

A Reflection on Tertianship

By Dan Mai, S.J.

In his role as Visitor to the Missions of the Far East during the early days of the Society, Alessandro Valignano made this observation about the European Jesuits in Japan; "People coming here from the [West] have to learn like children how to eat, sit, speak, dress, act politely, and all the rest." This statement could be applied to the life of a novice in the Society of Jesus.

The goal of the novitiate is the verification of one's vocation to the Society and the deepening of one's growth into the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. In this process, a novice is invited on a journey of radical re-orientation of his life. He learns new ways to relate to family and friends, to think with the church, to do ordinary tasks such as dusting and sweeping, and to re-visit basic table manners and etiquette. But ultimately, he learns to pray and recognize his deepest yearning and desires. He also discovers the obstacles that prevent him from freely choosing to be a companion with Christ.

In my role as assistant to the novice director during the past 18 months, I deal with the day to day running of the novitiate and help the novices in discerning their Jesuit vocation. However, this past summer, I embarked on a journey similar to the one of the novices. I began my first summer of Tertianship in Japan. Like a novice, a Jesuit in Tertianship is immersed in reading and studying the *Autobiography of St. Ignatius*; he makes the 30-day *Spiritual Exercises* retreat; and studies the *Constitutions* and other documents of the Society. He also involves himself in



A cemetery between the Paul Miki Retreat House and the Shrine of the 26 Martyrs.

experiments of proclaiming God's word and ministry to God's people, especially the poor.

St. Ignatius knew that there was a great deal of personal growth in the journey of a Jesuit. As a Jesuit progresses through his 10 plus years of formation, he is constantly asked to examine himself and see how he has deepened his faith both intellectually and spiritually. He does so that he can be more apostolically effective in responding to Christ's invitation in love and freedom.

In his *Directives on Tertianship*, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., Superior General of the Society, suggests that when a Jesuit considers the location of Tertianship he should take into consideration the need to break away from his comfort zone. Kolvenbach suggests that a tertian needs to immerse himself in another culture so he can experience the universal dimension of the Society and the diversity it has to offer. In this process, one also sees himself as a pilgrim like Ignatius. This calls for trust and placing one's life in God's hands.

It is not that I haven't had the opportunity to immerse myself in another culture. In fact, since I entered the Society, I have spent most of my summers abroad learning new languages. I have had the privilege of living for long periods of time in Toronto, Montreal, Paris, Beijing, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, and other places in between. One might think I am a seasoned traveler and could nonchalantly hop on the plane to Japan.

My Tertianship experience in Japan this past summer was far from that. I had very little knowledge of the language, but with my training in Chinese, I could make out some of



The tertians encounter traditional Japanese cuisine. "After eating that, you never want American food again," said Mai.

The school of the heart and the journey of gratitude



Dan and a group of nuns from the Pure Heart of Mary based in Nagasaki

the meaning of the Japanese writing. My other tertian companions and our instructors spoke English.

The most exciting part of being in a foreign culture was the experience of living in Nagasaki. This was the land of Francis Xavier and Alessandro Valignano, the historic site of 26 Jesuit martyrs, and the place of the atomic bombing that ended the Second World War.

Our Tertianship program was truly representative of the international and diverse dimensions of the universal Society. There were 12 tertians — half were from Japan (5 Japanese and a Korean working in Japan) and the other half were from Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Micronesia, the Philippines (originally from Ireland), and me from the United States. As for the two instructors, one was a member of the Japan Province originally from Spain and the other one was an American who is a member of the China Province.

At times there were challenges in juggling the cultural differences and the various languages, but it was an amazing experience to come together and share our last stage of formation. Part of our time was devoted to learning about the birth of Christianity in Japan and the early missions of the Jesuits. We also had the opportunity to make pilgrimages to the many sites where Jesuits such as Francis Xavier, Luis Frois, Frances Cabral, and Alessandro Valignano had set foot. We also studied and discussed *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius* and each of us was invited to reflect on our own journey and examine where God has invited us in our own conversion.

One of the great experiences of Tertianship in Nagasaki this year was the 60th anniversary of the dropping of the

atomic bomb in Japan. Nagasaki was the site of the second atomic bomb. It was a challenging experience to witness the effects of the destruction and the sinfulness of the human race in the dropping of the bomb. However, there were graces to be recognized in this. Twenty-five percent of Japanese Catholics lived in the Nagasaki area and their view and understanding toward the bomb was very different from the people of Hiroshima. The people of Nagasaki were able to accept and move on much faster than the people of Hiroshima for they saw the bombing of their city as a sacrifice and a holocaust to end the suffering and the horrific action of the war.

Almost every day, I walked the five-mile round trip to the hypocenter of the atomic bomb to pray for world peace or I descended the 500 steps of the Tateyama Hill to the site of the 26 Martyrs of Japan to pray for faith and hope.

We began our 30-day retreat on the 60th anniversary of the Japanese surrender and also on the anniversary of



Dan (far right) and his fellow tertians wearing traditional Japanese robes for relaxing around the house.

Francis Xavier arriving in Japan in 1549. Having made this retreat during my time as a novice, and having directed others, my experience this time was even more profound. I experienced the grace of gratitude for God's invitation and love in my life, gratitude for the Society, gratitude for my family and friends, and gratitude for all those who have helped me in my formation as a Jesuit.

I am very grateful for the experience of my Tertianship in Japan. I look forward to returning next summer for the second half of my program and continuing this enriching process.