

Fr Robert Flynn, S.J.

Teacher, Pastor, and Missionary

(March 12, 1920 ~ February 7, 2009)

Robert Chiesa, S.J.

(An article from Francis Britto's *All about Francis Xavier*)

What's in a name?

Fr Robert (Bob) Flynn was born in Manhattan, New York, on March 12, 1920, moved to Massachusetts when he was two years old, and then five years later to a suburb of Buffalo, New York. He was named Robert Paul Flynn, but, as was a prevalent custom among pre-Conciliar American Jesuits, he took the vow-name Maria, which can be verified in the formula of his final vows (Kobe, August 15, 1954) where he wrote "Robertus Paulus Maria Flynn." At some point in the Japan Province record his middle initial was changed from "P" to "M" and all his published works bear the name "Robert M. Flynn."

The original "Paul" catches the dynamic missionary character, almost compulsion, he shared with St Paul ("Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel." 1 Cor 9:16). His own personal choice of "Mary" highlights the deep devotional piety that shone through his preaching and the one spiritual book he published in the States with the title *...And Holy Is His Name* (from Mary's Magnificat).



Reluctant acquaintance with the Society

During the dark days of economic depression in the 1930s a family with 9 children could hardly afford to send a son to a Jesuit high school, but at the urging of the Sisters of his parochial school, he took the exam for a scholarship to the Jesuits' Canisius High School in Buffalo. He himself wrote that, much to his dismay, he passed the exam and ended up at Canisius, whereas he would rather have gone to the closer Christian Brothers' high school most of his friends were going to.

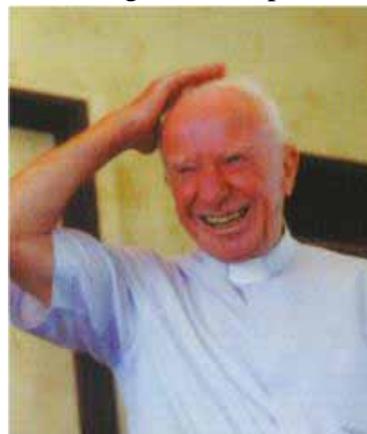
This reluctant first acquaintance with the Society in 1933 gradually evolved into a definitive decision to enter the novitiate of the New York Province on August 14, 1937, to begin the first of his more than 71 years as a Jesuit.

Linguistic adaptability

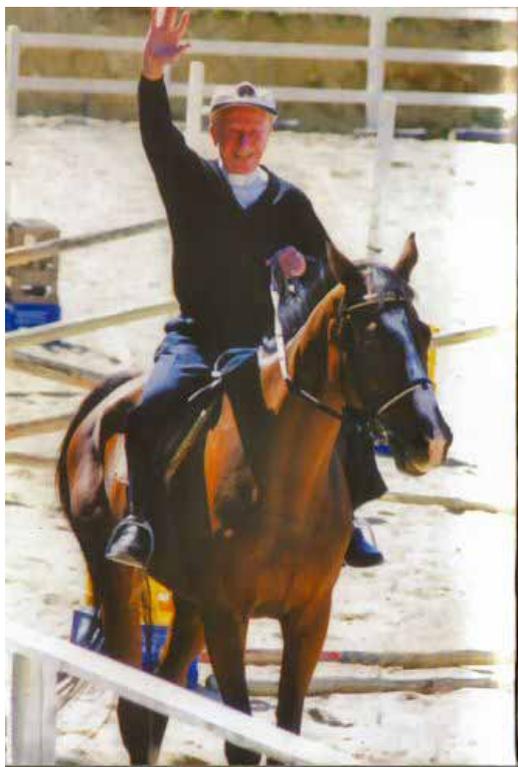
After his novitiate and juniorate, he went to St Louis for philosophy (1941-44). The great familiarity he had gained with Greek and Latin classics prepared him well for his regency at St Peter's Prep in Jersey City (1944-47). After regency he was sent to Louvain for theology in French (1947-51) and was ordained to the priesthood there on August 24, 1950. During theology he spent his summers in Germany and, at his own request, he was allowed to do tertianship in Münster (1951-52). He had become interested in Japan when Fr General Janssens issued his first call soon after World War II, and after his long retreat as a tertian he

wrote directly to Fr General saying he was willing to be sent. His offering was accepted and on October 29, 1952, he arrived in Japan to begin his study of Japanese, which at age 32 he found the most challenging of all the languages he had encountered so far.

His linguistic experience stood him in good stead when in 1954 he began to teach English at Rokko High School in Kobe. With little special training other than a brief seminar and his own “common sense” for language, he educated himself in the linguistic principles of what was then known as the “Michigan Method,” pioneered by Charles Fries and further promoted by Robert Lado. His practical sense for language analysis and education formed the basis of class notes he began to produce in order to give his students an aural/oral approach to learning English.



“Progress in English”



He was new to the turf and had to struggle to maintain and develop his own practical approach to English education while dodging the frowns of the experienced and stalwart German grammarians (especially Frs Lahaye and Knorr), who rightfully claimed the success of having laid solid rails that propelled their students straight through the university entrance exams.

Not to be daunted, Bob Flynn solicited the help of Frs Ulrich and Smith and some teachers in Catholic high schools of the Kyoto-Osaka-Kobe region to help polish up his 6-year program for wider use in Catholic junior-senior high schools. It was around this time that he made the acquaintance of Mr Ohyama Kisaburo, who ran a small company marketing educational materials. Mr Ohyama eventually devoted his company solely to publishing and marketing Bob Flynn’s textbooks. First appearing in 1964 along with open reel tapes, these books later went through a number of revisions, first with a complete set of cassette tapes in 1972, then onto CDs in 1994. With the advent of

the 21st century a thoroughgoing revision called *Progress in English 21*, now using flash-memory sticks, began to appear in 2003. This revision, made by a team of on-the-job teachers, superimposed a contemporary look onto Bob Flynn’s original content and approach. The final volume of this newest revision reached its completion with the Master’s blessing just two years ago, in 2007.

Too many to be counted, Fr Robert M. Flynn’s English textbooks and storybooks are now being used in some 150 schools nationwide. Starting from a few Catholic schools near Kobe, they eventually spread to other Catholic schools around the country, then to other 6-year private schools and, most recently, have been introduced into a few 6-year public schools. Flynn publications account for the largest portion of publication royalties that enter the province coffers.

Progress in Life

Every appreciation of Bob Flynn hastens to add that his work was not confined to the classroom but reached out into all areas of his students' life. He was always there in their midst. A natural athlete, his baseball and basketball prowess were legendary. In extracurricular hours he coached basketball teams and candidates for speech contests, always with the aim of winning. He held bible classes for students and parents. In the evenings and on weekends he would hop onto his motorcycle and race around the streets and hills of Kobe to visit all 180 families he was responsible for that year. On holidays he would join or invite students for hiking and camping, ice skating or swimming. He was constantly on the move and enjoyed every minute of it.

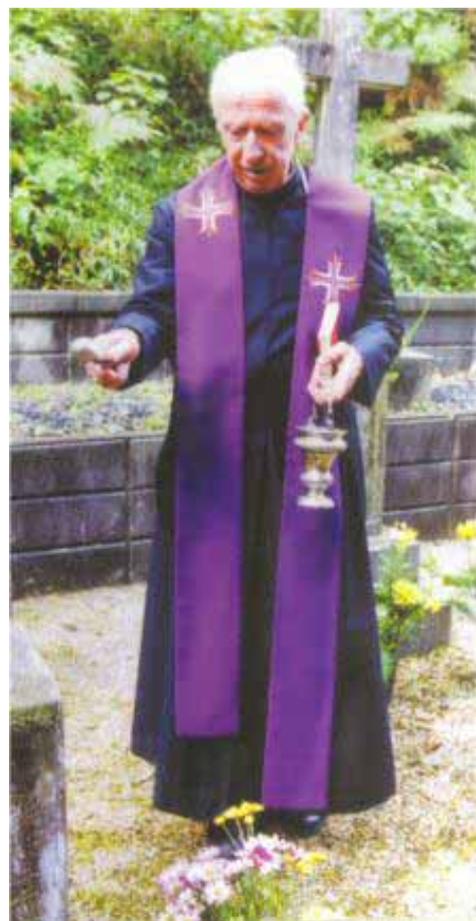
He not only taught through his words but through his whole life. This is what attracted students to him and what kept them close. He performed their weddings and kept an eye on their young families. The tremendous and lasting effect of his life's ministry can be seen in the handsome labor of love published by Rokko graduates and simply titled *Robert Flynn* with the subtitle "The Career of a Catholic Priest."

Progress in Christ

The first reading chosen for Bob Flynn's burial Mass was the section of Paul's Epistle to the Philippians (3:12~17) which says, "I press on to grasp Christ, by whom I myself have been grasped. Without looking back to the past, I run forward to meet him."

Bob Flynn was always ready to go where he felt called by Christ. After almost 30 years at Rokko, he was one of the first to volunteer for Taisei, a secondary school of the Fukuoka Diocese that had just been entrusted to the Society (1983). After some years there he received a Christmas card with the words, "God may lead us in a way we did not plan to go." While wondering what might be asked of him next, he received a call from the Provincial asking him to fill a vacancy left by Fr Horvath's untimely death in the small mountain town of Tsuwano, tourist spot and site of Japan's last martyrs before anti-Christian edicts were abolished in 1873.

Here Bob's main missionary work was telling tourists and pilgrims about the martyrs of Tsuwano up the hill at Otome Pass, the very site of their torture and martyrdom. Twenty years previously he had already written a small booklet on these martyrs whom he greatly admired, entitled "[No Greater Love](#)," and now he did the text for a picture book featuring one of these martyrs, a little girl named "Mori-chan."

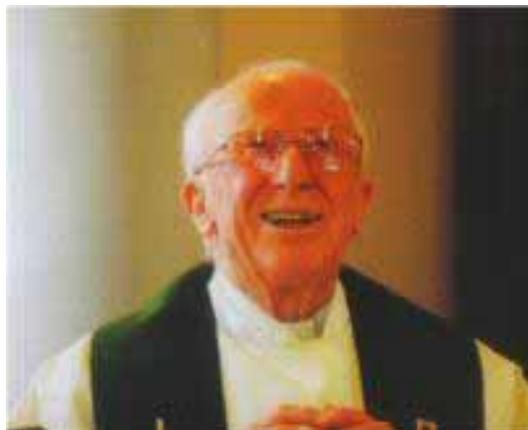


For fourteen years (1988~2002) he unflinchingly poured his whole self into Tsuwano with characteristic missionary zeal and persistent prayer accompanied by fasting. But here, too, where there was Flynn there was fun. He enjoyed teaching English to the children of Tsuwano as much as they enjoyed the crazy antics of their blue-eyed teacher. He gathered youngsters for overnight stays featuring fun and games and, of course, bible and Mass. He was the quintessential country pastor. Everyone in town knew him and everyone greeted him.

By the year 2002 his memory, but not his energy, was beginning to decline. After a few years in Hagi and Yamaguchi, he had to move to Loyola House in Tokyo for his final silent share in the Cross of Christ. He became less and less able to communicate through words but always had a beaming smile of appreciation for his many visitors.

Two former Rokko students, no longer young themselves, spent the final hours with him until he commended his spirit into the hands of God shortly after midnight on February 7. It had been a life filled with the same dynamic love and zeal for Christ that had filled the life of his baptismal namesake St Paul.

May the brightness and joy of his smile continue to shine on us all.



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Fr. Robert Chiesa, S.J. the author, has been a missionary in Japan since 1960. He hails from the California Province of the Society of Jesus. He has taught at several Jesuit Schools in Japan and has been re-editing and republishing the works of Fr. Flynn. Currently he works at the Jesuit Province Headquarters in Tokyo.