



Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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Koichi Yamamoto and the beginnings of Opus Dei in Japan

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A brief account of the beginnings of Opus Dei's apostolate in Japan and the life of one of the first Japanese members. It shows the keen affection St Josemaría always felt for Japan, as well as the way the spirit of Opus Dei is lived out in a very different culture.

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

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

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

When he finished high school, Koichi enrolled in the Faculty of Economics of Kwansai Gakuin University (Kangaku, for short) in Nishinomiya city near Osaka. In mid-1959, when he was in his second year, he encountered Opus Dei.

Opus Dei had been established in Japan in 1958. In 1957, during a stay in Rome, Msgr. Yoshigoro Taguchi, the Bishop of Osaka, with the encouragement of Cardinal Ottaviani, visited Msgr. Escrivá de Balaguer to ask him to send Opus Dei to his diocese. One of his hopes was to establish a center of higher education there. St. Josemaría received him, promised to meet his request, and, as a first step, asked Fr. José Luis Múzquiz, one of the first three members of Opus Dei ordained to the priesthood, to make a journey to Japan to get to know the country and write a report, before other people of Opus Dei were sent to live there permanently.

Fr. Múzquiz made the journey in spring of the following year. During his trip, he fulfilled one of St. Josemaría's wishes: to kiss the land of the Japanese martyrs on his behalf. He did so in the city of Nagasaki. As soon as he reached Tokyo on May 1, 1958, he sent a letter to the Founder, who was overjoyed when he received it, and wrote on the envelope: "First letter from Japan. *Sancta Maria, Stella Maris, filios tuos adiuva!* – Holy Mary, Star of the East, help your children!" "From that time on", recalled Msgr. Alvaro del Portillo, "when he was dealing with correspondence, if there was a letter from Japan he would open the envelope and put it to one side. He would pile up the other letters to read with me later. But the first one he read was always the one from Japan: those members had a special place in his heart, because they were in a wonderful country, with such a difficult language, in which the majority of people did not yet know Christ."

After reading Fr. José Luis's report, St. Josemaría decided to send two members of Opus Dei to Japan without further delay. He chose two priests then working in the U.S.: Fr. José Ramón Madurga and Fr. Fernando Acaso.

Fr. Madurga arrived in Japan on November 8, 1958. One of the first people he visited in Tokyo was the Papal Nuncio, Msgr. Furstenberg, who was pleased that Opus Dei was going to start up in Japan and who gave him some advice about living there. A few days later he went to Osaka, where he stayed for a short time in the residence of the Bishop, Msgr. Taguchi. Fr. Madurga wrote immediately to St. Josemaría, who sent an answer quickly: "My dearest José Ramón: may God watch over you! It was such a joy to receive your first letter from Japan! A warm embrace. Please pass on my warmest greetings to the Bishop. Your Father Mariano blesses you." ("Mariano" was the name he often used when signing

family letters, because of his love for the Blessed Virgin Mary, and because it was one of his baptismal names.)

St. Josemaría had asked Fr. Madurga to find a house and prepare for the arrival in due course of a group of women of Opus Dei. For some weeks Fr. Madurga lived in a house belonging to the parish in Ikeda, a town close to Osaka, which was run by the Redemptorist Fathers. There he learned that giving language classes would be a feasible way of making a living, the Japanese being very keen to learn foreign languages. Moreover, in this way he could meet young people, make friends with them, and talk to them about the Catholic faith and the spirit of Opus Dei that had motivated him to come to Japan. So he began giving English lessons, first in clubs for university students, and then in places that he rented at a low price.

Meanwhile Fr. Fernando Acaso, the other priest, was applying for his visa in the U.S. in the hope of joining Fr. José Ramón before Christmas. While still in Washington, he contracted pneumonia and had to be hospitalized, which meant that he would not reach Japan until January 1959. When St. Josemaría heard of this unforeseen problem, he asked people of Opus Dei all over the world to write to Fr. José Ramón Madurga as a way of keeping him company, because he did not want him to be alone, far away, at such a special time of the year¹⁹.

On December 6, 1958, when he did not yet know of Fr. Fernando's illness, St. Josemaría wrote: "My dearest José Ramón: may God watch over you! I have re-read your last letter, which gave me great joy. I hope that Fernandito will soon arrive in Japan. We are praying for you a lot. A warm embrace. The blessing of your Father Mariano". All the others who signed this letter – among others, Alvaro del Portillo and Javier Echevarría – agreed that the Founder of the Work was very pleased with the news from Japan, and that everyone everywhere was very united with the Father in this intention, and commended him to God.

Shortly afterwards a second letter arrived from Rome, written by Fr. Javier Echevarría on December 20, 1958, in which he explained how sorry the Father was about Fernando's delay. "But, right away he told us – *omnia in bonum!* all things work together for good – that this small difficulty will make us pray all the more, with God's help, for the work in these islands. [...] From all the Regions they are writing to say that they remember to pray for, and ask people to pray for the Work in Kenya and Japan. They are really enthusiastic about doing apostolate among the Japanese [in their own countries], and they always say that they are overjoyed when the Japanese people they know begin to respond and take part in the activities they organize."

On January 18, 1959, two days after his twenty-seventh birthday, Fr. Fernando Acaso finally arrived. Fr. José Ramón went to meet him at Haneda Airport, Tokyo, carrying in his pocket the key to a small house he had just rented in Toyonaka. They stayed in Tokyo until January 31, visiting people to whom Fr. Fernando had brought letters of introduction; and Fr. José Ramón introduced Fr. Fernando to his acquaintances there. Among these were Professor Kinichiro Saito, a former resident of Netherhall House (a London hall of residence for students, which is a corporate work of Opus Dei), and Mataichiro Yoshida and Tsunekazu Takagi, two Catholic professionals who had been in contact with Opus Dei in the U.S. and who were the first co-operators of Opus Dei in Japan.

Fr. Madurga did everything possible to help the recent arrival adapt to this new country. He made sure, for example, that the meals for the first few days were all Western, and then gradually introduced Japanese food, on which he was already becoming an expert, after only a few weeks in the country. He encouraged Fr. Acaso to adapt to the new tastes of food as a concrete way of assimilating the culture of his new country. He was to repeat this lesson with those who came later. He was quite certain – and used to teach others – that the universal spirit of Opus Dei helps one adapt to the culture and customs of a new country and love the country as one's own. He had learned this from St. Josemaría, who emphasized this principle: members of the Work who went to live in other countries were not to “form a cyst” but to “be transplanted” and grow roots, like a plant, in the new soil in which God had set them.

On February 1 they “inaugurated” the newly rented house – the first center of Opus Dei in Japan – a small detached house on the east side of the town. Toyonaka was chosen for its location near the campus of Osaka University where students spent their first two years.

Koichi Yamamoto's first contact with Opus Dei

During the first months, the two priests devoted long hours to studying the language, an essential tool for the pastoral work entrusted to them by St. Josemaría. At the same time, they got to know as many people as possible, focusing on university students – as the Founder of Opus Dei had done in the beginnings of the Work – especially young Japanese Catholics who might be attracted by the spirit of striving for sanctity through work and the ordinary circumstances of life. In the spring of 1959 a convention of Catholic students from the Osaka diocese was held in Kobe. Fr. Madurga and Fr. Acaso met several young people there with whom they could speak English – their Japanese was still very elementary – and made friends with them. One of them, Yukindo Tsurutani,

made up for his faulty English with an open, friendly character. He often visited them, and one day he introduced a close friend, a non-Christian studying at his university: Koichi Yamamoto. Tsurutani was a great soccer fan, not at all common at a time before professional teams and when soccer was played at only a few universities. Koichi loved baseball, like millions of other Japanese youngsters. However, as a good sportsman, he also played soccer with his friend. Although Koichi spoke English fairly well, he decided to join the language classes given at the Opus Dei center. He was lively and energetic and had many interests. He enjoyed exchanging impressions about different topics, and being able to speak with people from abroad was something of a privilege at the time, since there were fewer foreigners in Japan than there are now.

Apart from sport, a favorite subject for discussion among university students and young professionals was the economy and future of the country, now in a phase of growth, after the first post-war period. These were the first years of expansion, and the majority of university students were studying economics. Koichi, a man of his time, was no exception.

In addition to the university students Fr. Madurga and Fr. Acaso were meeting, a growing number of students were joining the English classes, and the house was growing too small for their needs. While searching for a larger house, they decided that they would set up a residence for university students to broaden the work of human and Christian formation, and also a language school. They set their sights on renting a large house in Ashiya. There were obstacles: the shortage of available houses large enough for a residence and language school, insufficient knowledge of the language, and above all the lack of money.

In the end, on October 2, anniversary of the foundation of Opus Dei, they found a suitable house and, quite providentially, were able to rent it without the usual large deposit. The new house was a typical Japanese building from the best period, and they gave it the name *Seido Juku*, the Seido Academy: *Seido* is a poetic name which could be translated as “way of the spirit” or “path of truth”. The move took a good two days, and Koichi lent a helping hand. Their joy at finding the house they had been so eagerly looking for wiped out the scare of their first typhoon, five days earlier – the most devastating of its kind in recorded history. A few days later a letter arrived from Rome in which St. Josemaría comforted them after this natural disaster and promised to send “reinforcements” from the U.S. To another letter, sent by Ernesto Juliá, he added these lines: “May God watch over my children in Japan! Dear ones, we are always very close to you, especially on the day of the typhoon. I hope that your brothers from U.S. will be with you soon: it is about time! Your Father Mariano embraces and blesses you.”

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

Once Seido Juku was established, apostolic activity began to increase. The first residents arrived, led by Yukindo Tsurutani, and the number of students learning English grew rapidly from 1960, when the promised reinforcements from the U.S. arrived. Koichi often visited the Residence: it was close to his university and his best friend lived there. It was no longer only the English classes and the opportunity to speak to foreigners that attracted him. After a series of conversations with Fr. Madurga, he began to take an interest in the Catholic faith, and later, late 1961 or early 1962, he continued his study of the catechism with Fr. José Antonio Armisen.

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

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

The Founder of Opus Dei took a strong interest in apostolate in Japan. Even now, it is not unusual to meet people, including bishops, who have one of the first editions of *The Way* (Michi in Japanese), and who read it frequently; so that St. Josemaría can be considered the person who has contributed most to developing the apostolate of Opus Dei in Japan, through the influence of his writings. As a result of his keen concern, he wanted his daughters to start work there very soon. This wish was fulfilled on July 15, 1960, when a group of women of Opus Dei arrived at the port of Kobe. That same day, they moved into a spacious house in Shukugawa, a suburb of Nishinomiya, bordering on Ashiya. They found waiting for them there a letter from Encarnación Ortega, the Central Secretary of Opus Dei, with the congratulations of St. Josemaría. “An affectionate greeting,” he wrote “on the start of your work in Japan, and a blessing for my Japanese daughters, Mariano”. On the following day, July 16, the first Mass was held in their Center, which was given the name Shukugawa Juku.

The first Japanese person to ask for admission to Opus Dei was Soichiro Nitta, on December 28, 1962. (He was ordained a priest in 1972, and is the current Regional Vicar of Opus Dei in Japan.) When St. Josemaría heard the news that Soichiro had asked for admission, he wrote a heartfelt letter, dated January 23, 1963: “Dearest children: may God watch over my children in Japan! I am very happy about your news. I continue to pray for Nitta: and I bless him especially, asking Our Lord and his Blessed Mother to give him the grace to persevere, *semper in laetitia* – always in joy! A warm embrace, and for everyone, the blessing of your Father Mariano.”

Koichi was at that time quite advanced in his study of the catechism, and it was envisaged that he would be baptized before long. He was in the last stretch of his Economics degree at university, exams were imminent (the academic year ending in March), and he was trying to sort out his professional future. He chose Easter Sunday as the best date for his baptism, by which time all the other questions would have been settled. The weeks passed quickly, the exams finished, and he heard that he had got his degree. To celebrate, Fr. José Antonio Armisén and Desmond Cosgrave, two of the people of Opus Dei in Seido, organized a trip to the south of the country with Koichi and some other friends. They set out on March 20, starting with a pilgrimage to Ooura, the church in Nagasaki with the image of “Our Lady of the finding of the Christians”, the patron of Japan. In this church on March 17, 1865, two hundred years after the persecution of the Christians had given so many martyrs to the Catholic Church, a group of 12 or 15 people from Urakami, a village near Nagasaki, presented themselves before a French missionary. They were a group of *kirishitan*, Catholics who, as the missionaries had already heard rumoured, had kept the faith for over two

centuries without priests or sacraments except for baptism, with the entire country closed off from the outside world.

The group from Seido visited other places as well, where the Japanese martyrs are commemorated. It was a tour of places with a Christian heritage, and a catechism lesson for those who, like Koichi, would receive the faith in the near future. Koichi, however, had to return ahead of the others for the graduation ceremony on Sunday, March 24.

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

On Easter Sunday, April 14, 1963, Koichi was baptized by Fr. Armisen. Some months later, he expressed his desire to join Opus Dei. He formally asked for admission on October 20. In April 1964, Koichi entered graduate school to work for his MBA. He also started work at Seido Language Institute in an administrative capacity, and later giving English lessons to groups of beginners. He combined this job with his studies until mid-1966.

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

Meanwhile, the activities of Opus Dei were increasing and St. Josemaría felt that the time had come to establish an adequate Center for the formation of the members of the Work and many other people, Catholic and non-Catholic, who sought spiritual help from the Work. In May 1965 he suggested studying the

possibility of setting up in the immediate future a conference center for retreats and workshops.

To the Roman College of the Holy Cross

In March 1966, Koichi finished his graduate studies. Shortly afterwards, he applied for a grant from the Spanish embassy to further his studies in Spain. After qualifying, he received a one-year grant, and decided to use it at the Institute of Spanish Language and Culture in the University of Navarre, in the city of Pamplona. He worked on perfecting his Spanish while taking theology courses in the International Center of Studies at the Colegio Mayor Aralar.

Given the circumstances of Opus Dei's expanding apostolate, and the particular situation of Japan, it was decided to send the first two Japanese young men of Opus Dei, Soichiro Nitta and Koichi Yamamoto, to study in Rome where they could deepen in their theological studies and learn more of the spirit of Opus Dei from the Founder himself. The decision entailed a considerable sacrifice at this time of early expansion, but everyone (certainly including the two concerned) realized that it was necessary. To prepare, Soichiro and Koichi began Latin classes: they would need this language for their ecclesiastical studies in Rome.

In October 1967 Koichi moved from Pamplona to Rome, joining the Roman College of the Holy Cross, where he continued studying theology until returning to Japan in June 1970. In Rome, he lived close to St. Josemaría for almost two years. Soichiro Nitta arrived in Rome a year later than Koichi, and they were both there at the same time as Katsushi Sasano, a member of Opus Dei who had been born in Brazil of Japanese parents, and who later went on to work in Japan. For the first time, there were three Japanese men in the Roman College of the Holy Cross, and they all experienced the great affection which the Founder had always had for Japan. In Spain, Koichi had also met a Mexican-born Japanese member of the Work, Julio Inukai Tomida, who would also be leaving for Japan some time later.

Koichi returned to Japan for a one-month stay in summer 1968, helping with educational activities that had been organized in the newly built Okuashiya center. St. Josemaría gave him a monstrance to take to Okuashiya, and a basket of cherries for his mother, and later mentioned in a get-together in Rome that Koichi was doing good work in that center.

Return to Japan

Koichi arrived back in Japan for good in 1970, having clearly benefited greatly from his stay in Spain and with St. Josemaría in Rome. He was able to help

enormously in setting up all the projects St. Josemaría had in mind for Japan. In fact, Koichi's return gave a huge boost to apostolic activities. From the start he took charge of the initial training of those who were gradually coming to join Opus Dei.

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

What was Koichi like?

Koichi was reserved in character and had a great ability to do things unnoticed, even when he was working on something important and commendable. Mention has already been made of his strong character, but he was also gentle and cheerful. Physically, too, Koichi was a strong man, a good sportsman who loved being in the open air, even though his health was always a little delicate, and he was rather thin. Those who knew him agree that he was somewhat reserved, but responsible and warm-hearted. Underlying these qualities was an energetic, decisive temperament. His physical constitution, his mentality, his way of doing things and even his way of walking were as close as could be to what is typically Japanese. He was one hundred percent Japanese, loved his vocation to Opus Dei, and had a great love for St. Josemaría and the other people of the Work, particularly those whom it was his task to direct. To his mission of formation he brought humility and a desire to serve. For many years he was simultaneously the director of a center for the formation of students and another for professional people. In both his work and his apostolic activities he never showed any sign of being rushed or overwhelmed. He acted without hurry, but without rest, with an outer serenity that surely reflected his inner equilibrium. Many remember the spontaneity that characterized his usual relations with people, accompanied by his smile, and the peculiar charm of his colloquial speech in the Kansai accent (the area of Osaka and Kobe). They also recall how easy it was to understand the

examples he gave in his classes of Christian formation; and how, when necessary, he corrected people clearly and unforgettably.

Koichi rarely talked about personal matters, about which he was very reserved. But Julio Inukai remembers one rare exception: “When I met him in Pamplona, in 1966, he told me some details of his conversion. He was quite convinced that the faith, and his vocation to the Work, were the greatest grace that he had received from God. For me, this was the first experience I had had of talking to a convert from Japan who had received doctrinal formation in the Work. Normally, Koichi was very reserved. But on this occasion he talked with such enthusiasm and joy about his conversion, that I was very moved. This conversation still remains in my mind. Then, over the years, once I was in Japan, I was able to witness his constant gratitude to Our Lord for this great gift of faith, crowned with God’s calling to Opus Dei, which Koichi was to follow so faithfully until the end of his life. I also remember in gratitude how much he helped me in those early days of my stay in Japan. Discreetly, without drawing attention to it, he generously devoted a large part of his time to correcting my Japanese and explaining details of Japanese life to me. He practiced charity very naturally, and during that time I felt completely protected in my family life. During the early years, I had the opportunity of working with him. I was greatly struck by his sense of responsibility in his work, and I saw borne out what I had heard our Father say on several occasions: that one of the human virtues of the Japanese was hard work. Koichi had this virtue very markedly [...]. There is no doubt that he was a great help to Fr. José Ramón. You could say that he was his ‘right arm’.”

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

Another aspect which many people stressed about talking to Koichi was that he never spoke a word too many. He thought about what he had to say, and when someone asked him about an especially delicate issue, he tried to find the appropriate solution, consulting when necessary the people he thought were the

right ones to solve the problem. Kioyuki Fuwa, who worked for many years in the Publications Department of Seido Foundation, found in Koichi, in his own words, “a true master of my life. From the time that I met him, when I enrolled in Seido in 1969, Yamamoto-san was always an object of my admiration. He spoke English and Spanish fluently, he had lived and studied in Europe for several years, and he was concerned not only with the academic side of his students – he easily managed to direct his conversation to more personal areas of each student’s character. The fact is that he gave me classes for only one semester, but as I went regularly to Seido, we formed a firm friendship. At first I thought it would be hard to talk to him, because his appearance was serious and he seemed a little inexpressive. But after our first conversation, this initial impression was dispelled. Once I discovered that he was a graduate of my university, my feeling of respect towards him grew. He was always warm and very generous. He helped me a lot in many different ways. From what he said, I always understood that he prayed for me and prayed about the things I told him. He welcomed me with a generous heart when I consulted him on matters that at that time seemed [to me] to be enormous problems. Curiously, most of them were solved in the course of our conversations, and with great charity he helped me to understand that these ‘problems’ were not as big as I thought. For me, he was not only my boss at work, but also a true spiritual director. I always felt full of peace after talking to him about so many things – my work, my family, my interior life... At the end, we almost always talked for a while about baseball, which we were both crazy about.

Only twice was Koichi’s reaction not what I had hoped. The first time was when I was considering leaving my job because I was angry about a personal matter. After listening to me, he said loudly, but without changing his expression, ‘Go to the oratory and cool your head!’ I have to admit that I was disappointed. I felt this as a rebuff, because I had thought that he would understand me as usual, and stand by my side. In my words he saw a lack of rectitude and an exaggerated sense of *amour propre*, and he told me to examine my conscience about these. On the other occasion, the issue was a family matter, to do with the education of my children. With great naturalness, he said to me ‘It would be better for you to consult Father Madurga about that,’ and he went straight off to find him. I was always impressed at how much Koichi respected Fr. José Ramón. At that time (it was the mid-1970s) they were both fully occupied with setting up Seido Gakuen, for the Nagasaki schools, and it was necessary to overcome a lot of difficulties that sometimes defied the imagination. I remember that Koichi talked frequently about the drive and vitality with which Fr. José Ramón tackled this issue, and about how Koichi tried to back him up with all his might, even though he sometimes felt that the effort was too much for him.”

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

Seido Gakuen: his last adventure

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

Meanwhile, the apostolic work had grown. More people were asking for admission to Opus Dei, and some Numeraries had been ordained priests. The moment had come to begin some apostolic undertaking of greater magnitude, and St. Josemaría proposed that they start to think seriously about setting up two schools, one for girls, another for boys, which could be corporate works of apostolate, i.e., with Opus Dei taking responsibility for the spiritual direction. It took some time for this proposal to bear fruit.

The idea was to create an entity which would provide Christian formation – which would teach in a way that was Catholic – but which would not be an officially Catholic institution. The Archbishop of Nagasaki, Msgr. Satowaki, understood this idea very well, and from the start encouraged them in their project. This was an essential step, but only the first of many which would have to be taken, all fraught with difficulty. After studying the factors in favor and against, the city of Nagasaki was chosen as the site. Nagasaki has always been the prefecture with the greatest density of Catholics in Japan. A second reason was that land prices were much lower than in cities that were, perhaps, more important.

The measures needed to carry out this project were set in motion in early 1975, and on the morning of June 26, a couple of hours before he died, St. Josemaría mentioned this in a get-together with women of the Work in Villa delle Rose, a center of studies in Castelgandolfo, near Rome. To a Japanese woman who was present, he said: "Pray for your country, because you are a great people. Pray for people to meet Christ and love him, and serve him. You already know that they are preparing to start a school in Nagasaki. We have to pray so that the obstacles disappear, so that they can start to work there as soon as possible."

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

The last years

During this period, it is hard to know exactly when, Koichi began to feel unwell. He often felt tired and had to go to bed early. He himself did not pay much attention to this and did not say anything about his health. Ramón López Mondejar, however, a doctor who was living in the center in Ashiya at the time, noticed how unwell he was. In 1980 Koichi had a thorough medical examination, but nothing was found. In late autumn 1981, however, his condition had worsened and he went for another examination, accompanied by Soichiro Nitta. This time the doctors found colo-rectal cancer, which had reached an advanced stage. It had gone undetected previously due to its location in the hepatic angle of the colon.

The first operation was performed in mid-November. During his stay in hospital, and for the whole of his illness, he carried out an intense apostolate among relatives and acquaintances. When he was discharged from hospital he wrote to Fr. Alvaro del Portillo, St. Josemaría’s successor as head of Opus Dei. A few days later he received a reply, dated December 3, 1981, in which Fr. del Portillo expressed the great love with which he was accompanying Koichi at those moments.

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

1982, in which he stated that he was still praying for a complete recovery.

Koichi spent the rest of the year free from major health problems, although he had to visit the hospital for periodic check-ups and medical treatment. He carried on his work as administrator in the Regional Commission of Opus Dei in Japan, and as the director of the Ashiya center. After the operation he seemed to be more willing to externalize his capacity for affection, which he showed in many details – countless small things which left their mark.

From 1983 onwards, his health broke down rapidly. Shohei Kimura remembers that one day, in mid-April 1983, when they were going out of the dining-room, Koichi went up to him to thank him for everything he had done for him. Shohei was taken aback, and did not know how to respond. The same thing happened several times with other people. At that time, no one realized what that meant. Later, they would come to understand that it was a discreet way of gradually saying farewell to everyone. From the very first moment, he had realized the gravity of his condition, and he knew he did not have much time left. He wanted to make the best he could of that time, putting in order all the papers and documents that he had dealt with in his work – though he had always been orderly.

In May 1983, after various examinations and tests, the doctors found a tumor in his pancreas and duodenum. To prevent him from deteriorating physically because of lack of nutrition, they decided to create a bypass round the obstruction, as a palliative measure. As far as the tumor itself was concerned, it was impossible to extirpate it because of its size and position. The prognosis was still grave, and everything depended on how he would react to the treatment. After this second operation, he felt somewhat better for a time, but he had to remain in hospital until close to the end of his life.

In July he was allowed to leave hospital on two occasions, on Saturdays and Sundays. The mere fact of being at home gave him a great psychological boost. On these occasions he used to say that the sound of the street – cars, voices, and so on – which reached him through the window of his bedroom comforted him. The fact that the doctors let him go home, however, meant that they had decided to suspend the strong anti-cancer medication that they were giving him, because they had reached the limit that could be tolerated, and it was not producing positive results. Some days before his first trip home, they had taken a large number of X-rays which showed that the tumor had grown more quickly than predicted. The specialists thought that the situation would become critical from the end of August.

Koichi was in considerable pain. It should be remembered that in 1983, palliative treatments for controlling pain were not as developed as they are today. He had known of the gravity of his illness for a long time, and felt that a crisis might soon occur. On July 22, Fr. José Ramón Madurga explained the exact situation to him. Koichi received the news without fear, in a truly supernatural spirit. He was convinced that Opus Dei was the best place to live and the best place to die, as he had heard St. Josemaría say. That same day, the Anointing of the Sick was solemnly administered to him; he was to receive this Sacrament on two more occasions in the hospital.

At the beginning of August, the Prelate of Opus Dei sent two handwritten letters, one to Fr. José Ramón Madurga and the other to Koichi. In the letter to Fr. José Ramón, Msgr. del Portillo said: “My dearest José Ramón: May God watch over you and all my Japanese children! We have just been talking over the telephone, José Ramón, and now I am writing to you, as I said I would, and I enclose another letter for Koichi. I understand your pain, which I share, because of the illness of your brother, this son of mine who, in human terms, is now ending his earthly journey. And, feeling as you do, I also sometimes find it very hard to understand Our Lord. Koichi could still do so much! But although we do not understand God, we know that he is our Father, the most loving Father that could possibly exist. He is Love itself, and if we love Koichi, He loves him still more. If we think how effective Koichi could be, He knows this even better, and He loves the Work more than we do, because it is His, and exists for His glory. We have no alternative but to pray a lot, mortifying ourselves and offering this penance to God; asking God to perform a miracle. Let us ask Him this with the faith and trust of the saints: of those prophets of the Old Testament who stood face-to-face with God, giving Him very human reasons, treating Him with absolute trust: ‘Lord, our enemies will make a mockery of us!’ And God heard them. Or, like the men and women of the New Testament – like our Father! – who called on His mercy, His love, His omnipotence, full of faith. And if their faith seemed to fail, they cried out: ‘*Credo, sed adiuva incredulitatem meam!*’ – I believe, but help my unbelief!’ And He heard them too – He heard our Father! – so that they could see clearly that the Lord is our God, and this strengthened the faith of the chosen. This is how I want to ask this of Our Lord. ‘Lord, perform this miracle, so that the Japanese are strengthened in the faith! Lord, think of your Japanese children, who are now my children or could become mine, and give them this sign, so that they can see that you are the true God, and remain by your side!’ Pray like this with me, and think at the same time that God knows better – as our Father said – and that He will hear our prayers, giving us and giving Koichi what is best for him, and for the Work. Be filled with peace, exclaiming with all the strength of your soul: ‘*Fiat voluntas tua!* Thy Will be done!’ God, who is our Father, and who loves us so, will give us what

is best. We are, my dear children, *consummati in unum*, all perfectly made one, in our joys and our sorrows. And in the end, they will be all joys: *omnia in bonum!* Everything works together for the good! Pray for me. With all my love I remember you constantly. Your Father Alvaro embraces you and blesses you.”

The letter to Koichi was even more affectionate in tone. “My dearest Koichi, may Jesus watch over you! From the beginning I have followed the course of your illness, and I pray for you every day with all my heart. Now that I know you have received the Anointing of the Sick, I am sending you this letter to tell you that I am very closely united with you in your suffering and in your hope. I commend you constantly to Our Lord, calling on our Father’s intercession, asking that you should be healed, should this be His will. Please ask this too, with great faith, through our Father’s intercession: tell our Father that I told you this. Do not weary of asking. And, at the same time, nourish in yourself, with the grace of God, the virtue of hope. During the last days of her life, Aunt Carmen was so wrapped up in God, and had such a fervent desire to see God face to face, *sicut est*, just as he is – an infinite wonder of Love, Beauty, Goodness – that our Father said: ‘If this sister of mine were cured, she would be quite annoyed.’ You have to be like this, wrapped up in God, with enormous desires to work for Him, for His Work, and at the same time rejoicing when you think of the moment when Our Mother will take your soul up to Heaven, where you will see Our Lord, and where She will contemplate you and smile at you as your Mother. Ask, and accept with joy what God wants. If you bear your illness in this way, you are – remember! – a treasure for the Work. Do you want to apply a little of this treasure for me? I am envious of you. With all my love I remember, commend, embrace and bless you. From your Father, Alvaro. Please tell your mother and brother that I am closely united with them.”

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

Condensed from: “Koichi Yamamoto (1940-1983) and the beginnings of Opus Dei in Japan”, an article by Antonio Melich, published in *“Studia et documenta”*. *Rivista dell’Istituto Storico San Josemaría Escrivá* n. 1 (2007), pp. 127-159 (www.isje.org). To read the article, click [here](#).