

Notre Dame Goes to Japan

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The Mission in Okinawa of the School Sisters of Notre Dame

In response to a request by Msgr. Ley, OFM Cap. (later Bishop Ley) to send SSNDs to administer and teach in the already-established Christ the King School in Okinawa, four Sisters were assigned to the mission in 1961 by Sister Mary Paul, then in charge of the Japanese Mission. Monsignor Ley, Father Valentine, and Monsignor Hilarion Tuller had been taught by Notre Dame Sisters in Milwaukee and they wanted Notre Dame Sisters for Okinawa. Monsignor Ley had requested Sisters from Mother Commissary M. Hilaria Coleman in 1949. But since the Milwaukee Province had just opened a mission in Guam in 1949 they had no Sisters available for Okinawa. Moreover, since Okinawa, one of the Ryukyu Islands, was a Japanese possession, Monsignor was referred to the Saint Louis Province which had opened a mission in the mainland of Japan in 1948. But at this time the Southern Province could not provide sisters either. Finally in August 1959 Father Valentine made a personal visit to Mother M. Theodosia to request sisters. This time he had hope for Sisters in 1961. Mother Theodosia contacted the mission in Kyoto to send sisters to Okinawa.

Christ the King International School had been established in 1953 to take care of the many children of foreign nationals who up to then had been allowed to attend the US military schools but were gradually being excluded from them. Many of these foreign nationals were Catholics and were in dire need of spiritual as well as educational care.

When the Sisters arrived on May 19, 1961, Christ the King school comprised a kindergarten and six elementary grades with a total enrollment of about 265 pupils of many nationalities and creeds. Filipino Catholics (or ought-to-be Catholics) accounted for more the 50%, while Chinese, both Catholic and non-Catholic, accounted for about 30%, and the rest – Indians, Malaysians, British, Australians, Japanese, Americans – for the remaining 20%. Many of the children were of mixed parentage – especially Filipino-Okinawans, as well as for most Japanese, a Japanese education was essential as preparation for higher education. Others who used the school in the early days were, for the most part, civilian personnel working for the military or in private enterprises.

When three of the four Notre Dames arrived in May, that is, at the end of the 1960-1961 scholastic year, they found a well-established school staffed by very devoted Filipino and American teachers (wives of military and civilian personnel). Several of these teachers had been with the school from its birth and had sacrificed time, talent, and money to “take the child and make it grow”. The “child” was healthy and pupils and teachers were bonded with a wonderful family

spirit. Father Valentine Thibedeau, OFM Cap., who had administered the school from its beginning, was eager to have the administration in more professional hands as it would give a basis for confidence to the parents using the school that the school would continue and be able to develop on a competitive basis with the military schools and thus attract more Catholics to use it for their children.

The three Sisters who arrived on May 19 were Sister Mary Alix Kihnenmann, Sister Mary Francis Tagita, and Sister M. Vivienne Hazelett. Sister Marietta Yamada, who was to join the group in late August, remained in Japan to complete her preparation and pronouncement of secondary vows.

Upon arrival at Naha airport the Sisters were met by Msgr. Ley and Father Valentine and a delegation of school children representing each of the national groups, and each outdoing the other to make the welcome as warm and sincere as possible.

A thirty-minute drive from the airport brought the Sisters to Madhara and to the tiny convent which they were to call “home” until 1965, when the new convent was completed. The first convent was a trinity of discarded “BOQ” units joined together in train-style—one car joined to the next in a straight line – and held fast to the ground by strong cables strung over the roof and fastened firmly to the ground on either side. This was to prevent their being blown away in case of a heavy typhoon. But if the convent looked like a string of box-cars from the outside, within it was a very homey convent. Generous women from the military bases had transformed it into a completely furnished home-made curtains on the windows, beds made and extra bedding in the cupboards, towels on the racks, food on the tables, stores of food in the refrigerator and pantry, complete laundry equipment. Monsignor asked them to take a quick look-over to discover whether anything essential was missing. The only thing that wasn’t there was salt! So off they were taken on a shopping tour to buy “salt” - and they came home loaded with meats, vegetables, canned goods, household supplies for days and months to come. Their hardest problem on this first shopping tour was to avoid Monsignor’s sharp eyes. If they even stopped to look at something, he quietly stalked them and bought it while they were moving on. Even to buy highly personal items they had to use strategy – divide and divert his attention while they bought, paid, and stashed away before he could catch on.

The Sisters arrived in Okinawa just a few hours before a tropical storm (a kind of rain front that doesn’t move off the spot but just pours down). The first night in their tin-roofed dwelling they listened to the rain as it poured down, poured in through closed windows, and poured out of the cracks in the floor. We learned to appreciate cracks in the floor – they were convenient – cleanup was simple! Other nights they heard the rats having an “undokia” in the space between the roof and the ceiling (and sometimes in the bedrooms and pantry) but this night they were at least less noisy than the rain. Next morning they got up to find habits mildewed overnight and starched veils a sorry-looking limp head

coverings. In this state they had to go for registration with the Ryukyu Government. Sister M. Vivienne tried, in vain, to make a better appearance by putting a short plastic ruler across the top of her head to make the veil stand out. What a disaster!

Sister Mary Alix was asked to take the second grade so that First Communicants would come under her care. Sister Mary Francis was to take the first grade. Sister was quite good in English – was an English teacher in Japan – but the challenge of teaching all day in English to little ones who were either native speakers and could speak more fluently than Sister herself, or who themselves had learned English only the year of two before and could understand very little English, required heroic courage and humble obedience, - both of which Sister proved herself to have. Sister Vivienne was to teach the newly added seventh grade and be principal of the school. As the Sisters had arrived almost at the end of the school year, they spent their time in observing classes, getting the “feel” of the school and the people they would be working with and for.

The Sisters soon fell in love with the charming, warm-hearted children, their wonderfully cooperative parents, the devoted teachers. Parents, too, putting great trust in the Sisters, began bringing over their children from the Philippines, Taiwan, Macao, Hong Kong, India...Many Catholic (and a few non-Catholic) military families turned to Christ the King School from the military schools. The Sisters could anticipate a large increase in enrollment even before they began the new school year.

At home, Sister Marietta, in addition to caring for the meals and laundry of the Sisters, also provided the same services for the resident priest, who lived in a small house next to the convent.

Who was actually to administer the school: building, finances, etc., as distant from the educational work, became a question. It appeared that the Capuchins were rather eager to turn it all over to Notre Dame. But Sister Vivienne felt that she had neither confidence nor experience in this level of administration, so it was determined that it should be a “we” function of mutual consultation and cooperation - an arrangement which proved to be of great advantage to the school. Father Valentine, with hundreds of friends among the military and civilian personnel on the island, was able to engineer fund-raising and construction project, - both an ever-increasing need- while the Sisters and lay staff kept the education efforts moving at an ever-expanding and upgrading level.

When in 1965 a new two-story concrete convent was to be constructed, the U.S. Marines came out with heavy equipment and picked up the BOQ's and moved them off the site and closer to the sugar cane field on the adjoining property. The new convent had to be built on the same spot as the BOQ's

because of an underground river that runs through the property. The Sisters walked through the bed of the underground river when the men were surveying the site. Of course, the river was dry at the time. There are two sink holes on the property that are entrances to the bed of the river. The convent was built with its own lovely chapel, parlor, guest rooms, dining room, kitchen and laundry areas on the first floor and twelve bedrooms and a community room on the second floor.

In the meantime other Sisters arrived from Japan: Sister Adrienne Taitano in 1963. Sister Adrienne, a Guamanian by birth but a member of the St. Louis Province, came to Okinawa without having been first missioned to Japan. She brought with her talents of humor and an understanding of the problems of children gained from personal experience of similar difficulties that endeared her to both Sisters and students. Others who came from Japan were Sister Mary Margaret Hirasawa in 1959; also Sister Tolentine Melloh (1965) after a brief period of service in Japan, and Sister Alora (1966). Sister Tolentine taught in the Grade School in 1965, developed the home economics department and, in 1967, became principal of the high school, which at the time was separated in administration from the grade school. Other American Sisters who came were Sister Borgia Borgerding and Sister Jean Boschert in 1968 and Sister Camille Szdlowski in 1969. Sister Mary Joyce Uehara, a native Okinawan, who had entered the community even before the arrival of the Sisters in Okinawa, came back to serve the school in various non-teaching capacities. All of the Japanese-speaking Sisters, besides their convent and school work, became increasingly involved with parish activities which helped to bring many Okinawans, especially women, into contact with the Church and were often instrumental in helping them to overcome their reluctance to rectify their marriages with Filipino men and bring them to baptism. The English-speaking Sisters found outlets for other missionary apostolates among the English-speaking parents and CCD contacts with the military personnel.

From its very inception the school, though non-denominational in policy, was distinctly Catholic in tone. It was conducted in American style, with American curriculum, on an American schedule, with American textbooks. Yet, behind the facade of Americanism (necessitated by the fact that the Ryukyus were still under American occupation after the war), there was always a strong missionary thrust. Through the children parents were brought back to the Church or brought into the Church, marriages were sacramentalized, the faith of Chinese refugees from Communist China was supported and strengthened, the Church became a living reality in the lives of Hindu, Buddhist, Confucianist, Jew, Protestant, and atheist.

It was Catholic in a very real sense embracing at one time teaching staff comprising five races, a student body from twelve countries, and families of every religious persuasion – all bound together by the strong family sense that Christ the King is OUR school and its success, its survival is OUR problem. Sister

Vivienne asserts that one of the most unforgettable memories of these years is that of over 700 of the children, in their gray uniform and Christ the King emblem, massed in the field house at the Zukiran Army Base, together with thousands of adult Americans, Okinawans and other nationals, each singing out in his or her own language, "Holy God, we praise Thy Name" or a stirring hymn to Christ the King.

It was this same sense of unity, of mutual support in an atmosphere totally free from prejudice, that made the Sisters often say, "Thank God for Okinawa!" In an atmosphere so charged with diversity, they truly found their unity in Christ the King. It was this that made all the early Monday morning calls to find a substitute teacher, the heart-wrenching turning away of applicants because "there was no room in the inn:", the need to depend so often even on little children to serve as interpreters with Chinese-speaking parents, the necessity of teaching over the noise of helicopters overhead and pile-drivers outside the windows, the pleading of many fathers with low salaries to give consideration in tuition payments for their children, the typhoons that flooded the school with several inches (or feet) of mud and water to be swept out by hand or pumped out by kind Marines, the fund-raising carnivals and international festivals, the inevitable occasional misunderstanding, misinterpretation, misinformation that occur even with the best will... it was all this that was swept away in the joy of being a part of that vast chorus of praise offered each year from Okinawa to Christ the King.

In 1975 because of a lack of sufficient native speakers of English to staff the school, the School Sisters of Notre Dame withdrew from Christ the King School. A congregation of Dominican Sisters took over the administration and staffing of the school. Japanese SSNDs then began work in Nago. There are four Japanese Sisters there one of whom works with the lepers in the Leper Colony, another teaches in the kindergarten, and two are engaged in parish work.