

Monastic experience in Japan

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[Sogenji, September 2011](#) 

Abbot Harada Shodo

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From 17 September to 12 October 2011 brother Matteo was in Japan, where he was invited with four other monks and nuns from Europe and the United States to participate in the *12th East-West spiritual exchanges* between Christian monks and Japanese Zen Buddhist monks. For several years now these have been organized by the Monastic Inter-religious Dialogue (MID) and by the Institute of Zen Studies of the Buddhist University Hanazano of Kyoto. This experience of inter-monastic exchange gave br Matteo the opportunity to live as a guest in several Zen monasteries, as places fruitful in knowledge and spiritual enrichment.

The organization of the visit was faultless under every aspect, and the welcome received everywhere was astounding. The schedule provided for a first introductory stay at S?genji , a Zen monastery of the Rinzai school at Okayama. Here the group was initiated into the various dimensions of Zen monastic life: intense and lengthy sessions of *zazen* (seated “meditation”) in the *zend?* (the room for Zen), the hard discipline of work, the complex ritual of the meals, the profound instructions of the abbot. Br Matteo was able to have fruitful exchanges with the many outside presences in the community and with some had also the joy of sharing some moments of prayer, as he wrote in a letter to the community.

A particularly good moment is the prayer that we hold ourselves at the end of the morning, in which participate a good number of monks and students, who impress me by the determination with which they are seeking. An exchange with them on the basis of the Gospel reading is especially deep and fruitful. They give many ideas and ask for many explanations. We feel that we are on the same path of emptying and dispossessing ourselves, in a struggle against the ego that alone can liberate us.

Thanks to this warm reception, there was no lack of occasions for meaningful encounters with many r?shi, spiritual masters and abbots. Stimulating comparisons arose concerning the nature, goals, and forms of Christian and Zen monasticism. From the abbot of S?genji, the master Harada Sh?d?, br Matteo was able to gather penetrating intuitions on the monastic life:

"The more rules there are in the monastery, the more the monastic life becomes profound and interesting... Whatever kind of monastic life you live, not even a minute should be lost... In monastic life things need a long period of development, since the monastic life is not only an enthusiasm of the beginnings, but is to be carried forward to the end of one's life".

The second and real and true stay of six days in a monastery was at Manjuji, another monastery of the Rinzai Zen school, located in the city of Ōita on the Kyūshū, Japan's southernmost island. Br Matteo and br Irénée, a Benedictine of the Chevetogne monastery in Belgium, were happy to be the first Christian monks to stay in this monastery, living the daily life of the *dōjō*, “the place where is practiced the Way” of Zen. Among other things, they shared the practice of *takuhatsu*, the “begging” that the monks do several times a month. Fitted out with a bag for the purpose and a large straw hat, the monks walk for two hours in the neighborhood of the monastery collecting offerings.

Here too the conversation with the abbot of the monastery, Sasaki Dōitsu, was rich and fruitful, especially when it came to talking about the deepest goal of the monastic life, “to become one” for both traditions, but with very different meanings. For Zen it is to become one with the entire reality of phenomena, which is only the projection of our sense perceptions, to dissolve in it in order to realize that there is no individual I. For us it means to become one in ourselves and with God. The dialogue continued with other stimulating comparisons on food, solitude and community, happiness in the monastic life...

Br Matteo summed up his reflections on his experience, which he shared with the community.

"Side by side, in the poverty of necessarily limited communication, looks were exchanged and a fragment of earth was shared... I was able to sit for a little and only a few but intense and unforgettable days on the same human terrain, I was received for a certain time in the spiritual home of others, I shared the same *tatami*, the mat on the floor of Japanese rooms, of monastic fraternity... As a parting gift the abbot of the Manjuji monastery gave me a calligraphy written by himself. The word there is *kizuna*, which means 'tie, bond, connection'. This fraternal spiritual tie is truly what I lived during those days of life shared with our friends, practitioners of Zen. They and we together are seeking a way of liberation from the enslaving ties of an egocentric life and are filled with the same desire for a more profound, reciprocal 'liberating tie', the name of which is fraternity”.

The monastic experience concluded with a last three-day stay at Eihei-ji, the first monastery and center of the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism, founded by the great master Dōgen (1200–1253). Here the group received the great gift of various times of dialogue with the of the monastery masters.

Besides the visit provided for in the program to the enchanting ancient capital Kyoto, in the last days of his stay br Matteo was able to visit also the center of spirituality and inter-religious dialogue of Shinmeizan on Kyūshū, which seeks to incarnate the Christian spiritual tradition in Japan's traditional culture. Founded by father Franco Sottocornola, a Xaverian missionary, the center is administered by him together with sister Maria De Giorgi, also a Xaverian missionary, and father Pietro Sonoda, a Japanese Conventual Franciscan. Together they are trying to build relations of knowledge, of confidence, and of friendship with exponents of the various religions in Japan, convinced that this is the first and essential stage or building — perhaps in a few decades or centuries — true dialogue...

This three-day stay was truly a good intermediate period of a slow and progressive return to the Christian spiritual world, after some days of hospitality in another's house. The spaces, the prayer, the atmosphere at Shinmeizan all speak of a border place between spiritual worlds — Christian, Shinto, Buddhist — that are trying to speak to and derive fruit from each other.

After a brief visit to Nagasaki, tragic theater of atomic destruction and beginning of Christian history in Japan, as well as a significant center of Japanese Catholicism even today, the trip ended in Tokyo, where br Matteo was a guest for his last hours in Japan of the PIME missionaries in their regional house.