

Why Japan?

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Whenever I meet someone in Japan I am always asked, "How long have you been in Japan?" When I tell them the number of years, their next question is "Why did you come to Japan?" I always answer this latter question in the same way: "To meet you!" When they look a bit perplexed, I tell them that there is a deep meaning in those words "To meet you", and I ask them to think about it. For a Japanese, an encounter with another person for the first time has a kind of mysterious element to it. The word in Japanese for 'encounter' is *Deai*. I like that word, because I feel that God has led me to Japan through providential encounters.

When Gerry asked me to write something for *Interfuse* on the occasion of my 50 years in Japan, I thought that it might be a good opportunity to share with my brother Jesuits in Ireland how God led me to volunteer for 'the Japan mission', as it was called in those days. My first encounter with Japan came through Francis Xavier when I was attending the senior school in Belvedere. There was always a special Mass and homily in his honour on December 3. As far as I can recollect, it was then that I first heard about Japan and in particular about Xavier's total sacrifice of himself in the service of God. I suppose that deep down in me I had received inspiration from this man Xavier. For the next few years that seed grew, and God called me to enter the same Society of Jesus.

At the end of my two years in Emo I was sent by Father Donal O'Sullivan to Laval in France for my Juniorate. Donal's idea was to send one or two people each year to France to study the language and to encounter another culture. He felt that it was necessary for the Irish Province of those days to open up to Europe. Frank Keenan and Andy Mills had already spent the previous year there. Frank and I were now together for one year. However, in my second year in France a new Juniorate was opened

up in Aix en Provence, and I was sent there. During this second year I attended classes at the University of Aix, studying French language, literature and culture. I lived in the Jesuit community of La Baume - Sainte Marie. I was the only non Frenchman there. However, at the university there were students from all over the world. Looking back, I realize it was through this international experience that God was quietly leading me. I noticed that I could get on quite well with other nationalities, even if I had not the psychological and emotional support of fellow Irish Jesuits around me. Somehow I stored this away in my mind.

In 1955 I returned to Tullabeg for Philosophy. There are many memories of 'The Bog'. We all somehow survived and had great times on the way! As many of you will remember, it was at the end of our philosophy studies that our destination was decided by the Provincial. I had been thinking about what God wanted me to do with my life as a Jesuit. I often found myself thinking in prayer that God wanted me, too, to leave country, family, friends, and go to a country far away where I would be obliged to rely on God alone in my daily life. To be honest, all my inclinations were to stay behind in Ireland and work for God there as a Jesuit. But the more I looked into my heart to find God's will, the more I had the conviction that God was inviting me to volunteer for the missions and particularly for Japan.

Why Japan? There are a few reasons. I had for some time realized that God was asking me to make a sacrifice of all that was dear to me in Ireland. I thought about Zambia and Hong Kong, the two missions of the Irish Province. I felt that with whatever talents and weaknesses of character I had I would not be able to give of my best in Africa. I then considered Hong Kong. The East appealed to me, and I had met some Chinese Jesuits in Ireland. Yet, the more I prayed about it, the more I realized that there was another place God was suggesting to me, Japan. A few of the Spanish scholastics in Tullabeg were destined for Japan, Joe Palacios and Miguel Suarez being two of them. These two, and

another one, Jesus Guiral, a good friend of mine who later left the Society without going to Japan, spoke to me about the Japanese mission and the people. They gave me an article about the Japanese people, written by Father Arrupe, who was the Vice Provincial of Japan at the time.

In this article Fr. Arrupe spoke about the delicate sensitivity of the Japanese and their natural goodness and courtesy. He said that they were a gentle people who placed great importance on the feelings of others and were good listeners. He pointed out that they felt close to nature, and that they were not embarrassed by silence. He wrote that the Japanese had curious minds and would not be won over by reason alone, but also by 'carino', using the Spanish word for 'affection and warmth'. He mentioned that Xavier had called the Japanese "the best people we have ever discovered." Although I had not met any Japanese in my life, somehow I felt deep down in myself that I could work among this people and feel at home.. Another reason was that the Japanese province was looking for English-speaking Jesuits to come to Japan. When I reflected on my first 'encounter' with Xavier in Belvedere and then on my experience of many other nationalities in Aix-en-Provence, and the fact that I could get on well with them, the Japanese international province began to take on a special meaning for me. I prayed and discerned for a long time.

Quietly I began to sense that perhaps God's plan was for me to at least offer myself for Japan, even if I was turned down. In those days, if one wished to volunteer for Japan, one had to write a letter to Fr. General. I first of all consulted with Donal O'Sullivan in Emo whom I respected and was very fond of. He was very much against my leaving the Province and said that 'it would be over his dead body'! I told him the above reasons for volunteering and explained that I did not mind if I was refused but that I felt deep in my heart that I should at least volunteer. Just the offering of myself was enough.

I informed Fr. Provincial, Luigi O'Grady, that I was writing to the General. I sent the letter on December 8, 1957. In my letter I explained to Fr. General my reasons for volunteering for Japan. I did not force the issue in any way. I just wrote that there were three possibilities for young Irish Jesuits; to work in Ireland, to be sent to Hong Kong or to be sent to Zambia. For the reasons which I have explained above, I said that I wished to propose a fourth possibility, Japan. I asked him to feel free to consider me for Japan if he so wished.

I got my answer directly from Luigi in March when he came on visitation. He told me that I had been accepted for Japan. To be quite honest, I got a shock! I felt as if a huge black hole had opened up under my feet and that I was falling into an unknown world where I knew nobody! I had no idea what the future would bring. All other doors were closed to me. It was like dying. However, deep down I felt at peace because of the quiet discernment that I had gone through.

My first concern though, was my parents. I had never spoken to them about the possibility of Japan. So when the Provincial told me that Fr. General was sending me to Japan, I wrote a letter to my parents. It was a difficult letter to write, but after praying for light, I wrote it. I still have the letters which my mother and father wrote back. I will never forget what they said. Allow me to share them with you. My Mother's Letter: "To say we got a shock when your letter arrived today is putting it mildly, and I am not writing a proper letter until we are more used to the idea and I can write coherently. Even though I was accepting the fact that you might be sent on the missions, I kept hoping that you would be left in Ireland. However, we gave you to God, darling, when you entered, and let's pray that we give generously and without reserve. It will be a big sacrifice for us all, but please God we will get happiness out of it because we will do it out of love for Him. It will be wonderfully interesting for you, and I believe Japan is a beautiful country, and there will be such a lot to do for God there. Let us

know if you get back after three years for theology, and if eventually you are ordained for that Province. I have a feeling you are. We are very lonely at the thought of you going so far away and not knowing when we will see you again. At the same time we are proud of you. And I get strength from the Gospel words that keep coming into my mind: 'Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?' Please let us know where we can get booklets on the Japan Mission. I can't write any more now as I am upside down. All news in next letter. Always your loving Mother."

My Father's Letter: "Well, Donal, the news in your last letter has come as a bombshell and has left us a bit stunned! Needless to say, we must confess, from selfish motives, that we were looking forward to seeing a lot more of you if you were assigned to one of the colleges in Ireland, even Dublin! But I suppose man proposes! And we can only try to sympathize with you in the wonderful sentiments you express in your letter and the lofty standards you have set for yourself in making such a heroic sacrifice. Deep down, of course, we are full of admiration of your decision to give yourself and your talents to the conversion of the Japanese. Needless to say the work will be very uphill and unrewarding for a long time. In Japan I have always heard that they were tough nuts to crack from the Christian religious point of view - ancestor worship, Emperor worship, and granite-like unimpressionability amongst intellectuals."

"A most important question for me particularly - Do you return for theology to Milltown Park after your three years, like Father Bourke did? I think Mammy and I could bear the parting better if we could look forward to even that concession to an 'auld man!' She is naturally upset at the prospect of losing you for good, and I am buoying her up with the latter probability of a Milltown sojourn later on. We are also hoping to hear from Fr. Donal O'Sullivan, who I am sure will write her a letter of comfort, as he did before, on your assignment to France. In fact, we have a strong suspicion he has been in on your secret for some time though he

never hinted anything about your future movements. I have no doubt he was consulted before the final phase. With all our love and good wishes in all your undertakings for this world and the next! Dad."

Fr. Donal O'Sullivan wrote: "My dear Donal, I did as you asked and I pray that it will help, as I pray for them and for you. There is no use in pretending I am delighted: I am very sad about it humanly speaking. The Province is making big sacrifices in giving two of its promising men to a "foreign" mission when it has three missions of its own. However, you have done all you could to 'seek and find the will of God for the ordering of your life', and you can be happy. So congratulations! I know God will be good to the family and aid them: but it is - again humanly speaking - a big blow. You can be assured that I will always do what I can for them, however little that may be. I shall, either on business or pleasure, be in town at Easter and will look in on the folks. Ad multos Japanicos annos! In Xto servus. D.O'S, S.J."

On July 31st, 1958, we set sail from Naples for Hong Kong, a voyage that took us through the Suez Canal, stopping off briefly at Aden, Port Said, Karachi, Colombo, Bombay, Singapore, and finally reaching Hong Kong three weeks later. As you can imagine, it was a fascinating voyage. By then, we could begin to understand the meaning of 'Far East' as each day we sailed farther and farther away from Europe. After a short stay in Hong Kong, Dermot Brangan and I set sail on a cargo ship for Yokohama, where we landed on September 3rd 1958. Dermot was 25 years old, I was 26.

The next two years we spent studying the language. Including Dermot and myself, there were 20 scholastics from seven different countries, representing sixteen Provinces of the Society. Thus our international life in Japan began! On October 18 of that same year, too, it was officially announced that Japan had

become a fully-fledged Province. Father Arrupe was reappointed Provincial of the new Province.

After finishing language studies, I was appointed to do my regency in Eiko High School on the same campus as the language school. It was in my second year of teaching, in March 1961, that Adolfo Nicolas joined the community to start his language studies. We were in the same community until summer 1962 when I returned to Ireland for theology. He stood out as a great community man, with a special gift for friendship, always with a warm smile and a wonderful sense of humour. I enjoyed my teaching experience during regency and was fortunate in having Gerry Bourke in the same community. Dermot had already been assigned to Rokko High School in Kobe for his regency.

My Father died in 1961 in my third year. You will remember his letter to me, quoted above, in which he hoped that I would return to Milltown for theology. I only discovered after his death that at that time he had been given a year and a half to live by his doctors, but actually lived three years while continuing to practice as a doctor himself until the day before he died. So when he had said goodbye to me at the Mail Boat in Dunlaoire, he knew that we would not meet again in this life. He had kept his health condition secret from all the family, including my mother. The following year Fr. Arrupe arranged for me to return to Ireland for theology.

The four years in Milltown were very special for me, and I was ordained a priest in 1965. There is an interesting anecdote about this. Those of us who were being ordained that year asked the Rector (Brendan Barry) for permission to get the breviary in English. However, we were turned down! I went to Father Paddy Joy, our Moral Theology professor, and consulted him. I told him that my superior was the Provincial of Japan and would it be alright if I wrote to him for permission. Father Joy told me by all means to write to the Provincial of Japan. If he gave me permission, then it would be easier for the others to receive

permission! I received a letter from the Provincial of Japan officially blessing my request and telling me, "It would be a wonderful thing to pray the breviary in one's own language." He ended his letter with these words: "I am about to leave for Rome to help in preparing for the General Congregation. Please remember me in your prayers. Pedro Arrupe, S.J."

I returned to Japan for tertianship after which I was assigned to Hiroshima High School. For ten years I taught English. In those days there was no custom of returning to one's country for a sabbatical. It was only later on that a visit home every ten years was introduced. There is another anecdote concerning Fr. Arrupe. In 1971 he came to Japan as General. I had just been appointed Rector of the School community. As I was guiding him to a meeting in the school, I asked him if he had any advice for me. He said 'Yes'. He told me, "Always trust your men" and added, "I am sometimes accused of trusting my men too much! But I think it better to trust them even if you are let down by them". My own ten years in Hiroshima were satisfying times. I learned a lot from the local people, from the parents and from the boys. Through them I could realize the terrible tragedy of war and of atomic weapons. And when one thinks of the nuclear weapons of the present day, one can only call them evil.

In 1977 I was moved to Tokyo where I was asked to be Rector of the Theologate. This was a big change from the active life of a high school! I spent nearly four years there, followed by three years as secretary to the Provincial. During this time I was teaching part-time in Sophia University. This was a different experience from teaching in a school. These were young adults, and I enjoyed the challenge. In dealing with each one, I learned so much about God. Very few of them have any 'religious belief'. Yet they are good people who care for others, who are polite and courteous and kind in their daily life. I found that in dealing with them I was becoming more aware of the presence of God in each one even though they themselves were not aware of God's presence in

themselves. I think most Japanese think there is 'something/some mysterious power out there', but they are not too interested in finding out. I notice that when you tell a person that 'they are never alone and that. God dwells in them', this gives them consolation. I have found that my own faith is being refined all the time by living in this non-religious, non-faith environment.

Another thing I have noticed, as I said at the beginning, is that each encounter with one person in Japan leads to an encounter with another. I feel that God is always leading me to new encounters each day. Seven years ago, when I returned to Ireland to celebrate my 50 years in the Society, I spoke, in my homily on that occasion about the greatest grace of my life, namely, God mysteriously leading me to an encounter with Him in Japan. I have had very difficult times over the years. We all have them, I am sure, wherever we are, but I have never had any doubts about my vocation as a Jesuit or as a priest. There was one period when I felt I was suffocating in Japan. I was tempted to leave Japan and find an easy way out. The great support and understanding of my superiors in particular helped me, and I was able to come through that difficult time. The individual Japanese is a wonderful person, but Japanese society can be very non-spontaneous and formal, particularly in human relations and in their extraordinary work ethic. It is always a source of wonder to me how God led me, 'the weakest of the weak', to Japan. It is, as I said, the most mysterious and wonderful grace of my life. In a letter Xavier sent from India in 1552, he exhorts his companions in Rome to send many companions to Japan "where they will encounter both many difficulties and great spiritual consolations." How true those words of Xavier are!

Looking back on these 50 years in Japan, I thank the Lord for the wonderful Novice Master I was blessed with, Fr. Donal O'Sullivan. He was the Jesuit who opened my mind and my heart to the wider world and set me on the road to spiritual discernment. I thank the Irish Province for the support and encouragement it has

shown me from the beginning. I thank my parents and family who with great love and understanding have always shared in my missionary life in Japan. I thank the Japanese Province, which is so international and Japanese at the same time, for accepting me as their brother. I thank the Japanese people for everything that I am today.

Finally, over these years, I was always consoled by the presence in my life of two Jesuit cousins, both grand-nephews of my Father's, the two Philips, Philip Harnett and Philip O'Keeffe. In sharing the mysterious grace of my vocation to Japan in this issue of *Interfuse* I join with each one of you in thanking the Lord for the mysterious grace of your own personal vocation history.