



Ref.: 08/68

Rome, 30 May 2008
Feast of the Sacred Heart

Dear Sisters,

Each year the Feast of the Sacred Heart offers us a precious moment to reflect on our charism, on the gift that is ours as Religious of the Sacred Heart. The familiar words of our *Constitutions* are a continual invitation to understand it ever more deeply so that we may live it ever more generously.

“The pierced Heart of Jesus opens our being to the depths of God and to the anguish of humankind.” (#8)

Longing for **union**, we accept the invitation into the very Heart of God; moved to **communion** with our suffering brothers and sisters, we try to feel their anguish and, however we are able, to be channels of Jesus’ unconditional love for them.

This year we are especially conscious of the anguish of Kenya, Chad and Zimbabwe; Haiti and Colombia; Myanmar/Burma, Pakistan and Tibet, and, most recently China, to mention only some of the situations we hold in our hearts. It is often difficult to see “what hope his call holds for us”, as Paul urges in his letter to the Ephesians. (1:18) and when we do it is cause for gratitude and celebration. This year we have such an occasion as we recognize with joy **100 years of the Society’s presence in Asia**, home of two-thirds of the world’s poor, and birthplace of the major religions of the world. This anniversary of our arrival in Japan gives us the opportunity to reflect on some of the **characteristics and values of Asia** which enrich the whole Society and which contribute in a special way to this year’s celebration of the Feast.

XIX century “Kakemono” (silk scroll) sent from Japan to Spain. It is now in the Castle of Francis Xavier.

Ever since I realized nearly a year ago that the Society arrived in Japan on January 1st 1908, I have wanted to write a letter commemorating not only that event but the subsequent growth of the Society in Asia. As in 2001 with Africa, and in 2003 with Latin America, I want to take advantage of this feast to focus our attention on a specific part of the Society. Although few non-Asians in the Society have had a personal experience of Asia, I am aware as well that those from our six countries of Asia may not know very much about each other.

In presenting the Region of Asia to the provincials at the Assembly in Korea (October 2003) Keiko Iwai, then provincial of Japan, pointed out the enormous differences of geography, history, language, culture, and religion that characterize the countries where the Society has taken root: Japan, Korea and Taiwan (in East Asia), India (in South Asia), and Philippines and Indonesia (in Southeast Asia). I am filled with gratitude and awe when I realize that the Love of the Heart of Jesus continues to be communicated to each one of these cultures through RSCJs who have generously offered the whole of themselves in response to His irresistible call. Despite their differences, they are bound to one another and to every other part of the Society. It is a union which words cannot describe nor human reasoning adequately explain. It is the *Cor Unum* which is our great gift and which we celebrate on this feast. In a certain sense we can listen to the liturgy's first reading from the book of Deuteronomy as addressed to all of us in the Society who, out of many peoples form "one people":

"For you are a people consecrated to Yahweh your God; it is you that Yahweh our God has chosen to be his very own people out of all the peoples on the earth." (Dt. 7:6)

As we think about the Society in Asia, each one of us could ask herself: What do I know about these countries? What do I know about our sisters there: what they do, how they live? Perhaps a probation sister comes to mind, or a young professed whom we welcomed for language study or her international experience. But, in general, many in the Society know little of this Region which makes up more than 10% of the Society, although this year we may know a bit more than we did, thanks to the provincial chapter reports which many are reading and appreciating, helped by the corresponding pages of the catalogue.

At the end of this letter I have appended a brief history of the Society in Asia which highlights our beginnings and several characteristics of each Province/District/Area. Although it is separate from the letter, the letter is incomplete without it, so I urge you to read it!

For our reflection this year I suggest that we take time to ponder with gratitude some of the **values of Asia** that are a contribution to the multi-cultural family of the Society. They are so needed in our world today and so consonant with our spirituality. Let us hear the challenge to all of us, Asians as well as non-Asians, to incorporate them ever more deeply into our lives. Taken together they have the power to shape our hearts and permeate our consciousness:

- **Silence and interiority as integral to one's being;** valuing presence/being over activity.
- **A sense of interconnectedness with all beings,** which promotes harmony rather than competitiveness; community and solidarity rather than individualism.
- **A holistic view of the person** rather than the separation of body from spirit.

- A **strong environmental consciousness** which reverences the sacredness of all of nature and the consequent responsibility to cherish, repair and care for our planet.
- **“Mindfulness”**, being attentive to the gift of the present moment, particularly in situations where the need to succeed produces a rushed, stressed, overactive life.
- **The ability to discover “wells of spirituality”** in the midst of poverty and in the life of the poor.
- A **“liberating poverty”** in the sense of non-attachment to material goods.
- A **commitment to peace, gentleness and non-violence; to be peace-makers, builders of peace.** The countries where we are have known colonization and conquest both from within and by foreign powers. The scars of war are many in Asia and there are open wounds today, such as the division between North and South Korea.
- **An ability to live comfortably and peacefully with different religions.** With the exception of Philippines, all our Asian sisters live as a religious minority in their country. For those in the Society from predominantly Christian or even Catholic countries, the challenge may not be so much one of inter-religious harmony, but rather the daily call to accept, welcome, and sit down at table with those who are different.

It is in this spirit of mutual acceptance and desire to open ourselves to one another that we look to the intercultural dialogue of the General Chapter. May this celebration of our Feast in which we recommit ourselves to God, to one another, and to the mission with which we have been entrusted, be a moment when we once more proclaim with joy that our God is a God of Love, whose tenderness and mercy embrace all the peoples of the world.

Since this year the feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary on May 31st coincides with the Feast of the Visitation, could we not pray especially to Mary on that day for the Chapter which will certainly be a “visitation”, an encounter of the whole Society, East and West, North and South.

In fact, beginning on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, let us pray daily for the Chapter, confidently begging the Holy Spirit to be present, to bless the delegates with those attitudes of mind and heart that will ensure loving and fruitful dialogue. During their General Congregation, the Jesuits were asked to keep a candle burning in churches, communities and other places that would remind them to pray. I leave it to each community’s creativity to find a way to focus their prayer for the Chapter. The Chapter belongs to all of us. All of us on the Council are deeply grateful for the work that has already been done in communities and provinces and for the seriousness with which the preparatory documents are being studied. May they continue to nourish us and strengthen the bonds among us.

United in mind and heart with all of you, and with much love, I wish you all a very Happy Feast!


Clare Pratt, rscj
Superior General

A glimpse of the Society's history and presence in Asia¹

The call to Asia

The call to Asia came as early as 1854 when Madeleine Sophie Barat was asked to make a foundation in **China**, a request that was repeated a number of times, but was not to have a response in her lifetime, in fact, not until 1926. But it was in 1908, the year of Sophie's beatification, that Mother Mabel Digby, who, after witnessing the expulsion of over 2,000 RSCJs from France, and about to leave Conflans herself, responded to the appeal made by Pope Pius X to the Jesuits and to the Society of the Sacred Heart to establish institutions of higher education in **Japan**. If the Society had to leave France it would go to the Orient!

Japan 1908

Mother Digby lived long enough to see the first fruits of the seed that had to die in France, sending four from Australia, (three Irish and a New Zealander) with their French Vicar, Mother Amélie Salmon, who stayed in Tokyo long enough to get them settled. The original foundresses were reinforced quickly by others so that by 1912 there were over 30 RSCJs, a mixture of Irish, French, Belgian, English and German, and the works multiplied so that today we have an international school, a university with 2300 students, a teacher-training college, and the schools of Sankocho, Obayashi, Susono and Sapporo.

Despite the fact that Catholics number fewer than 1% of the population of **Japan**, Catholic education with its intellectual and spiritual qualities is highly valued in the country. Thus, from the beginning, formal education has been our principal ministry, though since the 1967 General Chapter our apostolates have become more diverse, in response to the needs of Church and society. There is a continuous search for ways to nurture life: counseling, retreats, ministry to the increasing numbers of migrants and refugees, the homeless, the sick and the aged, and those with HIV.

With the exception of **India**, which was founded from the English province in 1939, and **Indonesia** begun by the mother house in 1989, **Japan** was indeed the "trunk" of the Society's tree in Asia. Thanks to a steady stream of missionaries and, as the years went by, Japanese, Korean and Filipina vocations, from Japan we extended branches to China in 1926, Korea in 1956, Taiwan in 1960 (8 years after being expelled from China in 1952) and Philippines in 1969. For many years **internationality** was a strong characteristic of our communities and it itself kept our sisters closely united to the rest of the Society. Brigid Keogh (1909-2007), as vicar/provincial (1954-1971) was known for her vision and her "fishing expeditions" to other parts of the Society, enticing RSCJs to come to the Far East to contribute to the Society's development. In fact, since 1908 over 200 RSCJs from at least 23 countries have served in what is now the province of Japan.

As Korea, Taiwan and Philippines became established and became independent from Japan each needed to find its own identity. Though there were exchanges of personnel and financial support, the Japan province stood at a distance, respecting each country's uniqueness, a bit like a grandmother quietly admiring the growth of the next generations. Now

¹ I am grateful for the contributions of the Asian provincials as well as the documentation found in Margaret Williams, RSCJ, *The Society of the Sacred Heart in the Far East 1908-1980* and Madeleine Chi, RSCJ, *Shanghai Sacred Heart: Risk in Faith 1926-1952*.

100 years old, the Japan province is in a new moment of its history. On January 13, 2008, at the Centennial Mass of Gratitude, Koko Nagano, provincial, said:

“Just as a person who becomes 100 years old lives according to his or her age, so during our 100 years in Japan we have learned to trust in the invisible work of God, which is far above human strength. Many of us in our younger days learned from the deep faith and active strength of our sisters of the early days and made efforts to spread the gifts we have received in our country which is non-Christian and in other parts of Asia. We too are now somewhat at a standstill, not because of natural disasters or wars, but by rapid changes in the world and the ageing of our sisters. Because we are in such a period, *we are learning to see what is invisible, to hear what we did not hear and to work more contemplatively*. The history of the Church and that of the Society may seem to have come to a slowing down but new life begins to sprout out from happenings that might make us shrink back. In our weakness we are filled with hope and trust and sing the *Magnificat*. From today, let us look with a new eye at the world that surrounds us and work with greater faith and gratitude for the glory of the Heart of Jesus.”

China 1926

The first venture outside of Japan into China was in 1926, and the Far East vicariate was established with Mary Sheldon as vicar. In Shanghai’s French Concession we opened an International School, a Primary School, a Middle School and Aurora College for Women on the same campus. The foundation in Shanghai lived through the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and unrest continued until the Communist government confiscated the property, and the nuns were driven out of China by 1952. During the short 25 years in Shanghai, 60 RSCJ missionaries served there and 26 Chinese entered the Society. For the past 25 years, ending in 2007, about a dozen RSCJs of different nationalities, including Brigid Keogh, taught English or Japanese language and literature in many universities, or helped with the formation of seminarians and diocesan religious congregations. Now we have Sophia House of Studies in Manila, and Chinese novices in Korea. **The seed which fell into the ground is bearing fruit in new and unexpected ways.**

India 1939

The Society was brought to **India** by our Sisters from the English Province in 1939. The first group of 4 RSCJs was invited by the Archbishop of Mumbai to start a college in that city. One of the main objectives of the College was to provide a facility for higher education for Muslim girls who were not otherwise able to get an education. From the start, the English RSCJs encouraged the students in the college to deepen their knowledge and appreciation of Indian culture. In 1956 the noviceship was opened in Bangalore.

Inculturation has been a big challenge for the Society in India. In 1969 the Church in India had a National Seminar at which the indigenization of the Church in India was a high priority. The Society was one of the first to take up this challenge. The noviceship had just been moved from Bangalore to Mumbai in March 1969 and Indian Spirituality was integrated into the formation program. Since then, Indian methods of prayer, yoga, etc. as well as exposure to other religious traditions have been very much part of the formation program. In 1972 Sr. Vandana, with a small group of RSCJs started an Ashram as an ecumenical venture

with the Sisters of the Wantage Community in Pune. Later, another Ashram was started in Rishikesh, a place of pilgrimage for Hindus.

The province realized that for religious life to be inculturated, knowledge of Indian languages had to be a priority. Young professed were sent for language study soon after leaving the noviceship. They were given an experience of living in non-Christian hostels, families, etc. With the removal of cloister, the knowledge of Indian languages and the invitation to live in communities inserted among the people gave the efforts towards indigenization of the Church a new thrust. During the last 25 years we have been getting vocations from the rural areas, with a knowledge of Indian languages as well as a culture that is not affected by Westernization. This has gradually changed the face of the Society in India where culture and spirituality are very much linked.

Korea 1956

Just over 50 years after the arrival of Sister Theresa Chu (exiled from China) as the first principal of the middle school, the Korean Province has more than 60 members. The creation of an autonomous Korean District in 1975 opened the door to having its own noviceship. Catherine Kim, the first Mistress of Novices, prepared herself by spending three months in a Buddhist monastery and that was **the beginning of discovering ways of inculturating Society spirituality and practice**. Today the province serves the Korean people through a large retreat center, university education, a middle and high school for girls, two shelters for runaway girls, alternative education of small children in study rooms, work with laborers, as well as participation in an ecological farming community. The province has contributed to the country through its **participation in the process of democratization**, the **fostering of women's theological reflection**, through the **preparation of leaders in many areas of the life of the Church and Korean society**, and in its service of a great number of priests, religious and lay people who have benefited from making 3, 8 and 40 day retreats.

Taiwan 1960

Mother Benziger initiated the foundation in Taiwan on the side of a hill in the outskirts of Taipei. Four of the six foundresses are still alive: Lucy Hu, Rose Chen, Mary Yuen and Rose Sun. The people in Taiwan are religious-minded. They are mostly Buddhists, Taoists, followers of folk religions, and of Confucius. Christians are in the minority and the Catholic population is about 1%. Within the first ten years, in response to the needs of the country, we opened a High School, a Primary School for the village, an International School, and a small university for women on the same campus. However, with the withdrawal of Taiwan from the United Nations in 1972, and the subsequent withdrawal of diplomatic missions and foreigners, we closed the newly opened university and international school. The Primary School for boys and girls and the High School continued to grow. **From the days of the foundation, the laity were deeply involved in carrying out our apostolates. They continue to explore ways to promote the educational vision of St. Madeleine Sophie.**

On the campus there is a retreat center since so many people thirst for spirituality. There is also a growing parish for Catholics of the neighborhood. Some RSCJs are giving counseling sessions and workshops for personal growth, and are doing social work for the marginalized. Often we are asked to give retreats and workshops in China where the need is keenly felt. In 1990 Taiwan became an Area. Today there are only 10 members, spread out in

three countries. However, God seems to be sending new vocations from China, which we are now nourishing with the help of the Philippine District and the Korean Province.

Philippines 1969

The Philippine District was established by the Far East Province, based in Japan, where the first ten Filipinos entered the Society and received initial formation. In 1969, two Filipino young professed and an American professed were sent from Japan to begin the Philippine foundation.

The founding vision was that of a mobile group of religious infiltrating existing secular institutions, sharing the life of the people and with particular concern for university students. At that time, it was a radical departure from the traditional approach of the Society in other countries where our religious lived and worked in institutions owned and operated by the Society.

From being a community, the group became an Area and later, on January 1, 1987, a District. Today there are five communities, of which three have initiated corporate ministry projects: in Montalban, Ormoc, and Catarman. What the three have in common is that they cater to the **education of the very young; they are for the poor; they are community-based; and they promote collaboration and cooperation among members of the District, even as they rely on lay mission partners**. The Japan Alumnae Association of the Sacred Heart and students of our schools in Japan have been consistently providing financial support to these ministries.

Indonesia 1989

The Society went to Indonesia, not in response to a specific call to begin something, but as a project initiated by the General Council at the time of Philippine's canonization. Indonesia has the 4th largest population in the world, a country of 200 million people, comprising 300 ethnic groups speaking 250 languages and inhabiting 17,000 islands spread over a 3,500-mile archipelago. Indonesia is a deeply religious country, which is approximately 85% Muslim (the world's largest Muslim population), 5% Catholic Christian, 5% Protestant Christian, and 5% Hindu and Buddhist. Religious tolerance is a basic tenet of the Indonesian constitution, although clearly the Muslim faith predominates in much of the country, including northern Java where we are.

It has gone from being a "project" to an Area of nine: five professed RSCJ from India, Japan, and the U.S., one Indonesian young professed who is coming to the next probation, two novices (one Filipina and one Indonesian), and a candidate from East Timor. This mixture of six nationalities, each with its own rich spiritual traditions, combined with a diversity of ages (from 20 to 80) contribute to the understanding of our spirituality as lived in Indonesia.

Our sisters in Indonesia find the deep religious sensitivity of the people very compatible with our RSCJ spirituality with its emphasis on the interior life and the recognition of God in all things and all things in God. The things of God are taken very seriously, to a degree that can be surprising for those from more secular cultures. We teach in Catholic, Muslim and state institutions, work with the poor, offer opportunities for prayer and counsel, participate in the life of the archdiocese, engage in Muslim-Christian dialogue, offer

hospitality, and more. We choose to work primarily through institutions and agencies run by others. The dialogue of cultures goes beyond borders in our international formation program, in welcoming many from other countries, and in our daily communal lives.

The Region of Asia in 2008

As mentioned above, the **internationality** of our beginnings in Asia gave way to the need for RSCJs in each country to establish their **national identity** as well as that of the Society in each place. Until recently there has not been much interaction among the various countries except for student exchanges, some workshops and sending young professed for their international experience. The realization of the differences and the geographical distances was stronger than the consciousness of what was held in common. **Now that each country has a sense of itself there is a growing desire to strengthen the bonds among the Asian countries.**

The September 2007 meeting of Asian Provincials was a turning point and a symbolic event. In the words of Koko Nagano:

“We felt very strongly that we must go beyond the borders, cultures, religions, or national situations, learn from our differences, reconfirm our common spirituality as Asians and share more among ourselves. As the world is getting smaller and smaller, our relationships are getting deeper and deeper. When we remember that at the start of the province missionaries from many countries came to Japan to lay its foundation, we feel that the time is ripe for RSCJ in Asia to become united again to enrich and to make alive the internationality of the Society.”

As the Asian continent becomes more and more significant in the world family of nations, the Region of Asia is turning its face to the future, eager to respond generously to the needs of its peoples, blessing the international Society with new hope.