

The 2023 Annual Meeting of the Italian Commission of DIM•MID



"Only if you practice the Way inwardly will the virtue of the Way naturally manifest itself outwardly. Without expectation or desire to be known by people, if you just follow the teachings of the Buddha or the Way of the patriarchs, people will believe in the virtue of the Way of their own accord" (Eihei Dōgen, Shōbōgenzō zuimonki 2:3).

Members of the Italian commission for Monastic Interreligious Dialogue enjoyed a rich, dynamic, and fruitful exchange with Buddhist monks and nuns. This year's meeting was held from September 26th to the 29th at the Zen Buddhist monastery of Sanboji, the "temple of the three jewels" (Buddha, dharma, and sangha) at Berceto, in the Parma Apennines. Twenty-eight participants, including twenty Christian monks and nuns of different religious communities (Benedictines, Camaldolese, Bose, Poor Clares, Capuchins, Carmelites, Little Family of the Annunciation, Perpetual Adorers of the Blessed Sacrament), six Zen Buddhist monks and nuns, and a Muslim brother and sister from the "Italian Islamic Religious Community" (Co.Re.Is.) were joined by the abbot and the monks and nuns of the "Sangha of the Bamboo forest" who reside in Sanboji. We were sorry that our Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist brothers and sisters were not able to join us this year, but we were happy to welcome two new members eager to share our journey.

As was the case in 2016 at Fudenji, this year's meeting allowed the participants to immerse themselves in the life of a Zen monastery. By sharing the daily life of this Zen



community, we were able to engage in an encounter that deeply affected our understanding of and appreciation for the monastic way of life. Our experience was made possible thanks to the hospitality of our Buddhist brothers and sisters who, assisted by a small group of volunteers, devoted themselves to attending to many the details involved in hosting such a meeting and helping us understand and appreciate what we were experiencing.

Our two days at Sanboji gave us as taste, albeit fleeting, of what life is like in in this Zen Buddhist monastery situated in a place that is so quiet and beautiful from a natural point of view, and so well cared for from an aesthetic and architectural point of view.

The life of this community is structured by a meticulous arrangement of time around three different but complementary activities for "cultivating the Way."

First, *zazen*, "just sitting" (*shikantaza*), which is not so much a meditation technique as the very essence of Zen. At our sessions of *zazen* on the tatami mats of the *zendō*, (meditation hall) and of *kinhin* (walking meditation) outdoors we were fortunate to have the clear and vibrant guidance of the abbot of Sanboji, Master Carlo Tetsugen Serra, who in 1994 began establishing this monastery.

Second, the *kōan* [Zen stories] that can enable us to break through conventional language and achieve a true understanding of reality. Here again, Abbot Tetsugen's masterful commentary on one of these Zen stories allowed us to sense the power of this tool for spiritual realization.

Third, *samu*, manual labor, to which a Zen monastic community devotes some time each day. Accompanied by the brothers, sisters, and volunteers of Sanboji, we devoted a couple morning hours on the two days we were there to work with them on the grounds, in the vegetable garden, and in the various rooms of the monastery. Our work was interspersed with breaks that gave



us an opportunity to meet and converse with our hosts.

The recitation and chanting of sutras and the time of communal meals (formal and informal) prepared with care and deliciously seasoned, also allowed us to immerse ourselves in a liturgical and ritual language that is certainly “other” but still resonates with the everyday elements of our monastic way of life.

Eager to engage more directly with the monastic observance of the Sanboji community, an extended time was devoted to listening to the abbot and members of the host community who offered insights from their particular vision, practice and history on the theme, “Monasticism in the West Today: Challenges and Perspectives.” A lively and animated dialogue continued the reflection with input from the perspectives of other religious and other monastic communities.



As has been our custom, we set aside some time for a meeting of the DIM members who were present to recommend books, share memorable events of our communities over the past year, and suggest future projects. Our meeting ended with a convivial dinner that was an expression of the degree to which our fellowship is becoming more harmonious, profound and joyful each year.

A few days after our meeting one of the participants wrote to say, "My skin still tingles when I recall, in heart and mind, the magical moment we all experienced at this year's DIM meeting. If I had to describe it with a single word, I would say cohesion: cohesion of purpose, cohesion on the path we have taken to offer our lives in the service of the Divine."

Translated by William Skudlarek