Spirituality



Sister Agnes Sasagawa, pictured in an undated Instagram photo, died on Aug. 15, 2024, some five decades after witnessing the miraculous weeping of a statue of Mary, apparitions that became known as Our Lady of Akita, Japan. Sister Agnes, who died on the feast of the Assumption, was 93. (OSV News screenshot/Instagram)

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Akita, Japan — August 20, 2024

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A Japanese woman religious and Marian visionary has died some five decades after witnessing the miraculous weeping of a statue of Mary and receiving urgent messages to pray in reparation for humanity's sins.

Sister Agnes Sasagawa, a member of the Institute of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist in Akita, Japan, was reported to have passed away Aug. 15, the solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, at age 93.

A convert to Catholicism from Buddhism, Sister Agnes experienced several apparently miraculous events centering on a statue of Mary from 1973 to 1981. The phenomena were witnessed by several others, including the local bishop at the time, Bishop John Shojiro Ito of Niigata, who in 1984 approved their supernatural character and encouraged the veneration of "the Holy Mother of Akita."

Current Bishop Paul Daisuke Narui of Niigata confirmed by email to OSV News that he had been informed of the nun's death, saying that he had "no plan to publish a statement in relation to her passing" and adding, "I thank you very much for praying for her."

An Aug. 15 post to X account @seitai_hoshikai — the religious order's Japanese name and linked to the religious order's website — stated in Japanese that Sister Agnes "had been undergoing medical treatment for some time" and had "passed away … due to old age."

The post also said that Sister Agnes' body had been "donated to the medical school" at her request, following a funeral Mass held "at the main monastery with only members in attendance.

"We are deeply grateful for the kindness shown to us by everyone during (her) lifetime," the message concluded.

No announcement of Sister Agnes' death was posted to the religious orders' website or YouTube channel, with a message on the former stating that "the entire grounds, including the chapel and gardens of the Society of Eucharist, are closed for the summer from Aug. 1 to 31.

"We hope to welcome you back as usual from September 1," said the website.

In July 1973, Sister Agnes — then a 42-year-old novice — claimed to have witnessed a light surrounding the convent's wooden statue of Our Lady of All Nations, a Marian image from postwar Amsterdam that, along with its title and accompanying prayers was approved, although its reported apparitions were not. The statue in the Akita convent was alleged to have spoken to Sister Agnes on that occasion and in August and October of that year as well, asking her to pray in reparation of the sins of humanity and to be obedient to her superior.

Sister Agnes also experienced visions of her guardian angel and the stigmata, the wounds of Jesus Christ, as a wound in her left hand. She, her fellow sisters and hundreds of visitors to the religious order also would witness the 3-foot-tall statue sweating as well as shedding tears, a phenomenon that continued sporadically, 101 times in total, until 1981.

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In a pastoral letter announcing the miraculous occurence's approval, Bishop Ito — who retired in 1985, and died in 1993 — said he witnessed the statue's tears, and that what was observed by at least 500 others and studied at the University of Akita

could not have been achieved by "human maneuvers." The phenomenon also was broadcast on Japanese television.

Before joining the Handmaids of the Eucharist, Sister Agnes had suffered ill health, including paralysis. Just months before she entered the order in May 1973, she lost her hearing — but Mary told the novice her hearing loss would be healed, and exhorted her to pray in reparation for "the sins of men" as well as for priests and bishops. In August 1973, she told Sister Agnes that God the Father was "preparing to inflict a great chastisement on all mankind," but "prayer, penance and courageous sacrifices can soften the Father's anger."

Mary repeated that message in October 1973, and also said that "fire will fall from the sky and will wipe out a great part of humanity," and called for daily recitation of the rosary. She warned that the devil would infiltrate the church, with "cardinals opposing cardinals, bishops against bishops" and "priests who venerate me … scorned and condemned by their confreres."

In a July 2023 interview with OSV News, Robert Fastiggi, a theology professor at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Milwaukee and Mariology expert, said that while some could use Our Lady of Akita's message to support complaints about the state of the church, such a reading would miss the mark.

"The message is not one of complaint but of peaceful action, and intercession and praying the rosary," he said, emphasizing that Mary said to pray for the pope, bishops and priests. "The warning could be given to inspire us to be more faithful."

Fastiggi also stressed church teaching does not recognize "private revelations," even those that have been recognized, as part of the "deposit of faith." Rather, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, the role of such revelations is not to "improve or complete Chirst's definitive Revelation," but instead to help the faithful "live more fully by it in a certain period of history."

"People are losing faith," said Fastiggi. "There's much sin. So we need to return to the Eucharist. We need to pray the rosary. We need to intercede for the conversion of poor sinners. That's the message, and that is as timely now as ever."