

Considering Mercy among Japan's Buddhist, Shinto and Catholic faiths

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan's Inter-Religious Dialogue Committee as part of the Jubilee Year of Mercy held discussions on the theory and practice of mercy in Buddhist and Shinto faiths.



Japanese has several words corresponding to the English word "mercy." Two terms, *itsukushimi* and *awaremi*, are in common use among Christians, Buddhists, and Shintoists alike. In addition, Japanese Buddhists also use the ancient Chinese term *jih* for a similar idea.

Venerable Toru Satake, a Buddhist monk, explained that *jih* refers to the mind of Buddha, and is comprised of characters meaning "feelings toward a friend" and "the feeling of an inability to keep silent." According to Buddhist belief, the Buddha's *jih* knows no bounds.

Carmelite Father Hiromichi Nakagawa who was part of the panel of speakers at a recent symposium in Kanazawa City said that the Latin word for mercy, *misericordia*, consists of two words, "*miser*" (miserable) and "*cor*" (heart).

"Let us turn again to meet Him who unites his own heart to the hearts of the suffering," said Father Nakagawa. "That is the meaning of this Year of Mercy."

According to Takeshi Mihashi, a professor and lecturer in the field of Shinto studies, the original sense of the term *itsukushimi* long ago was that humans feared the mysterious power of the gods so they ritually purified themselves and set up shrines to them.

However, Mihashi explained that, in modern Shintoism, *itsukushimi* means that the gods "hold humans dear" as parents do their children.

Mihashi pointed out a direct parallel to this idea in Japanese Christianity. When Christians first arrived in Japan, they spoke of God's love not using *itsukushimi* but rather *gotaisetsu*, which means "to hold dear."

"That was a fantastic translation," he said, adding that the mercy of the Shinto gods is also limitless.

Venerable Satake found significance in another Japanese word, "yami," which means "darkness." The Chinese character for this word is comprised of characters that imply "a state in which one cannot hear the voices of others," he said.

This demonstrates the importance of talking to one another as a means to counteract the darkness gripping more than a half-a-million Japanese adults who have considered suicide, he added.

Venerable Satake was referring to statistics released three days before the symposium that said about 530,000 of Japan's 120 million people have attempted suicide. The figures also said that one in four of adults over 20 have considered taking their own lives.

Venerable Satake explained that *jiji* is also found in concrete actions such as the volunteer activities following the Japanese earthquake and nuclear disaster at Fukushima. It "connects one person to another," he said.

The Buddhist priest then showed participants a book of poetry by a Buddhist who died at the age of 75 a few years ago.

The man had been bedridden for about 50 years after his body succumbed to a malady that left him unable to move. His sister's family took him in and cared for him, but he could find no meaning to such a life and hoped only for death.

But then, one day, he chanced to see a television program about Buddhism and realized how fortunate he was. Although he was himself helpless, he had the help of a whole family, with three generations tending to his needs, right down to his sister's grandchildren, who would give him his medicine each day.

"I think discovering the mercy of the Buddha is exactly like this man's discovery," Venerable Satake added.

The Japanese bishops' Committee on Inter-religious Dialogue has over the years brought Catholics together with Buddhists and Shintoists to discuss topics, such as Japan's aging population and the continued need for peace to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II.

Pope Francis declared the "Year of Mercy" encouraging people to "be merciful like the Father." Pope Francis declared an "Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy" beginning past Dec. 8 on the feast of the Immaculate Conception and concluding Nov. 20 on the feast of Christ the King.

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