

The Sanctification of Work in a Foreign Cultural Environment

Peter P. Baron

Graduated in Economics from Bonn University and has worked in Tokyo for many years for the German HVB Group, currently as Country Head Japan. He is an honourable Professor of the Gerhard Mercator University Duisburg, Germany and a member of the Board of Directors of SS Seiyaku KK, a Japanese pharmaceutical company. He met his Japanese wife in Germany 32 years ago. They have three children.

Life does not always turn out as we plan it. In 1969 I received a scholarship and left for Japan to complete work on my doctoral dissertation. I had never been to Japan before. I was 27 years old, a product of the late 60s, and in search of a future. Though my parents had provided me with a wonderful example of the warmth and love of a true Christian life, I hardly thought of my religious activities as being very relevant to my own life's goals and orientation. Furthermore, the feelings of alienation evoked in me by my Japanese surroundings, together with my own scholarly travail, made my life difficult and influenced strongly my first impression of Japan. By the time I returned to Germany one year later I was certain that Japan and my future would have little in common.

Little did I know. While still at the University of Bonn I met a young Japanese woman. Two years later we married and by 1974 were on our way back to Japan — I as the Far East Representative for a large German bank and she as a Japanese wife bringing her newly wedded husband home to her native country. My fate was sealed, and I am grateful to have spent most of my life in Japan ever since.

What truly amazes me, as I look back into my past, is that I came to know the full depth and richness of our faith — not in a land predisposed to Christianity such as Germany — but rather in the geographically and culturally remote Christian diaspora that is Japan. What I had never been able to realize in my very homeland became for me in Japan the intimate focal point of my life — the joy and challenge of being a child of God in the middle of my ordinary life.

Yes, a challenge! I had become a businessman, and as such I was compelled to view life as a constant struggle to be successful. As time passed, however, I also realized that there was something missing. My life's fulfillment could never be achieved solely through the accomplishment of my daily business targets. It was Blessed Josemaría, whose spirituality and teachings made me realize that there is another, much more important dimension to my daily business routine, the supernatural, spiritual dimension: the sanctification of my daily work. "Sanctifying one's work is no fantastic dream, but the mission of every Christian — yours and mine»¹. Like the challenges we face in business, the spiritual challenge requires effort and struggle and is no less tangible, because "The work of each one of us, the activities that take up our time and energy, must be an offering worthy of our Creator»². This demanding truth became very obvious to me in the different and ever challenging environment that is Japan.

The Japanese people are capable of working very hard and at great sacrifice to themselves, but they also expect full commitment on the part of their superiors. My own Japanese colleagues are no different in this regard. "Through your professional work, which you bring to completion with all the human and supernatural perfection that is possible, you can and should give Christian standards in the places where you carry out your profession or job»³. I found these words of the Founder of Opus Dei very inspiring for my working situation in Japan.

Amidst the daily business challenges in a different environment such as hectic Tokyo the ambitious, business goal orientated foreign manager is easily tempted to brush aside God and family in favor of the work place. The many explanations, suggestions and encouragements provided by Blessed Josemaría in this regard help me to find direction through these difficult circumstances. Persistently I make use of all the services offered by the prelature of Opus Dei for spiritual formation. Yes, sometimes it is not easy from an organizational point of view to meet these commitments and maintain the recommended norms. However, I have come to realize that it always works if only I try hard enough and leave the results to our Lord — this, despite the fact that the languages of my working environment have always been foreign to me, especially Japanese and even English on occasion.

Japan can be a desolate and remote place for Christians. Of the approximately 128 million residents of Japan less than one percent are baptized. In Tokyo there are only 80,000 Catholics among 12 million residents. Despite these

¹ *Furrow*, 517.

² *Friends of God*, 55.

³ *The Forge*, 713.

intimidating numbers, however, the attentive observer and over-challenged businessman soon realizes that there is no shortage of opportunities to pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. Located in the city of Tokyo alone, there are some 70 Catholic churches and many additional cloisters each with its own chapel! After discovering these amazing facts during my daily quests, I became so excited that I started to record my discoveries. Twenty-two churches later, I had accumulated enough for a small publication, and with the help of my children and friends I created a small, illustrated book in three languages — a work I would have never realized to be waiting for me in Japan.

The Founder of Opus Dei has clearly and repeatedly emphasized that the wonderful message that we Christians share amongst ourselves we must also pass on to others. “Preaching the kingdom of God isn’t only an official task of those members of the Church who represent Christ because they have received sacred powers from him»⁴. As a banker, for example, with many daily contacts there is always the occasional opportunity to mention during a business talk the spiritual aspects of our existence. I have discovered that in my little world in Japan people are appreciative and receptive toward subjects such as God, Christian faith, and/or Church. The little remarks and rhetorical questions exchanged and offered in the spirit of Blessed Josemaría are always met with positive surprise and attentiveness. Real challenges in this regard I am only facing with the members of my own family who know best my weaknesses and faults.

Not only is Tokyo a hectic urban metropolis, but international finance is an extremely competitive and demanding industry. These two conditions together make it easy to lose one’s sense of priority in daily life. The spiritual formation offered by Opus Dei helps me immensely to fulfill my daily work routine while keeping the presence of God with joy, confidence and cheerfulness.

⁴ *Christ is passing by*, 121.