

Frank Ngo

## 2019 Sophia University Research Grant Report

The original intention of my research was to look into the Marian apparition known as Our Lady of Akita, which had over one hundred occurrences in the 1970s and 1980s in a small convent in Akita. According to recorded accounts, a certain wooden statue of the Virgin Mary wept and at times bled in a stigmata-like way. Like all apparitions, Our Lady of Akita was first met with scrutiny from the local bishop, before it received approval and started building a following. But after about a decade, it was promptly stomped out by several bishops outside the immediate diocese. The Vatican approved of the apparition but the local Japanese bishops did not. This is where my research intended to pick up on, to see how the authority of the Vatican negotiated with the authority of the Japanese bishops on local practices inside and outside of the Japanese Catholic community.

Some preliminary findings are drawn from my research I was able to conduct thanks to the research grant. From 26-27 August, 2019, I went to Akita to collect ethnographic data and interview several nuns in the area about Our Lady of Akita. Because all informants were able to meet on the first day, the 26<sup>th</sup>, I was able to half my intended stay in Akita from four days to only two. One nun allowed me to record the interview between us but about half way she asked for me to stop because she did not want records of what she was about to explain. She did, however, allow me to take some written memos about the conversation so I have those written down. Another nun did not want me to record any audio of our conversation at all, and the nature of our conversation did not lend itself to me writing any notes down during our talk. I did, however, manage to take some notes afterwards in written form and in audio-log form, which consists of me audibly recounting our conversation to myself. In addition to these interview notes, I also collected ethnographic data from the convent in which Our Lady of Akita appeared. I noted the architecture and the history of the convent and building. Additionally, I received a present from the nun of the convent in the form of an official book sold by their gift shop.

My project includes a few conversations about Our Lady of Akita in Tokyo, as well. The conversations were not as structured as they were in Akita nor were they as formal since they were among Catholic informants with whom I am close with, of both Japanese and non-Japanese ethnicity. For the most part, only the non-Japanese knew about Our Lady of Akita and they heard about her from non-Japanese Catholic friends. Talks were brief and almost in passing since none of the informants had any devotion to the Marian apparition. Because of this, I made only short written notes about our conversation.

Since the original Akita trip took only half the time, I continued to Kyoto to see if the Catholic contacts I had there knew of the apparition from 6-8 September 2019. Like the Tokyo informants, conversations about her were short and only non-Japanese Catholics knew about her. I have more ethnographic notes about their devotions, including some on those who know about Our Lady of Akita, and their fostering of certain “Japanese” devotions.