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Celebrating the Eucharist in Japan

by Victoriano C. Torres, C.M.

Province of the Philippines

I remember clearly the evening I first arrived in Japan. I was welcomed at the airport by an elderly confrere and a group of sisters. It was about 10 o'clock p.m. when we got to the priest's house. The elderly confrere utterly surprised me saying: *"You better start celebrating Mass in Japanese from tomorrow!"* *"You must be joking!"* I said. But he was serious, and handed me the missal in Roman characters to start practicing. I practiced until I fell asleep past 12 midnight.

The following day, the elderly confrere decided he would be the main celebrant so that I could have an idea how the Mass would flow in Japanese. All I heard were strange sounds. It was my first Japanese Mass. For the ensuing weeks and months, even as I was doing an intensive Japanese course, I remember the terrible uneasiness in celebrating Mass in a language I could barely understand. That was truly a prolonged journey of faith.

Among the things that greatly struck me at the beginning was the small number of people who came for Sunday Mass in the sisters' chapel where I had been charged to celebrate Mass. Aside from the sisters, only elderly folks came with no young people. I found it quite sad, having been accustomed to the overflowing crowd with many young people in the Sunday Masses I celebrated in various parishes back in my country of origin. It took some time to get used to a totally different reality. The lovely harmony of the songs and responses of the Japanese Mass interspersed with semi-contemplative silence bring an atmosphere of solemn worship. One can almost breathe inner peace and experience harmony of mind and body.

After some months in this mission, I met a veteran Jesuit missionary who was facilitating the annual retreat for the sisters. I was moved to learn that he had spent over 50 years as missionary in Japan. I spontaneously asked how many conversions he had made during those 50 years. He spread out his two hands before me and said emphatically, *"Not more than these ten fingers!"* I soon got awakened to the great challenge of mission work in a country with advanced technology and rampant materialism and consumerism.

Some years later I learned an approach towards evangelization in this mission from another missionary, a Canadian Redemptorist. He shared being invited to give a talk at an organized church activity. When the time for the talk came, he was awkwardly surprised to see only a couple. Nevertheless he took the full time to give his talk. The couple asked many questions, and they later became friends. After several years of more or less regular meetings, further questions and meaningful exchanges, the couple requested baptism. I learned an important lesson — that is, every single person is important, every single one counts. A well-prepared talk or homily is equally good for an audience of one or of a hundred people. Faith is a gift that God alone grants in his own good time. It is often preceded by a sincere quest. God's gracious response may come in the form of some touching encounters, like the patient kindness of a missionary.

One dark, chilly, rainy day during winter, an usually very active and alive sister was seated most of the time during the early morning Mass. Apparently she was not well. She might well be excused from the community activity for being sick, but she decided to join the Eucharistic sacrifice. One very admirable characteristic of the Japanese is fidelity to duty. They would not so easily miss or absent themselves from work nor withdraw from their responsibility when inconvenienced by common illnesses such as fever or colds. What an amazing attitude! They consider devotedness to work as sacred, much akin to the sacredness we Catholics attach to the liturgy and the Mass.

For lack of priests, I celebrate Mass on most days of the week in two Provincial House chapels — that of the Daughters of Charity and that of the Carmelite Sisters of Vedruna. There I feel inspired by the sisters' devotion to the Eucharist. Their eagerness and enthusiasm for Mass is very contagious. They openly express how much they miss it when nobody is available to celebrate for them. From the very beginning, I have made it a practice to give a brief homily or sharing on the message of the readings everyday. The great majority of the sisters are converts, and many needed greater deepening in the Bible and Church teachings. Most of them have pretty much a life of regimented activities for the day. Those working in institutions under government regulations would hardly have quality time for spiritual or inspirational readings. That is why they appreciate the daily short homilies, which do not usually exceed three minutes. Preparing to share a point or a summary message of the readings in Japanese still takes a lot of effort and time, but the practice makes the Eucharistic celebration more rich and meaningful.

"What does the Mass or the Eucharist mean for you?" I recently asked a couple, who regularly come for daily Mass in the sisters' chapel. After expressing the great blessing of accessibility to the chapel from their new residence, the husband immediately

responded, “*I derive from the Mass great strength and daily sustenance to be a good Christian.*” The wife, who is suffering from a grave illness, said in turn, “*I grow in deeper closeness with Jesus and the Eucharist gives me the courage and hope I need for the day.*” Like most sisters, I believe they have made the Eucharist a most important part of their daily life. Both of them are actively involved in volunteer works and are generous in assisting the poor and the needy. The dedication of these lay people as well as the commitment of the sisters in their service to the poor bear witness to their lively participation in the daily Mass. The Eucharist makes the kingdom of God come alive amidst a non-Christian environment.

The *Japan Catholic News* issued last month the latest statistics showing the number of Catholics in Japan now exceeding one million for the first time. Of that number, approximately 450,000 are Japanese, while more than 565,000, or 56% are foreigners. Many bishops and priests have been sounding appeals for greater openness and welcome to the foreigners, for their fuller integration into the Japanese society. I believe the Church efforts and initiatives on this worthwhile venture can bear abundant fruit only in the context of the Eucharist — the sacrament of love and unity, the celebration of fellowship of the People of God as one family. I pray that people on fire with Eucharistic values multiply and become agents of change to transform the face of the Church in Japan.