

Origins of Japan Mission

The original request for School Sisters of Notre Dame to come to Japan was expressed in three significant letters. The first was sent to Mother Philemon in Baltimore, July 18, 1937, in which the Maryknoll superior in Kyoto, Rev. Patrick J. Byrne, was asking her to send Sisters to Kyoto.¹ Rev. Byrne mentioned that a few years before 1937, he had given a presentation on Japan at an SSND school in Baltimore, and praised the fine education offered by our Sisters.

In the letter he also described the cultural significance of Kyoto. He noted that “The Maryknoll Sisters are already here, studying the language, but their activities are to be directed entirely towards T-B sanatorium work, which will absorb all their energies.” In a closing paragraph he stated: “Reverend Mother, we would regard it as a great blessing upon the Kyoto mission if the School Sisters of Notre Dame would embrace this opportunity to enter the Japan mission field; and we are likewise convinced that such an apostolic venture would be fully repaid to you in countless ways, through the generosity of Christ. His dear Mother Mary is asking you to come, for her Kyoto girls, and I venture to hope that you will...”

This contact between a Maryknoll superior and an SSND superior in 1937, prepared the soil to receive the sturdy roots of community in Kyoto. In less than a month a second significant letter came from the Cardinal Protector of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Fiumasoni-Biondi, who sent his encouragement and blessing to Mother Medulpha, Commissary General.² He wrote: “For me personally, and for the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda, it would be most agreeable if your flourishing religious Congregation could accept this request. At present the apostolate in Japan, in the general plan of Catholic missions, is among its most important activities. The conversion of a people, so rich in spiritual energy, would be a factor of immense consequence for the triumph of the Reign of Jesus Christ in the world.”

A third letter sent to Mother Philemon in Baltimore, September 18, 1937, was from James E. Walsh, the Superior General (and founder of Maryknoll.) In his encouragement he adds: “As you may have heard, Kyoto is the old capital of Japan. Even now it is a cultural center and a college there, staffed by the good nuns of your community, ought to have considerable prestige and be successful almost from the start. It would be productive, I am sure, of great influence for good among the better classes in Japan which, no matter how the present unpleasantness turns out, is bound to be the leading nation in the Far East for many years to come...”³

Because of war the establishment of the first mission in Kyoto was delayed for ten years.

¹ To Rev. Mother Philemon, Baltimore, from Monsignor Patrick J. Byrne, MM, Superior in Kyoto July 18, 1937.

² To Rev. Mother M. Medulpha, Commissary General, Milwaukee, from Cardinal Fiumasoni-Biondi, Cardinal Protector of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, August 17, 1937.

³ To Rev. Mother Philemon, Baltimore, from Rev. James E. Walsh, Superior General of Maryknoll, September 18, 1937.

It was Mother Evangela Wagner who accepted the “call” of the Holy Spirit to send sisters to Japan. On March 10, 1948, a letter from Rev. Joseph Spae was asking for sisters to come to Himeji and establish a school. Fr. Spae was a missionary priest from Belgium. Earlier she was advised to contact Archbishop Ritter of St. Louis. The day she contacted him he had received a request from the Maryknoll Fathers to send sisters to Kyoto. He suggested to Mother Evangela that because the Sisters would be in a new culture, severely damaged by war, and basic necessities in short supply, it would be better to work with an American congregation, namely, Maryknoll, rather than with Fr. Spae’s Belgium congregation. Knowing the previous communication with Maryknoll, this decision had strong foundations.

Bishop Lane of Maryknoll offered to be of assistance as well as Fr. Walsh, MM, who had a sister who was a School Sister of Notre Dame. Mother Evangela wrote to Mother Fidelis Krieter on April 17, 1948. “The Maryknoll Fathers will help with preliminary arrangements and Father Walsh, our Sister Mary Joseph’s brother, promised that they will give our Sisters every spiritual advantage, namely, daily Holy Mass, Holy Communion, good Confessors and Conference Masters.”

Thus the “sturdy roots” of the School Sisters of Notre Dame were planted in Kyoto, Japan.