

“Lucien Miller, a married Catholic deacon and professor of Chinese studies, documents his experience of the person and teachings of Shigeto Vincent Oshida, a Japanese Zen teacher and Catholic priest. Miller translates in poignant detail the life and work of this no longer hidden spiritual master. *Jesus in the Hands of Buddha* presents boundary-crossing insights and practices at the core of cross-cultural spiritual living. He profoundly offers an experience of accessible guidance and consolation for world readers of all faiths living on the ropes.”

— Jonathan Montaldo, author of *Bridges to Contemplative Living with Thomas Merton*

“Oshida’s life and legacy is an experience of the spiritual senses knowing the mystical voice. Biblical in sources and Buddhist in form, reading this book took me as a reader to the great pause of silence.”

— Sister Meg Funk, OSB, Our Lady of Grace Monastery,
Beech Grove, Indiana

“Combining poetry, personal memories, and recollections of a retreat, Lucien Miller presents a vivid evocation of the late Japanese Dominican friar, Shigeto Vincent Oshida. Embodying values of both the Zen and the Catholic traditions in his spiritual journey, Oshida offered an inspiring and prayerful witness of simplicity, poverty, solitude, and concern for a world of suffering. This moving and loving portrait is highly recommended for all spiritual seekers.”

— Leo D. Lefebure, past president of the Society for
Buddhist-Christian Studies, and chair of theology,
Georgetown University

“Shigeto Vincent Oshida was a saint, a mystic, a Christian visionary, and a model of an authentic appropriation of Buddhist and Christian truths that collectively lead to a new vision of discipleship. Lucien Miller takes us deeply into the life and heart of Fr. Oshida whose existence was utterly simple and yet filled with paradoxes. He was a hermit in community, a solitary among others. He desired nothing other than to disappear into the silence and bear witness to the ‘Unborn Sphere,’ all the while in complete service to the poor and those seeking his spiritual guidance. Miller’s book inspires and challenges us to see a new model of the Christian life no longer dominated by a ‘Western’ model, but one immersed in the spirit of Asia.”

— Peter Feldmeier, professor of Catholic Studies, University of Toledo, Ohio

“Shigeto Oshida’s quest was to reveal the Christ indigenous to Japanese culture. Lucien Miller’s generous account shows us how he did this by rooting himself in the eternal rhythms of mountainous, rural rice-farming Japan, practicing zazen, offering Mass in a simple thatched roof hut, and opening himself to whatever the moment might bring.”

— David Hackett, professor emeritus of Religion, University of Florida

MONASTIC INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE SERIES

Jesus in the Hands of Buddha

*The Life and Legacy of
Shigeto Vincent Oshida, OP*

Lucien Miller

Foreword

by

Timothy Radcliffe, OP



LITURGICAL PRESS

Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Cover design by Monica Bokinskie.

Cover photo depicts sculpture by the late Heidemarie Kern.

Interior photographs produced by the late Anne Martens. Permissions granted by the Japanese Dominicans who oversee Takamori.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Miller, Lucien, author. | Radcliffe, Timothy, writer of foreword.

Title: Jesus in the hands of Buddha : the life and legacy of Shigeto

Vincent Oshida, OP / Lucien Miller.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, [2023] | Series:

Monastic interreligious dialogue series | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "A memoir of Father Shigeto Oshida, a man who was at once a Japanese Zen Buddhist Master and a Catholic Dominican priest"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022046139 (print) | LCCN 2022046140 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780814668672 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780814669365

(library-only) | ISBN 9780814668689 (epub) | ISBN 9780814668689

(pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Oshida, Shigeto, 1922- | Dominicans—Japan—

Biography. | Zen Buddhists—Japan—Biography. | Priests—

Japan—Biography. | Buddhism—Relations—Christianity. |

Christianity and other religions—Buddhism.

Classification: LCC BX4705.O7335 M55 2023 (print) | LCC

BX4705.O7335 (ebook) | DDC 294.3092 [B]—dc23 / eng / 20221115

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022046139>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022046140>

To

Anne Martens: Soulmate in Christ (1945–2022)

Chisato Kitagawa: Spiritual Guide and
Master in All Things Japanese (1932–2022)

John Deeney: Godfather of Chinese-Western
Comparative Literature (1931–2022)

Three who lived for others

CONTENTS

PRELUDE	
Jesus in the Hands of Buddha Sculpture	ix
FOREWORD	
<i>by Timothy Radcliffe, OP</i>	xi
INTRODUCTION	xxi
CHAPTER ONE	
A Buddhist Who Encountered Christ	1
CHAPTER TWO	
Hermit and Pilgrim	25
CHAPTER THREE	
Poet and Mystic	51
CHAPTER FOUR	
<i>Sesshin</i> Part One	69
CHAPTER FIVE	
<i>Sesshin</i> Part Two	121
EPILOGUE	
September Meeting, Last Days, Gleanings	163

POSTLUDE

The Greatest Accomplishment 177

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 179

VITA 181

BIBLIOGRAPHY 189

PRELUDE

Jesus in the Hands of Buddha Sculpture

The cover of this book portrays a unique image of Buddha and Jesus, truly iconic for those devoted to the encounter between contemplative spiritualities East and West.

Next to the gravesite of Father Shigeto Oshida in the woods of his hermitage, Takamori Soan, there is a one-foot-high clay sculpture made by the late Heidemarie Kern of the Child Jesus being held by Amida Buddha. “The idea of the sculpture,” Heidemarie wrote, “just came out of me.”¹ The Child, with arms outstretched before the cross, stands on a ball that rests on the palms of Amida’s hands and is secured by his thumbs. Catholics might be moved to imagine the Infant of Prague with its traditional *globus cruciger* (orb and cross).

When I look at this icon, I see the Buddha basking in the Real Presence. The Amida Buddha of all-embracing love, his face radiating innocence and serenity, compassion and awareness, blissfully holds the Child Jesus in the mudra of deep contemplation. He protects and adores the Child who stands

¹ Heidemarie Kern email to Lucien Miller, May 18, 2015. Heidemarie Kern was a German Catholic nurse who went to Japan to practice zazen under Yamada Koun Roshi (山田耕雲), visited Father Oshida, and stayed several times at Takamori Soan. A member and teacher in the Bodhisangha interfaith community in India, she devoted her life to assisting the dying. She died in India in 2021.

before the cross, knowing full well who he is, what he has done, and what he will do. He is Son of Mary and Son of God who suffered and died for us. He is the Word and Heart of God poured out in redemptive love for the whole world.

According to my friend, the late Chisato Kitagawa, Episcopal priest and professor of Japanese at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst,

The Buddha-Jesus statue at Takamori Soan symbolizes the dynamic of eternal salvation so well. Buddha, in a sense, is the Lord of this world. There is a story about Buddha saying at his birth, "I alone am the honored one in the heavens and on earth" (Chinese 天上天下唯我独尊). Jesus is the Son of the Holy Other, the Father, who is not contained in this universe, but is its Creator. Jesus is sent to live among us in this world as a channel for eternal salvation. Buddha, gazing upon the child, Jesus, is holding incarnate Love, coming from the Holy Other as His Only Son. Buddha represents this world, yearning for salvation.²

Not Catholic doctrine, nor Buddhist teaching.
Sub-Currents in our world?
Word-Event born from the Unborn Sphere?

² Kitagawa in an email to me December 12, 2018.

FOREWORD

I stayed for a couple of days with my Dominican brother Shigeto Oshida in Takamori Soan in the late nineties, when, as master of the order, I was visiting the Dominican family in Japan. He took me to see the statue of the Buddha holding the child Jesus, and the little spring flowing from the rock into three rivulets. It was cold at night and the little thatched cottage in which I slept had no heating, and so he told me to lie on a mattress with the hot water jar while with much laughter and merriment, he covered me with so many layers of blankets that I wondered how I would ever get out!

In the morning, he presided at an exquisitely simple celebration of the Mass in the tiny chapel. On the altar was one of the images of Christ on which Christians were required to trample if they were to avoid torture and death during the persecutions of the faith in the early seventeenth century. This was a direct link to the first Dominicans to come to Japan, many of whom were martyred because they refused to do so. Oshida also bore in his heart those first Christians who did not hold out.

My memory above all is of an *encounter* with this extraordinary person, his profound joy and simplicity. He was unlike anyone whom I had ever met before, a Zen master, a Buddhist who had met Jesus, a Dominican friar, and a Catholic priest. Yet I felt utterly at home with him, touched at the core of my being.

This book by Lucien Miller is for me a sort of reliving and deepening of that encounter. I found myself invited to live again the joy of that moment and Oshida's challenging invitation to

renew my faith and to embrace my life as a Christian at a deeper level. I hope that those who read this book will experience—a key word for Oshida—something of the unsettling beauty of that meeting, in which one is embraced without reserve and invited to venture further into the mystery.

I confess willingly that sometimes I am puzzled by Oshida. Lucien's book is authentic because he is unashamed to confess his own bewilderment at times. If I was at times thrown by Oshida's statements or way of being, this is not because of a lack of clarity, as if all could be made clear with a few simple statements. The challenge is far more profound. He was a living koan who invited one to see the world anew and in a way that could not be reduced to the categories in which Westerners like myself habitually think. There are some insights into which one can only be shocked! This is not unlike the way that Jesus' parables work. They do not explain or illustrate his teaching. They are like fireworks that explode in the night sky, casting a new light on who we are and what we live. "Look again!" they say.

Every encounter with the One who has become flesh and blood with us in Jesus will disrupt our old certainties. God's mystery can never be caught in flat literalism, which is why Christianity is always in need of poets and artists to open doorways into the transcendent. But Iain McGilchrist, in a groundbreaking book, *The Master and His Emissary*,¹ argued that in this historical moment, Western culture is often impoverished by the dominance of a way of thinking that is drily analytical, narrowed by reductionism and abstraction. It is ill at ease with ambiguity and metaphor. It settles for either/or rather than both/and. McGilchrist hopes that an encounter with Oriental culture can awaken us from this imaginative impoverishment and open our eyes to see the world anew.

¹ *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, new exp. ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019).

He claims that in Zen Buddhism, according to Soiku Shigematsu, the abbot of Shogenji temple,

a word is a finger that points at the moon. The goal of Zen pupils is the moon itself, not the pointing finger. Zen masters, therefore, will never stop cursing words and letters. In general, the Japanese place far more emphasis on individual existing things than on generalities, are more intuitive, and less cognitive, when compared with Westerners, and are not so easily swayed by logic and system building.²

When I read that, I thought immediately: Yes! This is Oshida!

No wonder that Christianity is often perceived as boring by our contemporaries and even unspiritual. Our faith invites us to *metanoia*, a Greek word usually translated as “repentance” but that means a transformation of how one sees the world. Especially in this historical moment, a Japanese Christian such as Oshida offers us an invitation not just to deepen our understanding of our faith but to challenge our Western culture. So, when Oshida says something that may seem nonsensical to us, we need to abide with our puzzlement, and wait for the moment when we may glimpse his meaning. When Oshida said, “Look at this flower. It is Jesus,” instead of dismissing it, “How silly,” I am beginning to learn to dwell with the statement. “Dwell” and “abide” are words that are at the core of the theology of John’s gospel, which was so loved by Oshida. With expectant attention, we await the dawn of understanding.

It was Oshida’s vocation, and sometimes his pain, to live the tension between the Western form of religious life, which he embraced when he became a Dominican, and his Zen Buddhism. He loved the church but was angry with its limited vision and its betrayal of the mystery. Yet he had the courage to abide in it as his home, and the order had the courage to accept this brother whom often they could not understand.

² McGilchrist, *Master and His Emissary*, 452f.

When he said to his local superior in Japan, the Canadian Father Bernard Trahan, that he wished to leave the community to live as a hermit, Bernard confessed that he did not like or understand this proposal, "but I have no right to prevent you from doing so. Please, Father, go ahead with your plan freely." What courage Bernard showed in opening the order to what he could not personally understand. In a sense, this is the challenge of this book for us all.

I would like, though, to share a few clues as to what helps me to glimpse the meaning of my encounter with Oshida and his teaching. It is not intended to reinterpret his teaching in more familiar terms. That would be to subvert the purpose of this book, which is to invite us to move beyond them. It is merely to share some of my experience of how he has touched me, both in that stay in Takamori and also in pondering on this fascinating book. This may or may not be useful for you.

As I stated earlier, in these pages I relived, even more deeply, my meeting with my brother Oshida in his home in the Japanese Alps. I was touched by his humanity, his humor and vitality, also sensing the pain and suffering he had endured. This encounter opened the door to the hidden center of his being, the encounter with God in Jesus. For Oshida, it is the experience, the encounter, that unlocks insight.

When we meet someone, do we *really* encounter anyone in their gritty particularity, or do two surfaces politely or aggressively bounce off each other? For Oshida everything was grounded in a true encounter with the other. Then one might glimpse the Divine Other. Once, when he was staying in a posh country club in America, he went for a walk in the woods. "Suddenly I had a strange feeling that someone was hurrying after me. As I turned to look over my shoulder, an old man began to speak to me without any word of introduction. 'Won't you please come to my house for a brief visit?'" This was the famous Hungarian artist and woodcutter, Joseph Domjan. Each was utterly rooted in their own traditions, but it was a meeting that transformed them both. "The phoenix spread its wings wide above."

Father James Campbell, an American Dominican, loved to tell of his meeting with Oshida. He had been a bomber pilot in the Second World War and repented of his collusion in this violence. He went to Japan to ask for forgiveness and there met Oshida. James expressed his sorrow at his sin; Oshida laughed and said that he had been in the anti-aircraft artillery and he repented that he had not shot down James! There followed laughter and the tumbling down of all barriers. Two people face-to-face, naked and unafraid.

Similarly, any encounter with the Word of God is not primarily the transmission of information. It is a Word-Event. Exactly as McGilchrist would lead us to expect, Oshida had a profound distrust of abstract language, which he refers to as "the third leg of the chicken," a leg that does not exist in reality, a conceptual construct. I had already encountered his rejection of the third leg but Lucien introduced me to Oshida's horror of the Parrot-Word, which is the mechanical repetition of language, and the Black-and-White Word, which excludes all ambiguity, all tension, imprisoning one in the anemic, univocal, polarizing categories so typical of Western contemporary culture. These are words that barricade one against the life-giving encounter with another, and with the Eternal Word that addresses me.

Oshida so rightly rejects most preaching as vacuous. "Anyone can give a sermon. In church there is no Word-Event. No life. People prefer Columbo," referring to the detective hero of a popular TV series. Our words about the Word of life must be ignited by an encounter with the Living God.

Cornelius Ernst, OP, was a Sri Lankan Dominican who was born just two years after Oshida. His father was a Dutch Protestant Christian and his mother a Buddhist, and so he bore in his own being something of the tension that animated Oshida. Cornelius too was a convert to Catholicism, becoming so when he was in Cambridge as a student of the philosopher Wittgenstein. He believed that grace worked in our lives through its creative fertility, what he called "the genetic moment":

Every genetic moment is a mystery. It is dawn, discovery, spring, new birth, coming to the light, awakening, transcendence, liberation, ecstasy, bridal consent, gift, forgiveness, reconciliation, revolution, faith, hope, love. It could be said that Christianity is the consecration of the genetic moment, the living centre from which it reviews the indefinitely various and shifting perspectives of human experience in history. That, at least, is or ought to be its claim: that it is the power to transform and renew all things: "Behold, I make all things new."³

All those touched by the mystery of God know that our words only speak when they provoke the event of grace in our lives. In *Peace like a River*, a novel by an American called Leif Enger, a young kid asks about a preacher, "Do things happen, when he preaches"?⁴ Usually, not much! A fifteenth-century Sufi imam, Mullah Nasrudin, is supposed to have said, "I talk all day, but when I see someone's eyes blaze, then I write it down." The Hebrew word for "word" means also "an event," as does the Japanese word *koto*.

This encounter for Oshida was often described as "the Hand of God," touching our inmost being, culminating in the Christ who touched the sick and whose pierced hands were stretched out on the cross. This is why he did not like the usual translation of the beginning of John's gospel, "In the beginning was the Word." He would say, "In the beginning was the Hand."

How can we become open to the Event of God in our lives? Without this, all our words will be worthless. Each of us must follow our own path but, if I have understood him correctly, some clues reoccur often in Oshida's writings.

The first task, as surely in all the major religions, is to be liberated from the arrogance of the ego. This is that self-absorption that becomes a barrier between us and each other and all of reality, the hungry, grasping, manipulative self. It is,

³ *The Theology of Grace* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, 1974), 74f.

⁴ *Peace like a River* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001), 28.

Oshida believed, a particular temptation for religious people. People may fall into thinking how good they are! He became aware of its prison when he was a Dominican in the first years of formation:

I felt I had wasted all my life. At that moment I saw all my past and I remembered, for example, how I would not eat but distributed food door to door. It was my passion: my zealous emotion. It was not by the Holy Spirit. It was my halo. I received an arrow in my chest. I tasted what ego is, arrogance. Since then, the spiritual life became a promenade with the hands in the pockets—to get free of the smell of ego.

How is one to become free of its blinders? One cannot think one's way out of its entrapment for then one may be plunged into self-consciously trying to become unself-conscious! For Oshida, his frequent experiences of sickness and of his brushes with death were his guru. "The Master of my Zen, my guru," he once remarked, "was my sickness." In his experiences of tuberculosis, he was confronted with his fragility, his dependence on the Hand of God. Each breath was a struggle; each breath was a gift, "when you experience helplessness, forgiveness, and freedom. Like a vulnerable bug on its back—flailing its legs in powerlessness. Eventually the bug is set aright—but not by its own power alone—then flies away, free to be itself."

Personally, I found this immensely helpful. I have been living with cancer of the mouth and then of the jaw on and off for the last six years. Who knows what comes next? Faced with sickness, our language is so often violent and combative. One must "fight" against this cancer; it must be "beaten"! Oshida invites me to see my situation otherwise. My own experiences of cancer can be my guru too, opening my eyes to the gift of every day, and the Giver of every gift.

During Oshida's sickness and convalescence in the sanatorium in Sendai, he discovered a new community. Lucien writes,

“Oshida believed that his vision for Takamori began with his profound experience of a *madoi* (円居), a ‘living friendship circle’ of people at Sendai. It was made up of patients with whom he bonded during their hospitalization.” Here he learnt simplicity, “to be simple within ourselves in order to be open to God.” When he talked to an official about the foundation of Takamori, he said, “I want to start a *madoi* of God in this area where poor people can live together.” Living with the poor, becoming simple, heals one of the smell of the ego and so opens one to the happening of the Word of God, the Hand that reaches out with its healing touch.

One’s ultimate poverty is revealed when one awakes to one’s mortality, and Oshida almost died three times. Then we know in truth that, as Psalm 144 says, we are only a breath and our life is but a fleeting shadow. We treasure our lives and all of creation, suspended over nothingness. We are most aware of the pure gift of everything when our eyes are open to its transience. This again, McGilchrist believes, is at the heart of much Japanese art and religion: “The impermanence of nature (*shizen*) is seen as the Buddhahood, or essence of the divine. In the West, with our recording apparatus of every kind, we value what we can grasp and hold. But life and everything living refuses this approach. It changes as we hold it.”⁵ In the West we have often valued what is immutable, unchanging. So here, embracing his sickness and death, we see Oshida as indeed the Buddhist who has encountered Christ. There is a reconciliation but it is not on the conceptual level. It is ontological, in his very being.

If we can but open our eyes, liberate our sight from the blinders of the grasping ego, we will see things, listen to them, and learn from them. Hence the importance for Oshida of manual work, the naked encounter with our world. The rice fields around Takamori were places of beauty and education.

⁵ McGilchrist, *Master and His Emissary*, 453.

When Oshida gave retreats, especially for bishops used to the sedentary life, he enjoyed sending them to plant rice in the paddy fields, impervious to their protests about backaches. He wrote, "A farmer who works hard from dawn to dusk knows that a grain of rice is not his product, a thing made by his own effort, but something given to him by God. He must offer the grain of rice to God who is hidden but who gives everything. He must say 'This is yours.'"⁶

Lucien describes with typical modesty his own struggle to work in the rice fields. I am glad that I did not stay long enough for Oshida to invite me to work in them! Yet here one learns, he believed, to see and to listen. "Listen to the rice. Be the farmer. The farmer listens. The rice tells him when it wants to be planted, fertilized, weeded, and harvested. How it should be cut and stacked. He doesn't read it out of a book. Listen, listen, listen. The rice will tell you everything."

Oshida describes the art of seeing as learning "the faraway look." One sees both the transient particular, but also the whole. "When you look into another's eyes, see the whole person—the baby, the old man, the young girl. Experience unity. Now you will know what charity is. If you live in a state of *dhyana*, deep contemplation, you always have the faraway look." You see the single grain of rice and the interconnectedness of all things. He delighted to see this binocular vision exemplified in a footballer such as the Brazilian Pelé, who must see every detail on the pitch and yet the interconnectedness of everything. He had the "faraway look"!

The fruit of this liberation from the ego and the encounter with the Lord is joy. Joy, he said, "is not something to explain but to experience." All who met Oshida were touched by overflowing, bubbling merriment, his almost childlike joy. I remember his joy as he tucked me up in bed in the chilly guest room, the same joy that overflowed in the retreats that Lucien de-

⁶ Claudia Mattiello, *Takamori Sōan: Teachings of Shigeto Oshida, a Zen Master* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos Color Efe, 2007), 75.

scribes, his irrepressible sense of fun. He even rejoiced in God's tricking him into becoming a Christian since he was fooled into thinking that every Christian would be like the marvelous first priest whom he encountered, or into being a Dominican, before discovering that most Dominicans were not the mystics he had expected. It was joy that triumphed in his life, even to the end. His last words were, "God is wonderful. God is wonderful, God is wonderful. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen!"

Timothy Radcliffe, OP
Master of the Order of Preachers, 1992–2001
August 6, 2022
Feast of the Transfiguration
77th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima

CHAPTER ONE

A Buddhist Who Encountered Christ

For Shigeto Vincent Oshida, Buddhism was the home within him that became a dwelling place for Christ. This Japanese Dominican priest, who died in 2003 at the age of eighty-one, was a Buddhist-Christian mystic who longed to be a hermit but was called to become the founder and director of an international interfaith center that was visited by thousands of spiritual seekers from around the world.

My sketch of Father Oshida's life and interreligious faith journey is essentially personal. There are a few books and articles about him to which I will refer, especially Claudia Mattiello's excellent summary of his teachings.¹ In a thirty-three minute video of an interview with Father Oshida conducted by Lucette Verboven, his deep and vibrant spirituality is strikingly displayed.² I rely mainly on my encounters with him at his Takamori Hermitage (*soan*) in the Japanese Alps, my participation in *sesshins* (contemplative retreats) he directed in the United States, and the "contemplative breakfasts" I had with my late colleague and dear friend, Chisato Kitagawa, one of the three persons to whom this book is dedicated. Father Kitagawa was my spiritual mentor as well as the wellspring

¹ *Takamori Sōan: Teachings of Shigeto Oshida, a Zen Master* (Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos Color Efe, 2007; first edition in Spanish, 2005). This and other publications on or by Oshida are included in the bibliography. For a detailed, chronological outline of his life and publications, see "Vita" at the end of this volume.

² Available on YouTube. Search for it with "Lucette Verboven Oshida."

2 *Jesus in the Hands of Buddha*

of my understanding of everything Japanese related to Father Oshida: language, literature, culture, and customs. Moreover, it was Chisato's intuitive grasp of the preeminence of the poor in the ministry of Christ that brought me to a deeper understanding and embrace of Father Oshida's love for the *anawim*, the Holy Innocents of the world who suffer through no fault of their own.

For several years Chisato and I met at a restaurant in Amherst for bimonthly discussions about Father Oshida and about the place of poverty and suffering in the spiritual life of Christians. One morning Chisato shared a dream. I cite it to reveal how his friendship and guiding spirit sustained and encouraged me in a way that is beyond my telling.

You are on your way to Bethlehem, one of the Three Wise Men, to see the baby Jesus, guided by the light of two stars, Thomas Merton and Shigeto Oshida. You discover the Holy Innocent, Christ, whose existence leads to the martyrdom of all boys in Bethlehem under the age of two. You do not know what to do about the Holy Innocents whom you will stumble upon, "by accident"—how to understand them. You do not yet know them—the victims, the poor, to whom you will awake on your pilgrimage, East and West, the aborted Yet-to-be-Born, the hapless women hod and brick and coffee sack carriers, the road builders smashing rocks by hand, the sunken eyes of lepers missing hands, toes, and noses, the dying innocents in Mother Teresa's houses of hospitality—these are the Holy Innocents. You did not become "enlightened," aware, awakened, until you realized they were Jesus, the scapegoat, upon whose innocence the world heaps its sins, the sins it cannot confess, for to do so might destroy it.

Chisato's dream inspired me to complete a book I was writing on the spirituality of the poor in India and China.³ His

³ Lucien Miller, *The Hidden Side of the Mountain: Encounters with Wisdom's Poor and Holy* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2021).

constant insights and cheering presence guided my writing of this memoir of Shigeto Oshida.

This chapter is by no means a complete and definitive portrayal of the life and ministry of Father Oshida. Rather, it focuses on the period between his conversion to Catholicism and his founding of Takamori Soan.⁴ Father Oshida's own understanding of Takamori, its beginnings and meaning, its way of life and appeal, is especially illuminating, for it contextualizes his interior call to live as a hermit in community while remaining dedicated to his vocation as a Catholic priest and a Dominican who continued to be a Buddhist. In his eyes, Takamori was the flowering of his priesthood in the Order of Preachers. From my viewpoint, the origins of Takamori are mysteriously providential, a combination of chance encounter and personal illness. His vocation came from a similar fortuitous intersection of his unique personality with circumstance, historical context, and grace.

Tricked by God

In 1943, a few months prior to his being drafted into the Japanese army, Oshida had an extraordinary encounter with a Catholic priest. Like other high school and college students of that era, he had learned about Christianity, but he had no interest in the Christian faith or way of life. One day, he happened to drop by a Catholic church in the Tokyo neighborhood of Kōjimachi, and there he discovered Christ in the person of Father Herman Heuvers (1890–1977), a German Jesuit who had been the president of Tokyo's Sophia University from 1937 to 1941.

⁴ Biographical details are gleaned from Oshida: "The Good News from Sinanosakai," 1965; English translation made after his death, unpublished manuscript; "Evangelization and Inculturation," *Tooi Manazashi, A Far Away Look*, English translation by Chisato Kitagawa (Tokyo: Chiyūsha, 1983); Rev. Chiemi Ishii Sasaki, "Encounter with Takamori—Encounter with the Deep Stream," unpublished manuscript; *sesshin* talks in America (see chaps. 4 and 5). See bibliography for works by and about Oshida.

Oshida was immediately aware that he was meeting someone truly exceptional. Indeed, so widely revered and respected was Heuvers that when he died, over 2,500 people attended his funeral. Since his encounter with this Catholic priest was so fortuitous and made such a strong impression on him, Oshida felt that “Catholicism” was something he could no longer ignore; he therefore soon asked to be baptized. As he was about to be inducted into the army, he received the sacrament knowing that he might soon die in combat. He was firmly resolved to accept that possibility or whatever else might happen to him during the war.

Many years later during a *sesshin* he led in the United States of America, Father Oshida remarked that he had become a Catholic “by a joke or trick of God,” because he had assumed that all Catholics must be like this German Jesuit. The “trick of God,” was a reference to the words of the prophet Jeremiah who suffered imprisonment and beatings for chastising his fellow Jews for their idolatry and faithlessness and who cried out,

You seduced me, LORD, and I let myself be seduced;
you were too strong for me, and you prevailed.
All day long I am an object of laughter;
everyone mocks me (Jer 20:7).

In Oshida’s case, it was he who laughed; the joke was on him. God had seduced him, and he let himself be seduced into believing that all Catholics were like Father Heuvers.

Nonetheless, thanks to Father Heuvers, his disappointment did not keep him from pursuing his spiritual journey.

During the American Occupation of Japan (1945–1952), Oshida was an undergraduate student in the Philosophy Department at Tokyo University. He graduated in 1951 with a bachelor’s degree in Indian philosophy. While still a student, he returned to Father Heuvers, telling him that he had explored various monastic communities but was undecided about his

future course. It had occurred to him that he might like to visit the Dominican monastery in Sendai, north of Tokyo. He had come to believe that Dominicans were very explicit about seeing things from God's perspective rather than from a simply human point of view, and so he wondered if the window to his future might be opened there.

Oshida was not in the least prepared to hear the response of his spiritual director. He knew from others and through his own experience that Father Heuvers was extremely cautious about telling others what they should decide. Normally, he would say things like "Wait a while," counselling patience and further discernment. However, his words to Oshida were clear and direct: "It is clear that you are called. You have a vocation. There is no doubt about it."

Oshida was shocked when he heard this and initially resisted what sounded to him like a karmic final verdict in a court of law.

Father Heuvers went on to caution Oshida, telling him that his monastic vocation would not be easy for him. "The truth is, you have too much love for humanity to live an ordinary monastic life," he said. "Yet, it is even more true that the goal you set for yourself is too high to be a married man and have your own family."

"My life was decided by his words," Oshida said. Although he did not know it at the time, he was destined to follow a way of life that was altogether different from the regular conventual life of Dominican friars.

Drowning and *Madoi*—the Roots of Community

While an undergraduate, something else happened to Oshida that was transformative, both for himself and eventually for the circle of seekers who would gather around him. One day while swimming in turbulent waters at Arahama beach in Miyagi Prefecture he nearly drowned. An American soldier serving in the Occupation Armed Forces happened by

and saved him. Oshida's mouth was so tightly clenched that the soldier had to use an iron bar to open it in order to apply artificial respiration. Oshida vividly recalled how close he had come to death and then been reborn, describing his experience of beginning to breathe again as "taking my first breath."

The date was August 12, 1948. Oshida was twenty-six years old. The immutable physical and mental marks of his near-death experience would stay with him until the day he died.

What marks?

During the war, army physicians discovered that he had tuberculosis. They determined he should be hospitalized, but he refused treatment. To my knowledge he never explained why. Surely he had deep empathy for his fellow soldiers. He once remarked, "Always in war it is the best boy who goes," meaning who goes to his death. He abhorred privilege. His ideal was Jesus. He wanted to be poor and live among the poor, his hands in his pocket and a whistle on his lips, as he would say, to be one with those for whom there is no room. Here I see a possible seed of his Dominican vocation and his attraction to the Dominican vow of voluntary evangelical poverty which he lived out at Takamori Soan in the Japanese Alps.

Later, when he almost drowned to death, his tuberculosis worsened, and he suffered gangrene of the lungs. Thus began his lifelong struggle with respiratory and lung illnesses. "The Master of my Zen, my guru," he once remarked, "was my sickness."⁵ In "The Good News from Sinanosakai," a reminiscence Oshida recorded in 1965, he revealed that his "Master Sickness" was an unremitting thorn stuck in his side, constantly reminding him that he got to live while other TB patients did not:

⁵ Shigeto Oshida, "The Mystery of the Word and the Reality," in *Toward a New Age in Mission: The Good News of God's Kingdom; To the Peoples of Asia*, International Congress on Mission, Manila, December 2-7, 1979, vol. 2, book 3 (Manila: Theological Conference Office, 1981), 210.

I know now that my lung disease will not heal and I want to confess that during all my life, I will take with me the debt that I owe to the patients of tuberculosis. Seventeen years ago [1948], I became very sick. It was a time in which medicines could hardly be obtained. I did survive due to the fact that, for my special position [perhaps as a former soldier], I obtained medicines, to which normal patients couldn't have access. I will never be able to forget the young man who was beside me at the hospital, a fisherman. He was dying then because he could not receive streptomycin. . . . He was operated on and died during the operation. [At that time, lung removal had become a treatment for tuberculosis in Japan]. I will never be able to forget his sharing of himself a few days before he died.⁶

After his near drowning in 1948, Father Oshida spent the next two years, off and on, recovering at Tohoku University Hospital in Sendai, the capital city of Miyagi Prefecture, and subsequently at the National Miyagi Prefectural Sanatorium in Sendai. This period of treatment was to be the first of many hospitalizations and recoveries at medical centers and tuberculosis sanitariums for years to come.

During his treatment at the Sendai sanatorium, Oshida did not forget Father Heuvers's conviction that he was being called to the religious life. To nurture his vocation, he attended Mass at Catholic churches in the Sendai area and at the Sendai Priory of the Order of Preachers, which had been founded by Canadian Dominicans. On Sundays, the US army would send a Jeep to take Catholics to these churches. Oshida accepted the rides yet felt hostile towards the American soldiers who were his former enemies.

Oshida was discharged from the Sendai sanatorium in 1950. Following graduation from Tokyo University in 1951, he formally entered the Dominicans, beginning his novitiate and taking his first (temporary) vows at the Sendai Priory. Inspired

⁶ Oshida, "Good News from Sinanosakai."

by the novice master, Father Bernard Tarte, he made his final vows there in 1955.

During his years at the Sendai Priory (1951–1958), Oshida continued to suffer relapses of his lung disease and was in and out of hospitals and sanatoriums. A serious relapse occurred in 1952, for which he was hospitalized through 1953.

Oshida felt profoundly touched by the other TB patients he encountered at the hospital and sanatorium in Sendai and developed a deep sense of community with them. While none of these persons ever participated in the establishment and life of Takamori Soan, which began much later in 1964, Oshida believed that his vision for Takamori began with his profound experience of a *madoi* (円居), a “living friendship circle” of people at Sendai.⁷ It was made up of patients with whom he bonded during their hospitalization. The seeds of the living tree of Takamori, which began to grow visibly in the mid-1960s, had begun sprouting in the soil of Sendai in the years following the war.

Father Oshida maintained a permanent connection within this intimate circle of soulmates. He was deeply touched by the simple and unpretentious way the sick lived together while recovering from tuberculosis. He retained a deep reverence for his initial taste of an uncluttered life, which teaches us, said Oshida, “to be simple with ourselves in order to be open to God.”⁸

More Tricks of God—Father Bernard Tarte, Mystic

As we have already noted, Oshida was, in fact, duped three times. Encountering the person of Jesus embodied in Father Heuvers, a Catholic foreign missionary, he immediately longed to be baptized. After his baptism, he discovered to his dismay that most Catholics were not at all like that missionary. Sub-

⁷ Chisato Kitagawa translation from Oshida, *Tooi Manazashi*, 102, 105–6.

⁸ Oshida, “Evangelization and Inculturation.”

sequently, the priestly witness of Father Heuvers inspired him to become ordained, only to find that most priests fell far short of the stature of his charismatic mentor.

And then came the mystic, Father Bernard Tarte. It was he who enkindled in Oshida the desire to delve more deeply into Dominican spirituality. Father Tarte was Provincial Vicar of the Dominicans in Japan from 1947 to 1955. He became Friar Oshida's spiritual director during his last years at the Sendai Priory (1956–1958). Once again God was tricking Oshida into thinking that all Dominicans must be mystics, and that being a Dominican friar was the way he would be able to live his life in the company of mystics. Alas, during his novitiate and seminary years he awoke to the realization that most friars were not mystics. Just as all Catholics and all priests were not like Father Heuvers, all Dominicans were not like Father Tarte.

Be that as it may, Oshida was captivated.

To begin with, Tarte was an unconventional teacher and his views were refreshingly original. At the beginning of a teaching session one morning, the priest urged his friars to move beyond hostile inflexibility and dependency on the letter of the law and turn toward following the spirit of the law. Father Tarte explained:

If you keep the rules, you are kept. You are protected. But that's all. You should not criticize those who do not keep the rules. There are times that the rules must be broken. That is when you need to love. Love supersedes everything.⁹

Father Tarte lived in a dimension all his own, distinct from the other friars, whether he was praying, having a meal, or speaking on the phone.

One night, during the Grand Silence that is observed through the night, something happened that none of the friars

⁹ Oshida, "Evangelization and Inculturation."

could explain. They could hear the distinctive breeding call of the storied Japanese Bush Warbler, which during the daylight hours proclaims the arrival of spring throughout Japan, reverberating through the darkness of night:

“Hoo ho-ke-kyo!” “Hoo ho-ke-kyo!” “Hoo ho-ke-kyo!”

Not only was it not daytime; it was not spring. Oshida and other friars began opening windows and going onto balconies to listen to this miracle of nature. At last, Oshida made out a ghostly figure walking about the garden. It was Father Tarte, sounding the haunting refrain on a bird-whistle.

“This is the world of *kotohogi*” (言祝ぎ), Oshida said to himself, using the Japanese Shinto term meaning “celebration or praise of the sacred.” Instantly this world was opened to Oshida and became palpable. Now he felt comfortable being at the monastery. As Chisato Kitagawa noted, “Father Tarte’s child-like joy and singularity, completely unencumbered by the anxiety of daily life, must have opened for Oshida a new vista, a possibility of a blessed life.”¹⁰

Every day during the novitiate at the Priory there were similar events and moments. It was the singular Father Tarte who taught Oshida the meaning of true penance. “You must mock yourself and look upon your star, the cross,” he told him. Oshida interpreted this to mean that penance should take you out of your consciousness, out of phenomena. He experienced this removal or transformation in Father Tarte directly. One day he entered the chapel and saw Father Tarte praying alone. Wanting not to disrupt the novice master while at prayer, friar Oshida started to turn away silently.

“Only God and you are here!” Father Tarte boomed. “Why do you worry about me?”

Oshida felt as if he had been struck by a bolt of lightning that brought him to an overwhelming awareness of his own self-conscious ego.

¹⁰ Chisato Kitagawa email to Lucien Miller, December 8, 2014.

One early morning during the Grand Silence everyone heard loud music coming from Father Tarte's room. Oshida peeked in his door and heard the Banana Boat Song "Day O!" being sung at full volume by Harry Belafonte on the novice master's record player.

Oshida was baffled by this utter contrast between required silence and prohibited sound. Then he realized that Father Tarte, who was known to have a hard time waking up in the morning, was totally unaware of the ear-splitting music or of Oshida. He had "that faraway look," Oshida said, a feeling for the whole, a look that was always proportionate to his awareness of the complete mystery of each human being. Father Tarte was entirely unconscious of anything else. Beholding "that faraway look" Oshida wept.

Father Tarte perceived that Oshida's near drowning had had a profound impact on him, making him aware of an after-life and knowing that everything was in God's hands. "What you are tasting is what theology calls *sapientia*—wisdom," said Father Tarte. Years later in an interview Oshida recounted his interior awareness of God's presence:

When I hear a birdsong, I feel the hereafter; I hear the deepest voice of God, not mingled with my own voice or the voice of society. The child Shigeto, the adult, and the old man are present here, inseparably bound to Him, sometimes touched by His presence. God's breath is always there.¹¹

Ordination and Priesthood

Inspired by Father Tarte's mystical spirituality, Oshida decided to persevere with his Dominican studies and hold fast to his monastic vocation. Before he made his final vows at

¹¹ Lucette Verboven, ed., "Vincent Shigeto Oshida (Japan)," in *The Dominican Way* (London: Continuum, 2011), 192.

Sendai Priory in 1955, however, he asked Jesus in the Eucharist whether he should permanently commit himself to the Order of Preachers. He had been profoundly affected by his experience of the small simple community he had been part of during his time in a tuberculosis sanatorium in Sendai, the *madoi* referred to above. The simplicity of that living friendship circle of the sick had felt very natural to him. He realized that for himself “this simplicity is a ‘*sine qua non*’ for complete openness to God.”¹² While he intuited a personal truth—that he could not remain truly humble and unpretentious in the Dominican Order—he did not yet have a sense of an alternative path.

Another Japanese friar friend had the same question and told him about a conversation he had had with their common Jesuit spiritual director, Father Heuvers. Father Heuvers advised Oshida’s friend that such questions about living a humble and simple spiritual life were too advanced for someone at his level of development. Oshida borrowed the advice Father Heuvers had given to his friend and stopped worrying—for the time being.

“Jesus did not answer my question,” Oshida admitted wryly.¹³

His unanswered question together with his contemplative master—his sickness—continued to instruct him. “One way or another,” he told an interviewer, “I survived in the conviction that I could not die and leave behind the church as a bastion of the conventional bourgeoisie! My ideal was the priesthood even if I could only say Mass once.”¹⁴

In 1958 Oshida entered the Dominican Theological Seminary in Ottawa, Canada. There he learned French, the language of the Dominicum Studium or House of Studies. The works of

¹² “Evangelization and Inculturation,” *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin* 75, ed. Mark Delery (October 2005): 3–4.

¹³ See chap. 5 below, “*Sesshin* Part Two.”

¹⁴ Verboven, “Vincent Shigeto Oshida (Japan),” 191.

St. Thomas Aquinas were read in Latin, but the lectures on them were given in French. While Oshida was an excellent student, he continued to feel that the Dominican monastic way of life was unnatural for him; it was too great a contrast to the Asian Wisdom path he knew. Since Jesus still did not answer his question or his fears, however, he struggled on.

Oshida's father was a Buddhist in the Soto Zen tradition, and Shigeto had grown up with a deep love of *zazen*. He and his father would do *zazen* together from the time he was in elementary school. He recalled that whenever *zazen* came up in the course of a conversation, his father would say, "Hey, let's sit."¹⁵ It was through the practice of *zazen* that he survived his seminary years and held fast to his vocation. The superior of the Canadian Province of the Dominicans believed that Oshida's particular calling was to transplant the European or Canadian Dominican way of life to Japan, but Oshida thought otherwise. He told his superior that perhaps he could live that life himself in Japan, but he could never ask the younger generation of Japanese to do the same.¹⁶

Before his ordination on April 8, 1961, Oshida made a "promise to Him": "I shall not lie any more to myself and to You after the ordination."¹⁷ I think he felt he was lying by not letting others know he felt smothered by the European cultural impact on Catholicism. From now on he would be clear about it, as he was when he asked his superior for permission to leave parish ministry and be on his own, seeking to follow God's will for him as a Japanese Dominican priest who was convinced that there had to be a Japanese—and indeed, a Buddhist—way of being a Catholic. Thus, when the time came for the reception of holy orders and someone wanted to honor the event by

¹⁵ Oshida, *Tooi Manazashi*, 135. Chisato Kitagawa email to Lucien Miller, May 19, 2015.

¹⁶ "Evangelization and Inculturation," *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin*, 3–4.

¹⁷ "Evangelization and Inculturation," *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin*, 4.

giving Oshida money to purchase a new chalice, he simply could not bear the thought of having a metal chalice made and then plated with gold or silver, as required by church law at the time. "Anything plated with metal would be a symbol of a falsehood to a Japanese soul," he declared. "To me it would mean a mixing of worldly spirituality with religious spirituality." Besides, he knew that most of the world's gold came from South Africa where apartheid reigned. Instead, he had a chalice created, Japanese-style, out of powdered stone and fired at 1300 degrees. This chalice met with his inner need for simplicity. "Happily," Oshida said, "it was blessed by the papal nuncio in Japan" some years later.¹⁸

Oshida's tuberculosis worsened soon after ordination, and he was hospitalized yet again, this time at Hôpital Maisonneuve Montreal and then at a convalescent center on the shore of Lac Edward. During his recovery he began to experience mysterious encounters with strangers. One day he met a "mystical lumberjack." On another he received a small package with a candle made of beeswax from a woman mystic in Germany who was living a life totally devoted to the love of God.

With these incidents there came a sense of "co-vibrations," a communication of a shared atmosphere and feelings from which a vision, a horizon of the new church, began to take shape for Father Oshida.¹⁹

Weeds and Seeds of Community

Oshida returned to Japan in 1962 and was engaged in parish work in the Tokyo area for six months.²⁰ During the first year

¹⁸ "Evangelization and Inculturation," *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin*, 4.

¹⁹ Chisato Kitagawa's translation of Oshida, *Tooi Manazashi*, 98–99, mailed to Lucien Miller on May 19, 2015. Father Watanabe's interview with Chisato Kitagawa on April, 20, 2015, is another source for Oshida's sense of "co-vibrations."

²⁰ David G. Hackett, *The Silent Dialogue: Zen Letters to a Trappist Abbot* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 53.

of his return, however, he came down with tuberculosis once again and was admitted to St. Mary's International Hospital. Later he was transferred to Sakuramachi Hospital in Musashi Koganei about twenty miles outside Tokyo where he had an operation on his bronchial tubes and also had part of his right lung removed. For his recovery, he was sent to Koike Hospital, a sanitarium in the vicinity of the village of Takamori in Fujimi township, Nagano Prefecture.²¹ It was there, in the mountains above Takamori village, that he would establish the Takamori hermitage in 1964.

Speaking to an International Mission Congress, he said it was during his stay at the Koike Hospital sanitarium that "a little community was formed in the rhythm of daily life."²² A new way of life began, another *madoi* of the sick, the offspring, as it were, of the *madoi* of convalescents at Sendai and Miyagi. Like the previous two, it was not meant to last, even though the participants longed that it would. Over time the patients Oshida met and came to know at Koike Hospital began to speak to him of a "communitarian life."²³ These companions in suffering wanted to join him in a search for a new way of life.²⁴

At first he did not know what to say. He had seen experimental communities fail. He felt that trying to bring together persons with dependencies could only lead to catastrophe, for he understood the insecurity of those who lived with the uncertainty of not knowing when their disease might return. At the same time, he sensed that in their hunger for affection, these handicapped and afflicted were chasing a utopian dream world of fraternal love and companionship. In their starry-eyed vision

²¹ "Evangelization and Inculturation," *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin*, 4.

²² Shigeto Oshida, "Zenna," article for the International Mission Congress, Manila, Philippines, December 2–6, 1979.

²³ Oshida, "Good News from Sinanosakai."

²⁴ Swami Amaldas, "The Breath of God—To the Zen Center of Soan, Japan," trans. Sarah Schwartzberg, *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin* 10 (February 1981).

there lurked the danger of ignoring the simple truth that human beings are imperfect. He was convinced that a community of sick and needy individuals who idealized togetherness and amity would do nothing but deform people. A community formed from such persons would not be viable.

My answer to their wish was very hard. They had to give themselves away completely and live like a religious, working with their own hands and harvesting their own food. They must live a family life, the normal way for humans, and plant their roots deep within society. Such a way of life is more real than trying to make communities.²⁵

Following his discharge from Koganei hospital at Fujimi, he recuperated at the Fujimi sanitarium. Afterwards, he lived an ascetic life of poverty for roughly a year, all alone, like a hermit, staying at two places in a village adjacent to the small city of Fujimi. Intermittently, he inhabited an abandoned temple—actually, little more than a small hut—at Takamori dedicated to Kannon, “Goddess of Mercy,” for which he did not have to pay rent.

Some local people said the Kannon temple was haunted, though, and began to wonder about him. They called him “the priest of the chapel,” but were surprised that a Christian priest did not construct a church or begin a kindergarten. Gradually their doubts evaporated, and they came to regard him as a person who wished them well, someone who did not have a hidden agenda and was not looking out for his own interests. They were impressed by his genuine dedicated spirit and the fact that he was able to survive, residing alone as he did in that eerie Kannon temple.

He told a village official whom he met that he was interested in something quite simple. “I want to start a *madoi* of God in this area where poor people can live together.”²⁶

²⁵ Oshida, “Good News from Sinanosakai.”

²⁶ Chisato Kitagawa, *Tooi Manazashi*, 105–6.

By a kind of spiritual osmosis, things developed. Given Oshida's singular charisma, students and other individuals began to gather at the Kannon temple. Gradually Oshida felt comfortable to have people congregating around him there and felt accepted and at home in his surroundings.

As he described those early years during which Takamori Soan was evolving, "we were just running away from our egos with our hands stuck in our pockets and a whistle on our lips."²⁷ During this period of time, he did not have a clear vision of living an eremitical life, nor did he have any thought of establishing a community at Takamori. He had no project in mind, no idea to develop; he simply lived, facing each moment and each person that came along, trying to respond to whatever need presented itself.

"I had a nostalgia for the Baby Jesus in the manger and was carrying some vision about Jesus," he later wrote. But there was no deliberate thought of, "let us make a community," or "let us start a new religious life."²⁸ His one certainty was that the ego must disappear so that "the Hand of God" could be at work.²⁹

Still, despite this complete absence of any plan, it seems clear to me that Father Oshida had found his niche at the Kannon temple. He was being called to a new life's work, a vocation within the priestly vocation that had been recognized by his spiritual mentors, Father Heuvers and Father Tarte. He was floating on a wave of grace, holding a life preserver that had been thrown to him by One who was bidding him to go with the current and swim in a new direction. He gradually intuited that he had to receive this gift of the Holy Spirit with open arms. What was evolving around him in the Japanese

²⁷ Sasaki, "Encounter with Takamori."

²⁸ Katrin Åmell, "The Dominican Vincent Oshida Shigeto—A Buddhist Who Has Encountered Christ," *La vie spirituelle*, 731 (1999): 355–68.

²⁹ Sasaki, "Encounter with Takamori."

Alps was the community of Takamori Soan, with himself as its humble master.

At this point it might be good to add a background note for clarification. Since entering the Order of Preachers in 1951, except for occasional conversations with his provincial, Father Oshida had been relatively silent over the course of thirteen years about what he felt was his deepest vocation. His inner conviction was that obedience means obeying God's Voice,³⁰ and he determined he must submit to that Voice.

Speaking of his own calling, Thomas Merton wrote: "It has never been practical to leave all things and follow Christ. But it is supernaturally prudent."³¹ For Oshida, his "Yes!" was neither practical nor well advised, but an inescapable necessity.

One day, he resolved it was time to return to Tokyo to talk with his religious superior in Japan, Father Bernard M. Trahan, who was the Japanese regional prior of the Canadian Province of the Dominicans. He was pastor at Sukegawa Catholic Church, Fukushima Prefecture, where Oshida had served as a curate for six months. Father Oshida wanted to request permission to leave the conventual community life of the Dominicans and live outside the monastery, finding his way alone.

This encounter took place at some time in 1963 or early 1964. Oshida suspected that his superior had some inkling of his intention even before they talked. He also sensed that Father Trahan was a priest who knew his role was to help his brethren follow the Voice of the Father speaking through his Son.

Oshida spoke directly to Father Trahan: "I shall leave to begin to be myself, to respond to my vocation even as a member of this order." The prior responded, disclosing first his reaction to Oshida's way of doing pastoral ministry when he

³⁰ In Hebrew, *bat kol*, which literally means "daughter of a voice." It refers to a heavenly voice that proclaims God's will or a divine judgment in a matter of legal dispute. The characteristic attributes of the Voice of God are the invisibility of the speaker and the phenomenal quality of its sound.

³¹ Quoted in Thomas Merton, "In the Wilderness," *The Merton Seasonal* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 5.

was with him at the Catholic church at Sukegawa, and next his decision: "Father, I do not understand what you do. You sit long hours of *zazen*. That's it. I don't get it. No, not just that. I do not like it. And all the young people are imitating you, sitting." There was a long silence, and then Father Trahan elaborated: "But Father, even if I do not understand it, and however much I might dislike you, I have no right to prevent you from doing so. Please, Father, go ahead with your plan freely."³²

Oshida told Father Trahan that what he had said was infinitely more precious than any word to indicate that he understood what Oshida wanted and needed to do. He left the superior's room with a *Deo gratias!* ("Thanks be to God") and a *Tibi gratias!* ("Thank you") on his lips. He was overwhelmed by the deep sense that he had experienced the *chikaryū* (地下流), the "subterranean stream," the current of faith flowing from the Unborn Sphere deeply beneath the world's religions, traditions, and indigenous communities in the East and West, forming many different and distinct tributaries.³³

Father Oshida's reference to the underground river is familiar to all who have known him. It lay deep within his spirit and consciousness and was palpable in his being, his teaching, and the Takamori community. In homilies and retreats he awoke listeners to what he called "Word-Events" in Sacred Scripture. These "Word-Events" emanate from encounters with the sacred river (see chapter 4, "*Sesshin* Part One). For example, the water Moses saw flowing from the "rock" (Exod 17:6; Num 20:11) is a "Word-Event" that gushes from the "Unborn Sphere."

³² Oshida, "Evangelization and Inculturation."

³³ Rev. Chiemi Ishii Sasaki, "The Idea/Image of Water That Runs Under the Ground—'Faith' for Shigeto Oshida," 2013 Sophia University Summer Theology Workshop, trans. Chisato Kitagawa. Email to Lucien Miller, August 30, 2014. "Unborn Sphere" is Father Oshida's preferred term for Ultimate Reality, the Absolute, the Source, which he often called "the Hand of God." The "subterranean stream" and the "Unborn Sphere" are central symbols in Oshida's portrait of faith, as explained in chapters 2, 3, and 5.

Like the fire at Oshida's celebration of the Eucharist, which we will encounter in chapter 2, biblical water is no ordinary metaphor, but a divine living stream in which Jesus stands at his baptism and sees the heavens open and "the Spirit of God descending like a dove." There he hears a voice declaring "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Matt 3:16-17; Mark 1:9-11).

This same water from the subterranean current is the water Jesus changes into wine at the marriage feast at Cana, revealing his glory, and upon witnessing this, "his disciples began to believe in him" (John 2:2-10). It is the salvific water that is a necessity for us as he tells Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel who comes to him by night: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (John 3:5). Drinking the water Jesus gives, the Samaritan woman at the well "will never be thirsty" (John 4:13-14). At the fall harvest festival, the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*), Jesus cries out, promising the coming of the Holy Spirit, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:13-14).³⁴ Through the water of baptism, one dies and is reborn, is enlightened, and becomes a creature of light.

Having been given permission to leave the conventual life with its Western European form of Christianity to pursue his vocation in his own way, Father Oshida followed his deep longing for poverty and simplicity while remaining a Dominican priest. He wanted simply to be Japanese, "a human being with a nude face," one who had encountered Jesus, a pilgrim priest who believed in Christ.

³⁴ For further references to this divine water, see John 19:34-35 (water and blood flowing from Jesus' side); 1 John 5:6-8 (Jesus came through water and blood); Rev 7:17 (the Lamb will guide his flock to springs of living water); Rev 21:6; 22:1; 22:17 (the gift of life-giving water).

“My heart was weeping,” said Oshida of his leave-taking.³⁵

To this bittersweet moment of parting with gratitude and tears, with risk and uncertainty, we might append Merton’s words on the singularity of a solitary, which aptly fit Shigeto Oshida at this turning point in his life:

The hermit remains in the world as an unheeded prophet, as a voice crying in the wilderness and as a sign of contradiction . . .

But . . . even those who fear the solitary nevertheless become fascinated by him, because his very uselessness continues to proclaim that he might after all have some incomprehensible function.³⁶

Takamori Soan—Hermitage and International Community

Father Oshida lived the solitary life in the Kannon temple for close to a year. He was then drawn by the Voice and community seekers to settle down at Takamori Soan. As he once

³⁵ Oshida, “Evangelization and Inculturation.” Pope Urban II (1042–1099) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) would understand both Oshida and his superior. The pope wrote famously that there are “two laws” (*duae leges*) governing religious vocations: the public (a priest must not move between dioceses without the bishop’s recommendation) and the private (written in the heart by the Holy Spirit). St. Thomas, a Dominican, quotes Urban’s text: “If one . . . driven by the Spirit . . . is guided by the private law, there is no reason why he should be bound by the public law. The private law is, after all, superior to the public law. . . . And who can resist the Holy Spirit? If that Spirit guides a man, then, he should go freely, by virtue of our authority, and even defy the opposition of his bishop. In fact, there is no law for the righteous man—where the Spirit of the LORD is, there is freedom. And if the Spirit guides you, you are no longer subject to the law.” See Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 1 (New York: Seabury, 1983), 110–11. The Rule of St. Benedict, chap. 1, states that for some monks, the cenobitic life may be preparatory to the hermit life, arming an anchorite or hermit for “the solitary combat of the desert.”

³⁶ “In the Wilderness,” 7

remarked, laconically, "The more I want to be a hermit, the more the people have gathered around me."³⁷

One December day in 1964 he received a message saying that ideal land had been found in the Fujimi area. He visited the property and instantly fell in love with its mountainous surroundings and agricultural setting. What immediately drew him was the little spring (小泉 *koizumi*) that emerged in three rivulets from rocks near a rice paddy. For Oshida, it was a sacred place. Koizumi provided drinking water and irrigation to many of the area homes and farms and would become the site of baptisms and prayer at Takamori.

Chisato Kitagawa told me that Koizumi was the reason Father Oshida longed to buy the property. But no one living in this revered rural region ever thought of selling to an outsider. Nor did Father Oshida have the money. He appealed to a town official to facilitate a sale, emphasizing the land would be used for a worthy purpose.

Then he put his trust in God.

Somehow, through the combined generosity of town authorities and local farmers and families, a continuous area of open space and farmland was acquired, and Takamori Soan came into being.

Beginning in 1964, for the next thirty-nine years until his death in 2003, Father Oshida guided the hermitage community in living a contemplative life of poverty and simplicity, self-emptying service to the neighbor and the down and out, and welcoming the stranger belonging to any faith, or none. Gradually, visitors and guests came from around the world, attracted by Takamori Soan's radical openness and its attentiveness to the Voice of God. The president of the Shinto temples of Suwa District rejoiced when he saw a cross being raised, for he felt the land on the border of his jurisdiction was being consecrated and no one living in the venerable region would now have to worry about developers building chalets.

³⁷ Oshida, "Evangelization and Inculturation."

Oshida admitted that it was very possible that none of the local people knew that every morning Mass was being celebrated in the new chapel with a thatched roof, but he was sure they sensed that the land was being used in such a way as to give them hope. He insisted that the property belonged only to God and the poor, the ill, and the suffering, "to those who make their life a total offering." Takamori Soan was to be run by the poor and supported by whatever they could offer; it would be a site of and for the spiritually poor.

This is a place where the weak and the poor produce by their hands the food they need, in a style of religious life. It is a place where the weak are healed of their great disease, which is dependency . . . A place where anyone can contemplate without concern for his ideology or his religion.³⁸

The way of poverty and self-emptiness the Takamori community was following was full of grace; surprise followed surprise at every turn. To Oshida what unfolded was inexplicable, except as an intimation of the gospel of Jesus: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

In Father Oshida's words: "Some grains of wheat fell to earth. . . ."

Captivated by what had transpired through the unfolding of Takamori in the early 1960s, Father Oshida was surely mindful of the fire he lit at the daily celebration of Eucharist when he said, "This fire will pass from heart to heart."

Strictly speaking, according to Catholic Church requirements, the Dominican Order should have asked permission from the local bishop for Father Oshida to move from his assigned parish at Sukegawa Church to Takamori. That would have been the bishop of the Diocese of Yokohama, Lucas

³⁸ Oshida, "Good News from Sinanosakai."

Katsusaburo Arai (荒井勝三郎), whose jurisdiction included Nagano Prefecture where Takamori Soan is located. It was rumored Bishop Arai was displeased that he was not consulted about the agreement between the Dominican prior and Father Oshida.

Be that as it may, the bishop came to accept and welcome the change. When Father Oshida took a temporary position filling in for the pastor at Sukegawa Church, Bishop Arai said to him, "Please make sure to return to Takamori Soan."³⁹

Some twenty-five years later, in 1990, Father Oshida organized and hosted the 1990 Asian Bishops' Conference at Takamori.⁴⁰ The convocation may well be viewed as a singular affirmation of his way of living out his Dominican vocation, of heeding Jesus' call to freedom, the inner law written in the heart by the Holy Spirit. When Father Oshida looked inward, he must also have sensed that the fact that the Asian Bishops Conference was willing to meet at Takamori was a validation of the vow he made at his ordination in 1961: "I shall not lie any more to myself and to You."

³⁹ Chisato Kitagawa, interview with Father Hiroshige Watanabe, OP, at Takamori Soan, April 20, 2015.

⁴⁰ Verboven, "Vincent Shigeto Oshida (Japan)," 189.

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