

Little Tokyo Historical Society Meeting - March 24, 2007, at JACCC, Los Angeles

The Maryknoll Story in Little Tokyo

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Let me begin when Japanese Catholics became a part of history

Jesuit padre St. Francis Xavier initiated the Christian movement in Japan when he landed in Kagoshima in 1549 that lasted for about 100 years. Because European missionaries appeared as a political threat to military leaders seeking to centralize Japan, they and their converts were persecuted; missionaries were expelled; Christianity was banned. The Tokugawa regime closed the nation in 1639 to stabilize Japan's feudal system.

With only 16 American priests out of 17,000 in the country serving overseas around 1900, Father James A. Walsh then with the Propagation of Faith office in Boston, was able to organize the first American society engaged in the foreign missions with Father Price, known for his work with the impoverished in North Carolina, and with Mary Josephine "Mollie" Rogers, who left teaching at Smith College, to help Father Walsh publish his *Field Afar* magazine on foreign missions. *These hundred-words are about how Maryknoll came to be in 1911. And Mollie Rogers (Mother Mary Joseph) founded the Maryknoll Sisters.*

How Maryknoll came to Los Angeles stems from a Russo-Japanese War veteran, Leo Kumataro Hatakeyama, who wrote to his bishop in Hakodate, wanting to confess his sins by registered mail because there was no priest in Los Angeles who understood and spoke Japanese, The bishop replied that while confession by mail was impossible, a Japanese-speaking priest would be sent to minister to Japanese Catholics in Los Angeles. *Mr. Hatakeyama came to America in 1908, settled in Los Angeles and worked at a Spring Street store near St. Vibiana Cathedral at Second and Main Streets.*

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1912: Father Breton's Japanese Catholic Mission on Hewitt Street

Father Albert Breton, a Paris Foreign Missionary stationed in Morioka, northern Japan, and then convalescing in London, was told by his bishop to return by way of Los Angeles, minister to the Japanese Catholics and also to survey other Japanese colonies on the West Coast for prospective missions. Father Breton arrived in Los Angeles on Oct. 12, 1912, and gave his first sermon in Japanese during the Christmas Mass at Brownson House chapel, a social service agency still on-going in Boyle Heights. *It is this day that Maryknoll-in-Los Angeles marks their anniversary, the 95th coming up this year.*

In 1914, Bishop Conaty of Los Angeles-Monterey diocese provided a house on Bunker Hill, on the western side facing west, for a chapel, clubhouse and his residence. It was dedicated on Feb. 1 under patronage of St. Francis Xavier, the Apostle of the Indies and Japan. The local Catholic press, *The Tidings*, reported Japanese Episcopal priest, Father John Misao Yamazaki was present. Peter M. Suski spoke on behalf of the Japanese Catholic community, (around 50 strong) spoke and the Mikado Band entertained.

Mr. Suski had moved to Los Angeles after the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, and lived in the area east of Alameda. He was the one who gathered his Japanese Catholic friends for meetings. His daughter Louise, in 1926, was editor of Rafu Shimpo's English section. His grandson, Alan Kumamoto, is a community analyst.

When Father Breton saw children being neglected, either orphaned or both parents struggling to earn a living, he realized the need for a child care center. He wrote to his colleague, Father Emil Leger in Kagoshima, for help, and who responded by dispatching four ladies from Aiku-kai, a society assisting in church work. Upon landing in San Francisco in 1915, they established themselves as sisters of the Order of Visitation, Homon-Kai, after changing their clothes from *montsuki* and *hakama* to a black habit and veil. Margaret Matsumoto, the eldest, became Sister Superior. They opened a nursery at a home in the Washington Blvd. and Vermont Ave. area (then the western edge of the city) on W. 23rd St., and a kindergarten on Hewitt Street (now Zenshuji's parking lot). This order was also the first Catholic community of sisters established in Japan.

Father Breton reported the kindergarten that began with 20 pupils in 1916 mounted to 60 by end of the year. Some local nuns came to teach. More Japanese sisters came to care for children at the home.

Bishop Alexandre Berlioz in Hakodate, in the meantime, petitioned the American Foreign Mission Society in New York (about to be known as Maryknoll) to assume Father Breton's mission. It's worthy to note that Father Breton also began the St. Francis Xavier Japanese Catholic Mission in San Francisco in 1913, which the Jesuits took over that November. About 50 Japanese Catholics from the Bay Area were meeting each week for prayers since 1910 at St. Dominic's Church (Bush and Steiner). Francis Sakamaki and a Mr. Nakamura were the leaders. Father Breton went once a month from Los Angeles to teach catechism in Japanese while sisters of the Helpers of the Holy Souls taught sewing and began their kindergarten in 1915.

Also at the San Francisco mission were Pius Moore, a Jesuit finishing his studies for the priesthood, and his Spokane Issei convert, Francis Masui in 1912, who became a Jesuit brother and was assigned to Tokyo in 1918.

Father Breton had originally intended to stay but two or three years! He, too, approached the Maryknoll Fathers in June 1919 to take over. Maryknoll agreed to take over the mission in Los Angeles, upon assurance from Rome that the Hewitt Street mission would be a stepping stone to future mission in Japan. Thus Father Breton was able to return to Japan. The last Homon-kai sister returned in 1925.

The net result turns out that the Maryknoll sisters came first in 1920 and Father Kress, the first Maryknoll superior for the entire West Coast, took charge in Los Angeles in 1921. Maryknoll was to send its first priests in 1930.

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1920: Maryknoll magnifies Father Breton's mission

Plans for a school for Japanese children were the first consideration of the Maryknoll Fathers and Sisters. Down the street from Father Breton's K-2 grade school (113 Hewitt St.) were two houses, the Deaconess Home and Deaconess Annex (226 Hewitt St.) which were purchased and served as the school for a time.

Then the two buildings were moved elsewhere, lock, stock and barrel. ~~and~~ With an adjoining sand-lot as a playground, a two-story concrete school was erected for \$29,500, dedicated in December, 1921, and by November 1922, 200 children were enrolled. A third floor was added in 1929.

Memory of this school is one that Little Tokyo remembers well.

In 1920, Bishop Cantwell provided a modest two-story mansion on the Hollenbeck bluff (just above the Santa Ana Freeway today) for the Maryknoll Sisters and the sisters from Japan as a convent and as the home for the children. Sisters Home, as it was called, was located on Boyle Ave, just south of Fourth Street. The rear building was three stories high: dining room and play area on the ground floor, convent for the sisters on the second floor and a chapel on the third floor. The carriage house to the rear served as a laundry and work area, while the attic (where hay was stored), became Troop 145's meeting room. *Don't ask me where they kept the horse.*

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1927: Father Lavery begins his 30-years with Japanese

Fr. Hugh Lavery, ordained at Maryknoll, N.Y. in 1924, came in 1927. A star pitcher at Holy Cross College near Boston, he organized our baseball team in the JAU league. He knew some of the pros on the Los Angeles Angels and Hollywood Stars those days to outfit the club with bats, baseballs and gloves. And he was keen at stealing the signals of the opposing teams.

Speaking of sports, well-known athlete and coach at Arizona State, Bill Kajikawa attended Maryknoll School in the late 1920s until his family moved to Tempe, Arizona. There is a 1927 class picture showing him, seated across the aisle from Larry Tajiri, a foremost Nisei journalist. Incidentally, this classroom consisted of 6th, 7th and 8th graders and one Sister Therese as teacher.

For the record, two Maryknoll School graduates, George Omokawa ('28) and Katsu Okida ('30) served in the 442nd and were killed in action.

When Father Lavery added the third floor in 1929, the ground floor served as a school room during the week and the chapel on Sunday. More sisters came to teach as classes up to the 8th grade became larger after 1926. More brothers came to drive the school bus and tackle other duties. Brother Theophane, whose first job was painting, drove the bus picking up school kids who lived in the Boyle Heights area as well as serve as scoutmaster of Troop 145.

Besides catechism, Japanese was being taught daily by Issei women from the parish. With three buses rounding up the kids from Boyle Heights to the east, Uptown, Seinan districts to the west and the Market and South Central to the south, Maryknoll School enrollment was over 300 through the Depression and nearing 400 when the Pearl Harbor was attacked.

In 1930, the Maryknoll Sisters took over a sanatorium in the Monrovia foothills. Mountain air and cottages were order of the day to care for the Japanese afflicted with tuberculosis. A \$10,000 donation from Dr. Daishiro Kuroiwa, an Issei Catholic physician, made this possible. Two well-known Issei who were patients at the Maryknoll Sisters sanatorium in Monrovia were George Aratani's father and Bruce Kaji's father-in-law Dr. Kikuo Tashiro. And Sister Bernadette prepared Japanese meals for all the patients.

Till 1938, the priests who lived across the street from Sisters Home on Boyle Avenue, about 3 miles from the school, chapel and Japan-town, Father Lavery launched the mission's biggest campaign to build a chapel seating about 350, rectory, clubhouse and gymnasium (now the auditorium without the basketball court).

In late 1939, now Archbishop Cantwell dedicated the new church and the additions to the school. As one Maryknoll sister commented years later,

"More important than the things Father Lavery built was the impression he made on all by his priestliness." She meant, "He was father and friend to all and shepherd to the souls entrusted to him." Maryknoll became a household word within the troubled Japanese American community, definitely in Little Tokyo, in the weeks that followed December 7, 1941. As this Sister concluded, "He withstood racial prejudice against his people, defending them, championing their rights, allowing nothing ill to be said of them."

Hysteria reigned. "The people did not really know, and felt they could not trust anyone and be driven like scapegoats into the desert. One voice did cry out when criticism was dangerous—the voice of the shepherd, Father Lavery."

Can you imagine an editor or newspaperman saying such words?

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December 7, 1941

With the attack on Pearl Harbor and the Evacuation of Japanese to the camps, it seemed the mission that Father Breton began in 1912 had ended. Father Lavery, as pastor, dispatched the priests and brothers to accompany them. Out to the camps went Fathers Swift, Clement, Steinbach, Tibesar, Felseker, Petipren, Hunt, Ryan and Whitlow (some of them had been repatriated from Japan in 1942) and the Brothers Paul, Bernard, Theophane and Charles—"Names all held in benediction by the thousands they helped through those tragic days," this unnamed Maryknoll sister records. And Maryknoll's two Japanese nuns, Sisters Susanna and Bernadette chose evacuation to Manzanar rather than moving back to their Motherhouse in New York.

It must have been a comforting sight in Manzanar to see the familiar sight of the gray habit and black veil of the Maryknoll Sisters.

The now vacant Maryknoll School served as a junior high school for Mexican American students from St. Vibiana School, now the site of the new Little Tokyo Branch of the L.A. Public Library at Second and Los Angeles Streets.

In 1943, Maryknoll parishioner Ryozo Peter Kado of Santa Monica completed construction of the two sentry guardhouses with stone and concrete at Manzanar and the much-revered monument at the cemetery. Two classmates of mine, George Minamiki and Thomas "Watson" Takahashi, left Manzanar in 1944 and began their eight-year studies for the priesthood. The first Nisei Maryknoll priest was James Tokuhisa of Los Angeles who was ordained in 1949. "Watson" was ordained at Maryknoll, N.Y., in 1952; George in 1954 at the Jesuit seminary in Los Gatos, Calif. The 1945 Manzanar High School graduate Bryce Nishimura of Beverly Hills was ordained at Maryknoll in 1956 and just celebrated his golden jubilee last year in Japan.

I like to acknowledge that Father Minamiki's invitation to speak about Japanese Americans or Nikkei Identity to students at the University of Notre Dame in the spring of 1984. It was an unwritten dream come true.

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1946: Maryknoll Fathers and Sisters welcome back Maryknollers

By 1946 as evacuees were returning to Los Angeles, Father Lavery assisted many Issei-Nisei find jobs, homes and schools. He regained Maryknoll School for the Japanese Americans. The Maryknoll Sisters were still here, too. Buses were rolling back in action. Ten years later, Father Lavery [1895-1970] was transferred to Maryknoll's new promotion house in New Orleans, thus leaving a record of 30 years with Japanese on the West Coast. His contributions and achievements were duly recognized by Emperor Hirohito in 1966 with the Order of the Sacred Treasure.

Succeeding him was Father Michael McKillop, reassigned from Kyoto to Los Angeles. In 1960, taking the advice of Cardinal James McIntyre not to reinforce the school to the new earthquake code, Father McKillop undertook the campaign to build a new school beyond the school yard. Ground was broken in November 1963 and six months 413 students marched in the two-story, L-shaped building designed and built by O'Leary and (Tosh) Terasawa, as related by J.D. Hokoyama, Maryknoll's first lay principal (1976-77) and a Maryknoll School graduate ('59). He noted there were seventeen graduating classes between 1926 and 1942, and forty more classes graduating after the war, the last being in 1994.

School records show close to 1,400 Nisei, Sansei and Yonsei have graduated from the school. Another 5,000 attended at one time or another. Hundreds more have roots in Maryknoll-in-Los Angeles.

In 1964, the National JACL honored Maryknoll curate, Father Clement, as "JACLer of the Biennium" for outstanding service to the community as Downtown JACL chapter president and as an unofficial National JACL chaplain since 1954.

Those were the years when this selection was kept a secret to be announced at the convention recognition luncheon. Father was not in the banquet hall and Mike Masaoka went looking for him and said he was needed at the gathering. As they entered the hall, applause greeted them when the surprised Father Clement heard the news.

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1968: Plans to close down Maryknoll School revealed, but

Father Clarence Witte, another veteran of the Japan missions who had to learn Spanish to work in Guatemala during WW2 and returned after the war to his mission in Hikone, was assigned to Los Angeles in 1968 with plans from Maryknoll headquarters to close down the school because of high expenses. But the whopping success of the annual three-day carnivals at end of the school year delayed the decision until 1995.

Happily, Fr. Witte's fourth mission from 1976 found him back in Japan in the Osaka suburbs. His autobiography published a year before he passed away six year ago bears a Latin acronym: "Q.E.D." Quod Est Demonstrandum—What It's All About.

Maryknoll-in-Los Angeles celebrated its 75th anniversary in August, 1987, with colorful ceremonies at St. Vibiana and a gala banquet at a downtown hotel, all chaired by San Francisco-born Rev. Mr. Arthur Hiraga, ordained a permanent deacon in 1975 by Cardinal Timothy Manning.

Married with three children, Art chaired this occasion and challenged the parish leaders, "Where are we going?" pointing to the road of building the church.

After 75 years, the Maryknoll Fathers and Sisters moved on. They left in 1991, but the name of Maryknoll stayed. Father Joseph Klecha, Maryknoll's last pastor, remained on loan to organize a pastoral team to prepare the Japanese American community of faith for the new millennium. And what a blessing it was to have a Japanese-speaking priest, Father Jim Fredericks, professor in comparative religion and theology at Loyola Marymount University, join our community in 1993.

In 1995, Cardinal Roger Mahoney blessed the mission as the "Maryknoll Japanese Catholic Center," and saw St. Francis Xavier Chapel "the most important beacon of our Faith for the newly arrived people in our midst."

The following year, Cardinal Peter Shirayanagi archbishop of Tokyo, visited the mission to celebrate MJCC's first anniversary. It was unique to see two princes of the Catholic Church together in Little Tokyo.

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1997: Franciscan Friars of Atonement breathes new life

In 1997, two Franciscan Friars of Atonement, Fathers Henry Mair and David Doerner, responded to the need for Japanese-speaking priests take up residence and pastoral duties at 222 Hewitt Street. As they recognized the gentrification occurring around Maryknoll, for the first time daily masses were instituted at noon. So were RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) classes for adults not yet baptized, confirmed or anyone interested in the Catholic faith. Their guidance ended when Father David retired eight years later (2005).

The center with its hall, kitchen and classrooms has become a home for Japanese cultural arts (calligraphy, ikebana, English and Japanese conversation, karaoke, shiatsu, shigin) and for religious activities (catechism, liturgy and scriptures in Japanese for adults, in English for youth on Sundays, Wednesday morning Marian Prayer Group for world peace and intentions, choral arts to train voices for church services, and altar servers).

Sushi Chef Institute is the latest program at Maryknoll under master chef Andy Matsuda: one-month class in basic Japanese cooking and a 120-hour class for sushi chefs.

The Kumon Center is open Wednesdays and Saturdays to reinforce students the lessons taught at school through increased concentration, better work habits and improved skills.

I'm glossing over MJCC's annual report for an accounting of what's happening at 222 Hewitt Street. Let me continue.

Maryknoll's Troop 145 Boy Scouts, founded in 1924, and Cub Scouts, meet in the clubhouse on Friday evenings. The Maryknoll Federal Credit Union office is open Sundays between 9:30 and 11 a.m.

The Maryknoll Karate Club, which began in 1963 under the renowned instructor Tsutomu Ohshima, then the Nihongo instructor at Maryknoll School, still practices on Tuesday and Thursday from 6:30 p.m. for boys and girls age 10 and up and from 7:30 for men and women, age 16 and over. Even dance classes, ballroom and line, for all levels meet on the same floor in the auditorium Sunday afternoons, Monday and Friday nights.

MIS Southern California and other groups meeting at MJCC are diverse in scope: Shiatsu Association, Taisho Club's annual health fair; the Koala Club assisting Japanese-

speaking parents with young children in a casual setting, a cancer support group for patients and survivors and Nikkei Alzheimer's Caregivers Support group, all from Little Tokyo Service Center; Cold Tofu Improv workshops on Wednesday, fabric dyeing Yuzan style, Makko-ho stretch exercise, Taisho Club's first Saturday computer class in Japanese, three Japanese *odori* classes under Mme. Kikuta, Mme. Bando Mitsuhiro and Mme. Hanayagi Wakano-kai, and Yae Aihara's yoga group on Monday and Friday a.m.

For details, please call the MJCC office, (213) 626-2279 during office hours. Or check their website, www.japansecatholiccenter.com

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Only in L.A. are Masses celebrated in Japanese every Sunday

Priests from Japan, men who came to improve their English or to advance their pastoral skills, were celebrating Sunday Masses since the 1980s after Maryknoll added an 8:30 a.m. Mass. It was a sign that number of Catholics from Japan was steady and increasing. And a valuable asset to the ministry is Sister Cecelia Nakajima of the Poor Clare Missionary Sisters who coordinates the visits of Japanese in the hospitals and the homebound.

It was Father Abraham Tabata, whose ancestors were Kakure Christians in Nagasaki, who in 1997 installed Japanese software into five computers at the clubhouse and started the Japanese computer center at MJCC.

Finally, thanks to the assistance of the Archdiocese, priests from Japan come to serve as administrators at St. Francis Xavier Chapel. It began in 2005 when Father Peter Jun'ichi Iwahashi, pastor of the Tokyo Cathedral, spent his sabbatical year here. He returned, vowing to seek others in Japan to serve at Maryknoll and at the same time minister to other Japanese in the Archdiocese.

Currently, his successor Father John Koji Mitsudome has a buoyant air of Japanese culture and brought a measure of Vatican II to the parish.. He espoused that movement in Japan and the Philippines. He has undertaken to write a book about the early days of the Japanese Catholic community here: Father Breton and the Visitation Sisters from Kagoshima, as we look forward to our 95th anniversary this year.

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The Coronation of the Maryknoll Spirit

Brother Theophane said in the '40s, "Maryknollers are Maryknollers the world over. We hope through of this little paper we can keep in touch with each other and follow each other's progress along the highways. Friendships we have made the hard way are always the ones we want to keep. Out of the many hardships and heartaches we have experienced during the dark days of the war, we (like others) have made friendships of the finest type. May these friendships so dearly made, endure and be a comfort and strength for us all." The message appeared in the *Challenger*, the Maryknoll alumni monthly newsletter of August, 1947.

About 50 years later was this excerpt expressed by a Sansei in the *Rafu Shimpo* in September, 1994: "Something else which lives on is the Maryknoll spirit. I see it every Sunday. I see it in my relatives; we are many and many of us went to Maryknoll. I see it in the eyes of a man whom I met by chance during a difficult time in my life and knowing he was fellow Maryknoller made my burden that much lighter. I see it in my

fellow graduates, most with growing families of their own. I see it in the parents of some of my classmates who longer come to church at Maryknoll.

“There never has been ‘magic’ at Maryknoll . . . only the hard work of Maryknollers . . . the sweat and satisfaction of hard work and dedication to a special place with a special mission. No matter how long you’ve been away, it endures as a good place to be.”

They’re comments from the guy who sings with his guitar at the 10 a.m. Mass on Sundays, Geoffrey Yamamoto.

And I thank Sister Joanne Doi, a Sansei Maryknoll nun, who included these two thoughts in her master’s thesis, “Dance of a Thousand Cranes: a Legacy of Suffering and Hope from the Maryknoll Japanese American Catholic Community. She has devoted ten years with the Aymaras in the altiplano of Peru.

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Pope John Paul II Visits Little Tokyo

It was Sept. 17, 1987, that Pope John Paul II, in a brief hour at the Japan America Theater, addressed representatives from Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism, underscoring Vatican Council II’s call for a “new respect of other great religions of the world.” He also cited the 100-plus years of Japanese in Los Angeles with a papal blessing on the JACCC and Little Tokyo. Over 800 present in the theater were each presented a white rose and bodhi branch from students of Maryknoll School.

Because of tight security, Little Tokyo shops were virtually paralyzed and the banks closed early for three days. The Pope was staying at St. Vibiana’s Rectory a half block from the New Otani Hotel.

As I look back twenty years now, the Pope’s visit really pictured the “new millennium to come” for us Japanese Catholics in particular and the community-at-large to heed his cal — “to respect others”. ■