



Monastic Encounter

Monastic
Interreligious
Dialogue (MID) in
Great Britain & Ireland

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Eastern encounters at Glenstal Abbey



Saint Benedict reminds us that monasteries are never lacking guests, and the summer months often bring a variety of passers-by to monasteries including visiting monks and nuns from around the world. Last summer the monastic community at Glenstal Abbey in Ireland was delighted to host for some weeks Sr Agnes Yoshioka, a Trappistine nun of Holy Family Abbey in Japan's northernmost Hokkaido prefecture, who came to study English and to spend time getting to know the monks at Glenstal.

Throughout her stay, Sr Agnes had a quiet and unassuming presence in the cloisters of Glenstal yet her conversations with the monks prompted a fascinating cultural exchange which spanned the spiritual traditions of East-West and revealed the intriguing history of Japanese Christianity. Her sharing with the monks also opened up the topic of conversion from one religion to another, and the place of interreligious dialogue in the monastic life.

Born in Nagasaki, Sr Agnes studied medicine before embarking on a career in psychiatry. It was during a period of further study in England that the Buddhist-raised Agnes came to the Catholic faith when she was baptised at Saint Bartholomew's parish in Norbury, south London. Her plunge into Christianity owed itself not only to a specific experience of call and conversion during her time in England, but also to her earlier upbringing when sent by her parents to a Catholic kindergarten.

"It's a popular choice for parents to send their children to Catholic kindergartens in Japan. At the age of four I was taught how to pray and we went to church on special occasions. I remember liking our missionary priest very much. I started to pray at home, and even though I went on to lead a life that had nothing to do with Christianity I wanted to go to church and was always attracted to the Bible and to Christ," explains Sr Agnes.

continued overleaf...

Reading Hermann Hesse's novel *Narcissus and Goldmund* with its tale of two Cistercian monks and their search for meaning impressed Sr Agnes. "It had a big influence on me because it made me want to be a Cistercian monk!" she laughs, adding that "it was a dream, of course, and it sounds strange because I wasn't a Christian and could never become a monk. Many years passed, but it had some effect on me," she says.

The seeds of Sr Agnes' earlier encounters with Christianity started to come together whilst she was studying treatments for eating disorders in London. During a difficult period in her life, she retreated to the North York moors and stopped to rest in a small village church not far from Pickering. "Sitting there, I had a very strange and shocking feeling, and felt that I was being called by Jesus," she recalls. "From that moment, I started to think about baptism and becoming a nun." Not long after, Sr Agnes began attending a very active and diverse parish community in London where she was baptised before returning to Japan to continue her work as a psychiatrist in Hokkaido. Her heart was set on the monastic life, however, and she soon made the decision to leave her profession and enter the monastery in 2012.

Just one percent of Japan's enormous population of 125 million is Christian, as the vast majority of people subscribe (often simultaneously) to the Shinto and Buddhist faiths. Christianity has been marked by periods of growth, persecution, and resurgence in Japan, with the faith first planted by the Jesuits in the 16th century. It was initially tolerated until its growing influence alarmed the authorities who saw it as a threat to the traditional social order. Thus Christianity was outlawed in the early 17th century and a long period of brutal suppression and persecution began. It was not until 1873 that Japan lifted the ban on Christianity and foreign missionaries returned with new Christian communities beginning to emerge.

Sr Agnes spoke to the monks about how a western monasticism of the Catholic Cistercian variety finds a home in the Far East as it adopted a Japanese flavour through a long and careful process of inculturation. As such, Catholic monasteries such as her own represent a sort of bridge between Western Christian and Japanese spiritual traditions as monastic practices like meditation and communal living find resonance within the Japanese culture. Indeed, Sr Agnes points out how Christian monks and nuns are uniquely placed for interreligious dialogue, for example, because our monasticism creates a point of dialogue with monastics of other faiths. "One of our roles should be interreligious dialogue," she says, "and I've found that Buddhist monks are very interested in talking with us. There are many Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines near my monastery and we should talk and co-operate with each other to improve our understanding of one another and to make our society a better place."

Last summer's guest at Glenstal revealed to the monastic community a fascinating story of call and conversion, opened an encounter between East and West and reminded us of the resilience and adaptability of monastic life wherever it is found. The story of her journey to Christianity was intriguing, and many lessons were drawn for the monastic community on the place, necessity and opportunities for interreligious dialogue in the monastic life today. "Arigato," Sr Agnes!

Sr Agnes Yoshioka is a Trappistine nun of Holy Family Abbey in Japan and was interviewed for Monastic Encounter during her stay at Glenstal Abbey in Ireland.

Cardinal Ayuso Guixot (1952-2024)



Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, who served as Prefect of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, passed away on 25th November 2024 at the age of 72 after a long illness.

Born on 17th June 1952 in Seville, Spain, Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot grew up in a devout Catholic family, the fifth of nine siblings. Seville's unique blend of Christian and Islamic heritage deeply influenced his sensitivity to interfaith understanding. Initially pursuing law studies, he felt a vocational calling and joined the Comboni Missionaries in 1973. Ordained a priest in 1980, he pursued advanced studies in Rome, specializing in Islamic studies.

His missionary journey began in Cairo, Egypt, and later took him to war-torn Sudan and academic leadership as president of the Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies. His expertise earned him a role as a consultor to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 2007. Elevated to Prefect in 2019, Cardinal Ayuso Guixot became a central figure in the Church's efforts to promote dialogue with faith communities worldwide.

For years, Cardinal Ayuso Guixot had been a firm advocate for interreligious dialogue, accompanying Pope Francis on nearly all of his apostolic journeys. His extensive knowledge of Islam and the Arab world made him an indispensable part of the Pope's initiatives to strengthen relations with other faiths. These journeys, often referred to as "pilgrimages of fraternity," showcased the cardinal's dedication to fostering unity in regions where Catholicism is a minority.

In 2019, he participated in historic visits to the UAE and Morocco as Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, assuming leadership of the Dicastery shortly after being created cardinal in 2019. He later joined Pope Francis on pilgrimages to Iraq, Kazakhstan and Bahrain, and remained active in his mission until health challenges overtook him.

Cardinal Ayuso Guixot embodied Pope Francis's vision of fraternity as outlined in the encyclical "Fratelli Tutti." Through his tireless dedication to dialogue, he demonstrated that peaceful coexistence among diverse faiths is both possible and necessary. His passing marks the loss of a visionary leader who brought the spirit of unity to the global stage.

Salvatore Cernuzio for Vatican News.

A stroll in Southall

"I knew you would enjoy Southall," smiled Abbot Dominic Taylor of Ealing Abbey, recognising my amazement as we walked together down Southall High Street in London. A short visit was an education in itself, as Abbot Dominic had promised.

I had long wished to visit the town as, I was told, anyone interested in interreligious dialogue would see theory play out in practice before their very eyes. Staying for some days with the monks of Ealing on my travels between Ireland and the Middle East, I seized the opportunity for an afternoon stroll in this diverse part of west London on a sunny afternoon in late June.

A few stops from the monastery on the Elizabeth Line, Southall is located in the London Borough of Ealing and has a population of around 70,000 people. Since the middle of the last century the town's employment opportunities and proximity to Heathrow Airport have attracted such a large number of Asian immigrants that it has become home to the largest Punjabi community outside the Indian subcontinent. The most recent census records indicate that nearly half of all residents are Sikhs or Hindus, with around a quarter each being Muslim or Christian. The town's newest arrivals hail from places such as Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Somalia.

The first indication of the town's diversity are the bilingual English and Punjabi signs seen on arrival at Southall railway station. Punjabi is heard spoken on the streets which are lined with stores selling Asian foodstuffs, brightly coloured garments, jewellery and much more. Jehovah's Witnesses stood with their magazines on a street corner as across the road a young white man who had converted to Islam preached his new faith to any passers-by who might listen. Southall is very much a



feast for the senses. In a short distance we stroll past mosques, churches, temples, and we stopped at the imposing Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha, London's largest Sikh temple and the largest to be built outside Asia.

Visiting the Roman Catholic church maintained by the Jesuits, a memorial plaque there recalls the work of a religious brother who spent nearly thirty years engaged in interfaith dialogue in the area. As happily expected, it was another example of Catholic religious being at the forefront of interreligious work and the building of understanding and harmony between different faith communities. Heading back to the monastery, I was delighted to have seen such a vibrant part of London where 'dialogue of life' is simply a part of everyday existence, where people of different backgrounds and faiths enrich their local community together and where a pleasant stroll down the High Street has much to teach about interreligious dialogue in action.

Justin Robinson OSB is a monk of Glenstal Abbey in Ireland residing in Cairo.

Edited by Br Justin Robinson OSB
MID Co-Ordinator for Great Britain and Ireland
Glenstal Abbey, Murroe, Co. Limerick, Ireland
midgbi@glenstal.org
www.midgbi.org