

STATUS OF A NON-GOVERNMENT SCHOOL IN JAPAN (1/2)

In order to understand the present situation of a La Salle school in today's Japan it behoves to say first a few words about the education system.

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF JAPANESE EDUCATION

The first Imperial Edict dated in 701 A.D. can be considered the start of the real system of formal education. That Edict provided for an organization of lay schools modeled on those of China for the training of civil officials. A parallel educational ladder for the education of priests in Buddhist temples and monasteries was also envisaged. Outside of those government and clerical schools during the eight and the ninth centuries, private schools were established in Kyoto for the education of the court families.

During the long feudal period formal education came to play a very minor role. Educational institutions virtually disappeared. As in Europe of the Middle Ages, scholarship was kept alive in temples and monasteries.

Under the Tokugawa regime, (Shogun) formal education prospered once again. The feudal lords (daimyo) were encouraged to set up schools in their own fiefs. They were for persons of rank. Some private schools were also set up to educate children of lower status. Temple schools for both boys and girls were encouraged, and by the close of the Tokugawa period, 15,862 of these institutions were reported in operation. Intercourse with Europeans gave the Japanese a knowledge of Western culture. The Jesuits established seminarios and collegios in various parts of Japan to facilitate the propagation of Christian teachings.

The change from the Shogun to the Imperial rule—commonly referred to as the Meiji Restoration—took

place in 1867. The aim of the new leaders of Japan was to make Japan a strong state, unified internally and opposed to the rising power of the West. They looked upon education as a powerful means to achieve their Restoration and National Unification program. They lost no time and in January, 1871, the Ministry of Education was organized and vested with authority over all educational and cultural matters. In August 1872, the system began operation. Though there were many changes in the details of the organization, it remained the basic pattern for Japanese education. The purpose of this new system of education seems to have been to train a people that would be both technically competent in the skills necessary to operate a modern state, and indoctrinated with the principles upon which the unity of that state rested. Education from 1872 to 1945 was essentially an instrument for the control of the people by the state. The Imperial Rescript remained the accepted statement of the principles underlying the educational system from which much of the militaristic and ultranationalistic emphasis in education was later developed. By means of education, militaristic leaders fostered a "national spirit" to make the new generation fanatical about the "Mission of Japan." Service to the Emperor and the State was made the principle of life. This ideology was mirrored especially in courses in history, geography and morals.

During the pontificate of Leo XIII, the Brothers were asked to go to Japan but it was not until 1932 that it could be materialized with the arrival of four Canadian Brothers. In September 1930 Brother Ephrem had been sent by Brother Assistant Mandellus to make a kind of survey. In his report we read: The Japanese Government having rather strict educational requisites the establishment of the Institute in Japan will be an expensive adventure. Besides, the apostolic results will take many years to be noticeable. During the few weeks he had spent in the Far East he had foreseen what was needed except one important detail: The Brothers sent to Japan would have to be fully qualified with University degrees to get permission from the National Board of Education to teach even in elementary schools. The international armed conflict being near, the Brothers were advised to wait before building any school.

After 1945.

The surrender of the Japanese military government in August 1945 brought the Imperial Rescript to a sudden end and the Occupation authorities attempted a reformation of Japanese education. Their ultimate goal was the establishment of a system of education based on the principle: pursuit of truth and recognition of the dignity and worth of individual. The Japanese government was then strongly directed to eliminate all militaristic and ultranationalistic features in the new educational system and to construct a sound demo-

cratic pattern of education. Following the promulgation of the new Constitution on November 6, 1946, the fundamental Law of Education and the School Education Law were enacted in March 1947. The new school system provided free and compulsory education for children of elementary and middle school age, and introduced coeducation. Two notable features of the postwar system were removal of restrictions upon private schools and the freedom granted to these schools to teach religion. Unfortunately, some of the unpleasant features of the old regime remain: namely the utilitarian view of education simply as a means to get ahead in life, the college entrance examinations, the textbook control by the Department of Education, etc.

Situation of Private Schools in the Past and at Present.

The feeling of the Meiji statemen was that private education, which advocated academic freedom, was an impediment to the aim of the restoration and tended to perpetuate feudalistic tendencies. For this reason there was discrimination against private schools through the whole period from 1872 to 1945. In November, 1945, the Chief of the Bureau of School Education, in a directive to the Prefectural Governors, acknowledged the fact that private schools had "suffered too much interference and excessive oppression in the past" and instructed them to "pay attention to schools of this kind treating them justly and helping them to develop their special character."

It explains in a certain way, why the Governor of Kagoshima Prefecture did not hesitate to affix his seal of approval when in 1949 we asked permission to open a La Salle School in his Prefecture. He even sent his own son to our school and more than once he accepted to give a talk to our students. It must be pointed out that this long period of oppression has produced in the country a rather unfavorable attitude towards education where religion was taught.

We thus had to prove that religion was not an obstacle to education through the accademic results of our Catholic schools. Of course this attitude is fading away but it took many years to be acknowledged but it has not yet completely disappeared. In the minds of some people, even to this day, public education is regarded as the superior form of education. This should be understood by anyone who seeks to know the actual position of Catholic schools in Japan. *These schools are operating under a handicap which only a high reputation, based upon academic superiority and excellent moral training, will enable them to overcome. In other words, Catholic schools in Japan must be outstanding schools if they wish to succeed.*

Fortunately our La Salle Institutions rank among the best even academically above most of the public schools in Japan. «The influence of the Church in the field of education is shown in a special manner by the Catholic schools. No less than other schools does the Catholic school pursue the goal of human formation of youth.» (Gravissimum educationis, 8)

Brother Marcel Petit