes: “While breathing, you can recite the words: “Come, Holy Spirit”, asking to be filled with the breath of the Spirit. And you can let go of anxieties as the conviction of being loved grows and deepens and becomes an unshakable source of strength.

Let me repeat that I am not saying that one should reason and think about faith. Only that one should sit silently, receiving the love of God into the depths of one’s being. The principal thing is to receive and to keep receiving the immense love which is being offered. Perhaps we could say that the basis of Christian meditation is the art of being loved. The Song of Songs speaks of opening the door to the Beloved. And Jesus says: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to share his meal, side by side with him” (Rev. 3:20).

At this point, the roads of the wisdom of the East (Yoga and Zen) and Christian prayer have already parted. The starting point can be similar if not the same, but then, in the course of the journey, the roads diverge. Christian mysticism is always Christ-centered. The metaphors of darkness, desert, abyss, silence, unknowing used by Christian mystics differ from those non-Christian. Thus it is a

“dazzling” darkness, a “fertile” desert, a “love-filled” abyss, a “Word-resonant” silence, a “knowing” unknowing.

For them it is only in the crucified Christ, where the opposites of Word and silence, Life and death coincide, that there is loving access to the Father who dwells in unapproachable light. For the Christian, moreover, love of God and love of neighbour are simultaneous actions. This explains the extraordinary development of the works of charity in Christianity as the fruit of prayer and contemplation.

An encounter with a personal God

“Christian prayer is always determined by the structure of the Christian faith, in which the very truth of God and creature shines forth. For this reason, it is defined, properly speaking, as a personal, intimate and profound dialogue between man and God. The essential element of authentic Christian prayer is the meeting of two freedoms, the infinite freedom of God with the finite freedom of man (*Christian Meditation*, letter of the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, 1989).

“For me, then – writes W. Johnston – the greatest practical difference between Zen and Christian contemplation is that, whereas Zen regards thoughts and feelings and aspirations of love for God as illusion, I regard these sentiments as-yes, imperfect and inadequate to express the reality, but nevertheless as true and valid and valuable religious experiences. From Zen I can, and I will continue to, learn many things. But I am convinced that it is not the same as the Christian contemplation to which I feel called”.

Paul Williams, a Buddhist who found his way back to Christianity, writes: “Buddhism is all about the mind. Mental states are essentially subjective. The great glory of Buddhism is its relevance to the immediate situation of suffering. And suffering springs (naturally) from the mind. The Christian religion instead is all about God and the salvific actions of God through Christ.

Buddhism is working on oneself. For if Buddhism is all about the mind it has to be the mind of someone. And that someone is oneself. But God is not a mental state. Christians who would seek common ground with Buddhists in meditation and “mystical

YOGA

Yoga (Sanskrit *yuga*, “yoke”) is a classic Hindu system of philosophy. It affirms the doctrine that through the practice of certain body disciplines one may achieve liberation and attain union with the object of knowledge. It is a “yoke” that joins body and soul.

For most *Yogi* (those who practice Yoga), the object of knowledge is Brahma, the universal spirit. A minority of atheistic *Yogi* seek perfect self-knowledge instead of knowledge of God.

Yoga practice forms a ladder leading to perfect knowledge. This ladder consists of eight steps/aspects. The first two aspects regard the conduct of the person before even one starts exercising. They are: *yama* (which implies self-control in relation to others, like truthfulness, gentleness, etc...) and *niyama* (i.e. right behaviour towards the self, like sobriety, austerity, contentment, etc...).

The next two aspects are related directly to the body and they are the most eye-catching and widely followed. They are: *asana* (posture: the different positions of the body; they are regarded as basic to all the stages that follow) and *pranayama* (regulation of the breath and it includes altering its depth and rhythm).

At this point, the person is ready to ascend to the heights of meditation. The next two stages are already interior ones and refer to the control of the senses. They are: *pratyahara* (or restraint of the senses: it means their withdrawal from external objects and the consequent turning of the mind upon itself) and *dharana* (the science of concentration or the steadying of the mind: it is achieved by narrowing the attention to one part of the body, such as the navel, the tip of the nose, or the middle of the brow).

The last two aspects regard the achievement of the goal: to acquire the true knowledge of reality beyond the deception and illusion of the senses. They are: *dhyana* (meditation or contemplation: it fixes the mind on the object of knowledge, especially Brahma, to the exclusion of all other thoughts). When meditation becomes enlightenment there is *samadhi* (profound contemplation: the perfect

absorption of thought in the object of knowledge, its union and identification with that object).

The achievement of *samadhi* liberates the self from the illusions of sense and the contradictions of reason. It leads to an inner illumination, the bliss and ecstasy of the true knowledge of reality. The final stage, in yoga doctrine, rarely can be attained in one lifetime.

As a system of practice, Yoga has from the beginning been one of the most influential features of Hinduism. Yoga exerted a powerful attraction upon Hindus because of the wonders attributed to it and because it gives countenance to the performance of austerities, to which Hindus are so strongly inclined. The strong influence of Yoga can also be seen in Buddhism, which is notable for its austerities and spiritual exercises.

In recent years Yoga exercises have been recommended by some physical fitness experts as a means of cleansing the body impurities, of reducing weight, of toning the nerves and muscles, and, generally, of improving health and prolonging life. &&&&&&&&&&

ZEN

A thin column of incense smoke curls up to the ceiling; candles flicker before a golden statue of the Buddha, while two nuns lead the Tibetan liturgy. A couple of dozen people, ages ranging from early twenties to late forties, sit cross-legged on meditation cushions... Eventually, they fall silent, and the period of meditation begins.

It could be a scene from a temple in Lhasa or Kathmandu. In fact, this is London and a stone's throw from Waterloo railway station.

Western society and Buddhism are still relatively new to one another. It was not until the 1950s that Buddhism really began to be assimilated into Western culture. By this time, Japanese immigrants had transplanted their Zen tradition to the West Coast of America. In

the winter of 1953-54, Jack Kerouac, having read several Buddhist scriptures, started to meditate and chant the traditional sutras. Four years later, he published: "*The Dharma Bums*", a book which not only prophesied but also inspired the subsequent "rucksack revolution" of "wandering Zen lunatics".

Kerouac's awakening to Buddhism stirred similar searches in other members of the Beat Generation and in the hippies of the Sixties. Within a decade, Westerners were returning from India and Nepal with new words and concepts such as enlightenment, guru, karma, and rebirth.

But the decisive factor in the Western assimilation of Buddhism was the invasion of Tibet in 1959 by the communist Chinese. This, in turn, led to the first Tibetan diaspora of refugee *lamas*, or teachers, settling in the West. Eventually, these lamas began to found temples and centers where they continued to propagate the Buddha's teaching, or *dharma*.

Buddhism is a fruit that grew on the tree of Hinduism. The founder of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha, gave up yoga and its radical asceticism and adopted a middle path between the life of indulgence and that of self-denial. Sitting under a tree, he meditated, rising through series of higher states of consciousness until he attained the enlightenment for which he had been searching.

At the core of the Buddha's enlightenment was the realization of the Four Noble Truths. (1) Life is suffering. (2) All suffering is caused by ignorance of the nature of reality and the craving, attachment, and grasping that result from such ignorance. (3) Suffering can be ended by overcoming ignorance and attachment. (4) The path to the suppression of suffering is morality, wisdom and *samadhi* or concentration/meditation.

Zen and *Ch'an* are, respectively, the Japanese and Chinese ways of pronouncing the Sanskrit term *Dhyana*, which designates contemplation or meditation. Zen is the way of accomplishing the Buddhist goal of seeing the world just as it is, with a mind that has no grasping thoughts or feelings, a state of consciousness wherein thoughts move without leaving any trace.

According to Zen the mind serves properly as a window glass rather than as a reflector, that is, the mind should give an immediate view instead of an interpretation of the world. Zen meditation is like cleaning the glass so that reality can be perceived in all its clarity.

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John Main: the single minded mystic

John Douglas Main was born in London into an Irish family in 1926. He served in the army at the end of the war and then he studied in Rome for two years. After a degree in law at Trinity College, Dublin, John Main learned Chinese and was posted to Malaya. There he was introduced to a simple form of meditation by an Indian monk which became the contemplative foundation of his Christian life.

With this vision, John Main gave the rest of his life to teaching meditation to people of all walks of life. In 1977 he was invited to start a small Benedictine community in Canada. There he died in 1982. Although he was only 56 when he died, his influence has grown steadily as his teaching about meditation guides many to the practice of “centering prayer”.

After his death, John Main was hailed by Bede Griffiths as the “most important spiritual guide in the church today”. An annual John Main Seminar is held in his honor and memory. The World community for Christian Meditation, which grew out of his inspiration, has its International Centre in London.

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Anthony De Mello: wisdom in the fragment

Anthony de Mello was born in Bombay in 1931, he studied philosophy in Barcelona, psychology in Loyola University, Chicago, and spiritual theology in the Gregorian University in Rome. A member of the Jesuit province of Bombay, he took part in the XXXII General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (1974-75).

He was for many years the Director of the Sadhana Institute of Pastoral Counseling located at St. Stanislaus Villa, Lonavala, India. He was well known in English and Spanish speaking countries for his retreats, workshops and seminars on prayer, and therapy courses.

Especially in his early writings, Father de Mello, while revealing the influence of Buddhist and Taoist spiritual currents, remained within the lines of Christian spirituality. In these books, he aims to teach interested readers how to pray, through a series of practices

drawn from the Church's tradition, St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises, oriental techniques stemming from sources such as yoga or Zen Buddhism, and modern psychology.

Fr. De Mello, during his lifetime, enjoyed an extraordinary popularity both in his native India and even more in the West, especially in the USA. His outgoing and warm personality and the novelty of his approach made his teaching a great success. His books with their collections of thought provoking short stories have been translated in most languages and are continuously reprinted.

He looked as the right man in the right time; he appeared to have the answers to the quest of the times. Paradoxically, his death came suddenly when he was still in the prime of his life and fame (he was only 56), because of heart attack, probably due to that stress typical of our modern living that he had so much contributed to overcome with his teaching.

[illegible]

William Johnston: an oriental at heart

William Johnston was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 1925, and was educated in Liverpool and at the national University of Ireland. He joined the Jesuit order and then went to Japan in 1951, where he has lived ever since, receiving a doctorate in Mystical Theology from Sophia University, Tokyo, in 1968. He has made a special study of Buddhism and has taken an active part in the dialogue between Zen Buddhism and Christianity.

His little book: “*Christian Zen*” is at the same time a handbook for Christian meditators who intend to make use of the teaching of Zen and the best interpretation of the Buddhist attitudes towards simplicity and stillness in the light of the Christian spirituality. All his subsequent books are marked by serious scholarship and enthusiasm for the attractions and challenges of spirituality.

William Johnston was the first to translate Shusaku Endo into English. His translation of “*Silence*”, the best novel of the Japanese writer who is a convert to Christianity and has made of Jesus on the cross the main topic of his writing, contributed to make Shusaku Endo known to the West and consequently contributed to his international success. Shusaku Endo died in 1997.

William Johnston has been the Director of the Institute of Oriental Religions of Sophia University, and has lectured widely on East-West mysticism in Europe, the United States of America, Australia and Oceania. He is now retired but still active in writing.

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Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ
September 2004

ASIA



From the origins of Christianity to the present, Asia has been alive in the heavenly scenario of Holiness:

- *Asia's Heavenly Panorama*
- *The Horizon of Christian Life*
- *Lilies of the Battlefield*
- *Holiness in Waiting*
- *A Tsunami of Forgiveness*

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ASIAN HEAVENLY PANORAMA

From the origin of Christianity until the present time, Asia has been present in the heavenly scenario of Sainthood. This short survey wants to give a hint of the immense wealth of the world of the Saints of Asia and its various facets.

The Foundation Stones

The history of Catholicism in Asia dates to biblical times, with the overwhelming majority of biblical figures spending all or most of their lives in the Holy Land, Palestine, which is part of Asia, also described as the Near East. Jesus Christ, the Founder of Christianity, we must not forget, is Asian.

Chronologically, the first saints of the Christian era are the Holy Innocents. Then Peter, Paul and the other Apostles and the prominent disciples of Jesus like Luke and Mark and Barnabas; the martyrs like Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna; the Fathers of the Church like Basil the Great and John Chrysostom and Ephrem, the Syrian. *This special about “Asian Saints” focuses only on the Saints of the modern and contemporary times.*

The Immense Army of Martyrs

The modern and contemporary eras have presented the phenomenon of the Martyrs who represent traditionally the first, most radical following of Christ. We list the martyrs who have been recognized officially by the Church, in a growing process of discovery, together with the year of canonization:

The Japanese Martyrs (the first 26 martyrs: Paul Miki and companions (1862); other 16 martyrs: Lorenzo Ruiz and companions(1987) and 188 martyrs: Petrus Kibe Kasui and companions (2008).

The 117 Vietnamese Martyrs: Andrew Dung-Lac and companions (1988);

The 120 Chinese Martyrs : Augustine Zhao Rong and Companions (2000);

The 103 Korean Martyrs : Andrew Kim Taegon and Companions (1984) to whom we should add the 123 proclaimed Blessed by pope Francis in 2014 (Paul Yun Ji-Chung and Companions).

The martyrs officially recognized by the Church are the tip of the iceberg: tens of thousands of faithful have given the supreme witness of the sacrifice of blood for their faithfulness to Christ, especially during the XVI and XVII century in Japan; during the XIX century in Korea and Vietnam and during the XX century in China.

I will consider the theology of Martyrdom in order to understand the relevance of this extreme way of following Christ (Sequela Christi) which has appeared always at the foundation of Christianity and is so relevant also in our time as Christians again face the frequent challenge of martyrdom in this beginning of the Third Millennium.

A Growing Awareness of Holiness

Catholicism in Asia is everywhere in a position of minority, with the exception of the Philippines. Yet the Catholic Church is alive and growing, with a remarkable consistence in number and vitality in abundance of vocations in India, Vietnam, Korea and China. And even the small communities like Singapore or East Timor are vital. This vitality brings an interest and a research in promoting the Saints who have exemplified the Christian vocation in every walk of life, not by dying but by living.

The last to be canonized is St. Joseph Vaz, Oratorian priest from India. He comes to join other Indian Saints like Alfonsa of the Immaculate Conception, Kuriakose Elias Chavara or the champions of the Maronite Catholic community in Lebanon like Charbel Makhluf and Nimatullah Kassab.

The list of the heroic followers of Christ from the Asian context who are on the way to canonization, at different stages of research and promotion, is growing longer and longer as every local church focuses her attention on the exemplary figures that can inspire the new generations in the appreciation of their Christian heritage.

I cannot fail to mention two recent heroes of Christianity in Asia: the martyr of Pakistan, Shahbaz Bhatti (2011) and Card. Nguyen Van Thuan from Vietnam (2002) of whom both recently I wrote already in this magazine. *This time, I will present the figures of Ignacia de Espiritu Santo of the Philippines and the samurai Takayama Ukon of Japan who are close to the target of Beatification.*

It goes without saying that the panorama of holiness in Asia is much wider than the one officially promoted by the Congregation of the Causes of

Saints. I will introduce the profile of three heroic followers of Jesus who have honored the XX century: Paul Takashi Nagai and Shigeto Oshida both from Japan and Agneta Chan from Korea.

Asian by adoption

The scenario of the Asia Saints will not be complete without considering the giants who, although born in different continents, have lived most of their adult life in Asia and have linked their destiny to that continent like, for example, Saint Francis Xavier, Saint John De Brito, Saint Damien of Molokai, Saint Joseph Freinademetz, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, Blessed Clement Vismara... They also belong to Asia.

The Twilight Zone

Asia is famous for its spirituality which is represented in a special way by the ancient non-Christian religions like Hinduism and Buddhism which still manifest a great vitality and attraction also for the people of our times. In the contest of the spirit of Dialogue promoted by Vatican II, some outstanding Catholic scholars and mystics have pursued an attempt of approaching the Hindu and Zen traditions of spirituality with the sincere intention of learning and joining somehow what is similar in Christianity.

The champions of this attempt are well known names: Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths, Anthony De Mello, John Main, William Johnston and others. Their experience is not without controversy as it is exemplified in the story of Maura O'Halloran (1955-1982) whom Robert Ellsberg doesn't hesitate to call "A Christian Zen Monk": an Irish young woman attracted by the Zen spirituality, who entered a Buddhist monastery and apparently reached "enlightment" and was killed in a car accident at the age of 27.

Her diaries were published and Ellsberg writes: "Her short road to holiness in a Zen monastery has been compared to that of Therese of Lisieux. Both young women, having accomplished their spiritual business in this world, promptly departed. It is certain that Maura would have identified with the words of Therese, who hoped to spend her heaven doing good on earth". Yet there is no mention of Jesus in Maura's Diaries. Can there be Christian holiness without Jesus? This was my instinctive reaction when I came to know Maura's story.

"Christian prayer is always determined by the structure of the Christian faith, in which the very truth of God and creature shines forth. For this reason, it is defined, properly speaking, as a personal, intimate and profound dialogue

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Paul VI would also be the first pope to visit Africa five years later, and to pray at Namugongo in Uganda, in the place where the Uganda Martyrs accomplished their supreme sacrifice. That was a prophetic gesture which pointed out at the role of the African church in the future of Catholicism. Now I experience the same excitement in recognizing the fact that martyrdom is the overwhelming feature of the Asian Saints of the modern and contemporary eras. Out of more than 600 individuals officially proclaimed saints or blessed by the Catholic Church, almost 95 % are

martyrs. They are a confirmation of what appears to be a general law: that, in every new place, the faith in Jesus has to start with the shedding of blood by his first followers. It was true of the apostolic era, when all the apostles but one paid the tribute of their blood.

It was true of the ancient era, in a very special way during the time of the Roman Empire in Europe and North Africa, when Christianity was persecuted for almost three hundred years before acquiring the right to exist and be free at the cost of tens of thousands of martyrs. The mind cannot fail to embrace the tragic reality of the masses of victims in Japan in the XVI and XVII centuries, in Korea and Vietnam in the XIX century and in China in the XX century.

The Martyrs of Japan

Christianity was brought to Japan by St. Francis Xavier who stepped ashore at Kagoshima in the year 1549 with two Jesuit companions and a Japanese interpreter. Within a few months of his arrival, he had fallen in love with the Japanese whom he called “the joy of his heart”. The real architect of the Japanese mission was Fr. Alessandro Valignano. When he arrived for the first time in Japan there were already 150,000 Christians (1579) and Valignano, anxious to entrust the infant church to a local clergy, set about founding seminaries, colleges and a novitiate.

In the meantime Japan, who had been always divided into different fiefdoms, was brought together by the *shogun* Hideyoshi who started becoming suspicious about the links of the missionaries with their European countries. In February 1597 the first martyrs: Paul Miki and Companions: 26, Japanese and European, were crucified on a cold winter morning.

Today, not far from Nagasaki station, there stands a monument to commemorate the spot where they died. The persecution became systematic from 1614 onwards, with the appearance of the English and Dutch protestants who became influential councilors at the court of the *shogun*, Hideyoshi's successor, Ieyasu. Then the martyrs became thousands. The most striking episode is the rebellion of the Christian peasants at the Shimabara castle (Nagasaki) in 1637 that was suppressed at the cost of an estimate 35 thousand lives.

We are in possession of the statement of the rebels, smuggled from the siege, which contains the most noble reasons for the rebellion: it is as if the new Christian faith has awoken in the peasantry the courage to fight for their dignity, crushed by the rigid feudal system. In the letter also is the decision to die and not to deny the faith: "For the love of our people we have resorted to this castle... Now, we consider the hope of life eternal the most important thing. There will be no escape. Since we will not deny our religion, we will face death".

Many were the forms of torment, but the most famous was the "Hanging in the pit", by which the victim was hung head downwards from a gallows into a pit which contained excreta and other filth. But not all Christians became martyrs, many renounced their faith to save their lives. The most common form of apostasy consisted in trampling on the image of Christ. Today at Ueno Museum in Tokyo, we can still see those *fumie* (images), rubbed flat and shining by the hundreds of feet that ached with pain while they trampled on someone whom their hearts loved.

Yet Christianity's root had gone too deep for the faith to be completely eradicated. Besides the martyrs (estimated at some five or six thousand for the period 1614-40 alone), thousand of Christians kept their faith and they expected the return of the missionaries. In 1865 when the first European missionaries entered Japan, they found the descendants of the first Christians who had kept their faith. But the mass conversion never happened ... Like a sudden frost burns the buds on the trees, the long persecution congealed the expansion of Christianity which therefore remained, up to the present time, the faith of a very small minority of the Japanese.

The Martyrs of Korea

During the early 17th century, Christian literature obtained from the Jesuits in China, was imported to Korea and had the educated class interested about and attracted by Christianity. A home Church began. When a Chinese priest managed to enter secretly a dozen years later, he found 4,000 Catholics, none of whom had ever seen a priest. The dynamic Catholic communities were led almost entirely by educated lay people of the aristocratic classes. The Christian community sent a delegation on foot to Beijing, 750 miles away, to ask the Bishop of Beijing to send them bishops and priests.

Bishop Laurent Imbert and ten other French missionaries were the first Paris Foreign Mission Society priests to enter Korea. During the daytime, they

kept in hiding, but at night they travelled about on foot attending to the spiritual needs of the faithful and administering the sacraments. The first Korean priest, Andrew Kim Taegon, succeeded in entering Korea as a missionary. However, thirteen months after his ordination he was put to death by the sword in 1846 at the age of 26.

Even though it was scholars who first introduced the Gospel to Korea, it was the ordinary people who flocked to the new religion. The new believers called themselves "Friends of the teaching of God of Heaven". The term "friends" was the only term in the Confucian understanding of relationships which implied equality.

The Catholics gathering in one place with no distinction on the basis of class were perceived to undermine 'hierarchical Confucianism', the ideology which held the State together. The new learning was seen to be subversive of the establishment and this gave rise to systematic suppression and persecution. There were four major persecutions - the last one in 1866, at which time there were only 20,000 Catholics in Korea. 10,000 had died. Those figures give a sense of the enormous sacrifice of the early Korean Catholics. We can say that the history of the martyrs of Vietnam and China have similar features.

Martyrdom: a present day challenge

The XX century is already accepted without argument as a century of martyrs, from the intuition of Saint John Paul II on the occasion of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000. Christians have borne the impact of the violence that has touched the masses of humanity involved in the changes of the time.

The Boxers' rebellion in China, at the beginning of the century, made thirty thousand victims among the followers of Christ. In the same country, the Cultural Revolution has cancelled the patrimony of generations with countless victims in all spheres of society. The same happened at different times and in different proportions in other Asian countries like the Pol Pot genocide attempt in Cambodia, between 1973 and 1979, which reduced to almost zero the presence of Catholics in that country. The same happened to the small Catholic community of North Korea, when the Communists took hold of the power.

The last years have brought to the fore the present day reality of persecution and martyrdom for Christians in an unexpected and even shocking way: it is

the new fulfillment of the sentence of Scripture: “Because of you, Christ, we are massacred daily and considered as sheep for the slaughter” (*Romans* 8:36). Only in the peak of the most rabid persecutions Christians have been set apart and killed as it is happening in Iraq or Kenya because of Isis fundamentalism.

Theological Depth

We will try to penetrate a bit deeper into the theological depth of the idea of martyrdom and its connection with our condition of followers of Jesus . In this we are helped by the teaching of a great theologian of the XX century, Hans Urs Von Balthasar.

A Christian is one who commits his life for the brethren since he himself owns his life to the his Crucified Lord. The disposition to martyrdom, as radical witness of a love which goes beyond death, is proper of the Christian as a new creature, full of the fruits of the Spirit. “Try, then to imitate God, as children of his that he loves, and follow Christ by loving as he loved you, giving himself up in our place as a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God” (*Ephesians* 5:2).

The mandate of the Christian is to testify, even with death if necessary, that love is superior to death, is life eternal. The faithful lives always according to death and resurrection because the whole Christian existence is the attempt, the effort to answer in faith and thanksgiving to Jesus who loved us and offered himself for us. We have the example of Saint Paul who writes: “I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in this body I live in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake” (*Galatians* 2:19-20).

“Take, Lord, and receive”

St. Ignatius of Loyola, at the end of his Spiritual Exercises, teaches us to offer our life to God and the brethren daily in answer to Jesus, the Crucified love: “*Take, Lord, and receive...*”. This is the permanent LIFE-FORM for all those who want to follow Jesus. The one who likes Jesus, chooses the Cross as the “place” where dying is not a possibility but an absolute

certainty. This is what we must conclude from the biblical data: Martyrdom is the natural horizon of Christian Life.

We can reflect on the difference between the martyrdom of the Maccabees brothers and their mother in the Old Testament and that of Christ's followers in the New Testament. For the Maccabees, their death is the last human possibility of manifesting their faith in Yahweh. For the Christian, instead, it is the condition of the new life that flows from Christ, not a point of arrival, but a point of departure.

"The love of Christ overwhelms us when we reflect that if one man has died for all, then all men should be dead (are dead); and the reason he died for all was so that living men should live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised to life for them" (1 *Corinthians* 5:14-15). Christ's death for us is shown as "*a priori*" of Christian behavior: this is completely shaped by it.

Hide me in your wounds

Faith (and life of faith) means therefore to thank with the whole of our life for the fact of being in debt for the whole of our existence because Jesus gave his whole existence for our sake; this thanksgiving cannot be expressed but with the whole of our existence. This is the logic of Christianity: we cannot say thanks to God in an adequate way but with our own complete existence.

The truth which constitute the measure of faith is the death of God for love of the world, for humankind and for each member of it, in the night of Jesus' cross. All the fountains of grace spring from this night: Faith, Hope and Charity. All that I am, if I am more than a perishable and hopeless being whose illusions are destroyed by death, I am because of that death which opens to me the access to God.

I blossom on the tomb of the God who died for me, put down my roots in the soil which is his flesh and blood. Life of faith means therefore existence in death out of love: an anticipation of the offering of my life in every single situation of my Christian existence. Christian Faith is an anticipation of the offering of my life to Christ.

An anticipation of one's death as answer to Christ's death. It is the way of making sure in a serious way of our faith. *Hide me in your wounds*: we used to pray in an ancient formula. But in which place would we be more

exposed? In which other place would we be sure of receiving more blows? And yet that is the safest place, there we would be totally safe because it is the final place: the complete openness to death out of love. For the world, there is no other symbol or prototype than this and it was set by God.

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LILIES OF THE BATTLEFIELD

The tragedy of the atomic bomb is the background of Dr. Paul Takashi Nagai's holiness in the spiritual anguish of finding a reason for it. Agneta Chang represents the absolute faithfulness to her people when the communist storm was swallowing them and Shigeto Oshida is like a zen flower, blossoming from a war witness of heroism. Three inspiring, noble, truly Asian saintly figures.

Takashi Nagai: The Mystery of Atonement

On the morning of August 9, 1945, Dr. Takashi Nagai was working in his office at the medical center in Nagasaki, Japan. At 11 am, he saw a flash of blinding light, followed by darkness and a crashing roar. In that moment, his world collapsed around him. It was the explosion of the second plutonium-fuelled atomic bomb five hundred yards over the Urakami cathedral of Nagasaki. The first, a little time before, had fallen over the town of Hiroshima.

After escaping from the rubble and receiving treatment for a severed carotid artery, Nagai saw that his children had survived, but he had to gather to himself the small heap of ashes that was what remained of his wife Maria Midori Nagai, together with her rosary beads, surprisingly intact. He then

joined the rest of the hospital staff in treating the survivors. Given the force and heat of the blast, he imagined that such a big bomb must have killed hundreds of people. Only gradually did the extent of the destruction become clear. The bomb had killed nearly eighty thousand persons, and wounded many more.

As Robert Ellsberg writes in his profile *The Mystic of Nagasaki*: “Nagai witnessed scenes of horrifying suffering. The intense heat near the epicenter of the blast had vaporized humans, leaving only the outline of their shadows. Hordes of blackened survivors, the skin hanging from their arms, desperately wandered the streets crying for water.

Such circumstances might naturally prompt a range of reactions – madness, despair, or the hunger for revenge. But in the days following the explosion, Nagai, a devout catholic, instead expressed a most unexpected attitude – namely, gratitude to God that his Catholic city had been chosen to atone for the sins of humanity”.

In arriving at this perspective, Nagai undoubtedly responded with the strong consciousness of Nagasaki’s Christian population. Since the time of the early Jesuit missions, the city had been the center of Japanese Catholicism, and consequently the scene of extensive martyrdom. Over time Japanese Catholics had claimed a deep identification with the cross of Christ and a conviction that atonement must come only at the price of blood. Thus, it seemed natural for Nagai to pose the question: “Was not Nagasaki the chosen victim, the lamb without blemish, slain as a whole burned offering on an altar of sacrifice, atoning for the sins of all the nations during World War II?”

The suffering, atoning Christ

The same perspective inspired the scene of Jesus speaking to the imprisoned missionary, in the novel *Silence* (1966) of Sushaku Endo. Jesus appears not as the beautiful, haloed and serene Christ of the missionary’s devotions, but the Christ of the twisted and dented *fumie* (the images of the face of Jesus used by the persecutors to force the Christians to step on), the trampled upon, and suffering Christ. And what the Christ says to the priest shocks him to the marrow: “Trample on me, trample...It was to be trampled upon by men that I was born into the world; it was to share men’s pain that I carried my cross”.

Nagai found remarkable that the bomb had been dropped that day on Nagasaki, as a result of heavy clouds obscuring the originally intended city. As a further result of clouds, the pilot had not fixed his target on the Mitsubishi iron works, as intended, but instead on the Catholic Cathedral of the Urakami district of the city, home to the majority of Nagasaki's Catholics. He noted moreover that the end of the war came on August 15, feast of the Assumption of Mary, to whom the cathedral was dedicated. All this was deeply meaningful. "We must ask if this convergence of events –the ending of the war and the celebration of her feast - was merely coincidental or if there was here some mysterious providence of God".

Dr. Paul Takashi Nagai, himself a victim of the atomic bomb, became its mystic: he gave his life to the mission of making Christian sense of the greatest war tragedy of modern history. He was himself a convert. Born on January 3, 1908, he had become a Catholic in 1934. His conversion was prompted by several influences, especially the example of his fiancée, who belonged to an ancient Catholic family. Nagai pursued a career in medicine, ultimately entering the field of radiology. In 1941, he was found to be suffering from incurable leukemia, induced by his exposure to x-rays. Nevertheless, he was able to continue his work, and in 1945 he had become the head of radiology at the University of Nagasaki.

The effects of radiation, combined with his previous illness, left Nagai an invalid, barely able to leave his bed. He lived as a contemplative in a small hut near the cathedral ruins in Urakami, writing books and receiving visitors. Increasingly he came to believe that Nagasaki had been chosen not only to atone for the sins of the war, but also to bear witness to the cause of international peace. Doctor Takashi Nagai described his experience of the atomic bombing and the aftermath in his bestseller book, *The bells of Nagasaki* (1951). He died on May 1, 1951, at the age of forty-three.

Agneta Chang: the tip of the iceberg

This is the story of a Korean religious sister, Agneta Chang, a woman of an outstanding personality, who refused to abandon her people and save herself: she is like the luminous tip of the immense iceberg representing the masses

of the Christian suffering humanity who have disappeared un-named in the underground maze of history.

Sr. Mary Agneta Chang came from a Korean family which had been Catholic from the time of persecution in the 19th century and included at least one martyr among her mother's ancestors. It was a well-to-do family. Her father provided education in the United States for two of his daughters as well as his sons. Her brother, John Chang, served as delegate to the United Nations, Ambassador to the United States and also shortly as Vice-President and Prime Minister of the Republic of Korea. The whole family had a special friendship with the Maryknoll congregation which they came to know and appreciate both in the States and in Korea.

Agneta joined the Maryknoll Sisters while studying in the States. She was assigned to Korea in 1925, after completing novitiate training at Maryknoll, New York. She did parish and catechetical work in Uiju and taught Korean language to her American companions. She had natural gifts for art and music, sewing and embroidery, and became proficient in English. She was attracted to the Scriptures and contemplative Saints and authors. After five years in Uiju, she went to Japan, to the College of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, for further study, obtaining a A.B. degree in 1935.

The Korean community of the Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, a local congregation, was started in the Diocese of Pyongyang in 1931. Four American Sisters were involved in the formation of this young group and Sr. Agneta joined them on completion of her studies. She remained with this community, right across two wars.

Under communist yoke

In 1941, the war broke out between Japan, which had annexed Korea early in the XX century, and the United States. It was then that the American Sisters were repatriated and Sr. Agneta was left alone to continue the work as novice mistress on behalf of the young community of Korean Sisters. During these years of war and Japanese domination, she found herself cut off from her Maryknoll headquarters and in charge of 29 women with insufficient funds, in a time of food shortages and high inflation.

For a short time between the surrender of the Japanese to the Americans in Seoul in 1945 and late in 1948, she again had contact with the motherhouse

in USA, receiving letters and supplies through her family in Seoul. But in that year, with the departure of the Russian troops that had entered north Korea during World War II, the Korean Communists took control of the country.

The Sisters, middle-class and educated, attracted their enmity and experienced their more intensive use of investigations, inspections and residence checks. Sr. Agneta, because of her American ties and her brother John's position as diplomat, attracted special suspicion. She decided not to risk appearing in public. Soon the last building used by the Perpetual Help Sisters was taken over by the government, and each Sister, dressed in lay clothes, left for home. At that time, many priests and even bishops were arrested and killed.

Buried in a mass grave

Sr. Agneta's health was poor since she had previous back surgery. Sr. Peter Kang accompanied her as she took refuge in various villages, the last being Songrimri, about 25 miles from Pyong Yang. The Korean war had in the meantime broken out and by October 1950, the United Nations forces began to drive northward, reaching the 38th parallel, putting pressure on the communist North.

On October 4, 1950, a representative of the Communist military mobilization office came for Sr. Agneta, demanding that she help care for wounded soldiers. Sr. Peter pleaded in vain that Sr. Agneta was ill and unable to walk. Neighbors were forced to help load her bed on a waiting ox-cart. Sr. Peter tried to follow, but was turned away. She, with a handful of other sisters, eventually made for the south and freedom.

This is how she describes the moment of separation: "The time was about eight in the evening. The world was wrapped in dusk. The only sound was that of the ox-cart jogging down the mountain trail together with the groaning and the sound of Sr. Agneta's prayers. She made no complain but only exclaimed: Lord, have mercy on us! O miserable night! My heart seems to shatter and break into a thousand pieces at the thought of it".

That was the last moment that Sr. Agneta was seen alive. Sr. Agneta's final moments remain unknown, but a group of women were said to have been executed and hastily buried in a mass grave. The site was never located.

Shigeto Oshida: when Budha meets Christ

World War II is raging in the Far East. The Japanese army has invaded the surrounding countries: Singapore, Southern China, Thailand, the Philippines... Everywhere the cruelty and fanaticism of the Japanese soldiers have spread terror and the grim fate of the people in their prison camps will remain in the collective imagination and be the object of famous films like *The Bridge over the River Kwai* by David Lean or novels like *King Rat* by James Clavel.

It is against this somber background that God performed a tiny, personal miracle that transformed the life of a Japanese young man in his twenties, simple, humble follower of the tradition of Zen Buddhism, Shigeto Oshida. Years later, many times Fr. Oshida used to mention the circumstances of his encounter with the German Catholic youth who was instrumental to him meeting Christ: “As soon as I saw that Christian man I already believed. I did not yet know the dogmas, but I already believed. I had no problem in accepting the dogmas because I first believed in the testimony of a true Christian”.

How transparent must have been the goodness of Christ in the face of that youth! Fr. Oshida used to talk at length of his journey as a young man into Zen and how, going through the dignified silence of Zen, he immediately believed in the Man who died on the cross pleading for universal forgiveness. “Forgiveness is silence within silence. Christ is the heart of Zen”. Fr. Vincent Shigeto Oshida, OP, was born in Japan in 1922.

After becoming a Christian, the young Oshida felt the desire to dedicate his life to Christ as a religious and was attracted by the Dominican order. But he fell sick with TB and was confined in a sanatorium. It is there that a small community was born around him made up of his fellow patients who liked to pray with him and sit with him in Zen meditation. He already had the feeling that living and thinking in a Dominican monastery was not going to be natural to him. For the Wisdom tradition is to be simple with ourselves in order to be open to God. On that occasion, however, Jesus did not give him a clear answer, so he continued in his vocation.

He was sent to Canada to study theology. Upon his return to Japan, he was hospitalized once more for tuberculosis and had surgery which removed half of his right lung. He was then transferred to a sanatorium for convalescence

in the district where he later settled. Here, in the sanatorium, around his person, a small community of silence and prayer was born for a second time.

After approximately thirteen years of relative silence, he decided to talk with his local superior and was given green light. It was so that, at last, Fr. Oshida left the convent and created a small hermitage, where he and those who joined him lived in solidarity with their neighbors and practiced a way of life made up of manual labor, prolonged Zen meditation and a Christian liturgy of luminous simplicity.

The Grass Hermitage

It was 1964 when Fr. Oshida, by then 42 years old, opened the hermitage *Sooan* in order to make room for all those who were attracted by his way of life (*Soo* means grass, *an* means hermitage). *Sooan* was in the village of Takamori, in the province of Nogano, not far from the sacred mountain Fuji. It was built like a traditional peasant hut. Takamori's hermitage was not an organization neither an institution. It was a humble place that fitted naturally in the rice fields, the streams and the rural life of the surrounding villages.

God gave Fr. Oshida forty years to stay in the silence and simplicity of *Sooan* and to pursue his search for Christ's face and his listening to simplicity. God works through our simplicity. Simplicity can be like a "sacrament." In the Christian tradition, a sacrament is a visible sign pointing to the presence of invisible grace. In Zen, it is precisely the simple and everyday things that have a sacramental character. There is nothing special about drinking tea, meeting people, going about one's daily work, playing with children, or taking delight in nature; but it is in the elements of ordinary life that the mystery of existence opens up.

It is this simplicity that people sought in Fr. Oshida and that he took with him when he went out to preach retreats, even to the Bishops of Asia, or hid in the pages of the many books he wrote. One day he received a visit from a Buddhist nun. He saw her standing at the door of the community grass hut. "I feel like I have come back home," she said. Next morning she assisted at the Mass. After Mass she remained in the chapel. One of our sisters was also there. After a while she approached the sister and said: "In Buddhism we have what we call 'unifying communication' between Buddha and ourselves, but in your place, the Hand of God appears visibly before our eyes." Tears continued to flow down her cheeks. Some months later I received a

telephone call from her telling me of a dream in which she was being baptized. Her official position at that time was one of presiding at a temple near Osaka.

Autumn leaves and rice grains...

In the convent of Takamori, in the last days of his life, Fr. Oshida spent long time contemplating the way autumn dresses the surrounding hills in colors. Looking at the leaves falling gently on the ground, he uttered the words that will remain on his lips until the last breath: “God is marvelous! Amen, Amen!” He left this world in a state of profound quiet, crossing to the other side of life while resting in a deep sleep. His face in death was radiant with beauty and peace. It was November 6, 2003.

Fr. Oshida was buried on the fifth day after his death by his followers and friends: the simple, wooden coffin was placed in the midst of the trees of the Sacred Memorial Wood that commemorates the victims of all the conflicts. After a prayer vigil that lasted throughout the night, the Mass was celebrated among the trees, near the small spring, and then the coffin was lowered into the earth, just behind the chapel of the hermitage, in front of the statue of Mary holding the child Jesus. Some grains of rice were placed inside the coffin and then the tomb and the ground around it were strewn with beautiful autumn leaves: red, yellow, golden...These simple gestures in the celebration fittingly made present the religious figure of Fr. Oshida.

For the last forty years of his life, Fr. Oshida lived in his “Grass Hermitage”, searching for the face of Christ through the Japanese Zen Way that he had practiced in his youth. He became a point of reference in the dialogue between religions he preferred to describe as “meeting in the depths”. In him the wisdom of Asia became a heritage of the Church.

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HOLINESS IN WAITING

Two outstanding Asian public figures are on the threshold of canonization, according to well founded inside information. They are very different of their personalities and in the details of their lives: Mother Ignacia de Espiritu Santo in the Philippines promoted, with a life consecrated to prayer and apostolate, a prophetic emancipation of indigenous womanhood and Takayama Ukon in Japan embodied the meekness of Christ with the traditional valor of the Samurais.

In a papal decree dated 6 July 2007, Pope Benedict XVI accepted the findings of the prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints and declared: “The Servant of God, Ignacia de Espiritu Santo, foundress of the Religious of the Blessed Virgin Mary, is acknowledged to possess to a heroic degree the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity toward God and neighbor, as well as the cardinal virtues of Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude”.

As a consequence, she now deserves the title of “Venerable”, the last step towards Beatification. On February 1, 2008, Archbishop of Manila Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales presided over the promulgation which officially accorded Ignacia the title "Venerable", at the Minor Basilica of San Lorenzo Ruiz in Binondo, Manila, the original place of the new Venerable.

A woman ahead of her time

For two main reasons Mother Ignacia can be seen as a prophet: first of all, she defied the barrier by which the Spanish had forbidden the natives to receive Holy Orders and enter a Religious Congregation. She started alone a life of prayer under the protection of the Jesuits. When other native girls joined her, eventually the group was recognized and protected and the future full acceptance was made possible.

Secondly, Mother Ignacia and companions ignored the prohibition of active apostolate which then constrained women religious to limit themselves to

the enclosed life of the monastery. In Europe, Mary Ward who had dared to overcome that prejudice and had started an order of women dedicated to education, herself influenced by the Jesuits, had ended in the prison of the Inquisition and had failed. It will be only after the French Revolution that women religious will be allowed to active apostolic life.

The birth date of Mother Ignacia del Espíritu Santo is piously attributed on February 1, 1663, based on the cultural customs of the Spanish Era. Only her baptismal record is preserved, which occurred on March 4, 1663. Ignacia was the eldest and sole surviving child of María Jerónima, a Filipina, and Jusepe Iuco, a migrant convert to Christianity from Amoy, China.

Expected by her parents to marry at 21, Ignacia sought religious counsel from the Jesuits. She was given the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, from which she drew her religious devotion and piety. After this period of solitude and prayer, Ignacia finally decided to pursue her religious calling, to "remain in the service of the Divine Majesty" and "live by the sweat of her brow."

Poverty, simplicity and education

She left home and brought with her only a needle and a pair of scissors. She started to live alone in the house located at the back of the Jesuit College of Manila. Her life of prayer and labor attracted other native girls who were also called to religious life but could not be admitted to existing *beaterios* at that time.

Venerable Ignacia accepted these women into her company and the first community was born. They became known as the *Beatas de la Compañía de Jesus* because they frequently received the sacraments at the Church of St. Ignatius, performed many acts of devotion there and went to the Jesuit Fathers for spiritual direction and confession.

Venerable Ignacia centered her life on the suffering Christ and tried to imitate Him through a life of service and humility. She prayed earnestly to God and performed penances to move God to have mercy on them. Her spirituality of humble service was expressed in her capacity to forgive, to bear wrongs patiently and to correct with gentleness and meekness. This spirituality was manifested in peace and harmony in the community, mutual love and union of wills, witnessing to the love of Jesus Christ and the maternal care of Mary our Blessed Mother.

This spirituality sustained the *beatas* in their moments of difficulties especially during times of extreme poverty, when they even had to beg for rice and salt and scour the streets for firewood or during the long years of the suppression of the Jesuit order and the consequent loss of their first supporters.

Venerable Ignacia gradually realized that the *Beaterio* was called by God not only to a life of prayer and penance but also to apostolic service. The *Beaterio* admitted young girls as boarders who were taught Christian doctrine as well as works proper to them. Venerable Ignacia did not make any distinction of color or race but accepted *yndias*, *mestizas* and Spaniards as *recogidas*. The *beatas* were also involved in retreat work and helped the Jesuit Fathers by preparing the retreatants to be disposed to the Spiritual Exercises.

In 1732, the Archbishop of Manila approved the Rules and accepted the group as pious Association. Ignacia then, with great humility, surrendered the leadership and continued as a simple member. She had the consolation of seeing the steady growth of her small band of members. Mother Ignacia del Espíritu Santo died on September 10, 1748 at the age of eighty-five. She died on her knees after receiving Holy Communion at the altar rail of the old Jesuit Church of San Ignacio in Intramuros.

The final Decree of Approbation of the Religious of the Virgin Mary was granted by Pope Pius XI on 24 March 1931 which elevated the Congregation to Pontifical status. It is today the largest religious congregation of women in the Philippines and by far the most ancient.

The Christian 'daimyo'

In the XVI century, Japan was ruled by warlords in continuous fight against each other, surrounded by the class of warriors who has made Japan famous: the Samurai. It was the year 1578 and the castle of Takatsuki, held by the Christian *daimyo* Takayama Ukon, together with his father, was joining the rebellion against the *Shogun* Oda Nabunaga.

While surrounding other rebels with his troupes, Nabunaga, knowing that the Takayama were devout Christians, called for the Jesuit Father Organtino. He asked the Padre to convince them to surrender, promising that such an outcome would benefit the Church. At the same time, he hinted that failure

to submit would lead to an unfortunate persecution. Padre Organtino obligingly contacted Ukon and informed him of Nobunaga's message, which the younger Takayama took to heart.

Unwilling to allow harm to come to his religion, he abandoned Takatsuki in the night. Nobunaga rewarded Ukon for his decision, allowing him to keep his castle. Takayama Ukon took advantage of the relative period of tranquility that followed for promoting the conversion to Christianity of the population in his fief.

It is of interest to note that later, during Nobunaga's funeral, Takayama refused to light incense at his mortuary altar or say traditional Buddhist prayers, due to his Christian beliefs. This does not appear to have sat so well with Toyotomi Hideyoshi, his new warlord, and may have gone some way towards fostering disquiet between the two men.

A heroic decision

Takayama Justo was born in 1552 as the heir of Takayama Tomoteru, the lord of Sawa Castle in the Yamato Province. He had one sister and two brothers. His name as a child was Hikogorō. At the age of 12 in 1564, his father converted to Catholicism and Hikogorō was also baptized as Justo. However, he is better known as Takayama Ukon. The name Ukon comes from a government post he held as it was usual practice among samurai.

At some point, he married and had three sons and one daughter.

Justo and his father fought through the turbulent age to secure their position as a *daimyo*. They managed to acquire Takatsuki Castle (Takatsuki, Osaka) under the warlord Oda Nobunaga and also under *daimyo* Toyotomi Hideyoshi, at least in the first years of his rule. However, Toyotomi Hideyoshi grew against Christianity and, in 1587, he ordered the expulsion of missionaries. While many *daimyo* obeyed this order and discarded Catholicism, Justo proclaimed that he would maintain his religion and rather give up his land and property. We can imagine the inner struggle and the heroic decision: it was like a civil death.

Justo lived under the protection of his friends for several decades, but following the 1614 prohibition of Christianity by Tokugawa Ieyasu, the ruler of the time, he was expelled from Japan. On 8 November 1614, together with 300 Japanese Christians he peacefully left his home country

from Nagasaki. He arrived at Manila on 21 December and was greeted warmly by the Spanish Jesuits and the local Filipinos there.

The Spanish Philippines offered their assistance in overthrowing the Japanese government by an invasion to protect Japanese Catholics. However, Justo declined to participate and he opposed the plan. He died of illness just 40 days afterwards.

There is a statue of Dom Justo Takayama in Plaza Dilao, Manila. Justo appears in the statue wearing warrior robes with his hair tied in the knot of the samurai. He is carrying a sword that is pointed downward, upon which hangs the figure of the crucified Jesus.

“Jesus, your new lord, will never abandon you!”

The fascination of the cross is the center of *The Samurai* (1981), a major historical novel by Sushaku Endo, the Japanese best-selling Christian novelist. In *The Samurai*, Rukuemon Hasekura, a traditional Japanese warrior in the service of a powerful feudal lord, is chosen as one of Japan envoys to Mexico and Rome. In the course of the journey, the samurai converts to Christianity under the influence of Fr. Velasco, a Spanish missionary.

However, the journey has been futile since the start: Hasekura returns to Japan to discover that in his absence the political tides have shifted. The authorities are pursuing an isolationist policy and ruthlessly stumping out all Western influences. In the face of disillusionment and death, the samurai's only support and solace comes from his reluctant commitment to his new spiritual Lord.

Wherever he had gone in his journey, in ships or houses, the tragic figure of the Crucifix had confronted the samurai, evoking in him mostly revulsion or lack of understanding. But on the point of being taken away, his old, faithful servant Yozo, who is also a Christian, tells him: “From now on, Jesus, your new Lord, will be beside you ... He will attend to you, he will not abandon you”. So, the samurai goes to his place of martyrdom where he is joined by Fr. Velasco. Both are crucified on the seashore, on a brisk winter morning. This work of fiction very much recreates what must have been Tukayama Ukon's inner ordeal.

A lesson for our competitive society

Takayama Ukon is currently under consideration for sainthood in the Catholic Church. His cause of sainthood started at a diocesan level in 1994. Cardinal Angelo Amato, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, told a group of Japanese pilgrims on October 21, 2014 that Takayama Ukon is likely be accorded the title of *beatus* (blessed) in 2015, the 400th anniversary of his death. Ukon will be the first Japanese who will be beatified on an individual basis.

“Ukon consistently set his faith above his desires for career success and wealth whenever he was forced to choose,” said Yoshinao Otsuka, the bishop of Kyoto Diocese, “There is a lesson for people today, who live in a highly competitive society, from his courage to set aside his competitive instincts for his faith.” The Japanese Church authority has recommended that Ukon be beatified as a martyr.

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A TSUNAMI OF FORGIVENESS

This is how we can describe the extraordinary witness of the members of Sr. Rani Maria's family who forgave her murderer and caused him to convert to Christianity. A religious sister from the traditional Catholic Kerala, Sr. Rani Maria was a missionary among the Adivasi, the indigenous population of Northern India. Shocked by the exploitation they were subjected to by the money-lenders, she put in operation a series of initiatives to make them financially independent and progressive. The cruel reaction of the money-lenders soon appeared when Sr. Rani Maria was stabbed to death in front of the people of the bus in which she was traveling. Her lifeless body was abandoned on the road. Her cause of beatification is on the way.

On February 24, 2003, in India, two national newspapers in the Hindi language, one of them the *Dainik Bhaskar*, which prints more than ten million copies daily, gave extraordinary relevance to an unusual happening: the generous forgiveness that the family of the murdered Sr. Rani Maria bestowed on the assassin. It was the eve of the very date of the murder, and Sr. Rani's mother, Eliswa, came from Kerala all the way to the North of India, to the jail of Samundhar Singh and kissed the hands which had stabbed her daughter.

She said: "I wanted to do this, to kiss the hands that killed my daughter, because these hands were bathed in my daughter's blood". No gesture of forgiveness could have been more eloquent. This captured the attention of the mass media and the news of Christ's forgiveness has spread far and wide. Powerful expression of this forgiving love had also been given by Sr. Rani Maria's younger sister, Sr. Selmy Paul, on August 21, 2002, rightly interpreting the mind of her martyred elder sister.

She visited the hitman Samundhar Sing in the Indore Central Jail. She was accompanied by her religious superior as well as the prison's chaplain. That day was the day of *Rakshabandhan* (knot of protection), an annual feast held among the Hindus to consolidate a sacred relationship between brothers and sisters. The sister would tie '*Rakhi*', a decorated thread, on her brother's wrist and he would assume responsibility to protect her. This is what Sr. Selmy Paul did to Samundhar Singh. Overwhelmed by this unexpected gesture, Samundhar Singh asked forgiveness of Sr. Selmy and expressed his repentance.

Daughter of Christian Kerala

Kerala is a small state, a fairly narrow strip of land, in southwest India. With beautiful seawaters, high mountain ranges, green forests and wavy coconut trees, Kerala has been called God's own country. Kerala ranks first among the states of the Indian federal union with a literacy of more than 90%. Having received the Christian faith in the first century from the Apostle St. Thomas, Kerala's population today is about 19% Christian. It is mostly Kerala that supplies missionary personnel to northern and central India.

Pulluvazhy is a small tranquil village of Kerala where spirituality, elegance of nature and cultural prosperity join hands. The parish church acts as the pivot of the spiritual, social, and cultural advancement of the people. This religiously oriented little village is today proud of its chosen daughter Rani Maria.

Sr. Rani Maria was born on January 29, 1954 as the second child of Paily and Eliswa of Vattalil, in an ordinary peasant family. Her baptism name was Mariam. Her God fearing parents brought her up in Christian faith and charity along with their six other children. From her infancy her parents and grandparents made her understand the importance of prayer. Even at the young age, she regularly attended Holy Mass and took part in the popular devotions. She frequented catechism lessons and practiced what she learned in her day today life.

Her brother Stephen speaks about her childhood: "She was a girl of few words; she needed only very simple clothes and did not show any interest in wearing ornaments. She never did anything to hurt anyone. If something unpleasant happened she felt sorry about it." Her mother recalls: "She was different from other children and was an exceptionally obedient child." She

was good at school but she also found time to help her father in the work of the fields and her mother in her domestic duties. She showed keen interest in and special love towards the servants and found time to chat with them.

Mariam was 20 years of age when she made her first profession in the Franciscan Clarist Congregation in May 1974 under the new name Rani Maria, the first word Rani having the meaning “Regina” or queen. A fellow novice has described her thus: “During the period of formation, we were busy with various assignments. All wanted to have Sr. Rani in their group. She was always the first for every humble work.

During her hours of work, her favorite ejaculatory prayer was “Jesus.” She kept up the habit of uttering the name “Jesus” till her very last breath. In fact she was heard repeating “Jesus, Jesus” right up to the end of her death agony. Hearing of the experiences of missionaries, Sr. Rani Maria's missionary zeal was inflamed. She used to repeat: “I too want to go to North India, to serve the poor and die for them”.

Missionary Life

India is a land of diversity of religions, languages and cultures. It is the cradle of different religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. The vast majority of the population are Hindus; Christians represent a tiny minority. The Indian society is structured on the caste system. A caste is a group of families bound to each other by special rules for the observance of ceremonial purity, especially as regard to marriage and food. Traditionally the Brahmins are the priestly caste and keep the highest positions of honor in society.

Those without any caste like tribal groups are marginalized and relegated as ‘outcasts.’ They are exploited in many ways by the upper-castes. This social system has also brought extreme disparity among the people of India, divided into the highly rich and the desperately poor. It is mostly Hinduism that has shaped India and constitutes the most prominent religion in the northern parts of India, where most people do not know Jesus and his gospel. It was the knowledge that there are millions of people who have not even heard of Jesus Christ that led Sr. Rani Maria to the northern missions.

She spent twenty years in her mission which was cut short by her supreme sacrifice. The place in which her maturity as a missionary blossomed was Udainagar. The biting cold, heavy rains, intense heat, irregular meals, lack

of water, and journeys through dangerous moments, lonely moments of helplessness... nothing was a hindrance to Sr. Rani Maria. Sr. Rani Maria was convinced that an evangelizer should be interested in the life of the poor to give them Christ, his love and his redeeming message, thereby helping them to attain special growth and material welfare.

As an experienced social worker she made a thorough study of the tribals of the villages and realized that those villagers had become over dependant on the unscrupulous money lenders who devoured their meager earnings and property. The poor were not aware of the grants that the government had allotted for their socio-economic development. Through various conscientization programs, Sr.Rani Maria made them aware of their rights and injustice perpetrated on them. Thus, the poor of Udainagar became active citizens and started to free themselves from the bondage to their heartless moneylenders.

As a result of her developmental work in Udainagar, the marshy places were converted into agricultural land. The men folk were engaged in small-scale business. Those capable of going for higher education were given the opportunities. She chose a few youngsters and gave them training to become animators.

Sr.Rani Maria mostly worked among the Adivasis and among those who were marginalized by society. They loved her as a mother because for the first time they saw a person who shared their life, lived with them and acted in their favor. Her life was set apart for the poor. Since the developmental programs for the tribal poor went counter to the vested interests of the moneylenders and social exploiters, she became the object of their hatred, which grew steadily in step with the progress of the poor. And her enemies decided to get rid of her. They waited for an opportunity. They did not have to wait long.

Stabbed 54 times

As usual on February 25, 1995, Sr. Rani Maria rose early in the morning. She had to take the first bus to Indore and from there go to the Provincial House, Bhopal and then proceed down to Kerala. As it was her custom, before leaving the house she picked up the bible to read the word of God.

She got the line: ‘Do not be afraid. I have carved your name on the palm of my hands’ (*Isayah.49:16*).

The bus arrived in front of the convent. The sisters bade her farewell. One of them helped her to get into the bus with her handbag. A young man dressed in white, kept her bag near the driver and asked her to sit in the back seat. This was something unusual in Udainagar. The sisters were always given the front seat in the bus. Among the fifty or so passengers there were three, seated in different parts of the bus, but united in one thing: the determination to murder Sr. Rani.

Jeevan Singh, the leader of the group, was seated in the back seat of the bus together with Dharmendra, his bodyguard. The third man was Samundhar Singh, a youth of 28, who took his seat near Sr. Rani Maria. Jeevan Singh began to insult her saying: “Why have you come here from Kerala? Have you come to convert these poor tribal people to Christianity? We will not allow that.”

The bus reached a jungle about 20 kms from Udainagar. Samundhar rose from his seat and asked the driver to stop the bus. He got down from the bus and broke a coconut against a rock on the road side: it was a *pooja* or sacred rite offered to their divinities. With pieces of the broken coconut in his hands he re-entered the bus and distributed them among the passengers. He offered a piece to Sr. Rani Maria but suddenly withdrew it as if to fool her.

She asked him, “Why are you so overjoyed today?” Drawing out a knife he said, “Just for this,” and thrust it into her stomach. Repeatedly he stabbed her. Then the bus stopped. Deaf to her cries, he dragged her out of the bus and stabbed her to death. The post-mortem registered 40 major injuries besides 14 bruises. Until the last breath she kept on saying “Jesus! Jesus!” None of the passengers dared to come to her rescue. Most of them ran away.

A sea of mourners

The news of her assassination spread rapidly provoking sadness and dismay. Thousands of people including non-Catholics came to render her homage. The following day her body was taken to the Cathedral Church of Indore and Bishop George Anathil SVD celebrated the Holy Mass with several priests. The Church was packed with people. After the mass a protest rally was taken out and memorandums were presented to the government authorities.

On February 27, in the morning, seven bishops and nearly a hundred priests concelebrated the Holy Mass. In a grand funeral procession of 125 vehicles, Sr. Rani Maria's body was taken from Indore to Udainagar.

The air rang with the praises of Sr. Rani Maria, who had died for the poor. Udainagar became a human sea of mourners, irrespective of caste or creed. At a condolence meeting in the parish yard, many eminent personalities spoke about her life and works, hailing her as a martyr. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (*John*: 15:13)." Quite significantly, this saying of Jesus was carved on her tomb.

"Christians are India's hope"

This is the statement of Samandhar Singh, Sr. Rani Maria's murderer. He converted to Christianity and today he is a different man. He helps tribal people and for him Sr. Rani's family has become his own. Sadly, he agrees that a climate of anti-Christian hatred is currently sweeping across India. He urges his compatriots to see the truth in the presence of missionaries in the country.

After his arrest in connection with the nun's murder, he was tried and sentenced to prison, where he spent 11 years. During that time, his wife divorced him and his first son died. Behind prison walls, he began plotting how he could take revenge against the man who pushed him to kill the nun. But he was profoundly touched by Sr. Rani Maria's family and their forgiveness, so much so that from their embrace his journey of repentance began.

He gave up plans for revenge and accepted the sorrow caused by the murder. Eventually, Samandhar Singh was released because of a petition signed by Sister Rani's family, the provincial of the Clarist congregation and the bishop of Indore. When his release was slow in coming, a delegation went to see the local governor to plead his case. "Only you Christians can truly forgive," the latter said. "You are a great example. Go, I shall do all I can to get him released."

Once he was free, Samandhar Singh began to treat Sister Rani's family as his own. "I regularly visit her tomb," he said. "For me, it is like a sanctuary of peace and strength." "I want everyone to know that Christians work to

make India great. The missionaries give us hope through their service, which is to make us a strong and independent people.”

Thus Sr. Rani Maria continues her mission as evangelizer even more efficaciously after her death. In conclusion, one may recall the significant words of John Paul II during his apostolic visit to India, in December 1999: “The Church of India will grow only in the blood of Christians.” Sr. Rani Maria’s beatification as a martyr may well signal that growth.

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