

Preservation and Conservation of the Marega collection in the Vatican Library:

A Multifaceted Project

Father Mario Marega (1902-1978) was a Salesian priest on a mission in Japan from 1929 to 1974. He extensively studied and wrote about Christian and Japanese culture.

During the first fifteen years, he mastered a large number of documents (counted as more than 10.000,) about Christian persecution in the Oita region (a southern region of Japan,) written between the early XVII and the late XIX century by the local civil administration, which had an aim to control and oppress the Christian community.

In 1945 the collection was shipped with the first boat that sailed away from Japan to Italy at the end of the Second World War. In order to protect the documents, the entire collection was split in several bunches, wrapped with daily newspapers and inserted in metal-sheet boxes.

In this way, after several steps, the most conspicuous of the collection arrived at the Vatican library in 1953.

Here in 1965 father Laurent, *scriptor latinus*, divided the collection into 21 parts (parameters unknown) and placed them in the deposit A, where the collection remained in oblivion for 46 years.

Finally, in 2011, thanks to the insatiable curiosity of Dottor Delio Vania Proverbio, *scriptor orientalis* of the Vatican Library, the Marega Collection came back to life.

From the very beginning of the Project, it was clear to us the need for a collaboration with Japanese institutions, to help us make an inventory and catalogue such a special archive. For this purpose, working contacts were established with Japanese institutions, state and local archives, universities and libraries, and in 2013 a multifaceted project began, which aims to make the Marega collection available to everyone, worldwide.

The Project foresees a first phase, at the Vatican Library, intended to compile an inventory, to conserve and to digitize the documents; followed by a second phase, in Japan, which should finish by 2019, intended to catalogue the archive, based on the digital images of the documents.

The first action was disinfestation of the entire collection by an anoxic treatment. Then, during the inspection of each of the 21 parts, accurate photographs and measurements of each document were taken.

The next phase entailed compiling the inventory of the material, using alphanumerical strings and a topographic criterion, meant to mirror perfectly the position of each single element within the archive, considered as a whole.

After long deliberation and discussion, we decided to write with pencil the call number directly onto the documents; which were inserted inside envelopes and boxes, made by archival properties paper and boards.

A database was built containing basic information for each document, such as type, measurements, brief description of content, dating, language, and the state of conservation.

At this point, the conservation department of the Vatican library was involved in the conservation treatments, which should be preliminary to the digitization phase, ensuring safe handling of the documents and able to reveal the text that was hidden because of different damages (biological, chemical and mechanical).

Considering the great number of items to be treated, it was decided to save time by not treating the wrapping material — i.e. newsprint scrap paper or parcel paper used to ship the documents, along with cords and wrapping twine — in favour of the original documents. They were damaged mainly by entomological and rodent attack, molds, humidity, water stains, lacunae, folds and loss of adhesion at the joints.

Considering the evident need of appropriate knowledge in relation to paleographical and codicological aspects of the Japanese collection, that we needed to conserve, it was necessary for us to undergo specific training sessions.

To understand and preserve the history of the artifacts, we learned the specific terminology, useful to recognize significant elements of Japanese archive material, foreign to us in the format and characteristics.

Working together with Japanese experts and teachers, allowed us to get familiar with materials and conservation techniques unusual and novel to us, such as the Japanese technique of loss infills, linings, and unrolling of damaged scrolls.

The most common treatments were:

- unrolling folded documents (“Jo”) with the aid of rayon paper and water or funori. In case of several documents folded together, severely affected by mold and/or insect damages, the tricky work was not only the careful and correct delamination of each single document (up to 11) but also the replacement of fragments belonging to different layers;
- lining was carried out only in the worst cases, and always respecting the original folds of the documents;
- loss infills and mending was carried out following the specific technical instructions, learned during the training, so to respect the original features of the paper, both in Japanese books and rolls;
- re-adhesion of scroll sheet joints and loose strips;
- flattening of folds on hidden text, with magnets on iron board.

After conservation treatments, the digitization phase began at the Photographic Laboratory of the Vatican Library, with a continual collaboration and a great exchange of knowledge.