

# Koichi Yamamoto (1940-1983) and the beginnings of Opus Dei in Japan

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**Abstract:** *Biographical sketch of Koichi Yamamoto, one of the first members of Opus Dei in Japan and the first to die, in 1983. His life coincides with the first stage of the beginnings and early development of Opus Dei in his country. Yamamoto helped promote the “Seido Foundation” in Osaka, primary and middle schools in Nagasaki, and residences and cultural centers in other cities.*

**Keywords:** *Koichi Yamamoto – Opus Dei – Japan – Josemaría Escrivá – 1957-1983*

**Abstract:** *Lineamenti biografici di Koichi Yamamoto, uno dei primi fedeli della Prelatura dell’Opus Dei in Giappone, ed il primo a morire, nel 1983, in questa regione. La sua vita coincide con la prima tappa di impiantazione e sviluppo dell’Opus Dei nel suo paese. Yamamoto è stato uno dei promotori di “Seido Foundation” ad Osaka, di scuole elementari e medie a Nagasaki, e di residenze e centri culturali in altre città.*

**Keywords:** *Koichi Yamamoto – Opus Dei – Giappone – Josemaría Escrivá – 1957-1983*

On the morning of September 1, 1983, Koichi Yamamoto died at the age of 43, after a long battle with cancer. He was one of the first Japanese members of Opus Dei. His life coincided with the establishment and early development

of the Work in Japan, the first country in Asia and the first with a Christian minority in which Opus Dei began apostolic activities.

This article tells two stories, which are interwoven and intrinsically inseparable: the life of Koichi, and the launching of Opus Dei in Japan. I will be referring to the latter as briefly as I can, simply to contextualize Koichi's life in Opus Dei; the history of the Work in Japan itself warrants a longer and more detailed treatment. However, weaving these two stories together will show us not only how the Work got started in Japan, but also how Opus Dei and its message were understood and lived by the first Japanese people who encountered it, Koichi among them.

### KOICHI YAMAMOTO

There are very few testimonies written on the life of Koichi Yamamoto, and so it is necessary to rely on oral narrative and the written memories of people who knew him personally, among whom are some of the people who lived the beginnings of Opus Dei in Japan first-hand<sup>1</sup>. These testimonies lack detail, perhaps because Koichi was reserved in character and had a great ability

<sup>1</sup> The sources used in this study are mainly the written memories of people I list below, which are to be found in the General Archive of the Prelature (AGP) or in my personal archive. The present article also contains some of my own testimony, since I had close contact with Koichi Yamamoto from 1963, when I moved to Japan. To reconstruct the beginnings of Opus Dei in Japan, I consulted some of the documents in the report *Japón: relatos comienzos*, to be found in AGP, Sec. A, Leg. 81, Carp. 3, Exp. 16, hereafter *Japón: relatos comienzos*. In AGP there are other narratives and testimonies on the early days in Japan, most written by the protagonists themselves for the processes of beatification and canonization of St. Josemaría. Those used are, in alphabetical order: two testimonies by Fernando Acaso (September 14, 1979) and (February 18, 1977), the former in AGP, Sec. A, Series A.4, Leg. 191 Carp. 1, Exp. 5 and the latter in *Japón: relatos comienzos*; the testimony by José Ramón Madurga (August 1, 1975) in AGP, Sec. A, Series A.4, Leg. 224, Carp. 1, Exp. 1; that of José Luis Múzquiz de Miguel, in AGP, Sec. A, Series A.4, Leg. 230, Carp. 1, Exp. 1; that of Soichiro Nitta (September 8, 1975) in AGP, Sec. A, Series A.4, Leg. 230, Carp. 2, Exp. 15. I will quote from these without repeating their archive reference. Many details of Koichi's life are taken from testimonies of people who knew him directly, or even had close contact with him for years. I wish to thank these people for their kind cooperation in writing out and sending me their memories and answering my questions. The written accounts and notes from these interviews are in my own archive. They are the following people: José Antonio Armisén (May 2, 1998); Kenji Fujie (May 12, 2004); Kioyuki Fuwa (May 20, 2004); Julio Inukai (May 9, 2004); Yoshiteru Kanashiro (June 7, 2004); Shohei Kimura (May 10, 2004); Ramón López Mondejar (June 10, 2004); Takayuki Nakajima (May 12, 2004); Soichiro Nitta (May 7, 2004); Teruko Oosuga (July 10, 2004); David A. Sell (May 12, 2004).

to do things unnoticed, even when he was working on something important and worthy of merit<sup>2</sup>.

Koichi Yamamoto was born on January 18, 1940 in the city of Himeji, some 50 kilometers west of Osaka, in the Prefecture of Hyogo. Himeji is famous for the beauty of its castle, a treasure of Japanese architecture<sup>3</sup>. From early childhood, he lived in Ashiya, his mother's hometown. Later, around the age of eleven, he moved to Suita with his mother, Tamako, and his younger brother, Junji. His father, Jiro Yamamoto, died (was reported missing) in the Philippines during the Second World War, when the two brothers were still small<sup>4</sup>.

The Yamamotos were comfortably off. Their father was the head of personnel in a mining corporation, and he devoted most of his energy to this job – which meant spending long periods of time away from home – until he was drafted. The cosmetics business run by the mother's family did not survive the turmoil of wartime, and they were ruined. Koichi's mother had great aesthetic talent, and was a good pianist and lover of classical music. To support her two sons, on the recommendation of her brother-in-law, Taro Yamamoto, who was on the board of several important corporations in the Osaka area, she studied design and specialized in Western haute couture for women, a very innovative idea in the Japan of those years. For many years from 1951 onwards she was responsible for sales in the haute couture section of the Lanvan boutique run by the Hankyu department stores in Osaka<sup>5</sup>.

After the war, they lived for a while with Taro's family in Ashiya, but it seems that the boys did not like it there, Koichi, particularly, who had a strong and energetic character and was uncomfortable with his uncle's authoritarian temperament. Probably for this reason Tamako decided to move to Suita with her sons.

When he finished high school, Koichi enrolled in the Faculty of Economics of Kwansei Gakuin University (Kangaku, for short) in Nishinomiya city near Osaka. He graduated in 1963 and that year requested admission to Opus

<sup>2</sup> One of them told me: "Koichi had the ability to go unnoticed and not to draw attention to himself in the things he did. It is hard for me to remember anything extraordinary in the time we were together. What I always remember when I think of him, and what was my first impression, was his cheerful, friendly smile". See the interview with David A. Sell (May 12, 2004). David Sell, a U.S. citizen, arrived in Japan on January 12, 1961 to study linguistics at Kyoto University, where he obtained a doctorate. Later he also worked as professor of English.

<sup>3</sup> The castle is also known by the name of Shirasagijo, because its white walls and stylized curves resemble a white heron (Shirasagi) about to take to the air.

<sup>4</sup> Koichi himself told me some of these biographical details. Others are from the memories of Teruko Oosuga (July 10, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Memories of Teruko Oosuga (July 10, 2004). Ms. Oosuga was the head designer of the fashion section of Hankyu and director of the Lanvan boutique.

Dei, which he had first encountered in mid-1959. Opus Dei had been established in Japan in 1958 and Koichi met the Work in his second year at the university<sup>6</sup>.

#### THE FIRST STAGES OF OPUS DEI IN JAPAN

In 1957, during a stay in Rome, Msgr. Yoshigoro Taguchi, the Bishop of Osaka, with the encouragement of Cardinal Ottaviani<sup>7</sup>, visited Msgr. Escrivá de Balaguer to ask him to send Opus Dei to his diocese<sup>8</sup>. One of his hopes was to establish a center of higher education there. St. Josemaría received him, promised to meet his request, and, as a first step, designated Fr. José Luis Múzquiz, one of the first three members of Opus Dei to be ordained a priest, to make a journey to Japan to get to know the country and write a report, before sending other members there to live permanently<sup>9</sup>.

Fr. Múzquiz made the journey in spring of the following year. As soon as he reached Tokyo on May 1, 1958, he sent a letter to the Founder, who experienced a strong sense of joy when he received it, and wrote on the envelope: “First letter from Japan. *Sancta Maria, Stella Maris, filios tuos adiuva!*”<sup>10</sup>. “From that time on”, recalled Msgr. Álvaro del Portillo, “when he was dealing with correspondence, if there was a letter from Japan he would open the envelope and leave it to one side. He would pile up the other letters to read with me later. But the first one he read was always the one from Japan: those members had a special place in his heart, because they were in a wonderful country, with such a difficult language, in which the majority of people did not yet know Christ”<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> After graduating, he continued his studies to obtain a Master’s degree in Business Administration.

<sup>7</sup> Some information about Cardinal Ottaviani’s role is to be found in the words of Msgr. Álvaro del Portillo (December 15, 1976), which are part of the report *Japón: relatos comienzos*.

<sup>8</sup> On this, see Andrés VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *El Fundador del Opus Dei. Vida de Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, vol. 3: *Los caminos divinos de la tierra*, Madrid, Rialp, 2003, pp. 355-359. Msgr. Paul Yoshigoro Taguchi was born in Shittsu, Kurosaki, in the diocese of Nagasaki, on July 20, 1902. He was ordained a priest on November 22, 1928 and consecrated bishop on December 14, 1941 to occupy the see of Osaka and to be Apostolic Administrator of the Prefecture of Shikoku. He was Archbishop of Osaka from July 24, 1969, and was made Cardinal on March 5, 1973. He died on February 23, 1978. See *Anuario Pontificio* (1978), p. 73\* and (1979), p. 985.

<sup>9</sup> See Andrés VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *op. cit.*, pp. 356-357.

<sup>10</sup> Testimony of José Luis Múzquiz de Miguel, in AGP, Sec. A, Series A.4, Leg. 230, Carp. 1, Exp. 1, p. 47; the translation is ours, as is the case of all the documents quoted in this study. On this day, Múzquiz fulfilled one of St. Josemaría’s wishes: to kiss the land of the Japanese martyrs on his behalf. He did so in the city of Nagasaki.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Álvaro DEL PORTILLO, *Entrevista sobre el Fundador del Opus Dei*, by Cesare CAVALLERI, Madrid, Rialp, 1993, p. 75.

After reading Fr. José Luis's report, St. Josemaría decided to send two members of Opus Dei to Japan without further delay. He chose two priests: José Ramón Madurga and Fernando Acaso. Fr. Madurga was the first to arrive, on November 8, 1958, two days before his thirty-sixth birthday<sup>12</sup>. He had belonged to Opus Dei since 1940, and had ample experience in management and formative tasks within the Work<sup>13</sup>. Before he moved to Japan, he had been living in the USA<sup>14</sup>, and it was from there that he took the plane to cross the Pacific and arrive in Tokyo in the afternoon, after the final stretch of his flight, from Wake Island. He was not able to celebrate Mass that day, so his first Mass in Japan was on

<sup>12</sup> He himself relates this in his testimony, *cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> José Ramón Madurga Lacalle was born in Zaragoza (Spain) on November 10, 1922. He studied Engineering in Madrid and Bilbao. In 1947 he began Opus Dei's apostolic activities in Ireland, where he worked as an engineer until 1950. In 1951 he was ordained a priest and moved to the United States to help establish the Work there, where he remained until 1958. He was counselor of the Region of Chicago, to which the Japan region belonged for many years. When he moved to Japan, he acted as Regional Vicar until 1997, after which continued to help in Japan with his example and advice until his death on June 29, 2002. Cfr. *Romana. Bollettino della Prelatura della Santa Croce e Opus Dei*, 17 (2002), p. 153. Various biographical data are in the testimony of José Ramón Madurga (August 8, 1975), p. 74. Note: At the head of each Region, the jurisdiction of which may or may not coincide with that of a country, there is a Regional Vicar (previously called Counselor), with his councils: the Regional Advisory for women and the Regional Commission for men. See *Codex Iuris Operis Dei*, nn. 150-157, in Amadeo DE FUENMAYOR - Valentín GÓMEZ-IGLESIAS - José Luis ILLANES, *El itinerario jurídico del Opus Dei*, Pamplona, Eunsa, 1989, *Apéndice documental*, p. 652.

<sup>14</sup> On more than one occasion I heard him recount how he first came to our country. When José Luis Múzquiz went back to the U.S. after his first trip to Japan, he took with him some textbooks for learning Japanese. When he saw them, José Ramón Madurga made some remark about the challenge of learning the language. It remained at that. But when St. Josemaría asked José Luis Múzquiz who he thought could go to start the Work in Japan, he said that José Ramón Madurga seemed interested. José Ramón explains that this was how he came, and remained. In an account of his memories, Madurga recalls how Múzquiz suggested Japan to him. "Even when he could naturally have said to me without further ado that I should make my preparations for going to Japan, this proposal was made to me in a very delicate way: "If you want...; if you would like the idea...; if you would like to go to this country to start..." leaving all possible ways open for me to refuse". See account (1976) in *Japón: relatos comienzos*. Before leaving for Japan, he went to Rome, where St. Josemaría gave him his blessing, an image of Our Lady and a wooden cross which is conserved in the offices of the Regional Commission of Opus Dei in Japan. In view of the meager economic resources he had, he asked for the Father's permission to go back to the U.S. to get donations. José Ramón had an interesting story about that. On his journey from Chicago to Rome he got into a conversation with the captain of the plane, a Catholic of Irish origin, who gave him a donation of 50 dollars when he heard of the reason for his move to Japan. When Madurga was returning to the U.S., as just mentioned, he ran into the Irish airman again, who thought that he had given up his plan to go to Japan, and asked for his donation back. Fr. José Ramón had a hard time persuading him that he really was going to Japan.

November 9, in the chapel of the headquarters of the Maryknoll Missionaries<sup>15</sup>. One of the first people he visited in Tokyo was the Nuntio, Msgr. Furstenberg, who was pleased that the Work was going to start up in Japan and who gave him some advice about living there. A few days later he went to Osaka, where he stayed for a short time in the residence of the Bishop, Msgr. Taguchi. He wrote immediately to St. Josemaría<sup>16</sup>.

He realized that he should not abuse of the Bishop's hospitality. He would have to find a way of earning a living as quickly as possible, and to prepare for others due to come. St. Josemaría had asked him to find a house and prepare for the arrival of a group of women of Opus Dei. For some weeks he lived in a house belonging to the parish in Ikeda, a town close to Osaka, which was run by the Redemptorist fathers. There, he learned that giving language classes would be a feasible way of making a living, the Japanese being very keen to learn foreign languages. Moreover, in this way he could get to know young people, win their friendship, and talk to them about the Catholic faith and the spirit of Opus Dei that had motivated him to come to Japan<sup>17</sup>. So he began giving English lessons, first in clubs for university students, and then in places which he rented at a low price. Soon after, he found lodgings in the city of Toyonaka, also near Osaka, in the house of a radiologist, Dr. Kazuo Miyata. He lived with this family for around two months.

Meanwhile Fernando Acaso, the other priest, was applying for his visa in the U.S. in the hope of joining José Ramón before Christmas. While still in Washington, he became ill with pneumothorax and had to be hospitalized, which meant that he would not reach Japan until January 1959<sup>18</sup>. When he heard of this unforeseen problem, St. Josemaría asked the members of Opus Dei all over the world to write to José Ramón Madurga as a way of keeping him com-

<sup>15</sup> Because of the liturgical regulations then in force, it was not possible for him to celebrate Mass in the evening. On the next day, he chose the votive Mass of Our Lady.

<sup>16</sup> St. Josemaría sent an answer quickly: "My dearest José Ramón: may God watch over you! It was such a joy to receive your first letter from Japan! A warm embrace. Please pass on my warmest greetings to the Bishop. Your Father Mariano blesses you". "Mariano" was the name he often used when signing family letters, because of his love for the Virgin, and because it was one of his baptismal names. In the same letter, Msgr. Álvaro del Portillo also wrote a few lines: "Dearest *Jotaerre* ["J. R." in Spanish]: We pray from our heart for these first steps in Japan: the first steps for now, and then those that come after. A warm embrace from Álvaro". Letter of November 1958 in AGP, Sec. A, Leg. 272, Carp. 1, EF-581100-03. He was called "Jotaerre" by his mother and, later, by St. Josemaría and the first people of the Work. See the testimony of José Ramón Madurga (August 8, 1975), p. 99.

<sup>17</sup> Other details in the testimony of Fernando Acaso (September 14, 1979), p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> This is described in the testimony of Fernando Acaso (February 18, 1977), p. 1.

pany, because he did not want him to be alone, far away, at such a special time of the year<sup>19</sup>.

On January 18, 1959, Fernando Acaso finally arrived – two days after having celebrated his twenty-seventh birthday. José Ramón went to meet him at Haneda Airport, Tokyo, carrying in his pocket the key to a small house he had just rented in Toyonaka. They stayed in Tokyo until January 31, visiting people to whom Fernando had brought letters of introduction; and José Ramón introduced Fernando to his acquaintances there<sup>20</sup>.

Fr. Madurga did everything possible to help the recent arrival adapt to this new country. He made sure, for example, that the meals for the first few days were all Western, and then gradually introduced Japanese food, on which he was already becoming an expert, after only a few weeks in the country. He encouraged him to adapt to the new tastes of food as a concrete way of assimilating the culture of his new country. He was to repeat this lesson with those who came later. He was quite certain – and used to teach others – that the universal spirit of Opus Dei helps one adapt to the culture and customs of a new country and love the country as one’s own<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> The number of letters and Christmas greetings he received from different parts of the world was such that it caused admiration and astonishment not only in the family, but also on the part of the postman, as it was not usual at that time for someone to receive a lot of foreign mail in a normal house or a post-box. A rumor spread among the neighbors that this young priest living in the Miyatas’ house must be very important. On December 6, 1958, when he did not yet know of Fernando’s illness, St. Josemaría wrote: “My dearest José Ramón: may God watch over you! I have re-read your last letter, which gave me great joy. I hope that Fernandito will soon arrive in Japan. We are praying for you a lot. A warm embrace. The blessing of your Father Mariano”. Letter, December 6, 1958, in AGP, Sec. A, Leg. 272, Carp. 1, EF-581206-01. All the others who signed this letter – among others, Álvaro del Portillo and Javier Echevarría – agreed that the Founder of the Work was very pleased with the news from Japan, and that everyone everywhere was very united with the Father in this intention, and commended him to God. Shortly afterwards a second letter arrived written by Javier Echevarría in which he explained how sorry the Father was about Fernando’s delay. “But, right away he told us – *omnia in bonum!* – that this small difficulty will make us pray all the more, with God’s help, for the work in these islands. [...] From all the Regions they are writing to say that they remember to pray for, and ask people to pray for the Work in Kenya and Japan. They are really enthusiastic about doing apostolate among the Japanese [in their own countries], and they always say that they are overjoyed when the Japanese people they know begin to respond and take part”. Letter of December 20, 1958, in AGP, Sec. A, Leg. 272, Carp. 1, EF-581220-01.

<sup>20</sup> Among these were Professor Kinichiro Saito, a former resident of Netherhall House (a hall of residence for students, which is a corporate work of Opus Dei in London), and Mataichiro Yoshida and Tsunekazu Takagi, two Catholic professionals who had been in contact with Opus Dei in the U.S. and who were the first co-operators of Opus Dei in Japan.

<sup>21</sup> He had learned this from St. Josemaría, who emphasized this principle: members of the Work who went to live in other countries were not to “form a cyst” but to “be transplanted” and grow

On February 1 they “inaugurated” the newly rented house – the first center of Opus Dei in Japan – a small detached house on the east side of the town. Toyonaka was chosen for its location near the campus of Osaka University (originally one of the prestigious “Imperial Universities”) where students spent their first two years<sup>22</sup>.

#### KOICHI YAMAMOTO’S FIRST CONTACT WITH OPUS DEI

During the first months, the two priests devoted long hours to studying the language, an essential tool for the pastoral work entrusted to them by St. Josemaría. At the same time, they got to know as many people as possible, focusing on university students – as the Founder of Opus Dei had done in the beginnings of the Work – especially young Japanese Catholics who might be attracted by the spirit of striving for sanctity through work and the ordinary circumstances of life<sup>23</sup>.

In the spring of 1959 a convention of Catholic students from the Osaka diocese was held in Kobe<sup>24</sup>. Fr. Madurga and Fr. Acaso met several young people there with whom they could speak English – their Japanese was still very elementary – and established friendships with them. One of them, Yukindo Tsurutani, made up for his faulty English with an open, friendly character. He often visited them, and one day he introduced a close friend, a non-Christian studying at his university: Koichi Yamamoto.

Tsurutani-kun<sup>25</sup> was a great soccer fan, not at all common at a time before professional teams and when soccer was played at only a few universities. Koichi loved baseball, like millions of other Japanese youngsters. However, as a good

roots, like a plant, in the new soil in which God had set them. On these criteria, and on the “parable of transplanting”, see Andrés VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *op. cit.*, pp. 313ff.

<sup>22</sup> The help and advice of Mother Dolores, a Spanish nun who had spent many years in Japan, and who was the Prioress of the Convent of the Adorers of the Blessed Sacrament in Toyonaka, were of inestimable value in obtaining the lease agreement for the house. While they lived in this town, one of the priests of Opus Dei said Mass for the nuns every day, and they did various favors for the priests: they cleaned the house completely, gave them bedclothes, blankets and cups which they had obtained from the American army of occupation, and above all, they sent them the first students of English for the classes which they were starting up in the house.

<sup>23</sup> All this is explained in the testimony by Fernando Acaso (September 14, 1979), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> According to the data for 1959, the Catholics of Osaka formed a minority of 28,580 people out of a population of 10,300,000 living in the area of the diocese. The diocese had 84 churches, 66 parishes, 37 diocesan priests and 154 priests belonging to religious orders. Osaka was a suffragan diocese of Nagasaki. See *Anuario Pontificio* (1960), p. 369.

<sup>25</sup> In Japanese, *san* at the end of a name means Mr, Mrs, etc., and *kun* is used for friends or younger people, especially men or boys.

sportsman, he also played soccer with his friend. Although Koichi spoke English fairly well, he decided to join the language classes given at the Opus Dei center. He was lively and energetic and had many interests. He enjoyed exchanging impressions about different topics, and being able to speak with people from abroad was rather like a privilege at the time, since there were fewer foreigners, or *gaijin*<sup>26</sup> than now.

Apart from sport, a favorite subject among university students and young professionals was the economy and the future of the country, now in a phase of growth, after the first post-war period<sup>27</sup>. These were the first years of expansion, and the majority of university students were studying economics. Koichi, a man of his time, was no exception. As mentioned, he was in the second year of Economics at Kangaku in the town of Nishinomiya when he first met Opus Dei.

Meanwhile, the two priests' contacts with university students were increasing. At the end of July 1959, start of the summer holidays, a national convention of Catholic students was held in Yokohama. Msgr. Taguchi invited Fr. Acaso to participate, accompanied by Fr. Hisao Yasuda, diocesan chaplain of the association<sup>28</sup>. There, Fernando met Fr. Kazuo Sawada, the national chaplain, who later would place the oratory of the chaplaincy in Tokyo at the disposal of Opus Dei. The first retreat organized by the faithful of Opus Dei in Tokyo would be held there. Fernando also met several university students from Kyoto, whom he was able to help spiritually for many years.

In addition to the students they were meeting, a growing number of students were joining the English classes, and the house was growing small<sup>29</sup>. While searching for a larger house, they decided that they would set up a residence for

<sup>26</sup> *Gaijin*: literally, a person from another country (informal); the complete term is *gaikokujin* (outside-country-person).

<sup>27</sup> Although most people at that time complained that Japan was a poor country with few natural resources, the fact is that the Japanese economy had accelerated from the mid-1950s when the Japanese recovered the levels of production per capita that they had had before the war. Half jokingly, half in earnest, they talked of the "Jinmu boom", referring to the greatest economic growth in Japan's history since the mythical birth of the nation under the Emperor Jinmu in 660 BC. From the late 1950s onwards, the annual growth rate was around 10% in real terms, a record unequalled by any other nation to date. See Edwin O. REISCHAUER, *The Japanese*, Tokyo, Tuttle Company, 1979, p. 115. The Japanese ceased to talk about their country's poverty from 1964 onwards, when on October 1, just nine days before the Tokyo Olympics, they inaugurated the *Tokaido Shinkansen*: the first line of the bullet train, between Tokyo and Osaka. From then on, Japan would form part of the international community of developed countries.

<sup>28</sup> Fr. Yasuda was later to be appointed bishop and succeed Msgr. Taguchi in the diocese of Osaka.

<sup>29</sup> A third priest had just joined them: on July 29, 1959 José Antonio Armisen arrived from the U.S.

university students to broaden the work of human and Christian formation and would found a language school.

They set their sights on renting a large house in Ashiya<sup>30</sup>. There were obstacles: the shortage of houses for rent large enough for a residence and language school, insufficient knowledge of the language, and above all the lack of economic resources<sup>31</sup>. In the end, on October 2, anniversary of the foundation of Opus Dei, they found a suitable house and were able to rent it without a deposit, thanks to a providential event<sup>32</sup>. The joy at finding the house they had been so eagerly looking for wiped out the scare of their first typhoon, five days earlier – the most devastating of its kind in recorded history<sup>33</sup>. A few days later a letter arrived

<sup>30</sup> The ideal place seemed to be between the two great metropolitan areas of Osaka and Kobe, well connected and easily accessible by railway. For some time they had been looking at residential areas near there, praying all the while. José Ramón and Fernando first investigated various possibilities in the town of Nishinomiya in the Kitaguchi area, where two urban railway lines joined together. When they did not find what they were looking for, they looked at the small residential town of Ashiya, which Professor Kiichi Matsuda of the University of Kangaku had recommended.

<sup>31</sup> As elsewhere, in Japan houses are rented out only on condition that a large deposit (*shikikin*) is paid. On this occasion, the amount that was requested was quite impossible.

<sup>32</sup> “In Ashiya we had searched every possible corner”, Fernando Acaso recalls “when suddenly, on October 2, they called us to visit a house that had been left vacant the day before. As soon as we saw it, we realized that it was exactly what we had been looking for: a gift from our Guardian Angels (whose feast day we were celebrating that day), on our first October 2<sup>nd</sup> in Japan. The rent was more or less within our reach, but the deposit was impossible! We turned to the Guardian Angels again: since they had given us this opportunity, they had to make it affordable. We talked to the owner through the intermediaries, who are *de rigueur* on such occasions, proposing that the owner should do without the *shikikin*. Mrs. Uehata (the owner of the house) told us that she would consult her son, who was living in Hiroshima. We continued to pray. A few days later, Mrs. Uehata received not a letter but a telegram from her son, saying: “If it is for Catholic priests, accept”. Without a deposit! The house, which we had found on October 2, was rented to us, and we signed the lease agreement on the feast of the Motherhood of Our Lady (at that time, October 11). We were still surprised at the reaction of this man, who was not a Catholic. Later on, he himself told us the story of a great *on* (debt of gratitude) which he had, from which we had benefited. During the war he was in a South Asian country, representing a major Japanese industrial company, when he was arrested and interned by the British authorities. But a Catholic priest he knew managed to get conditional freedom for him, so that he could live with him in the presbytery. He then spent several months with this priest, until the time came for him to be repatriated. Since then, as it was impossible to track down this friend and benefactor, he always tried to do good to Catholic priests whenever he encountered them”. This story was told by Fernando Acaso (partly reported in AGP, Sec. P03 1960, pp. 34-39), with some details filled in by Fr. José Antonio Armisen (2004).

<sup>33</sup> Known as the *Isewan taifu*, the typhoon left five thousand victims, including deaths and disappearances, and destroyed some one million houses.

from Rome in which St. Josemaría comforted them after this natural disaster and promised to send “reinforcements” from the U.S.<sup>34</sup>.

The move took a good two days, and Koichi lent a helping hand<sup>35</sup>. The new house, a typical Japanese building from the best period<sup>36</sup>, was given the name Seido Juku, the Seido Academy<sup>37</sup>. Over the years, other centers and corporate works<sup>38</sup> of Opus Dei were set up in Ashiya.

In December Fr. José Luis Múzquiz returned to Japan. He gave a retreat to the people of the Work and spent Christmas with them. He of course visited Bishop Taguchi. Above all, he satisfied everyone’s curiosity by talking about the Founder of Opus Dei, who continually thought of them and commended them to God. He spoke about how much the Founder prayed for them and asked others to pray, and about the affection he had always felt for Japan, which was now growing. Then Fr. Muzquiz needed to find out about all the details of life in Japan, about the apostolate, and about a site for the center for the women of Opus Dei. He knew that in Rome, St. Josemaría would bombard him with questions about his “Japanese” children (by which he meant both those born in Japan and those who arrived from abroad and chose Japan as their new country).

<sup>34</sup> In a letter sent by Ernesto Juliá, he added these lines: “May God watch over my children in Japan! Dear ones, we are always very close to you, especially on the day of the typhoon. I hope that your brothers from U.S. will be with you soon: it is about time! Your Father Mariano embraces and blesses you.” The letter is dated only October 1959, and can be found in AGP, Sec. A, Leg. 273, Carp. 2, EF-591000-01.

<sup>35</sup> We must emphasize particularly the collaboration of Yukindo Tsurutani, who borrowed a small truck belonging to his family’s construction company – his father and older brother were *daiku*, builder’s carpenters – and provided the people necessary to put the house to rights: carpenters, painters, people to wash down the wood (columns, ceiling, floor, etc.) and other craftsmen found in Japan.

<sup>36</sup> The architectural style followed the aesthetic rules usual in Japan: absence of added decorative elements; unpainted wood in the ceilings and the columns, generally made of well-polished tree trunks; floors with *tatami*: thick mats woven out of straw, that are soft underfoot and muffle the sound of walking; *fusuma*: sliding doors made of paper (stuck to a wooden grille) which enable varying the size and shape of rooms. The two rooms chosen for classrooms were European in style.

<sup>37</sup> *Seido* is a poetic name which could be translated as “way of the spirit” or “path of truth”. It is the old name of the area, which consisted of a few villages, one of which, Ashiya (which means “house with a roof of reeds”), gave its name to the whole settlement when the villages were fused together as one city.

<sup>38</sup> “Corporate” works of Opus Dei are educational, health care, formative and other projects started and run by the professionals in charge, who have entrusted to Opus Dei the spiritual direction and doctrinal orientation.

## KOICHI YAMAMOTO COMES CLOSER TO THE FAITH

Once Seido Juku was established, apostolic activity began to increase. The first residents arrived, led by Tsurutani, and the number of students learning English grew rapidly from 1960, when the promised reinforcements from the U.S. arrived. Letters to Rome written at that time breathed joy, as they told of adventures of apostolate and baptisms of Japanese people. They also spoke of people who might ask for admission to Opus Dei<sup>39</sup>.

Koichi often visited the Residence: it was close to his university and his best friend lived there. It was no longer only the English classes and the opportunity to speak to foreigners that attracted him. After a series of conversations with Fr. Madurga, he began to take an interest in the Catholic faith, and later, late 1961 or early 1962, he continued his study of the catechism with Fr. José Antonio Armisen.

It is well known that the apostolate *ad fidem* (bringing people to the faith) is generally a slow task in countries like Japan which lack a Christian tradition. Only a small percentage of those who are interested in the Christian faith and begin to study the catechism are eventually baptized. Although there are some exceptions, the experience of people of the Work is that on the average a person needs at least two to three years to decide. In the case of Koichi, it took almost four years.

This delay had an explanation. Koichi was the elder of two fatherless brothers and felt responsible for his mother and his brother. Both his father's and his mother's families had enjoyed a good social position in the pre-war period, and it was now his duty, as the elder son, to see to their well-being. This probably held him back from making decisions which could affect his family in the future. With the help of Fr. Madurga, he understood that the faith, far from being an obstacle, would give him the strength needed to carry out his responsibilities even more conscientiously.

## THREE IMPORTANT LANDMARKS IN THE HISTORY OF OPUS DEI IN JAPAN

Before continuing with Koichi's story, I need to refer to three important landmarks in the development of Opus Dei in Japan: the translation of *Camino* (*The Way*) into Japanese, the arrival of the women of the Work, and the opening of Seido Language Institute.

<sup>39</sup> Other news in AGP, Sec. P03 1960, pp. 34-39.

From Ashiya, as from Toyonaka earlier, trips were made to Tokyo, where gradually more people wanted to get to know Opus Dei and the numbers receiving classes of Christian doctrine were growing. There was a patent need for a Japanese translation of *Camino*, a book by St. Josemaría already widely read in many countries, in order to make the spirit of Opus Dei better known and to encourage the spiritual growth of friends and acquaintances<sup>40</sup>. It seemed an arduous task for people still at elementary stages of Japanese language study<sup>41</sup>. Finally the first edition of *Michi* (literally “the way” in Japanese) appeared on March 20, 1961<sup>42</sup>. This was a great step forward for the apostolate, as the book soon became known<sup>43</sup> and was reprinted several times<sup>44</sup>. With the help of *Michi*, the Work reached many Japanese Catholics<sup>45</sup>.

The Founder of Opus Dei took a strong interest in apostolate in Japan and wanted his daughters to start work there very soon<sup>46</sup>. This wish was fulfilled on July 15, 1960, when a group of women of Opus Dei arrived at the port of Kobe. That same day, they occupied a spacious house in Shukugawa, a suburb of Nishinomiya, bordering on Ashiya<sup>47</sup>. They found waiting for them there a letter from Encarnación Ortega, the Central Secretary of Opus Dei, with the congratulations of St. Josemaría<sup>48</sup>. On the following day, July 16, the first Mass was held in the Center, which was given the name Shukugawa Juku.

<sup>40</sup> More information in the testimony of José Ramón Madurga (August 8, 1975), pp. 98-99.

<sup>41</sup> José Ramón Madurga, who in his days in Ireland had worked on the first English version, was tireless in his quest for a translation. Takagi-san, one of the co-operators of the Work, who lived in Yokohama, introduced Fr. José Ramón to his parish priest, Fr. Hisayoshi Hino. Fr. Hino, a good writer and a highly cultured man, agreed to translate the book and prepare the first draft from the English version. To check the translation, José Ramón, Fernando Acaso and José Antonio Armisén enlisted the help of friends, university students specializing in English and others who knew Spanish.

<sup>42</sup> Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, *Michi*, Tokyo, Seido, 1961, 198 pp.

<sup>43</sup> A Belgian priest agreed to advertise and distribute the book through a publication of the Oriens Institute which he ran in Tokyo.

<sup>44</sup> Over the years, the text was revised thoroughly. To date, ten editions have been published, and currently a more definitive one is being prepared with the help of the recent historico-critical edition: San Josemaría Escrivá, *Camino*, historic-critical edition by Fr. Pedro Rodríguez, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Madrid, Rialp, 2004.

<sup>45</sup> It is not unusual to meet people, even bishops, who have one of these first editions of *Michi*, and who read it frequently. It has been noted that St. Josemaría is the person who has contributed most to developing the apostolate of Opus Dei in Japan, through the influence of his writings.

<sup>46</sup> More details in the testimony of José Ramón Madurga (August 8, 1975), pp. 97-98.

<sup>47</sup> Information on finding, purchasing and setting up this house before the women of the Work arrived, is found in Fernando Acaso (February 18, 1977), pp. 2-3.

<sup>48</sup> “An affectionate greeting,” he wrote “on the start of your work in Japan, and a blessing for my Japanese daughters, Mariano”. Fr. Álvaro del Portillo also adds a few words: “I pray for the whole group with all my heart, and ask Our Lord that you may work with great efficacy and joy. Álvaro”. In AGP, Sec. 1, Leg. 274, Carp. 4, EF-600700-02.

Before members of the Work went to Japan, the Founder suggested they set up some form of educational institution for university students, since they would not be in a position to establish a university. This would enable them to contribute to the development of the country, and at the same time, spread the Christian message among students and carry out a more extensive apostolate *ad fidem*<sup>49</sup>. José Ramón Madurga encouraged the members of Opus Dei who moved to Japan to specialize in the new methods of language teaching coming into practice in the U.S. This was the case with Desmond Cosgrave, of Irish origin, who had a Ph.D. in Chemistry and who arrived in autumn 1960<sup>50</sup>.

After a few years, the number of students in Seido Juku reached two hundred, and a new building had to be constructed with capacity of five or six hundred students. This was inaugurated in autumn 1962. The new premises bore for the first time the name *Seido Language Institute*, in English, and *Seido Gaikokugo Kenkyusho* in Japanese. In this institution, Koichi provided valuable help for many years.

With experience gained over several years of teaching foreign languages to the Japanese, and given the lack of an appropriate textbook which would take into account the special difficulties Japanese students experienced when trying to speak English, the teaching staff decided to prepare their own system: a complete method, well prepared and easy to teach, and geared specifically to Japanese learners<sup>51</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> Cfr. Andrés VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

<sup>50</sup> Desmond received the Ph.D at Catholic University of America. He also studied language teaching under Professor Robert Lado, one of the pioneers of the Oral Approach. In short, this method involves using spoken language from the first moment. Theoretical explanations of grammar are given in small doses, always preceded (or at least accompanied) by the practical use of the language being studied. He realized that this was a good method to help Japanese people, who usually had attained sound knowledge of grammar at school, to gain oral fluency. "The textbooks and other American didactic material that were used at first were aimed more at Spanish speakers who wanted to learn English in the U.S.", explained Yoshiteru Kanashiro, one of the directors of Seido. "This meant that they placed too much emphasis on structures and rules which did not cause difficulties for Japanese students, while they neglected other areas in which the average Japanese student had a lot of problems. This mismatch was particularly acute in the case of pronunciation". See Antonio MÉLICH, "Seido Foundation. Aventura educativa" in *Documentación*, published by the Information Office of Opus Dei in Rome, June 1996.

<sup>51</sup> Gradually a series of sixteen books was published, which formed the first edition of *Modern English – an Oral Approach* (1965), and which, in its revised editions, came to sell over one million copies. A great deal of work was devoted to the project, which turned out to be a major contribution to language teaching. Experience brought improvements and corrections in the successive editions, and teachers and students of Seido and of other schools played a role in this process. "I look back nostalgically to the vicissitudes of the first recordings", said David Sell. "At that time, we did not have the equipment we have now, and to avoid noise from outside, we decided to wait until after midnight to record the tapes which would serve as a model. But we

Over time, teaching methodology evolved, and Seido also contributed to these advances, producing further series of textbooks, audiocassettes and CDs.

#### THE FIRST JAPANESE MEMBERS OF OPUS DEI AND THE BAPTISM OF KOICHI YAMAMOTO

The first Japanese person to ask for admission to Opus Dei was Soichiro Nitta, on December 28, 1962<sup>52</sup>. Koichi was at that time quite advanced in his study of the catechism, and it was envisaged that he would be baptized before long. He was in the last stretch of his university studies; however, exams were imminent (the academic year ending in March), and he was trying to sort out his professional future. He chose Easter Sunday as the appropriate date for his baptism, by which time all the other questions would have been settled.

The weeks passed quickly, the exams finished, and the degree was conferred. To celebrate, José Antonio Armisén and Desmond Cosgrave organized a trip to the south of the country with Koichi and some other friends. They set out on March 20, starting with a pilgrimage to Ooura, the church in Nagasaki with the image of “Our Lady of the finding of the Christians”<sup>53</sup>, the patron of Japan. They visited other places as well, where Japanese martyrs are remembered. It was a tour of places of the Christian heritage and a catechism lesson for those who, like Koichi, would receive the faith in the near future. Koichi, however, had to return ahead of the others for the graduation ceremony on Sunday, March 24.

had not thought about the dogs in the neighborhood, whose barking mingled with the English conversations which we had prepared so carefully...”. Cfr. Antonio MÉLICH, “Seido Foundation. Aventura educativa” in *Documentación*, June 1996.

<sup>52</sup> Soichiro Nitta, ordained a priest in 1972, is the current Regional Vicar of Opus Dei in Japan. When St. Josemaría heard the news that Soichiro had asked for admission, he wrote a heartfelt letter: “Dearest children: may God watch over my children in Japan! I am very happy about your news. I continue to pray for Nitta: and I bless him especially, asking Our Lord and his Blessed Mother to give him the grace to persevere, *semper in laetitia!* A warm embrace, and for everyone, the blessing of your Father Mariano”. Letter, January 23 1963, in AGP, Sec. A, Leg. 278 Carp. 2, EF-630123-01.

<sup>53</sup> In this church, two hundred years after the persecution of the Christians gave so many martyrs to the Catholic Church, on March 17, 1865 a group of 12 or 15 people from Urakami, a village near Nagasaki, presented themselves before a French missionary. They were a group of *kirishitan*, Catholics who, according to the rumors that had reached the missionaries, had kept the faith for over two centuries without priests or sacraments, except for baptism, with the entire country closed off from the outside world. This image is known as *Beata Maria Virgo de Inventione Christianorum*. See Yakichi KATAOKA, *Nihon Kirishitan Junkyooshi*, Tokyo, Jiji Tsuushinsha, 1979, pp. 570-572.

By that time the question of his future career had also been resolved. Through his uncle Taro, who provided a reference, Nissho Iwai, a major import-export firm based in Osaka, accepted him. The strong character shared by Koichi and his uncle has been mentioned. When the uncle got the job for him, he said: “From now on, you belong body and soul to the company, and you must devote the best part of your life to it”. This exhortation did little more than exasperate Koichi’s independent spirit: he was not willing to dedicate himself to a company to that degree. In fact, after thinking the matter over carefully, Koichi left the company a few months later and returned to the university to get a Master’s in Business Administration.

On Easter Sunday, April 14, 1963, Koichi was baptized by Fr. Armisen; and the godfather was Antonio Villaceros<sup>54</sup>, the Spanish Ambassador to Japan<sup>55</sup> and a good friend of José Ramón Madurga. Some months later, Koichi expressed his desire to join Opus Dei. He formally asked for admission on October 20.

#### THE ESTABLISHMENT OF NEW CENTERS OF OPUS DEI IN JAPAN, AND THE OKUASHIYA STUDY CENTER FOR RETREATS AND WORKSHOPS

By December of that year, 1963, construction work on the Yoshida Student Center, the first Opus Dei center in Kyoto, was nearing completion. On December 8, the Immaculate Conception, the first to go moved in, even though a few things still needed to be finished, such as windows. The first floor housed a language school, scheduled to open at the beginning of January. The language laboratory and classrooms would have to be ready by then. The first women’s center in Kyoto, Shimogamo Academy, a university hall of residence, was inaugurated in spring 1964.

In April 1964, Koichi entered graduate school to work for an MBA. He also started work at Seido Language Institute in an administrative capacity, and

<sup>54</sup> Cfr. Baptismal register no. 305, in the parish of Ashiya (Osaka). Koichi was confirmed on March 6, 1966 in the same parish.

<sup>55</sup> A few days earlier, in Kyoto station, Koichi had noticed a foreign gentleman, rather elderly and dignified in appearance, who seemed to be uncertain as to which train to take. He offered help. The man wanted to go to Kobe; Koichi was going in the same direction and accompanied him. The gentleman was Antonio Villaceros. Taking advantage of the fact that he was close to Ashiya at that time, José Ramón Madurga invited him to be the godfather of this “boy he had met in the train”, which he gladly accepted. Koichi chose Antonio as his baptismal name in honor of his godfather.

later giving English lessons to groups of beginners<sup>56</sup>. He combined this job with his studies until mid-1966.

In September 1965, the Seido Juku residence moved to a four-story building next door to the Seido Language Institute, with room for more residents. This, together with the native Japanese members now in the Work, was a great step forward for apostolate. In the new residence Koichi carried out intense apostolic work, particularly with students from the language institute: university students and young professionals. There was a growing number of extra-curricular activities and cultural courses which, under titles such as “Mind of the West”, proved very useful for introducing participants to the truths of the faith. Students interested would continue on with a systematic study of the catechism. Of these students, some were baptized, and a few discovered their Christian vocation in Opus Dei. This was the case of Eguchi, Fuwa and Usui.

Meanwhile, the activities of Opus Dei were increasing and St. Josemaría felt that the time had come to establish an adequate Center for the formation of the members of the Work and many other people, Catholic and non-Catholic, who sought spiritual help from the Work. In May 1965 he suggested studying the possibility of setting up in the immediate future a house for retreats and workshops<sup>57</sup>.

The first idea was to purchase a house near the town and easily reached<sup>58</sup>, thinking of the Rokko Mountains just behind the city of Ashiya. The search was on, but some houses considered were ruled out because they did not offer all the necessary conditions. Building something new would be difficult, as the area was a national park scarcely built on at all. In the end, in spring 1966, an ideal place was discovered: a piece of land in a newly developed area of the mountains, in Ashiya City itself, fifteen minutes away by car. The new retreat center was built and given the name of Okuashiya Study Center, because it was “behind” Ashiya<sup>59</sup>. The Center’s doors opened in summer 1967 and, as St. Josemaría foresaw, it has since yielded abundant spiritual fruits.

<sup>56</sup> The complete Seido program for English covered two years, four semesters, taught by native speakers with the collaboration of a Japanese teacher the first semester. At the beginning, Nitta and Yamamoto were among those who specialized in this part of the program.

<sup>57</sup> Further information in the testimony of José Ramón Madurga (August 8, 1975), pp. 102-103, and the account by José Ramón Madurga (1976) in *Japón: relatos comienzos*.

<sup>58</sup> St. Josemaría gave them very concrete instructions on this point, which are explained by José Ramón Madurga (August 8, 1975), p. 102.

<sup>59</sup> *Oku* means *behind* or *in back of*: hence the name Okuashiya (behind Ashiya), which was given to the retreat house. The area in which it is situated is called *gorogoro*, which is onomatopoeic with the sound of thunder, and is the number 5656 in Japanese, indicating that the place is 565.6 meters above sea level.

TO THE ROMAN COLLEGE OF THE HOLY CROSS<sup>60</sup>

In March 1966, Koichi finished his graduate studies. Shortly afterwards, he applied for a grant from the Spanish embassy to further his studies in Spain. After qualifying, he received a one-year grant, and decided to use it at the Institute of Spanish Language and Culture in the University of Navarra, in the city of Pamplona. He worked on perfecting his Spanish while taking institutional Theology courses in the International Center of Studies at the Colegio Mayor Aralar. In October 1967 he moved to Rome, to the Roman College of the Holy Cross, where he continued studying Theology until returning to Japan in June 1970.

The Roman College of the Holy Cross was founded in response to the need for Opus Dei to extend its activities throughout the world. St. Josemaría thought it essential that some of the first members in each country should be formed close to the Founder, or in a center like the Colegio Mayor Aralar in a country where the presence of the Work had been consolidated for some time. The first members needed to be immersed in the spirit of Opus Dei so as to convey it to those who were to come. The Roman College was an opportunity to experience the true universality of the Work living with people from other countries who shared the same spirit<sup>61</sup>, in the city of Rome, the seat of the successors of St. Peter and the symbol of Catholicism. In this College, they could also train for the priesthood, if that was what God had called them to.

Given these circumstances, and awareness of the particular situation of Japan, it was decided to send to Rome the first two Japanese young men of Opus Dei, Soichiro Nitta and Koichi Yamamoto. The decision entailed no mean sacrifice at this time of early expansion, but everyone (certainly including the two concerned) realized that it was necessary. To prepare, Soichiro and Koichi began Latin classes: they would need this language for their ecclesiastical studies in Rome<sup>62</sup>.

In Rome, Koichi lived close to St. Josemaría for almost two years. Soichiro Nitta arrived in Rome a year later than Koichi<sup>63</sup>. In the Eternal City they coin-

<sup>60</sup> Information on this is found in the testimony of José Ramón Madurga (August 8, 1975), p. 105.

<sup>61</sup> Opus Dei was born universal, Catholic, above local idiosyncrasies and customs. From the outset, José Ramón Madurga strived to inculcate everyone with this universal spirit: it was necessary to keep this spirit alive and to prevent shallowness or carelessness from leading to what might be called a “Japanese” Opus Dei, thus losing the true nature of the Work.

<sup>62</sup> The classes were given by Fr. Tsutae Hamazaki, Ashiya parish priest and a competent teacher. He was very glad to cooperate in preparing two professional men for ecclesiastical studies.

<sup>63</sup> See the testimony of Soichiro Nitta (September 8, 1975), p. 75.

cided with Katsushi Sasano, a *nisei*<sup>64</sup> Japanese born in Brazil who later went on to work in Japan. For the first time, there were three Japanese men in the Roman College of the Holy Cross, and they all experienced the great affection which the Founder had always had for Japan<sup>65</sup>. In Spain, Koichi had also met a Mexican *nisei* of the Work, Julio Inukai Tomida, who would also be leaving for Japan some time later.

Koichi returned to his country in summer 1968 to stay for one month, helping with educational activities that had been organized in the newly built Okuyashiya center<sup>66</sup>. St. Josemaría mentioned in a get-together in Rome, that Koichi was doing good work in that center. Before he left, the Founder had given him a monstrance for Okuashiya and a basket of cherries for his mother<sup>67</sup>. From the time Koichi arrived back in Japan, it was obvious that he had benefited greatly from his stay in Spain and with the Father in Rome. He would be able to help enormously in setting up all the projects St. Josemaría had in mind for Japan. In fact, Koichi's return gave a huge boost to apostolic activities. From the start he took charge of the initial training of those who were gradually coming to join Opus Dei.

#### SEIDO FOUNDATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF EDUCATION

During those years, the number of students at Seido Language Institute had been on the increase, and as time passed the new building also grew small. In 1971 the language school was incorporated into a new educational organization named Seido Kyoiku Sokushin Kyookai (Seido Foundation for the Advancement of Education), which was recognized as an institution of public interest by the Government of the Prefecture of Hyogo. In addition to the Language School and the Cultural Center attached to it, Seido Foundation included a Publications Department and the Okuashiya Study Center. The same year, a new four-story building was also constructed, which is still home to Seido.

Seido Foundation has supported educational projects in other parts of Japan as well (Kyoto, Nagasaki and Oita), notably Seido Gakuen, an educational corporation with two schools offering separate education for boys and girls at

<sup>64</sup> *Nisei* (second generation) is the way children of Japanese emigrants are known. If the parents register their children's birth at the Japanese Embassy – as was the case with Inukai and Sasano – the children are thereby granted Japanese citizenship.

<sup>65</sup> Various journals have published a photograph of the three Japanese together with St. Josemaría, taken on the occasion of Koichi's leaving for Japan at the end of his stay in Rome.

<sup>66</sup> In the testimony of Soichiro Nitta (September 8, 1975), p. 55.

<sup>67</sup> Memories of Soichiro Nitta (May 7, 2004).

the primary and middle-school levels, and a catering school in Nagasaki. There are various residences for professional people and students in Ashiya, Nagasaki, Kyoto and Oita. In the Prefecture of Kyoto a second Foundation was established, which includes the women's university residence Shimogamo Academy, and Yoshida Student Center, for men.

Koichi returned to work at Seido. As he knew the laws and legal procedures in force in Japan, he took direct charge of handling legal matters with the Prefectural governments – which meant a heavy workload over many years. All who worked with him on these projects, and those with only sporadic contact with him, concur in emphasizing his industriousness and the serenity of his character. He never lost his temper, and he always seemed to be master of circumstances, however problematic. Julio Inukai mentions: “I remember, for example, that while the present Seido building was being put up, there were several neighbors who were opposed to it, in a way that was sometimes rather violent, and they even formed picket lines to protest. Those were difficult moments. However, with a lot of tact and supernatural vision, things gradually came out right, without anything dramatic happening. This also happened in other difficult or complicated situations. You noticed that he had a great sense of humility: he never paraded the matters which he was settling”<sup>68</sup>.

#### WHAT WAS KOICHI LIKE?

I have mentioned his strong character, but he was also gentle and cheerful. Physically, too, Koichi was a strong man, a good sportsman who loved being in the open air, even though his health was always a little delicate, and he was rather thin. Those who knew him agree that he was a normal man, somewhat reserved, but responsible and warm-hearted. Underlying these qualities was an energetic, decisive temperament.

His physical constitution, his mentality, his way of doing things and even his way of walking were as close as they could be to what is typically Japanese. He was a man one hundred percent Japanese who loved his vocation to Opus Dei, and had a great love for St. Josemaría and the other people of the Work, particularly those whom it was his task to direct. To his mission of formation he brought humility and a desire to serve. For many years he was simultaneously the director of a center for the formation of students and another for professional people. In both his work and his apostolic activities he never showed any

<sup>68</sup> From the interview with Julio Inukai (May 9, 2004).

sign of being rushed or overwhelmed. He acted without hurry, but without rest, with an outer serenity that surely reflected his inner equilibrium.

In spring 1979 – says Kenji Fujie – I finished my degree in the School of Education at the University of Nagasaki and from April onwards I started work as a teacher in a Kobe school. Yamamoto-san guided me from the beginning in various aspects of my work, giving me valuable suggestions. Although there was an age gap of around sixteen years, I never felt inhibited when I talked to him. His attitude towards me was that of a father. When I came back from my classes, or didn't feel well, he was always the first person to say: "Today you look tired" or "Ken, why don't you go to bed early?" Just by doing this, he would take a weight off my mind. He was also concerned about my belongings and the state of my room.

Early in 1980 I fell seriously ill with an intestinal infection that was uncommon in Japan, and I had to be taken for a few months to a clinic in the city of Izumo, where my parents lived. During those months I often had visits from people of the Work. Koichi told me I should sleep fifteen hours a day to get well soon. As far as my spiritual life was concerned, he proposed a simple and flexible program.

Thanks to everyone's prayers and help, I was discharged in June of the same year. Around that time, several young people asked for admission to Opus Dei, and there was a lively, cheerful atmosphere in the center of the Work at Ashiya. Koichi, who was the director of the center, was busy preparing the classes of formation for them. Fairly often, he would ask me to correct them about something. Sometimes I did not realize that someone needed to be corrected on some small matter of character or manners, and so on, and I admired the way that Koichi noticed everything we needed and helped us to struggle to be more faithful and more generous. When he gave the circle or a talk, it was always easy to understand, with plenty of concrete examples which went straight to the point, and which helped us to make clear resolutions about what needed improving<sup>69</sup>.

Many remember the spontaneity that characterized his usual relations with people, accompanied by his smile, and the peculiar charm of his colloquial speech in the Kansai accent (the area of Osaka and Kobe). And they also recall how easy it was to understand the examples he gave in his classes of Christian formation. And no one forgets the impact which a heavy correction made, when that was necessary. In this context, Akio Ozaki still remembers the strong impression he received when Koichi scolded two people from Kyoto who had come for lunch in Ashiya unannounced, thereby causing difficulties for the kitchen staff<sup>70</sup>.

<sup>69</sup> Memories of Kenji Fujie (May 12, 2004).

<sup>70</sup> These are memories which Akio Ozaki reported to me in 2004.

Koichi rarely talked about personal matters, about which he was very reserved. But Julio Inukai remembers one rare exception:

When I met him in Pamplona, in 1966, he told me some details of his conversion. He was quite convinced that the faith, and his vocation to the Work, were the greatest grace that he had received from God. For me, this was the first experience I had had of talking to a convert from Japan who had received doctrinal formation in the Work. Normally, Koichi was very reserved. But on this occasion he talked with such enthusiasm and joy about his conversion, that I was very moved. This conversation still remains in my mind. Then, over the years, once I was in Japan, I was able to witness his constant gratitude to Our Lord for this great gift, which God wanted to crown with the vocation to Opus Dei, which he was able to keep so faithfully until the end of his life.

I also remember in gratitude how much he helped me in those early days of my stay in Japan. Discreetly, without drawing attention to it, he generously devoted a large part of his time to correcting my Japanese and explaining details of Japanese life to me. He lived charity in a very natural way, and during that time I felt completely protected in my family life.

During the early years I had the opportunity of working with him. I was greatly struck by his sense of responsibility in his work, and I saw borne out what I had heard our Father say on several occasions: that one of the human virtues of the Japanese was hard work. Koichi had this virtue very markedly [...]. There is no doubt that he was a great help to Fr. José Ramón. You could say that he was his “right arm”<sup>71</sup>.

He was proud, in a healthy way, of traditional Japanese values: hard work, tidiness, honesty, respect and veneration for parents and superiors, and so on. He lived these intently, and tried to instill them in others. “During my first months in Japan”, Yoshiteru Kanashiro remembers, “he frequently insisted on the importance of punctuality: to help to jolt me out of my habit of ‘Brazilian informality’, he explained to me with great patience and kindness that what had rescued Japan after the disaster of the war was the spirit of self-sacrifice and order, which was rooted in a very complete system of education, and in the ethical values of the workplace. In this explanation, he went from the general to the particular, concluding with the importance of cultivating punctuality. And if I still did not improve, he would tell me off”<sup>72</sup>.

Another aspect which many people stressed about talking to him was that he never spoke a word too many. He thought about what he had to say, and when someone asked him about an especially delicate issue, he tried to find the appropriate solution, consulting when necessary people he thought were the right ones to solve the problem. Kioyuki Fuwa, who worked for many years in

<sup>71</sup> Memories of Julio Inukai (May 9, 2004).

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Yoshiteru Kanashiro (June 7, 2004).

the Publications Department of Seido Foundation, found in Koichi, in his own words, “a true master of my life”.

From the time that I met him, when I enrolled in Seido in 1969, Yamamoto-san was always an object of my admiration. He spoke English and Spanish fluently, he had lived and studied in Europe for several years, and he was concerned not only with the academic side of his students – he easily managed to direct his conversation to more intimate areas of each person’s character. The fact is that, he gave me classes for only one semester, but as I went regularly to Seido, we formed a firm friendship.

At first I thought it would be hard to talk to him, because his appearance was serious and he seemed a little inexpressive. But after our first conversation, this initial impression was dispelled. Once I discovered that he was a *sempai*<sup>73</sup> of my university, my feeling of respect towards him grew. He was always warm and very generous. He helped me a lot in many different ways. From what he said, I always understood that he prayed for me and brought to his personal prayer the things I told him. He welcomed me with a generous heart when I consulted him on matters which at that time seemed [to me] to be enormous problems. Curiously, most of them were solved in the course of our conversations, and with great charity he helped me to understand that these “problems” were not as big as I thought. For me, he was not only my boss at work, but also a true spiritual director. I always felt full of peace after talking to him about so many things – my work, my family, my interior life... At the end, we almost always talked for a while about baseball, which we were both crazy about.

Only twice was Koichi’s reaction not what I had hoped. The first time was when I was considering leaving my job because I was angry about a personal matter. After listening to me, he said loudly, but without changing his expression, “Go to the oratory and cool your head!” I have to admit that I was disappointed. I felt this as a rebuff, because I had thought that he would understand me as usual, and stand by my side. In my words he saw a lack of rectitude and an exaggerated sense of *amour propre*, and he told me to examine my conscience about these. On the other occasion, the issue was a family matter, to do with the education of my children. With great naturalness, he said to me “It would be better for you to consult Madurga *shimpu*<sup>74</sup> about that”, and he went straight off to find him. I was always impressed at how much Koichi

<sup>73</sup> Literally, *sempai* means “previous person” or “he who is before”: this denotes an order of precedence. It is always used in the school or university setting to mean students higher up in the educational system, vis-à-vis those who are lower down, who are known conversely as *kohai* with respect to the others. In Japanese society, the relations between *sempai* and *kohai* are important as a manifestation of the group to which people belong (school, university, etc.) and generally last for life. Traditionally, the *sempai*, particularly when people belong to the same club or association, acquires a strong sense of *gimu* (obligation) to see to the welfare of the *kohai*, while the *kohai* is expected to respect the *sempai*.

<sup>74</sup> The word priest in Japanese, specifically Catholic priest, is translated as *shisai*, but the faithful generally say *shimpu*, or *shimpusama*, which is more formal, when addressing a priest.

respected Fr. José Ramón. At that time (it was the mid-1970s) they were both fully occupied with setting up Seido Gakuen, for the Nagasaki schools, and it was necessary to overcome a lot of difficulties that sometimes defied the imagination. I remember that Koichi talked frequently about the drive and vitality with which Fr. José Ramón tackled this issue, and about how Koichi tried to back him up with all his might, even though he sometimes felt that the effort was too much for him<sup>75</sup>.

Koichi was always prepared to support Fr. José Ramón, the Regional Vicar, wherever necessary. Itsuo Takeda, an elderly man who had worked as a janitor in Seido for many years, summed up Koichi's figure briefly but accurately in words which can be translated literally as "Yamamoto-san was an outstanding student in the school of Madurga".

#### SEIDO GAKUEN: HIS LAST ADVENTURE

In 1972, St. Josemaría wrote a letter to Koichi in which he encouraged him in his work and told him that he was praying for his mother in her path towards the faith<sup>76</sup>. It was one of Koichi's greatest joys that his mother did in fact receive baptism. When he found out that St. Josemaría was also praying for her, he felt certain that she would be baptized. His joy was complete when, in 1978, Mrs. Yamamoto decided to join Opus Dei. Koichi's brother Junji also became a Catholic.

Meanwhile, the apostolic work had grown. More people were asking for admission to Opus Dei, and some Numeraries had been ordained priests<sup>77</sup>. The moment had come to begin some apostolic undertaking of greater magnitude, and St. Josemaría proposed that they start to think seriously about setting up two schools, one for girls, another for boys, which could be corporate works of apostolate, i.e., with Opus Dei taking responsibility for the spiritual direction. It took some time for this proposal to bear fruit. After studying the factors in favor and against, the city of Nagasaki was chosen as the site. The idea was to

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Kioyuki Fuwa (May 20, 2004).

<sup>76</sup> Letter from St. Josemaría to Koichi Yamamoto, September 14, 1972, in AGP, Sec. A, Subseries A.3-4, Leg. 303, Carp. 2, EF-720914-2.

<sup>77</sup> Koichi, like the majority of numeraries and associates of Opus Dei, was not ordained to the priesthood. For the numeraries and associates of the Prelature, ordination is not perceived as a goal to which they aspire; all try to live, in St. Josemaría's words, with "a priestly soul and a lay mentality". Only a small number, those who are strictly needed for the pastoral needs of the Prelature, are ordained by their own free decision and an invitation from the Prelate. See Amadeo DE FUENMAYOR *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 490ff.

create an entity which would provide Christian formation – which would teach in a way that was Catholic – but which would not be an officially Catholic institution. The Archbishop of Nagasaki, Msgr. Satowaki, understood this idea very well, and from the start encouraged them in their project. This was an essential step, but only the first of many which would have to be taken, all fraught with difficulty.

Nagasaki was chosen because it has always been the prefecture with the greatest density of Catholics in Japan<sup>78</sup>. A second reason: land prices were much lower than in cities that were, perhaps, more important. The measures needed to carry out this project were set in motion in early 1975, and on the morning of June 26, a couple of hours before he died, St. Josemaría mentioned this in a get-together with women of the Work in Villa delle Rose, a center of studies in Castelgandolfo. To a Japanese woman who was present, he said: “Pray for your country, because you are a great people. Pray for people to meet Christ and love him, and serve him. You already know that they are preparing to start a school in Nagasaki. We have to pray so that the obstacles disappear, so that they can start to work there as soon as possible”<sup>79</sup>.

This is not the place to go into detail about what the “adventure” of the schools entailed. After the legal entity Seido Gakuen, capable of building the schools, was formed, they had to find land of the right size in a suitable place, and then persuade fifteen owners of adjoining pieces of land in a mountainous area to agree – by means of long conversations which often went on long into the night. They had to solve engineering problems, moving large volumes of earth in order to create a flat surface. They had to overcome economic difficulties, and so on. Suffice it to say that this was a Herculean task for several people, which was to last nearly seven years – and Koichi and José Ramón Madurga were the main moving force behind all these activities. Finally, in 1978, the school for girls was opened. The boys’ school opened in 1981. As the schools had begun as elementary schools, it was later necessary to apply for approval as junior high schools for a continuing education into the higher grades. Legal approval would arrive in a sudden and unexpected way at the end of 1982, after asking St. Josemaría’s help in solving some serious difficulties that had arisen.

<sup>78</sup> According to the last statistics (2004), the Japanese Catholics are a 0.355% of the total population of 127 million. The actual number might be close to a million due to immigrants (many of them transitory) from traditionally Catholic countries (notably Brazil, Peru, the Philippines and Vietnam). Around 7% of the population of Nagasaki is Catholic.

<sup>79</sup> Notes taken at a get-together with St. Josemaría on June 26, 1975, in AGP, Sec. P02 1975, p. 865.

## ILLNESS AND DEATH

During this period, it is hard to know exactly when, Koichi began to feel unwell. He often felt tired and had to go to bed early. He himself did not pay much attention to this and did not say anything about his health. Ramón López Mondejar, however, a doctor who was living in the center in Ashiya at the time, noticed that Koichi needed to visit the bathroom frequently. He had intestinal problems and was suffering from abdominal pains.

In 1980 he underwent a medical examination, but nothing was found. In late autumn 1981, however, his abdominal pains were growing in intensity and frequency, and he suffered increasingly severe anemia and some rectal hemorrhages. This time the doctors found colo-rectal cancer, which had reached an advanced stage. It had gone undetected previously due to its location in the hepatic angle of the colon.

Soichiro, who accompanied him to the hospital, remembers that when the doctors palpated his stomach, they detected the tumor and muttered “apple core”, which was what “adenocarcinoma of the colon” is called in medical jargon because its radiographic image has the shape of an apple that has been bitten.

The first operation was performed in mid-November. A few days later Koichi received a letter from Fr. Álvaro del Portillo, successor of St. Josemaría as head of Opus Dei, in which he expressed the great love with which he was accompanying Koichi at those moments. In the letter, he said “I ask intensely for our Father’s intercession, praying for a quick and complete recovery, so that you can carry on *cum gaudio et pace*, working for many years, continuing to do Opus Dei in that beloved land of Japan, with all the love of God that you, through his grace, are placing at his service. Commend yourself to our holy Founder, so that he will help you to abandon yourself in the hands of God, who knows what is best for his children”<sup>80</sup>.

The operation went well, the tumor was removed and the area was cleaned as much as possible, but the doubt remained as to when a metastasis might occur. The prognosis was not particularly optimistic: the doctors talked of two years at most, perhaps less. Nevertheless, as Koichi was young and had a strong will, he recovered quickly: around two months later he was leading a nearly normal life. During his illness he had carried out an intense apostolate among relatives and acquaintances. Msgr. Álvaro del Portillo expresses his joy in a letter of February

<sup>80</sup> Letter from Msgr. Álvaro del Portillo to Koichi Yamamoto, December 3, 1981, in AGP, Sec. B, Series B-1.3, Subseries B-1.3-4. The letter was a reply to another one from Koichi, written when he was discharged from hospital.

1982, in which he states that he was still praying for a complete recovery<sup>81</sup>. He added:

It gave me joy to learn that Our Lord has taken advantage of this illness to give his supernatural aid to many of your relatives, who have been so moved. Congratulate your brother Junji and ask him to pray for me, as I am praying for him with all my heart, as I do for your mother.

I have a great desire to see you all, and I constantly beg Our Most Blessed Lady that she will soon grant me the grace to be with my children in Japan.

From your Father Álvaro, who loves you, embraces you and blesses you with all his heart.

Koichi spent the rest of the year free from major health problems, although he had to visit the hospital for periodic check-ups and medical treatment. He carried on his work as administrator in the Regional Commission of Opus Dei in Japan, and as the director of the Ashiya center.

After the operation he seemed to be more willing to externalize his capacity for affection, which he showed in many details – countless small things which left their mark. One of these things has stayed in my mind particularly. On November 27, 1982 we were all waiting anxiously for Pope John Paul II to establish Opus Dei as a Personal Prelature. We knew that the announcement would be made around midday Rome time. They would inform us by telex once the news had been made public. I remember that around eight o'clock that evening (the time difference was about eight hours), Koichi was walking around nervously in the office of the Regional Commission, glancing furtively from time to time at the machine. At 8:30 p.m. the expected telex arrived. He took hold of it at once and went to José Ramón Madurga. There was an outburst of joy throughout the house. And when we had given thanks to the Blessed Trinity and to St. Josemaría, Koichi disappeared, to return a few moments later with a tray of sweet cakes and a bottle of champagne, to everyone's delight.

From 1983 onwards, his health broke down rapidly. Shohei Kimura remembers that one day, in mid-April 1983, when they were going out of the

<sup>81</sup> Letter from Msgr. Álvaro del Portillo to Koichi Yamamoto, February 20, 1982, in AGP, Sec. B, Series B-1.3, Subseries B-1.3-4. There is another letter from Msgr. Álvaro del Portillo accompanying the one to Koichi, dated February 22, 1982, addressed to José Ramón Madurga. After writing that he was praying for St. Josemaría to intercede for Koichi's complete cure, he added: "It gives me joy to see the love and delicacy with which you have cared for him over these months, putting at his disposal all the human and supernatural means you have within your reach for him to be well cared for at every moment. I am sure that Koichi's illness – a sign of Our Lord's affection for your Region – has helped you to love each other more, and to be very united; and I do not doubt that this suffering, which you bear with such love for God's will, will yield wonderful apostolic fruit".

dining-room, Koichi went up to him to thank him for everything he had done for him. Shohei was taken aback, and did not know how to respond. The same thing happened several times with other people. At that time, no one realized what that meant. Later, they would come to understand that that was a discreet way of gradually saying farewell to all of us. From the very first moment, he had realized the gravity of his condition, and he knew he did not have much time left. He wanted to make the best he could of that time, putting in order – though he had always been orderly – all the papers and documents that he had dealt with in his work.

In May 1983, after various examinations and tests, the doctors found a tumor in his pancreas and duodenum, touching the aorta and pressing on the small intestine, causing problems of obstruction: this was the reason for the pains after meals. To prevent him from deteriorating physically because of lack of nutrition, they decided to create a derivation which would bypass the obstruction, as a palliative measure. As far as the tumor was concerned, it was impossible to extirpate it because of its size and position. The prognosis was still grave, and everything depended on how he would react to the treatment. After this second operation, he felt somewhat better for a time, but he had to be hospitalized until close to the end of his life.

In July he was allowed to leave hospital on two occasions, on Saturdays and Sundays. The mere fact of being at home gave him a great psychological boost. On these occasions he used to say that the sound of the street – cars, voices, and so on – which reached him through the window of his bedroom comforted him. The fact that the doctors let him go home, however, meant that they had decided to suspend the strong anti-cancer medication which they were giving him, because they had reached the limit that could be tolerated, and it was not producing positive results. Some days before his first trip home, they had taken a large number of X-rays which showed that the tumor had grown more quickly than predicted. The specialists thought that the situation would become critical from the end of August. The symptoms were increasingly alarming: weight loss, skin metastases and an inflammation in the neck which seemed to be lymphatic in origin, although it was not possible to rule out a metastasis there as well. Everything was very painful. It should be remembered that in 1983, palliative treatments for controlling pain were not as developed as they are today.

Koichi, who had known of the gravity of his illness for a long time, felt that a crisis might soon occur. It was time to inform him of the reality of his situation, as reflected in the medical report. On July 22, José Ramón Madurga spoke to him. Koichi received the news without fear, in a truly supernatural spirit. He was convinced that Opus Dei was the best place to live and the best

place to die, as he had heard St. Josemaría say. On July 22, the Anointing of the Sick was solemnly administered; he was to receive this Sacrament on two more occasions in the hospital.

He died on the morning of September 1. With him were several members of Opus Dei, who had been at his bedside constantly over the previous weeks. His mother and brother were also there. The Prelate, Msgr. Álvaro del Portillo, was informed at once, and within a few hours a telex arrived from Brussels, where he was at the time, in which he stated that he had celebrated Mass for his soul. A short time later it was learned that he had felt a call to the heart, and had celebrated that Mass for Koichi's soul before he received the news of Koichi's death<sup>82</sup>.

#### TWO LETTERS FROM MSGR. ÁLVARO DEL PORTILLO

At the beginning of August, the Prelate of Opus Dei had written two handwritten letters, one to José Ramón Madurga and the other to Koichi, which I cannot resist reproducing here.

In the letter to José Ramón, Msgr. del Portillo expressed himself as follows:

My dearest José Ramón: May God watch over you and all my Japanese children!

We have just been talking to you over the telephone, José Ramón, and now I am writing to you, as I said I would, and I enclose other lines for Koichi. I understand your pain, which I share, because of the illness of your brother, this son of mine who, in human terms, is now ending his earthly journey. And, feeling as you do, I also sometimes find it very hard to understand Our Lord. Koichi could still do so much! But although we do not understand God, we know that he is our Father, the most loving Father that could possibly exist. He is Love itself, and if we love Koichi, He loves him still more. If we think how effective Koichi could be, He knows this even better, and He loves the Work more than we do, because it is His, and exists for His glory. We have no alternative but to pray a lot, mortifying ourselves and offering this penance to God; asking God to perform a miracle. Let us ask Him this with the faith and trust of the saints: of those prophets of the Old Testament who stood face-to-face with God, giving Him very human reasons, treating Him with absolute trust: "Lord, our enemies will make a mockery of us!" And God heard them. Or, like the men and women of the New Testament – like our Father! – who called on His mercy, His love, His omnipotence, full of faith. And if their faith seemed

<sup>82</sup> José Ramón Madurga heard Msgr. Álvaro del Portillo say this, and reported it shortly afterwards to me.

to fail, they cried out: “*Credo, sed adiuva incredulitatem meam!*” And He heard them too – He heard our Father! – so that they could see clearly that the Lord is our God, and this strengthened the faith of the chosen. This is how I want to ask this of Our Lord. “Lord, perform this miracle, so that the Japanese are strengthened in the faith! Lord, think of your Japanese children, who are now my children or could become mine, and give them this sign, so that they can see that you are the true God, and remain by your side!”

Pray like this with me, and think at the same time that God knows better – as our Father said – and that He will hear our prayers, giving us and giving Koichi what is best for him, and for the Work. Be filled with peace, exclaiming with all the strength of your soul: “*Fiat voluntas tua!*” God, who is our Father, and who loves us so, will give us what is best.

We are, my dear children, *consummati in unum!* In our joys and our sorrows. And in the end, they will be all joys: *omnia in bonum!*

Pray for me. With all my love I remember you constantly. Your Father Álvaro embraces you and blesses you<sup>83</sup>.

The letter to Koichi is even more affectionate in tone.

My dearest Koichi, may Jesus watch over you!

From the beginning I have followed the course of your illness, and I pray for you every day with all my heart. Now that I know you have received the Anointing of the Sick, I am sending you this letter to tell you that I am very closely united with you in your suffering and in your hope. I commend you constantly to Our Lord, calling on our Father’s intercession, asking that you should be healed, should this be His will. Please ask this too, with great faith, through our Father’s intercession: tell our Father that I told you this. Do not weary of asking. And, at the same time, nourish in yourself, with the grace of God, the virtue of hope. During the last days of her life, Aunt Carmen<sup>84</sup> was so wrapped up in God, and had such a fervent desire to see God face to face, *sicut est*, just as he is – an infinite wonder of Love, Beauty, Goodness – that our Father said: “If this sister of mine were cured, she would be quite annoyed”. You have to be like this, wrapped up in God, with enormous desires to work for Him, for His Work, and at the same time rejoicing when you think of the moment when Our Mother will take your soul up to Heaven, where you will see Our Lord, and where She will contemplate you and smile at you as your Mother.

<sup>83</sup> Handwritten letter from Msgr. Álvaro del Portillo to José Ramón Madurga, August 2, 1983, in AGP, Sec. B, Series B-1.3, Subseries B-1.3-4. As we wrote (see citation n. 10), the translation of these two letters, originally written in Spanish, is ours.

<sup>84</sup> The sister of St. Josemaría is known familiarly as Aunt Carmen among the faithful of Opus Dei. Carmen Escrivá de Balaguer (1899-1957) gave inestimable help to the Founder and to all the Work, especially to the women of Opus Dei. She faced up to her last illness and death with a deeply Christian spirit, edifying those who accompanied her during that time.

Ask, and accept with joy what God wants. If you bear your illness in this way, you are – remember! – a treasure for the Work. Do you want to apply a little of this treasure for me? I am envious of you.

With all my love I remember, commend, embrace and bless you. From your Father, Álvaro.

Please tell your mother and brother that I am closely united with them<sup>85</sup>.

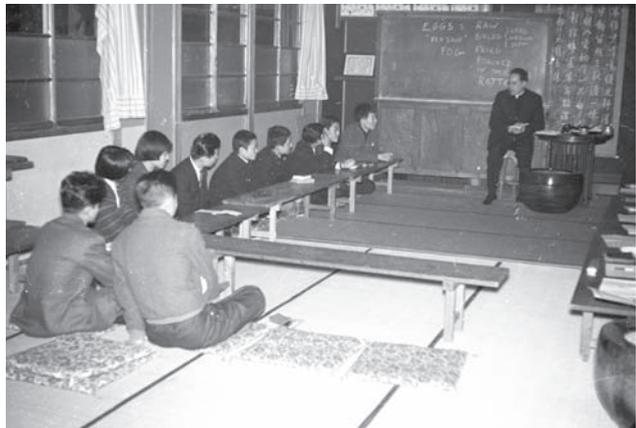
Antonio Mélich Maixé. Graduate in Journalism (1962) and Canon Law (1963) at the University of Navarre. Lecturer and teacher in Spanish Literature and Language at Kyoto University of Foreign Languages (1963-1975). Reporter and collaborator for several European and American magazines and newspapers. Director of the Publications Department at the “Seido Foundation for the Advancement of Education” (Osaka, Japan).  
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<sup>85</sup> Handwritten letter from Msgr. Álvaro del Portillo to Koichi Yamamoto, August 2, 1983, in AGP, Sec. B-1.3, Subseries B-1.3-4.



*Father Fernando Acaso and Father José Ramón Madurga studying Japanese recently after their arrival to Japan in 1959.*

*Father José Ramón Madurga discovered that one accessible way to earn a living was to give language classes. As such, he began to teach English, first in clubs for university students and later in municipal buildings rented at a very low price.*



*Baptism of Koichi Yamamoto (April 14, 1963), celebrated by Father José Antonio Armisén. Koichi's godfather was the Spanish Ambassador to Japan, Antonio Villacieros.*

KOICHI YAMAMOTO (1940-1983) AND THE BEGINNINGS OF OPUS DEI IN JAPAN



*Koichi Yamamoto (January 18, 1940 – September 1, 1983), one of the first Japanese members of Opus Dei, in 1965.*

*Koichi Yamamoto dedicated many years of his life to the Seido Language Institute as both teacher and administrator. The photo shows him working in the language lab.*



*Koichi Yamamoto with St. Josemaria in a get-together at Aralar College (Pamplona, 1966). While in Pamplona, Koichi combined studies at the University of Navarre to perfect his Spanish with institutional studies of theology. In October 1967, he transferred to the Roman College of the Holy Cross, where he continued his theological studies until returning to Japan in June 1970.*