**My Personal Encounter with Swami Vivekananda**

Cyril Veliath

Faculty of Global Studies

Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan

 Your Excellency Ambassador Mrs. Deepa Gopalan Wadhwa, Ambassador Madan Kumar Bhattarai of Nepal, Reverend Sister Shioya, Swami Suhitanandaji, Swami Medhasanandaji, and friends. When I was asked to say a few words today by way of tribute to Swami Vivekananda, I thought perhaps that in the brief period of time that was allotted to me, I could describe my personal encounter with the Indian saint. As most of you perhaps know, I was born in India of a Hindu mother and a Christian father, and I was raised in India as a Roman Catholic. I joined the Jesuit order in 1968, I became a Catholic priest in 1982, I arrived in Japan in 1974, and since then I have taught at Sophia University for nearly 30 years. Thanks to the generosity and welcoming nature of Swami Medhasanandaji, I have been associated with the Nippon Vedanta Kyokai for nearly 18 years.

 I first read about Swami Vivekananda when I was a university student in India, and it was from a book on Hinduism published by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. At that time, I recall how impressed I was by his tolerant and magnanimous nature. Swami Vivekananda was a devout Hindu. He faithfully followed all the laws of Hinduism, but at the same time, the reverence he showed for other religions, was simply unique. In Christianity, we have a book on spirituality called the ‘Imitation of Christ.’ It was a book written in the 15th century, and I used to read it with deep interest in my college days. When I read the life of Swami Vivekananda, I was amazed to learn that not only had he read the book himself, he had also translated some paragraphs from it into Bengali. This touched me greatly, and I felt I had a duty to learn more about the teachings of this exceptional man. There are several statements of Swami Vivekananda that made a deep impression upon me. On November 19, 1894, in a letter written from New York to his friend Alasinga Perumal in India, he said, “I do not believe in a God who will give me eternal bliss in heaven, but who cannot give me bread upon this earth.” In other words, what he meant to say was that our religion should not remain as something theoretical or abstract. It should be converted into love and service of others. As St. James, a disciple of Christ stated in a letter, “Even if we have faith, if we do not do charitable works, our faith is as good as dead.” The life of Swami Vivekananda reveals that he believed very much in charitable works, and the educational institutions and works of service carried out by members of the Ramakrishna Mission all over the world, bear witness to this fact. Yet at the same time, he also cautioned us to be careful that we do not restrict our lives only to doing good works, because virtues such as faith, hard work, and responsibility, were equally important. On one occasion, while writing about Bhakti Yoga he said, “For many people religion has become simply a means of doing a little charitable work, just to amuse them after a hard day’s labor.” We should be careful that our religion does not become like that.

 Speaking of the suffering millions in the world today, recently in Rome, His Holiness Pope Francis made the following statement: “Human rights are violated not only by terrorism, repression, or assassination, but also by unfair economic structures that create huge inequalities.” These words of the Pope echo the wisdom of Swami Vivekananda. More than 100 years earlier in 1893, at the world Parliament of Religions that was held at Chicago, Swami Vivekananda said, “Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled it with violence, drenched it with blood, destroyed civilizations, and sent entire nations to despair. Had it not been for these demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now.”

 What the world needs today is people like Swami Vivekananda. The chaos we see around us, the mood of depression we find in people, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the cries of orphans and widows, are all signs that a miracle from God is what we urgently need. Let us pray that with the grace of Swami Vivekananda, we may obtain that miracle.