

# A FAITH THAT DOES JUSTICE

Ando Isamu

## *Personal Introduction*

I was ordained a Jesuit priest in 1964, at the end of Vatican Council II in Tokyo. That happened 6 years after my arrival in Japan as a young scholastic from Spain. My first assignment was at the Socio-economic Institute of Jesuit Sophia University (Tokyo). In 1966 I was appointed province delegate of the Jesuit SELA (Socio-Economic Life in Asia) Committee that coordinated and promoted social apostolate ministries in East Asia. In 1968 I was made Lecturer of Ethics of Economics at Sophia University. From 1972 to 1980 I was Head of the Asian Relations Center at the Socio-Economic Institute of the same University. In 1976 I took Japanese citizenship. In 1979 I became a member of the Executive Committee of the newly founded JRS (Jesuit Refugee Service) in East Asia. In 1981, the Japanese Province opened a social center in Tokyo to which I was moved, and in late 1983, nominated Director of the centre. From 1989 to 1991, I served as Executive Secretary of SELA in the EAO Assistancy. At present I serve as director of the Jesuit Social Center in Tokyo and live in a small community of Jesuit seminarians.

After my assignment to work at Sophia University, I went to live in a poor region of Tokyo where a Jesuit had built a welfare institution for weak children with a free clinic for people in need. While there, I rented an old place in a low-income community that also served as a meeting place for the people in that vicinity and for volunteer university students. Although it was difficult to get Jesuits in our province to understand, a few showed interest in coming to live together. The place was very narrow and poor, and usually there were two or three of us living there. Since then I have experienced that is possible, even in affluent societies, to live

simply as ordinary people do in places that are not ours. It does not obstruct our apostolic work and you feel that you are living the Gospel values and getting closer to people.

### ***Getting Acquainted with Jesuit Social Justice Ministry in East Asia***

Working and teaching at the University I got deeply involved with issues of poverty, development, and gross violations of the rights of the people through the East Asian region, and started an Asian desk at the Socio-economic Institute to collect correct information on existing realities, to offer opportunities of attending challenging seminars and provide exposure for educators and university students.

In the meantime a group of Jesuits from East Asia had started a new network organization in the social apostolate called SELA (Socio-Economic Life in Asia) and the Provincial appointed me as a delegate from Japan. This Jesuit team generated common projects in the East Asian region. The fourth international seminar, the “Educators’ Social Action Workshop” held in Japan in August 1971 for about 200 educators from 11 Asian countries gave me very rich insights into Asian realities.

### ***Jesuit Answers to the Tragedy of the Vietnamese Boat People***

Together with the SELA team I had the chance of visiting Vietnam during the last phase of the American war there; it was a visit that made a definite change in my attitudes and personal life. A few years later, the flood of refugees into Thailand from Vietnam and the Cambodian and Laotian refugees—the “boat people”—prompted me to study the situation in refugee camps of East Asia with a team from Japan. A few of us Jesuits, mostly from the SELA team, realized the need to do something for the Vietnamese “boat people” and other Asian refugees staying in Thailand, and the result was that JRS was started under Fr. General Pedro Arrupe. In an atmosphere of international sympathy for the boat people, Sophia University, where I was working, began programmes of education in Thai refugee camps and created a new system of sending students to do voluntary work there under the leadership of Jesuit Bishop Joseph Pittau, then President of the University.

Our office at the University made it a priority to cooperate with the activities of JRS in East Asia. When, at the end of the seventies, hundreds of

“boat people” refugees began to reach Japanese shores seeking shelter, I discovered the coldness of Japanese society towards them. By now I had taken Japanese citizenship, and the egoistic attitudes of this affluent society hit me very deeply, but at the same time challenged me because I was in a privileged legal position to make the voices of foreign refugees heard as they begged for a safe place in which to survive. I knew well that immigration officials could not openly exert pressure against me because I was already a Japanese national and not a foreigner with a three-year visa. Nevertheless, they did put pressure on me through the authorities of the university where I was teaching. In the meantime, I was officially designated as a resource person by the Foreign Relations Committee of the Japanese Diet when politicians were discussing Japan’s ratification of the International Convention on Refugees.

*Salvation with a Human Face*

One day, a young Laotian in immediate danger of being expelled from Japan called urgently at my office in the University. I didn’t know

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what to do to help him, but I remember that I prayed and prayed, looking for influential persons who could be of help. His case was miraculously solved in no time, and then hundreds of young refugees and displaced persons started to flood the office for advice

and help. Ordinary citizens, some of them university professors and students, gathered together as volunteers; the mass media became sympathetic to the cause, and about 12 lawyers also assisted as members of the group, providing us with a strong image of a professional organization capable of negotiating with immigration officials. Political lobbying was a powerful tool to make desirable changes at that time. There were successes, but only after much expenditure of time and energy. The fact that people who were totally powerless in Japan were officially accepted here was a matter of great joy to all. Whatever their ideologies and beliefs and different

religious approaches, compassion and respect for the human person won the sympathy of most people. I can still now feel the joy of hundreds of young desperate refugees who found themselves wholly liberated and recognized, finally, as human persons after long years of oppression for no fault of theirs. For the first time in my life I understood what “salvation” really is.

Although the official atmosphere had changed and there was more lenient legislation to accept displaced persons, the system, and especially the officials responsible for keeping the strict status quo, remained largely unchanged. In the meantime, collaborators and volunteers were weary of continuing the fight and dropped out, telling themselves that the basic issues had been solved and that difficult cases needing strong and continuous support could be followed by a few dedicated persons. Such a situation brought disappointment and disillusion to all parties concerned.

### *Inauguration of Tokyo Social Center*

At the beginning of the eighties the Province opened the new Social Center and I offered to work there and leave much of my work at the University. The new setup in a center that started to function in a house donated to the Society, but without much preparation. It was no easy task. As happens in other apostolic endeavours there was lack of communication and mutual prejudices. The future of our apostolic involvement, specifically, work with refugees in Japan and close cooperation with JRS, together with other new tasks, brought painful tensions among the three Jesuits working there part time and living in the same house. I was in fact the only Jesuit working full time in the new center. The first two years were difficult and critical till some changes of Jesuit personnel occurred.

On the other hand, since the University absorbed more and more Jesuit efforts, I decided to stop all my University commitments so that, together with two lay staff, I could concentrate on the development of the Social Center as a center of the province. In so doing I lost my social status in Japanese society as a person linked to the University, but I got more freedom to be by the side of those discriminated against.

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Since then, the apostolic priorities of the Center have been:

- ~ To establish strong network links with the Society on issues concerning social apostolate matters, especially in the East Asian region
- ~ To become a channel for Rome's Justice Secretariat, translating into Japanese and introducing to our province the main documents of Fr. General and the Secretariat
- ~ To promote the social apostolate at the province level
- ~ To strengthen the links with Japanese NGOs that work for the transformation of society on the side of the weak and those who are victims of oppression.

Our center is deeply involved with development programs for poor rural communities in Vietnam (15 years) and in Cambodia (5 years).

The work with foreign migrant workers is one of our priorities and I dedicate part of my time to pastoral activities with them in a parish of Tokyo diocese, and together with volunteers, look for solutions to the difficult issues they face in Japan. Workers from Brazil, Peru, the Philippines, and other places comprise more than half our Catholic population in Japan.

Finally, as part of my sharing with those who will read this, I would like to mention that I feel fully satisfied with my life and my Jesuit vocation. I have, of course, experienced disappointments, misunderstandings, blackout moments, and lack of support, but I often find that my heart is at peace and full of joy. I constantly meet with new challenges. A sense of powerlessness is a very common phenomenon, but my natural prayer is: "Lord, now it is your turn. Do something about it".

Were I to enter the novitiate again, I would select the same life style, the same apostolic road.