

*Called and Sent, A Charism of Service: School Sisters of Notre Dame
History of the St. Louis Province 1858-1959
Therese Mary Rebstock, SSND, 2006*

Notre Dame goes to Japan

In the wake of destruction and need left after World War II, Americans were called upon for a variety of services, and a special contribution was requested of religious communities. In December of 1947 Reverend Joseph Spae visited the St. Louis Motherhouse to appeal for sisters to help him in Japan, where his congregation of Scheut Fathers, C.I.C.M., of Belgium had been working before and during the war. Following his visit, he put his request in writing and sent it on to Mother Evangela, and, as she liked to say, "The rest is history."¹ After consulting with her assistants, she thoroughly discussed the invitation with Mother Fidelis. Once preliminary consultations were taken care of, Mother Evangela presented the request and Notre Dame's openness to acceptance of the new mission field, to Archbishop Ritter.² (Archbishop of St. Louis)

The archbishop encouraged her, for he had just received a letter of request from the Maryknoll Fathers in Kyoto. They wanted sisters to establish a Catholic school there. After further discussion the archbishop suggested that, due to differences in philosophies and practices, it might be easier for sisters from St. Louis to work with other Americans. Mother Evangela acted on the advice and soon secured formal approval from Mother General Almeda; Monsignor Paul Furuya, the Prefect Apostolic of Kyoto; Bishop Raymond A. Lane the Superior General of the Maryknoll Fathers; Cardinal Fumasoni-Biondi, Prefect of the Propagation of the Faith in Rome and Cardinal Protector of the SSND Congregation; as well as from civil and military authorities.³

The School Sisters were to go to Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan. They would open a school for girls, almost all of them non-Christian. Since Emperor Hirohito had shattered the belief system of the nation when he publicly renounced any claim to divinity, the Church enjoyed a unique

¹ An interview with a former missionary in Japan. On mission with Mother Evangela after her term of office as provincial, this sister was privileged to hear her personal reflections on the opening of Japan.

² Mary Eugenia Laker, SSND *Notre Dame Goes to Japan* (St. Louis: School Sisters of Notre Dame, 1988)

1.

³ Sellmeyer, 68

spiritual opportunity. With only about one tenth of one percent of Japan's population Catholic, everyone involved in the restoration hoped that religious sisters, by their presence and form of education would serve as an example and thus bring many to know and accept Jesus and his teaching.⁴

Novices, candidates and aspirants had seen Father Spae when on his visit to St. Louis; they had witnessed his enthusiasm for the missionary vocation. An air of excitement permeated the motherhouse as final plans were made to send missionaries to the Orient. Much talk had filled the spring and summer months, and the paradox of curiosity and anticipation countered with concern and apprehension permeated all parts of the province. Once permissions had been obtained from congregation and church authorities, Mother Evangela sent out the call for volunteers.

After careful screening, four pioneers were chosen to expand the SSND mission from America to Asia. On July 16, 1948, just one hundred years after Sister Mary Caroline and four other sisters had been chosen to come to America, the first American community for Japan was announced to the Province; Sister Mary Eugenia Laker, Superior, Sister Mary Louise FitzGibbons, Sister Mary Vivienne Hazelett, and Sister Mary Paul Niemann

All would bring closure to their present ministry that spring and prepare to depart for Japan in November. Food, clothing and other necessary items were collected to pack for the house in Japan. The new missionaries visited schools throughout the province to ask for prayer and material help from thousands of students. As the time drew near for the departure ceremony, the reality of this new venture brought a fresh perspective to the sisters' commitment to service. At the ceremony bishop Helmsing would remind all the sisters that for the first time in the School Sisters of Notre Dame history, they were sent, not to "children of Faith [in order to] preserve, consolidate, establish more firmly that which was already done, already begun...[but] a going forth to other children of God – to those who have not had the message of Christ."⁵

Sister Vivienne recalled her being chosen as one of the first group to go to Kyoto. Her volunteering was, she said, an act of the: "blithe brashness of youth," but when she responded to the call, she experienced a deep conviction that it was right for her: "The qualifications I had heard mentioned were an ability to learn a foreign language and a grounding in philosophy. Of course, in my conceit, I knew I was fully qualified! Back to

⁴ "Christianity," Kodansha Encyclopedia Survey (Tokyo: Kodansha Publishers, 1990) The survey gave 118,000 Catholics as a post war population in 1948. The survey of 1990 had a count of 436,000 Catholics, 1 per cent of the total population of the country.

⁵ Sellmeyer, 70

my mission in Aviston I immediately wrote a letter volunteering for the new mission. No consultation with anyone! Two months later, on a momentous day in April, I received a letter from Mother Evangela telling me that if anyone would be sent, I would be one of them. I was the first to be given this assurance and was bound to secrecy.⁶

During the months following their selection, the four pioneers were able to get together and begin “immediate preparations – shopping for warm clothing, shots for immunization, passports, making (or rather have made) white habit, visits to schools and churches for fundraising.”⁷ Since Japan was still under American Occupation following the Declaration of Peace in 1945, the sisters needed military permits in addition to passports. Due to the devastation of war, Army Occupation Officials (SCAP) required that any persons entering Japan bring with them food to last at least a year. Household furnishings would also have to be brought. Missionaries could not hope to receive anything from the Japanese; they were to prepare as if nothing were available for purchase.⁸

The sisters were warned the winters were cold and buildings unheated so they would need warm boots. The best style was found at Barney’s army Surplus Store - huge fleece boots to be worn inside army shoes. The sisters were advised that it would be more appropriate to wear white habits in summer, so many volunteers made an all-out effort to produce two for each of the missionaries. Experience proved the white habits to be white elephants. They made a beautiful display on fundraising trips to schools throughout the province, but they were made of heavy rayon and took hours to dry. Sister Vivienne described how she clocked five hours on her first attempt to iron one dry in an emergency. Later reports on how to salvage these habits told of the attempt to dye them black. “In the interest of saving material, we tried to dye them except that black dye ‘took’ only on the horizontal threads, while the vertical ones remained a grayish white. And they would never wear out!”⁹

Sister Eugenia left her mission in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in late August to begin preparations. By telephone she gathered helpful information from other congregations of Sisters who worked in Japan. In addition, a certain Mr. Tunny who had just returned from overseas duty brought two Japanese girls to visit. One of these girls Teruko Ugaya, lived in Kyoto

⁶ Vivienne Hazelett, SSND, “The Unwritten Saga of the Early Days of the SSND Mission to Japan,” St. Louis, 1998. Sister Vivienne had completed requirements for her Master’s Degree in English and graduated with honors from St. Louis University before she left for Kyoto.

⁷ Mission Crusade Board Meetings, Minutes, 1948. Monies from this organization made possible the many and varied purchases necessary to maintain the Japan and Honduras missions for many years. See these minutes for accounts of dinners, special sales, bazaars, and contributions from children in the schools throughout the province. St. Louis Province Archives.

⁸ Laker, 3

⁹ Hazelett, 4

when she was not attending Manhattanville College in New York. She was pleased to learn of Notre Dame Sisters going to Japan and offered to get her family interested. Her mother, Yoshiko Ugaya, became a virtual Guardian Angel for the community, and one of the first of their new friends to embrace Christianity.

In September after a quick trip to Milwaukee to bid farewell to Mother Fidelis, the sisters met with Father Martin, the superior of the Maryknoll Seminary in St. Louis. Along with his blessing and promise of prayer, he shared sage advice for spiritual success, and through the years his comments proved to be a standard offering for new arrivals to Kyoto. No workshops or books were available for orientation to living in another culture in 1948. The use of “pagan” to designate non-Christians had not been removed from the vocabulary of the Church. Nor were understanding of value systems and dynamics of interaction considerations at this time. A look at the immediate renewal following Vatican Council II and the discussion on the role of the missionary demonstrates the progress in human relations since the mission was opened. The intervention of the Spirit in the work of the sisters in 1948 as they took on the task of implanting themselves in another country fills one with awe. The following are a few of the directives offered by Father Martin:

- Patience must be your constant virtue, your constant prayer.
- At all cost, “save face” – yours and the other person’s. Tact and Christ-like courtesy and thoughtfulness of others can do it.
- When you bow to another think that it is to the humanity of Christ. Keep your self-control always and everywhere. If you once lose your temper, you may as well pack up and go home.
- You are Japanese. It is “our” country. Do not speak of natives, but of “we.” Never say anything detrimental about the people.¹⁰

Although the Maryknoll Superior in Kyoto, Father Michael McKillop, assured the sisters of hospitality with the Maryknoll Sisters until they could be settled into their own convent, he also emphasized, “Bring everything with you.” As the sisters packed their trunks at Notre Dame Hall, Sister Vivienne recalled she had planned to travel “light” on this her first big trip. She ended up carrying 75 bars of laundry soap and an electric iron. Sister Eugenia went so far as to inquire whether she could bring a septic tank. That was denied, but she did pack a rubber bathtub, which proved very useful during their first years.

By the end of September Sister Eugenia returned to New Orleans to make the last purchases near the port from which they would be shipped. In early November Father Amadee, assistant pastor at Good Counsel Parish,

¹⁰ Laker, 4

where much of the cargo was packed, blessed the 85 trunks and oversized cartons that were then loaded on the Andrew Jackson freighter bound for Japan.¹¹

Archbishop Ritter, as well as representatives of other religious orders, diocesan clergy, relatives and friends, joined the sisters of the province for a grand departure ceremony on November 21, 1948.

The very next day sisters lined up at the front entrance of the motherhouse to say good-bye. More sisters and friends awaited the travelers at Union Station where they saw them board the train to San Francisco. They were on their way.

Many stories emerged from this long journey, and one of those proved to be a lesson on the benefits of being observant. On the way to the dining car, Mother Evangela noticed red socks on five men who were traveling together. When she and the sisters returned to their own compartments, Mother announced, "Sisters, Sisters, there are bishops on this train." During a stop in Sparks, Nevada, when the bishops alighted on the platform to stretch a bit, Mother introduced the sisters. The bishops of San Francisco and Honolulu cordially invited the sisters to take the opportunity for sightseeing and making other missionary contacts when the sisters arrived in the bishops' respective cities. The bishops later followed up those initial offers of hospitality with financial help for the new mission.

The plane bound for Japan, the China Clipper, was an early Pan American transcontinental three-motored turbo-prop plane. The flight stopped only twice: first in Honolulu and then on Wake Island. A diary entry made regarding Hawaii recorded special proof of the expanding generosity offered to the sisters in the name of the mission. Bishop Sweeney, whom they had met at Sparks, Nevada, had asked that they be given the hospitality of the island. Father Gienger, the Superintendent of Schools, and Dr. and Mrs. Henry Freitas, uncle and aunt of Phyllis Winter, a student of Notre Dame High School, had cars waiting when the plane landed. When they arrived at the Maryknoll Sisters' Sacred Heart Academy, they were greeted by Sister Irma Frances, sister of Sister Clotilla Kulage of Notre Dame High School, and they began to appreciate how small the world could be.¹²

Father McKillop was to meet the group in Tokyo, but had mistaken the day. Military personnel at the airport rallied around and put them on a bus. The driver was instructed to take the sisters to Seibo International Hospital in the charge of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, who had been able

¹¹ Ibid., 6

¹² Sisters in Japan, "The Trail to Kyoto- a Diary," Kyotones. Kyotones was a series of newsletters written in Kyoto and printed in St. Louis for distribution to houses of the province.

to stay through war. Providentially, an English-speaking sister welcomed them, found rooms for them in the hospital, and began communications with the Maryknoll Fathers in Kyoto.

Two days later they were connected with guides who accompanied them to Kyoto, again through the courtesy of the military. The diary recorded the sisters' awed reaction as between cities we ride backwards – a thousand years into history. Farmland, lowlands, and beautiful mountain valleys - all are tended by men and women using ox-drawn and primitive implements to cultivate and harvest their rice fields. There in her ermine hood reigns Divine [Mountain] Fuji.”

Mother Evangela remained with her small group of pioneers at the Maryknoll Sisters' house for a month. During that time she and Sister Eugenia accompanied Father McKillop on a search for a house that would meet the needs of the coming years, a task made easy since many families were forced to sell in the aftermath of war. Ground sacred to families for centuries, was sacrificed to economic necessity. Within a short time they found a place, long unoccupied but with potential for the future. It had been the paternal home of the Fujii family, and some members of the family lived nearby. The large Japanese-style structure was both practical and exotic, a convent home unlike any the sisters could have dreamed of. In a small section built in what was considered foreign in style was a large room called the ballroom of “leisure room.” At one end was a small raised dais that made a perfect location for the altar once the chapel was arranged. The location of the first house and the future school was on the west slope of Higashiyama. The former owners had placed a large flat tablet over the main gate the sisters could not help but believe this providential. The characters were Wachuan, House of Peace.

Christmas that first year of 1948 was celebrated with the Maryknoll community. During the afternoon their largest room was crowded with guests who sat for more than two hours in reverent silence while children acted out the Christmas story, an unfamiliar story for them in a language unfamiliar to the newest arrivals. One year later a similar scene was enacted at the Notre Dame house at Shishigatani where the honored guests were the new students and friends they had made and the Maryknoll sisters who had helped them throughout the initial process of getting settled.

With the purchase of the house and grounds completed, the assurance of the support of the Maryknoll priests and sisters, and the satisfaction of knowing there were new Japanese friends that stood ready to help the four pioneers, Mother Evangela made arrangements to return to the States. In the excitement of their arrival in November, she had not requested a permit to leave Japan, something she discovered at the airport prior to boarding. With the help from an army chaplain and in the

company of Sisters Eugenia and Mary Paul, who had come to Tokyo to see her off, Mother went from one lieutenant to another and finally to a major who was able to grant the permission. The last moments of departure were a mixture of tears and laughter as, with only minutes to spare, the sisters said good-byes and the plane took off. The first chapter of Notre Dame in Kyoto was completed.¹³

The foundation in Japan celebrated its fiftieth jubilee in November 1998. The sisters of the Japan Region welcomed International Leader Sister Rosemary Howarth and former missionaries to the three-day festivities held in Kyoto. The eighty-two women of Japan who became School Sisters were designated a special treasure, the “pearls of great price.” They provided the guest with an overview of their ministries and expressed gratitude for many blessings evident in the work with the people in several sections of the country.¹⁴

Sister Catherine Kaifuku, the first to enter the congregation in Kyoto, had always wished to meet the first sister to enter from the Honduras Region. As part of the fiftieth anniversary celebration Sister Fatima Carcamo flew from her mission in Central America to bring special greetings from the sisters there. It was a joy for these unique women to meet at last.

¹³ Information from several sources collected by Mary Dietz, SSND. Included here are only a few incidents of the story of the foundation in Japan. A dateline of the history of the Japan Region was prepared for the Fiftieth Anniversary in 1998. A full history of the region is a part of the history project initiated by the Generalate. See Appendix A, 7 for a list of sisters stationed in Japan during the first fifty years.

¹⁴ Eight of the sisters who entered in Japan have died. A burial place in the Catholic section of a Kyoto cemetery marks the repository for the ashes of Sisters Ignatius Ueda, October 8, 1984; Martina Nakazato, February 13, 1991; Stephanie Isumiya, August 5\6, 1991; Mary Theresa Nomura, August 22, 1995; Mary Margaret Hirasawa, August 20, 1996; Maria Vianne Fukumoto, January 30, 1997. Two sisters died before this history went to print: Sisters Dolores Ishizaki, December 18, 2000; Mary Catherine Kaifuku, January 31, 2001.