

Tablet - October 2009



Japan

Religion can take many forms, some more real than others.

I have always wanted to see Mt Fuji, the iconic mountain two hours from Tokyo and the theme of many poems and paintings. We were invited to see it with a Buddhist priest responsible for a small temple in the nearby town. With exquisite grace and courtesy he met us at the bus station and entertained us to lunch after showing us his temple. Temple probably gives the wrong impression. It is a beautiful Shintoist shrine but of modest size and surrounded by urban buildings and backyards. It would be better to think of it as a small parish church of no great ecclesial status. On my last day in Japan and not a little perturbed by the oddness and complexity of Japanese culture it was a revelation. It was a fleeting encounter with something essential Japanese spirit and that explained the reason some westerners become entranced and attached to it for life despite knowing that they will forever be a marginalised foreigner. Fr William Johnston who barely survives his stroke of last year, whom I visited and meditated with in his hospital room at the Jesuit residence, is one of these. They speak of Japan like unrequited lovers who are reconciled to just being in the presence of what they love.

Japanese religion is about coping with life in a dignified, effective way with a bare minimum of dogma and metaphysics. Ritual and aesthetics are more important than answers to Big Questions. 'Sincerity' therefore means something different. The priest described his quiet daily round: early morning and evening rituals prayers, maintaining the fabric of the building, listening to people's problems, visiting the sick. He was calm, restrained with humorous observant eyes yet attentive and generous in his hospitality. He showed us the photo of his young wife who died recently. It sits on a shelf behind the shrine area among the memorabilia of the deceased members of his temple. His two sons who are also now priests and his mother who also comes from a priestly caste now run the temple with him and have, in a way that seems effortless and unconscious, created a little paradise. It is a hereditary family business, as many European churches once were and a religious form that makes the world a better more peaceful place.

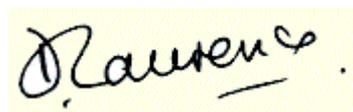
After lunch the father and his younger son, who poured, celebrated the tea ceremony for us in the special room set aside for this ritual. Many Christians have seen elements of the Eucharist

in it. Certainly the gentle mindfulness and naturalness with which they celebrated might influence some of the briskness with which we often say Mass. The he drove us to the cloud-topped mountain warning us that as Mt Fuji was a feminine deity she was unpredictable and we might not see the summit. In fact she was indulgent and we saw it, the bare slopes and as yet un- snowcapped peak of an exhausted volcano.

This family-run temple and oasis of peace was in my mind as I participated recently at the World Congress of Benedictine Oblates, many of them married followers of the Rule Of St Benedict, in Rome.

Speaking with monks in many places in recent years I see how widely it is recognized that the old institutions are crumbling and how much denial of death there still is about it. Many oblates sense this too. The older ones expect to pass on before the familiar forms of monastic life collapse. They are not working for change. One told me sweetly how she loved to sit in the church before Vespers identifying the approaching monks by the sound of their individual footsteps. For others, though, oblation is more about a way of life and personal vocation. I realized we talk much nonsense about the crisis of vocations. The crisis is in our perception and how little we are, religiously speaking, in touch with reality.

New forms of monastic life are necessary and inevitable. Ideally they will be supported by the old institutions practicing the renunciation of self-will that Benedict urges. Or, they will come to birth anyway because the monk within each person must seek expression. Either way the world needs new religious forms that breathe peace, like the small temple I visited, as much as our ailing planet needs trees. Contemplative life, however peripheral it may be to the institution, is the purifying element in religion. The new forms may be smaller, more mixed and flexible in commitment and work. Certainly they will be more focused in the practice and sharing of the contemplative experience that we are hungering for today. Among other things this experience elevates our sense of time. In such places we will have time to take tea and say mass with delight.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Laurence" in a cursive script, with a horizontal line under the name.

Laurence Freeman OSB

Laurence Freeman is a Benedictine monk of the Congregation of Monte Oliveto and also Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation (www.wccm.org)

Tablet Newsletter

Source URL: <http://www.wccm.org/content/tablet-october-2009>