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Presentation of the History of the Evangelization of Japan. The “Marega documents” of the Vatican Apostolic Library

At 11.30 this morning, in the Holy See Press Office, the presentation of *History of the Evangelization of Japan. The “Marega Collection” of the Vatican Apostolic Library* took place.

The following were available to the press for interviews: His Eminence Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça, librarian and archivist of the Holy Roman Church; Msgr. Cesare Pasini, prefect of the Vatican Apostolic Library; Dr. Delio Vania Proverbio, *Scriptor Orientalis*; Dr. Ángela Núñez Gaitán, head of the Restoration Laboratory; and Professor Silvio Vita, Kyoto University of Foreign Studies.

Below are their presentations:

Intervention of Cardinal José Tolentino de Mendonça

The cultural and ecclesial significance of the Marega project

Martin Scorsese's *Silence* (2016) was the last of the three cinematographic adaptations of the eponymous historical novel by Japanese writer Shūsaku Endō. The story of two young Jesuits who landed illegally in Japan in the aftermath of the Shimabara massacre (1637), is the starting point for the description of the tragedy of the persecution of Japanese Christians during the Edo period, when, having effectively ousted the emperor, the Tokugawa shogun took full power in the Land of the Rising Sun and in 1612 promulgated the *Kinkyō-rei*, the ban on Christianity in Japan. When the American director visited the Vatican Library in November 2016, he was shown one of its precious holdings: ancient Japanese documents dating from that period (1603-1868) and which take us back to that precise historical situation. These same documents are the focus and subject of this press conference.

As history would have it, the largest feudal archive outside Japan is now conserved here in the Library. These

papers, collected in the 1930s by the Salesian Mario Marega, have been the starting point for the major cultural cooperation project undertaken by the Library in recent years. This project has seen the Library and the Japanese National Institute for the Humanities undertake the study, restoration and cataloguing of thousands of documents (about 14,000), with dozens of Japanese researchers spending long periods of time in the Library each year. During these years of fruitful collaboration between the Japanese team and officials and researchers of the Vatican Apostolic Library, several conferences and meetings have been held in Rome and in Japan. The first promoter of this initiative, the then Librarian Cardinal Raffaele Farina, was awarded in 2019 with the Order of the Rising Sun, conferred by the Emperor of Japan, for his important work in favour of the “reordering of historical documents of the Edo period collected by the Salesian missionary Don Mario Marega”. But one must also note the extremely intense and decisive activity of the scientific staff of the Vatican Library as a whole. And I would like to mention three names in particular: the Prefect, Msgr. Cesare Pasini, the *scriptor orientalis*, Professor Delio Proverbio, who has assiduously accompanied this project, and Dr. Ángela Núñez Gaitán, head of the Vatican Library’s Restoration Laboratory.

The considerable scientific activity developed in recent years around the Marega Collection is an unmistakable mark of the international interest it has inspired. I think, for instance, of the various publications, among which I recall the two latest titles: Naohiro Ōta, *Reading Japanese documents from the Marega Collection. An introductory manual with selected texts* and Kazuo Ōtomo & Naohiro Ōta, *The Marega Collection in the Vatican Library. A Comprehensive Study*.

Furthermore, the Vatican Apostolic Archive, by opening its archival fonds, both modern and contemporary, to the investigation of researchers, is providing a considerable contribution to the study of the relations between Japan and the Holy See.

The documents preserved in the Marega Collection are fundamental for reconstructing the history of Japanese Christianity. But their historical value goes far beyond this context. The documentation produced constitutes a nuanced portrait of Japanese society in the pre-modern era.

Intervention of Msgr. Cesare Pasini

A significant collaboration between the Vatican Library and Japanese institutions

The Marega Project relates to an early history of Christianity in Japan and a modern history of discoveries and rediscoveries, starting in the 1930s, when Salesian Mario Marega collected many documents that were at risk of being lost, and sent them to Rome. The greater part arrived in 1953 in the Vatican Library. It was not immediately inventoried, like other collections that require careful and complex verification; the wait was prolonged, also because the material was in a language that was not immediately accessible (Japanese) and, moreover, in an ancient script that required special palaeographic skills. The opportunity to bring them back to light came in 2011 when Dr. Delio Proverbio, *scriptor orientalis* of the Library, took them into his care, enabling their restoration.

To proceed, it was necessary to create close collaboration with the Japanese world and with the skills that only its research institutes could offer. In 2013, a joint project was established between the Vatican Library and, for Japan, with the Institutes for Research in the Humanities (NIHU), specifically with Professor Kazuo Ōtomo, project director, with the Historiographical Institute of the University of Tokyo and the Ōita Prefecture Ancient Sages Historical Archives. On the Japanese side, the Kyoto Italian School of East Asian Studies, with Professor Silvio Vita, and the municipality of Usuki, the locality in Kyushu where most of the documents come from, also participated in the project. The Salesian University also participated on the Italian side.

The project involved the reorganization of the material, its conservation and the restoration of a part because of its precarious condition when it was collected by Marega, its full high-definition digitization as part of the project to digitize the Vatican Library’s eighty thousand manuscripts, the study and cataloguing of the documents and

the preparation of a database that would allow access to individual documents and a description of them. The project is now complete (the database with the digitized documents is now available online: <https://base1.nijl.ac.jp/~marega/>). But we are not stopping here: research and studies on the documents made available to everyone (to all those who can read them!) are now beginning, and the very constructive contacts with the Japanese institutions continue.

At this important moment in the journey of the Marega Project, it is important to focus once again on the profound symbolic significance of the collaboration between the Japanese institutions and the Vatican, and all the people involved. By working together on documents that bear witness to a persecution that lasted two and a half centuries, it was possible to build a common experience, which took the form of an exchange of expertise and which was broadened and deepened in mutual knowledge and esteem. We like to express this positive experience under the name of *cultural diplomacy*: culture enables us to establish relations and to deal with even the most delicate or thorny issues with finesse and accuracy. Even where history has inflicted wounds or known contrasts or pitted us against one another, we can build understanding and acceptance, harmony and respect, by researching and investigating, explaining and contextualizing, and making respectful memories of everyone and everything. And we get to know the lives of peoples even better. Not a random message, least of all in our times.

Intervention of Professor Silvio Vita

Don Mario Marega and the collection of Japanese documents

The more than ten thousand documents that constitute the Marega Collection relate in large part to the control of the descendants of Christians, and they enable us to take a look at the rural communities of a certain region of Japan over a time span of almost two centuries, from the 17th to the 19th. They reveal a very “modern” administrative management: individuals and families registered and followed in the salient moments of their lives: births, deaths, marriages, travels, and so on. There are also traces of individual events, which can be linked to other documentation in the Japanese archives. It is important to note that a collection of this size, concentrated in a specific territory, is unparalleled even in Japan.

The papers, however, also tell another story, that of the historic context in which their collector, Mario Marega (1902-1978), lived. And they show us glimpses of the life of a Salesian missionary, between the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Italy and Japan, during the twentieth century. The news from English or Japanese newspapers that report the events leading to the world war, or Japanese provincial life in the fragments of local newspapers, notes taken by him, traces of correspondence, notices of conferences, the passes necessary for movements outside the urban sphere in the last years of the war. The name of Mario Marega was not unknown in the Italian cultural scene of the 1930s and 1940s. Marega had published, through Laterza in 1938, a translation of *Kojiki*, the most ancient text of Japanese mythology that had acquired new life in the construction of the national identity of modern Japan.

The occasion of the discovery of the collection was also the stimulus for the reconstruction of the world of this figure, through the letters and relatives who remained in Gorizia, his hometown, and an extraordinary document: an autobiography in the form of a comic strip, to which Don Marega dedicated his time when, for around a month from in mid-July 1945 he was confined near Mount Aso, the famous volcano in the central part of the island of Kyushu. The era was between two world wars, which left him with a nostalgic memory of the two pre-war periods. His deep bond with the territories provides the backdrop: with Friuli, which never disappears from his letters, and with that part of Japan in which he carried out his pastoral activity, namely Ōita and Miyazaki, two bordering areas connected with the first spread of Christianity more than three centuries before. Miyazaki was the ancient Hyūga, from which Itō Mansho, the boy who headed the first mission to the pope in 1585, came. Ōita, the Bungo of old, was one of the first areas visited by Francis Xavier, where the spread of Christianity was more widespread.

To explain how Marega came to collect such an impressive quantity of documents, it is necessary to bear in mind the context in which he worked, with a network of well-consolidated personal relationships, surrounded by local notables, teachers, police officers, a general, and journalists. It is not difficult to imagine that he was considered a sort of “local treasure” for his translation of the Kojiki. Since the 1920s in Japan, the idea of a “local history” entrusted to “amateur” scholars, in opposition to the academic one of the imperial universities, had started to take shape. This stimulated the emergence of local history associations, with an eye also to work on folklore, inspired by the work of Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962). Don Marega was part of just such a group, the only foreign member. In essence, he was an active participant in this movement to recover local identities. And this is what in certain sense allowed him to put together the collection, which, as a Catholic missionary, in his intentions was to serve to keep alive the memory of a persecution and martyrs of four centuries earlier, a local but also global heritage, to be linked to Rome, the centre of Christianity.

Intervention of Dr. Ángela Núñez Gaitán

Restoring Japanese archive documents

Verba volant, scripta manent. It is true. But text is inscribed on material that must also be preserved and cared for, otherwise it too will fly away. An important phase of the Marega project, preparatory to future consultation and secure digitization of the entire collection, therefore, related to its conservation and restoration.

A preliminary remark must be made here: Japanese material is very different from Western material. Although Western paper restorers are used to dealing with modern Japanese papers and using them for paper reintegration, they are not used to handling ancient Japanese papers and manuscripts, which react very differently to restoration treatments. Moreover, that archival material is of different format (most of them are jō, “crushed” rolls of paper) which has particular diplomatic characteristics.

The key to adequately dealing with these peculiarities was the close collaboration with Japanese experts, who, led by Mutsumi Aoki and Masako Kanayama, introduced the Vatican Restoration Laboratory to the techniques of conservation and restoration of Japanese archival documents. In the course of the project, restoration work was carried out on about 4,600 documents.

In the spirit of collaboration that has characterized the various aspects of the Marega project, the exceptional experience acquired was shared by organizing a conference in the Vatican Library, which allowed a significant group of European restorers to learn the necessary theoretical elements and, for a smaller group of professional restorers, to experiment the main restoration techniques by working directly on original Marega documents chosen ad hoc. This was the first course in Europe dedicated to this type of document: the Western world of paper restoration in fact focuses on works of art, the so-called *kakejiku* and *kakemono*, which can be found in various collections in the West. However, the Marega collection, which is considered the largest archival collection outside Japan, offered an opportunity for Western restorers to learn about and gain experience with this other specific material (the proceedings of the conference - *Preservation and conservation of Japanese archival documents. The Marega Collection in the Vatican Library* - are now published in the series *La casa dei libri* of the Vatican School of Library Science).
