

Admiral Shinjiro Yamamoto

Among the Japanese Christians deeply connected to the Marianists, Admiral Shinjiro Yamamoto stands out (not to be confused with Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, who was in charge of the Pearl Harbor attack).

In 1891, when the superior of Japan was looking for a place closer to the sea where the religious could relax during the summer, he contacted the Yamamoto family. They agreed to rent him a house. Friendship and trust were established between the brothers and the Yamamoto family. The young Shinjiro often joined the religious for various activities and games.

Shinjiro Yamamoto was born in this village of Katase on December 22, 1877. He was 14 years old when he entered the Morning Star boarding school. Intelligent, studious, and joyful, he accumulated honors and awards, while, at the same time, building a strong personality.

With his parents' permission, he asked to be allowed to study the Christian religion and to become a Catholic. He expressed it in these words during a conference in Rome: "... I am the first student of the Marianist School in Tokyo to convert to Catholicism. I was also the first to be baptized [with the name Stephen] in their chapel of the Morning Star School, on the feast of Christmas, 1893. I cannot remember this occasion without experiencing a deep emotion concerning what happened in my heart as a young man...". His conversion was only the beginning. Eventually, his entire family converted to Catholicism. His father himself receiving baptism at the age of 86.

After naval school, he participated in the Boxer war in China, then in the conflict against Russia in 1904-1905 where he received the Golden Milan cross for his heroic behavior. He later wrote about this event: "What I have done is almost nothing, or at least not worthy of praise. I am rather ashamed that we're talking about it. If up to now I have managed to escape a thousand dangers, it is only through the special protection of the Blessed Virgin whom you have taught me to love and honor. For more than three and a half months, I have not been in Japan. I need to be strengthened by the sacraments [...]. I hope, with Port Arthur taken, to find time for a little retreat."

Shinjiro Yamamoto took advantage of the newfound peace to marry Shiyoko Yoshimara, who was also a Catholic. They had four children.

In 1916, Japan opened a diplomatic mission in Italy. The naval attaché at this mission was Admiral Yamamoto. In fact, he was much more than a naval attaché. His perfect knowledge of French and English, as well as his membership in the Catholic religion, were a precious asset for this diplomatic mission. For his part, Yamamoto took advantage of this opportunity to make contact with the Marianists in Rome, in particular with Father Maurice who had composed the prayer to Mary, the Morning Star, for the conversion of Japan. He said: Why not accompany this prayer with an image? He asked Mrs. Franchi, an artist, to paint a picture. He then presented this picture to Pope Benedict XV, who blessed the image.

After World War I, at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Yamamoto was appointed secretary of the Japanese commission.

His faith was great and he was anxious for Japan to be converted, as he explained at a conference in Paris in 1919: "It is important that the conversion of Japan be prompt, that it be worked on tirelessly and immediately, for the obstacles are not negligible [...]. If Japan does not quickly convert to the true religion, it will be disastrous not only for the country, but for the

whole Far East, which is under Japan's influence and which is a region that has a billion pagans. "And he continued: "With your prayers, may you obtain a large number of French missionaries to help us! Oh! How useful they would be for the conversion of Japan, for that of the peoples of the Far East, and finally for the peace of the world! For true peace is found only in the Church and not in leagues or in purely human or even pagan institutions. Only Jesus, who came to bring peace, is able to give us lasting peace on earth. May he grant it to the world!"

Following the Treaty of Versailles, the Carolinas, Marianas and Marshall Islands became Japanese. What would be the fate of the missionaries working on these islands? Japan manifested an openness to resolve this question. This situation earned Yamamoto the insignia of Grand Cross of the Order of St. Gregory received from the hands of Benedict XV. In bestowing this award, the Pope emphasized, "the intelligent zeal with which Admiral Yamamoto, in the fulfillment of his mandate, has corresponded equally to the views and desires of the Holy See and of his own government."

After his stay in Europe, Yamamoto was appointed to the household of Imperial Prince Hiro Hito, whom he accompanied as a translator on his 1921 tour of Europe. Yamamoto was a Marianist at heart; he was affiliated with the Society of Mary, which he esteemed and loved like a mother. During this trip, he took the opportunity to visit the communities in the countries he crossed.

The government was delighted with the success of the visit and asked Yamamoto to make an official lecture tour through the major cities of Japan to explain the Prince's visit.

The years following the terrible earthquake of 1923 were difficult for Admiral Yamamoto because of family events and the rise of militarism in the country. In 1937, when he was retiring, the Japanese government had the idea to call on Admiral Yamamoto and send him to 16 countries in the Americas and Europe to lecture on the positive aspects of Japan. This was a very difficult task, an almost impossible mission. However, out of patriotism, he accepted the task. Before leaving, around November 1937, he visited the Marianist community in Tokyo. He opened his soul and begged for their prayers. It was an agonizing farewell: "Please accompany me with your continuous prayers. This task is like a death for me.

After pursuing several other similar missions, Admiral Yamamoto, suffered a cerebral arteriosclerosis. He returned to his country and died on February 28, 1942.

The Archbishop of Tokyo presided over his funeral before a huge crowd. On April 6, a vigil was held to remember Admiral Yamamoto. Kotaro Tanaka, president of the Supreme Court of Justice, said: "last year, the Catholic community lost Father Soiji Iwashita. Now, a year and a half later, we have lost Shinjiro Yamamoto as well. Everyone knows that these two people were the best representatives of our Catholic community. They were the two great mentors, two living treasures of our Community for all that referred to wisdom, philosophy and religion. On the one hand, they both had an intense faith; on the other, they were the disciples who clearly lived this faith and this Catholic philosophy. In that sense, there was no difference between the two."