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“Etiam ‘stultis’ acuit ingenium fames”:  
A Curiosity from the Historical Archive of the Society  
of the Divine Word in Rome

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# “Etiam ‘stultis’ acuit ingenium fames”: A Curiosity from the Historical Archive of the Society of the Divine Word in Rome

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First, a note on the titulation. The *stultis* of the well-known Latin proverb cited in the opening line of the title may both hurt the ears of a too pious reader and sound disrespectful toward preceding generations of SVDs. Already placed within quotation marks, that term is further marked as to call attention to its peculiar meaning or meanings. There is, obviously, a *stultitia* that is simple foolishness; another that is attested, if not encouraged, by Scripture and one that has a long and well established tradition in Christianity and also outside it. The biblical *stultus* can, at times, display a noticeable degree of resourcefulness or ingenuity. The neuter *ingenium*, after all, is equally important as the seemingly disturbing *stultis*. To spare the ears of my imaginary too pious reader, I could have retitled this piece as “The Vacations of an Historian”, with the unpleasant result of calling the attention to the author and his profession, real or alleged. Further, one may add that to provoke and stimulate is undoubtedly the business of the historian—no matter if the reaction or emotion is a strong or unwelcomed one. The nuances of *fames*, the last word of the proverb, cannot be restricted to, or translated as, an empty belly growling for some food. That noun can be taken as the constraints of the economic, social, and cultural conditions under which a person or a group of persons is called to perform an assigned task.

Sitting in a library or archive and leisurely turning the folios of a manuscript or perusing documents related to my research is, for me, a form of vacation. The

absence of the pressure of a deadline for completing a paper or finishing a project makes for a relaxing stimulation. Last summer, while in Rome, there were several options available and all equally attractive: the inexhaustible Vatican Library, the imposing reading room of the Biblioteca Angelica with its remarkable collection of manuscripts of medieval civil and canon law; and, last but not least, the holdings of the National Library. Fascinating as it may be, Rome has a public system of transportation that, if not absolutely necessary, discourages traveling especially during the summer. The outside temperature was still high and the air-conditioning of the buses in Rome mostly works by opening the windows. The Historical Archive of the SVD was in the basement of the place where I was staying, the Collegio del Verbo Divino, and it became immediately attractive. The temperature of the reading room was comfortable and except for the unobtruding presence of the archivist nobody else was there. It was an ideal time for checking the material related to the history of Nanzan Gakuen conserved there with a focus on the beginning of that enterprise.

In a long series of documents, all written in German and mostly letters, my attention was caught by a Latin text inserted in the official correspondence between the Japanese province and the General Superior of the SVD and his assistants. In this kind of documentation Latin is generally confined to the formal agreements between the Society and the higher officials of the Catholic Church—local bishops and the heads of the various Trastiberine Congregations or the Vatican. Dissonant language aside, the document stood out for, in contrast to the rest of official correspondence, it was adorned with an unusual and boldfaced heading both in Latin and Japanese: *Missio Catholica* (for the full caption, see the transcription below). The English, Dutch, and Polish translations follow the Latin. To these four languages, one may add the postscript in French appended at the end of the Latin version. Surprisingly, given that the language of the correspondence with Rome over this period is predominantly German, there was no translation into this culturally dominant

language.

The document is a circular letter of about two pages describing the situation in which the SVDs operated in the mid-thirties of the past century and was mailed to a composite audience that, crossing the barrier of gender, included both males and females. Since it was mailed to private persons, it is not difficult to fathom that the exemplar now in Rome may be the only one that has survived. My focus will be on the Latin, likely the original version, for it has a fuller description of the situation of the Catholic mission. If deemed significant, the differences between the Latin and the English text will be indicated.

Several levels of reading are possible. The circular letter can be read as a document attesting the activities of the SVDs in the 1930s, the mindset of the members of the community, the difficulties they faced, and the ways in which they attempt to surmount the obstacles. And from this point of view, the document is certainly illuminating. It can also be read as a text documenting a stage of the history and development of what is now the city of Tajimi, for, if not a picture, it contains a description of the environment in which the SVD foundation was located—a landscape that has been deeply altered over the years due to the increase of the urban population.

Though the document has no date on it, the text itself provides an indication of when it has been written: about five years after the establishment of the SVD's community in Tajimi or in 1935. The undated exemplars are inserted in the correspondence covering the year 1935. Another but more vague indication, the *terminus ante quam*, is provided by the heading of the circular letter: the place of the foundation (多治見) was not yet designated a city (市) but as a town (町). The change of status occurred on October 1, 1940. The indirect but unmistakable reference to the Great Depression and the concomitant breakdown of international trade also help to establish the time of the drafting. The absence of a date suggests that the drafters meant the document as a portrait of the situation of the *Missio*

*Catholica* over a certain period of time rather than at a certain time.

Predictably, in the official correspondence one of the two authorial voices is that of the elected or appointed representative of the local community. The sudden change of this voice is no less significant than the boldfaced heading or the glossolalia of the four texts. The narrating voice, as well as the authorial self-representation, is that of the *Missio Catholica* or the work performed by the Catholic missionaries in Japan. This authorial self-representation is also restated in the signature appended at the end of the letter—again, a *Missio Catholica* working out of a geographically determined place. Significantly, the institutionally predetermined functions and roles found in any religious community—such as provincial, rector, and procurator, to mention just a few—are noticeably absent. It is the entire community that becomes the speaker and the speaker for an entire country. Even the congregational identity, the Society of the Divine Word, is eclipsed by the *Missio Catholica*, for it is only in the Japanese subheading that the qualifier “Divine Word” (神言) appears accompanied by a修道院 (convent, monastery). Among the documents now preserved in the Historical Archive in Rome this self-representation is unique and it might have been specifically devised for an appeal to a wider and composite audience.

While the vocative “Reverende Domine” (Reverend Father) indicates that the addressee of the Latin text was a member of the clergy, presumably familiar with that language, the salutation of the English version shows that the text was sent to the superior of a female religious community. On the basis of the surviving material, it is not possible to establish how many letters might have been mailed out and to whom. The Latin text with the French postscript suggests a wider circle than the English. For this last version, one can tentatively think of a congregation similar to the Sisters of the Holy Spirit operating in the U.S. Another limitation on the circulation derives from the material that was sent together with the letter and excludes mass production: two oil paintings representing a Japanese landscape.

Next, the structure of the document. The circular letter may be articulated in five

parts. After a twofold *captatio benevolentiae*, the second section offers a description of the social, cultural, and religious condition in which the *Missio Catholica* operated. The third section presents the reader a brief description of the worsening economic conditions on a world-wide level and the ensuing constraints the *Missio Catholica* was facing. Predictably, then, the fourth section turns into an appeal to the generosity of the recipient. In the last part, the narrating voice returns once more to a cultural topic: the Japanese system of writing and the difficulty the Japanese themselves, not to mention foreigners, faced while attempting to master it.

The narrating voice expects the recipient to be surprised for a threefold reason: the bulky envelop, well exceeding the flimsy size of the then common air-mail letters, the place of origin, far-away Japan, the land of the rising-sun, and the gift of the two accompanying cards. The cards were not printed but hand-made by people practiced in the art of oil-painting and, when suitably framed, they would make for a pleasing wall-decoration. The object of the paintings was a Japanese scenery or landscape. Unfortunately, no sample was sent to the General Superior in Rome. Unless at least one exemplar emerges, the size of the oil-paintings, the material support (cardboard or canvas), the quality of the execution, the identity of the painter(s) and the religious affiliation (Christian or non-Christian) are left completely in the dark or to the imagination. Similarly, the cost of production is withheld from the modern reader. Since the term “carta” (card, in English) was used, the dimensions of the two paintings were likely small and rectangular. It is not difficult to imagine that the initial move might have succeeded in capturing the benevolence of the recipient. In contrast to the freedom and wide-ranging network of contacts available to members of the clergy, the Mother Superior of a female religious community suffered from more restrictions. Accordingly, she was invited to make known the the existence of paintings and eventually dispose of them through the personal network of contacts (students and family members?) of each sister. If pleasing, the gift was meant as the first step toward building a lasting relationship and exchange. Depending on

taste and the cultural interests of the recipient, other artistic objects could be mailed. According to the French postscript, if the recipient himself was a philatelist or someone in his circle of friends had an interest in collecting stamps (timbres postes) of the Japanese Empire (l'Empire du Japon), he needed only to add a line on the back of the included "Bulletin de versement". If so, the SVDs would have obliged to the request "en signe de notre reconnaissance".

The second section—the description of the social, cultural and religious conditions in which the *Missio Catholica* operated—is assuredly the most interesting and revealing part of the document. Though the missionaries have to contend for each and every single soul, the "Volksgeist" of the Japanese makes up for the enormous difficulties. There are three qualifiers of Japanese manners and behavior (vitae consuetudo) that deserve attention: politeness (urbanitas), modesty (modestia), and friendliness (facilitas). In contrast to the English version, the Latin adds that the Japanese seem to have suckled these three traits from the breast of their mothers. Further, science, art, and commerce are indicated as fields in which the Japanese are not inferior to the Europeans. In other words, the social conditions in which the missionaries operate is not that of an undeveloped country. Yet—and here the narrator falls back to the language of the prayers then common to the entire Society—the "shadow of heathenism" (horrida illa nox paganismi) is spread all over the country. The size of the Christian community in the mid-thirties illustrates the slow progress of the mission. The entire population of Tajimi amounts to 40,000; the Christians living in the headquarters of the Society (Tajimi) are just ten; and a further group, ranging between thirty and forty, comes from the surrounding territory. The members of this last group are qualified as suburban (suburbani). The near-by city of Nagoya, where the first school of the Gakuen was already established and functioning, is made to look like the periphery of Tajimi.

The minuscule size of the Christian community is further stressed by contrasting it with the surrounding religious presence: three hundred "pagan temples", between



small and big. The SVD's foundation (*domus nostra*) is just outside the town, on the slopes of a hill (*ad radices modici montis*) known as Kokeizan (虎溪山). In a matter of a few years, the surroundings underwent a noticeable change: at the arrival of the SVDs just about thirty small temples (*aediculae*) covered the hill, at the time of the writing eighty more had been added—a hundred according to the English version—so that what is now known as Fujigaoka (藤が丘) could be labeled as “Mountain of the Deity” (*mons deorum*). The term “*aedicula*” suggest a small niche or shrine holding a sacred image.

Just a half hour walk away, the imposing presence of the vast complex of Eihōji (永保寺) placed in an idyllic solitude did not go unnoticed to the narrator who draws attention to the size of the complex that occupies the area of an entire village rather than that of a house (*vici potius quam domus*). The monastery (*coenobium*) belongs to a Buddhist sect (臨濟宗) whose male and female members amount to three million. Even if not seen from the ground, the presence of the structure could be heard in the morning when the neighbor's “prayer drums” called their faithful to prayer. While the English has “sounds in our ears” the Latin has “*feriuntur aures verberibus tympani*”—“our ears are being hurt by the beating of the drums.” The lyric effusiveness over the beauty of the richly decorated temple (*ornatissimam aulam orationis*) is hardly sufficient to cover a bit of envy for the imposing bell-tower (*turrim campanarum*).

Though the letter is effusive on the religious and cultural conditions in which the *Missio Catholica* operated, it is also remarkably laconic on the work its members actually performed, as well as on the long and short term plans and programs. The school that Msgr. Reiners had just started in Nagoya in 1932 is conspicuously absent in the description of the newsletter. Compartmentalization and the relative autonomy the Generalate granted Msgr. Reiners help to explain the glaring omission and place the beginnings of the Gakuen as hidden in plain sight. The text is also equally silent on the work that had been performed since the early members of the *Missio* arrived

in Japan.

The protagonist of the third section is the Great Recession of the 1930s that lasted for almost a decade. Though Japan was partly immune from the crisis, the SVDs depended on subsistence from abroad. Unwilling to join the increasing number of beggars (*ne auferemus numerum mendicorum*), it seemed advisable to convey the prospective benefactors a small token (*transmittere ... res artis Japonicae*). The difference between the production cost and the amount of the donation would be apportioned to the sustenance of the *Missio Catholica*. The recipient had the choice to retain the gift or give it to a third party. Though the expectation was that the donation would cover the production cost, no amount was indicated as appropriate.

In the last section the narrator turns again to a topic bordering on the curious. The two *iconunculae* had a long voyage in front of them and to protect them from hazards they had been wrapped with the pages of a Japanese newspaper (*ephemeridis Japonicae*). The writing on the paper, the narrator presumes, may elicit the curiosity of the recipient and for this reason he offers a description of the writing-system. The reader starts from the right and moves to the left, and from the top to the bottom of each line. For European missionaries mastering the characters (漢字) and the language (*perdifficilem ... linguam*) is a challenge that takes several year. This is because the Japanese employ a twofold system of writing: the first, borrowed from the Chinese, is ideographic (*scriptura imaginum*), the number of “kanji” amounts to thirty- or forty thousand, all are different, and each one conveys a single concept (*singulis singulas volunt exprimi notiones*); the second, however, is syllabic and each sign represents the constituting syllables of a word. Further, this last system has two variations (*duplici forma*). Fearing that the reader may be about to get lost in the intricacies of the language, the narrator stops (*Ne plura*). The enterprise is so complicated and laborious that a student who has just finished middle-school (*media dumtaxat scholas*) is unable to read (*ad omnia recognoscenda*) all the “kanji” and to write (*ad omnia scribenda*) all the “kana” (*sic*). For this reason, the narrator adds, “in

books and newspapers that are printed for commoners” (quae in vulgus eduntur) it is customary to add “kana” to each “kanji”. If this is not done, there would be very few people able to get the meaning of the “kanji”. The section on the writing system, shortened in the English version, ends with a rhetorical question for the reader: if the system is difficult and burdensome for the the Japanese themselves, think of the European missionaries.

A request for prayers, even a short one, to dissipate the “shadows of death” brings the letter to conclusion.

While the English, Dutch, and Polish translations reflect the mastery of the target language of a native speaker, the Latin style of the original calls for some brief remarks. Latin was mastered during the middle and high school and mostly on classical sources. Subsequent philosophical and theological formation introduced the students to a brand of flexible and efficient Latin that had its origins in the medieval universities and that was sharply criticized by the humanists. Latin was also the language of the liturgy, from baptism to burial, including the specific duties of the clergy, such as the recitation of the breviary and the celebration of mass. That a letter could have been written in this language constitutes no surprise. Though the author might have had Cicero as his model, the too many *quod* betray the time spent poring over a different brand of Latin texts. The result is a Latin that may be labeled as post-neo-scholastic and sounds a bit bookish.

For the author of the Latin text, deploying a series of neologisms was inevitable: paper, oil painting, and frames, for instance, were late comers for European society. Similarly, the language of banking and remittance had no equivalent in classical world and even in the neo-scholastic variations of Latin and a circumlocution like “*schedula receptionis gyri postalis*” for a postal money order attempts to capture modernity. Latin reveals its major limitations when the author ventures into the field of Japanese religion, where only Buddhism is considered to the exclusion of Shintoism, and architecture. The term “*aedicula*” qualified by the adjective “*sacra*”

captures and conveys the nature of the intended object. In contrast, the “*turris campanarum*” fails to capture and convey the reader, familiar with the elongated and slender bell-towers of the European landscape, the sloped shape and the storied structure of a 鐘楼. The plural, “*campanarum*”, is again a lapse into the religious landscape of Europe—if not a desideratum for the newly erected convent. A festal cacophony after the somber monotone of a single “*campana*”: the first speaking to the ears, the second to the entire body.

The criteria for the edition: the Latin text has been transcribed as it is; the few editorial changes—providing punctuation where it was omitted and an *exigno* changed into *exiguo*—are enclosed within square brackets. With regard to capitalization, the contemporary standards have been employed. The postscript in French has been reproduced as it is. For the Japanese characters of the heading, the old form of one character (旧漢字) has been replaced with the current simplified form.

Missio Catholica  
Tajimi, Gifu-ken,  
Shudoin, Japan  
岐阜県多治見町  
神言修道院

Admodum reverende domine!

Certe mirabitur Reverentia Vestra, quod vobis necopinantibus reddita est epistula eaque tantae molis inde ex remotis Japoniae oris. Nos Missionarii catholici oramus, ne in malam partem accipiat Reverentia Vestra, quod ausi sumus cum his litteris ad Eandem dare duas cartas arte Japonica pictas; quas dignetur acceptare tamquam salutationem ex illa “*Terra orientis solis*”. Sunt autem hae cartae, quod Reverentiam

Vestram minime fugere censemus, imagines regionum Japoniae oleatis pictae coloribus, quod genus multorum sedulorum et in arte peritissimorum hominum manibus efficitur; neque dubium, quin his tabellis, praesertim si aptis circumdentur marginibus, decenter ornentur domorum parietes.

Missionariorum catholicorum inter Japones labor magnis atque maximis obstruitur difficultatibus. Ut fidem amplectantur Christi, luctandum est cum singulis fere hominibus. Neque ullus missionarius hunc populum potest non amare; nam nulla alia natio in vitae consuetudine tantam prae se fert urbanitatem, modestiam, facilitatem; quam illi humanitatem paene cum lacte matris videntur imbibere. Neque litteris Japones et artibus neque negotiationibus quicquam cedunt Europae gentibus[.] Sed tam praeclarae homines naturae obcaecatos tenent horrida illa nox paganismi et umbra circumvolitat mortis. Velimus cogitet secum Reverentia Vestra haec, quae sumus dicturi: Haec urbs Tajimi, quae incolarum habet quadraginta fere milia, qua in urbe missionis nostrae collocavimus sedem, post complurium laborem annorum vix decem habet novos Christianos, reliqua pars gregis Christi (sunt fideles omnino circiter quadraginta) suburbani sunt. Paganorum vero sunt in hac urbe ad trecenta templa, maiora et minora. Domus nostra non longe extra urbem sita est ad radices modici montis. Qui mons propemodum obsitus est sacris aediculis paganorum. Nam cum ante annos quinque, quo tempore in nostro oratorio Jesus Eucharisticus habitare coepit, triginta fuissent polytheismi aediculae, his ipsis mensibus novae erectae sunt octoginta, ut circum ipsam missionis catholicae stationem pedem non proferas, quin offenderis illis paganismi monumenti. Ultra illum “montem deorum”, a spatio semihorae fere, in solitudine et amoenitate silvestri Buddhistarum coenobium est tam amplis latisque aedificiis, ut vici potius quam domus occupet aream. Habet ornatissimam aulam orationis et splendidissimam turrin campanarum nuper magna arte ex mediis aedificiis eductam. Est autem hoc monasterium cuiusdam ordinis Buddhistici per totam Japoniam diffusi, ad quem pertinere dicuntur virorum et mulierum tres milliones. Jam summo mane feriuntur aures verberibus

tympani, quo illi suos sodales ad faciendas preces invitant, et facile intellet Reverentia Vestra tam splendida vicinitate non raro suffocari vitae catholicae semina in animis eorum, qui missioni catholicae et religioni iam appropinquare coeperunt.

Quam verro tenuis, quam parvula, quam nulla fere in Japonia est res catholica ad hanc magnificentiam paganorum! In tanto numero templorum falsorum numinum templum veri Dei, qui caelum et terram fecit, exstat solitarium et desertum ab hominibus Deum nostrum ignorantibus.

Sane verum est operis missionarii profectum maximam partem deberi gratiae Divinae, quae apostolicorum virorum operam et orationem fecundet; sed in Japonia opus Dei misere impeditur rerum inopia temporalium. Primum illae semper crescentes difficultates oeconomicae totum mundum opprimentes vim suam exercent etiam in terris missionum, ubi passim, quae opera spes missionariorum conceperat, aut non exstiterunt aut inchoata derelicta sunt. Quodsi nobis, id quod Deo referimus acceptum, in his Japoniae partibus constitutis, tam exig[u]o Christianorum numero, nondum defuerunt, quae essent necessaria ad sustentandam vitam, tamen etiam hic futurarum tenebrarum cernuntur umbrae. Decrescunt magis et magis, quae antea ex antiquae Christianitastis terris subministrari consueverunt stipendia, et fontes eorum plurimi exaruerunt. Quid mirum, quod missionum superiores solliciti quaerant, quae futura sint.

Neque tamen inopia aut impedimentis volumus relanguescere fiduciam Dei. Dei confisi pietate oculos iterum iterumque reflectimus ad Christianam patriam. Sed ne augeremus numerum mendicorum undique emergentium, visum est transmitters ad homines beneficios res artis Japonicae speramusque per Dei providentiam et per animos hominum catholicorum promptos ad opitulandum ex illa pecunia, quae illarum pretia superaverit, missioni nasciturum esse auxilium. Itaque etiam Vestram Reverentiam liceat nobis adire, ut per Eam pro his duabus cartis aliquod licet tenue pretium recipiamus, quod nos convertamus in usus maxime necessarios. Noverit Reverentia Vestra, quibus hominibus illae picturae placeant quique missionis causa

parati sint easdem emere. Jam in antecessum gratias agimus precamurque Deum, ut Vobis retribuatur, quicquid in hac re dederitis operae. Inprimis hoc semper optabimus, ut Deus abundantia benedictionis confoveat pastorem ipsius Reverentiae Vestrae sollicitudinem. Et si forte etiam plures hoc genus imagines (vel aliae res Japonicae artis – Japoniam terram vocant artium) desiderentur, paratissimi erimus mittere. Pecuniam quamlibet dignetur Reverentia Vestra ad nos dare per additam his litteris schedulam receptionis gyri postalis; nam hac via pecuniae transmittuntur tutissimo. Et significabitur per litteras proprias, si quid in manus nostras perlatum fuerit.

Cartas autem, ne forte longo itinere attererentur, circumteximus folio ephemeridis Japonicae, quod haud scimus an attrahat Reverentiae Vestrae oculos. Nam exhibet scripturam Japonicam, quae legitur ad perpendicularum ex superiore parte columnae dextrae usque ad inferiorem partem sinistrae columnae. Characteres autem Japonicos et perdifficilem Japonum linguam discere missionariorum Europaeorum magnum opus et complurium annorum labor est. Nam duplici Japonum utuntur scriptura: una est, quam a Sinis acceperunt, scriptura imaginum, quae imagines “kanji” vocantur, et sunt circiter triginta vel quadraginta millia “kanji” inter se diversorum, quibus singulis singulas volunt exprimi notiones. Altera scriptura est syllabica, quod singulis verborum syllabis singula signa excogitata sunt, quae signa appellantur “kana” et duplici sunt forma. Ne plura: res est tam complicata et operosa, ut qui medias dumtaxat scholas frequentaverint, nondum reperiantur idonei ad omnia recognoscenda “kanji” neque ad omnia scribenda “kana”. Proprio ad eam rem opus studio est. Itaque in libris et ephemeridibus, quae in vulgus eduntur, apponi solent “kanji” signis signa “kana”; quod nisi fieret, perpauci Japonum, quid illis characteribus significaretur, perciperent. Quodsi ipsis Japonibus ea cognitio tam ardua et molesta est, mirumne, si Europaeis multo erit laboriosior?

Ante omnia autem precamur, ut Vestra Reverentia, dignetur missionem Japonicam inclusam habere in suis orationibus sacerdotalibus, quo brevi etiam his hominibus, insignibus cultu et humanitate vereque amabilibus dissipata umbra mortis luceat

splendor illius, qui ipse de se: “Ego”, inquit, “lux sum mundi”.

Reverentiam Vestram grato et devoto animo salutat:

Missio Catholica

Tajimi, Gifu-ken, Shudoin, Japan.

Postscriptum:

En cas que vous désiriez, mon Révérend Père, des timbres postes oblitérés de l’Empire du Japon, soit pour vous-même ou bien pour en faire plaisir à un ami philatéliste, vous n’avez qu’à nous le dire – éventuellement en écrivant quelques mots au revers du Coupon du Bulletin de versement ci-inclus – et nous nous empresserons de vous en envoyer une collection, en signe de notre reconnaissance.