

OUR LADY'S WARNING AT AKITA

By JAMES R. LOTHIAN

I AM starting this article from the bullet train running from Tokyo to Tohoku, the most northeastern part of the main Japanese island of Honshu. This might seem to be an odd place for *Brandsma's* North American correspondent to be, but my wife and I are in Japan visiting one of our sons who has been working here for close to four years now.

Today is the Feast of the Annunciation and the three of us are on our way to Akita, a city about the size of Cork on the Sea of Japan and the site several decades ago of a series of reported apparitions by the Blessed Virgin Mary and centuries earlier of the martyrdom of Japanese Christians.

Our Lady appeared there to Sister Agnes Sagawa, of the Handmaids of the Eucharist, a small community of Japanese nuns with a convent located in the hills somewhat outside the city of Akita. We have heard that it is possible to visit the convent and are on our way there to do so.

Brilliant light

The extraordinary events of Akita began on June 12, 1973. On that day, Sister Agnes was alone in the convent. She went to the chapel to pray and when she approached the tabernacle, which she had been given permission to open, a brilliant light that seemed to come right from the tabernacle appeared. She prostrated herself and remained in that position for an hour.

The next two days when she went to pray in the chapel she saw the same thing. For slightly over a week following that nothing happened. Then on June 23, the light reappeared. This time, however, Sister Agnes saw, as she herself put it, "an adoring crowd of spiritual beings" angels around the altar [cited in Yasuda, 1989 p. 17].

On the morning of June 29 Sister Agnes saw both the light and the angels again. This time, however, she also heard the angels singing in adoration. As she began to pray, an angel, later identified as her guardian angel,

joined her and prayed with her. The night before this she had developed the stigmata.

Blood and tears

The next week the Marian apparitions began. Three times in the space of the same number of months the carved wooden statue of Our Lady spoke to Sister Agnes. The same day that these apparitions started the statue began to ooze a substance later identified as human blood. A stigmata in the shape of the small cross on the right hand of the statue was its source. Finally, a year and a half later, the statue began to weep. These lacrimations continued for over six and a half years and numbered one hundred and one episodes in total.

Sister Agnes kept a diary in which she detailed these events. Throughout the time, she was under the spiritual direction of Bishop John Shojiro Ito, then bishop of Niigata, the diocese in which the convent is located. For most of that time, she also received spiritual counsel from Father Teiji Yasuda, O.S.V., formerly a priest in Tokyo and then for 13 years convent chaplain.

Both men were entirely supportive of Sister Agnes's account and firmly convinced that the events in question were supernatural in origin. Father Yasuda has written an extremely moving account of all that has transpired. This later was translated into English as *The Tears and Message of Akita*. Bishop Ito issued a pastoral letter expressing confidence in their miraculous nature.

Chastisement prepared

June 28, 1973 was the date on which Sister Agnes developed the stigmata. A week later to the day, the pain in Sister Agnes's hand had intensified greatly. In the midst of this suffering an angel came to her and asked her to go to the chapel to pray. When she got there and knelt down, the statue of the Blessed Mother, which was then to the right of the altar, began to speak. The Blessed Mother

asked Sister Agnes to pray in reparation for the sins of man and to pray especially for "the Pope, Bishops and Priests." She told Sister Agnes that the deafness that had afflicted her for the past four years would be healed. Our Lady then said the prayer of the Handmaids of the Eucharist with Sister Agnes and instructed her to add the word "truly" so that the invocation now became "Most Sacred Heart of Jesus truly present in the Holy Eucharist."

The second apparition occurred on August 3, 1973. This time Our Lady's message to Sister Agnes was one both of exhortation and of warning:

Many men in this world afflict the Lord. I desire souls to console Him to soften the anger of the Heavenly Father. I wish, with my Son, for souls who will repair by their suffering and their poverty for the sinners and ingrates.

She went on to say:

In order that the world might know His anger, the Heavenly Father is preparing to inflict a great chastisement on all mankind. With my Son I have intervened so many times to appease the wrath of the Father. I have prevented the coming of calamities by offering Him the sufferings of the Son on the Cross, His Precious Blood, and beloved souls who console Him forming a cohort of victim souls. Prayer, penance and courageous sacrifices can soften the Father's anger. I desire this also from your community...that it love poverty, that it sanctify itself and pray in reparation for the ingratitude and outrages of so many men.

State of the Church

The third and final message from Our Lady to Sister Agnes came on October 13, 1974, the anniversary of the great miracle of Fatima. This was the prophecy of a great cataclysm which would occur if men did not repent. The only way to avert this cataclysm, Our Lady said, was via the rosary and "the

Sign left by the Son."

She then went on to issue a warning about the state of the Church:

The work of the devil will infiltrate even into the Church in such a way that one will see cardinals opposing cardinals, and bishops against other bishops. The priests who venerate me will be scorned and opposed by their confreres. Churches and altars will be sacked. The Church will be full of those who accept compromises and the demon will press many priests and consecrated souls to leave the service of the Lord.

Ensuing controversies

In situations such as this, in which phenomena totally outside the realm of ordinary human experience have been reported, questions inevitably arise with regard to their authenticity. Are the reports themselves simply fabrications? Is there some other, purely natural explanation for what has occurred? These are obvious and quite legitimate questions.

The reaction to the events in Akita, however, seems to have gone very much beyond that level of questioning. Sister Agatha was subjected to such a rough time of it in fact that her health was adversely affected. One reason for the skepticism with which her account was treated is the influence that scientism has achieved both in society at large and, more importantly, within the Church. Science, it is believed, can, and indeed must, explain all. Any phenomenon out of the ordinary is therefore either hammered into the scientific box, no matter how much of has to be chiselled off to get it to fit, or treated as a non-event.

Marian devotion downgraded

A second reason likely for the hostile reception accorded Sister Agnes is the disfavour with which Marian devotion of any sort is now treated in certain circles, Japan has had a long history of devotion to the Blessed Mother, dating to the time of St. Francis Xavier himself. Nevertheless, in Japan as in Ireland and America, its appropriateness has

increasingly been called into question. Devotion to Mary, it is claimed, is a later addition to the core of Christian belief. Under the best of circumstances such devotion is therefore superfluous, or so we are told; under more usual conditions, an outright impediment to the practice of true Christianity.

I find such arguments, quite curious to say the least. Not only are they anti-historical -- devotion to and reverence for Our Lady dating at least to Patristic times -- but decidedly illogical. If one buys into the Divinity of the Son, how can one disregard the Mother? "God does not play dice," Einstein said, and although he had cosmology in mind, the same thing could be said with regard to salvation history. Mary surely was not someone picked at random. Her role throughout the entire redemptive process, from Annunciation to Crucifixion, was crucial. This has been recognized through the ages -- from Justin Martyr in the second century, right up through the writings of virtually all of the modern popes. Seen from this perspective, devotion to Our Lady is a natural complement to devotion to Our Lord.

Careful documentation

That the events in Akita have met with considerable resistance has, however, had one important salutary effect. It has led to extremely careful documentation of what went on. Samples of the dried blood and the dried tears were submitted on a number of occasions to laboratories for analysis. The two were identified definitively as human blood and human tears respectively.

Two commissions were appointed by Bishop Ito to investigate the events. Because he felt that the first had done a poor job of it and that it was far from impartial, he went to Rome where he was advised to appoint a new commission. A majority of the members of this group concluded that supernatural events had occurred. Bishop Ito, after further study on his own, issued his pastoral letter affirming this belief.

Perhaps most interesting, a Japanese television crew had been alerted to the events at the convent. Accordingly, they came and set up a camera in the chapel. After several

days, Our Lady rewarded their attention: The tears shed by her statue were seen live on Japanese television on December 8, 1979.

Up a mountain lane

When we arrived at Akita we went immediately to our hotel. We left our luggage, got ourselves a quick lunch and hailed a taxi. The taxi driver knew exactly where we were headed. The "Maria place" -- in Japanese the proper nouns associated with Christianity are taken directly from the Greek and the Latin -- is well known. It took the driver about twenty minutes to get there. We wound around the back streets of the city for about half that time and then in a few minutes more were out in the countryside. The convent is off the main road and up a small mountain lane. The turn off is signposted in both English and Japanese. The convent is high enough up the mountain that there was a fair amount of snow on the ground when we got there, even though there was virtually no snow at all in Akita itself.

Exceptionally beautiful

The convent is a two-story structure with a peaked roof and a half-timbered look that is characteristic of this part of Japan. It is set in the midst of fields, one of which has been turned into a Japanese garden in honour of Our Lady, and another which contains a Way of the Cross. On the grounds are several outer buildings. When we arrived no one was around. After wandering about for a short time, we found a bell for the convent off to the side in the entrance foyer. A few minutes later one of the nuns appeared and showed us in.

We visited the main chapel first and then went to the adjacent Lady Chapel where the miraculous statue of the Blessed Mother is now housed. The statue is rather small, maybe a metre or so in height, but exceptionally beautiful -- as fine an example of the woodcarvers art as one is likely to encounter. Here in the Lady Chapel we said our rosaries. When we had finished, it was almost time for the sisters evening prayer. The sister who had ushered us into the convent very generously invited us to join them.

Stations of the cross came first, then

the rosary, which the sisters chanted, and then the evening office. All of this was in Japanese. The sisters provided us with English versions of the prayers for the stations and the office and. English transliterations of the prayers of the rosary in Japanese.

Tatami mats and cushions

The interior of the convent is in the traditional Japanese style. Upon entering, one dons slippers and upon reaching the various rooms, takes these off and walks in stocking feet. The rooms, including both chapels, are tatami rooms. The main chapel has a small free-standing altar, with the tabernacle just off to the right and a craved wooden statue of St. Joseph on the left. The Lady Chapel is much smaller and adjacent to the main chapel. Flower arrangements adorn both. The effect, particularly in the Lady Chapel is one of Japanese household shrine.

Neither chapel has pews or kneelers, just the tatami mats and the thin cushions upon which one sits or kneels at table for traditional Japanese dining. Each of the nuns had such a cushion. Three were made available for us in the back of the chapel near the heater. The convent has no central heat and in this snow country of Japan that can make for a bit of a chilly time of it.

Reminder of West Cork

What was being there like? I am reflecting on that now, three weeks after the event, and having difficulty trying to come up with the right words to describe it. "Comforting, edifying and uplifting" come to mind, but somehow seem quite sterile in comparison to the experience itself.

In some ways it reminded me of a visit to one of those ancient little churches that lie in ruins here and there throughout the West Cork country side. For centuries they were the one tangible link between the people and their God. Today, when much of the once-Christian world has collected its pottage and moved on, such encounters are to be treasured for the spiritual succour that they provide.

The sisters are real people and their convent a real place . They go about their business, which to a great extent is prayer, in a highly purposeful yet very joyous and indeed saintly way. They are holy women and their convent a holy place They welcomed us in the best way they possibly could, by asking us to join with them.