



Before The Beginning

Marist Brothers International School (MBIS), formerly known as the Marist Brothers School, was founded by Brother Charles Fojoucyk and Brother Stephan Weber, in 1951. The school has a rich and interesting history; one which can be traced back well before its doors first opened.

The earliest recorded notion of a Marist Brothers school in Kobe comes from 1937. Father Unterwald, of Kobe's Sacred Heart Church, visited Marist Brothers working in Shanghai and discussed the possibility of opening a school in Kobe. The idea was closely considered by the Marist Provincial, but, at that time, there simply weren't enough Brothers available to seriously consider such a bold new venture. The same year saw the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War between China and Japan, which would have ended any further planning. Nevertheless, in a strange twist of fate, it was this world changing political and social conflict, along with the coming Pacific War, that would eventually lead the Brothers to Japan. Little over a decade later, Brother Charles and Brother Stephan would find themselves in Kobe, looking for a new beginning.

The Marist Brothers were founded in France, and mark their beginning with the date January 2, 1817. Founder, Marcellin Champagnat, was a Catholic priest working in La Valla, a village in the mountains south of Lyons. Champagnat was moved by the poor conditions of villagers in rural France, and particularly dismayed by their lack of adequate schooling. He was thus driven to make a real difference, and to do so primarily through education. The Marist Brothers were formed, and their first school opened in La Valla, in 1817. Marcellin Champagnat would later famously state: "To raise children properly, we should love them and love them equally," and this tenet has become the cornerstone of Marist schools around the world to this day. Champagnat died in 1840, having seen the Marist Brotherhood spread well beyond his mountain village – with 48 Marist schools in France and throughout the South Pacific.

By the 1930s, the Marist Brothers had established a significant educational and missionary presence in China. One of the most prominent schools was St. Louis College, in the port city of Tientsin (Tianjin). Although referred to as the "French School", the college was an English-language institution that primarily served the expatriate population of the city – these days, it would be referred to as an international school. Following the Japanese defeat in the Pacific and mainland China, the Nationalist and Communist Chinese resumed their civil war. Upon victory in 1949, the Communist government began to purge western influences from the country. This led to what has been referred to as a "Marist diaspora", with around 200 Brothers departing en masse from the mainland (a small number of Chinese Brothers





remained behind, some of whom became martyrs, executed by government officials). In 1950, all foreign schools in China were closed, and so the Brothers went on to rapidly establish new schools throughout other parts of Asia, including Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, and Japan.

The Marist Provincial of the region had remembered Father Unterwald's request, and dispatched two Brothers to Japan. According to tradition, Brother Charles and Brother Stephan landed in Japan in 1950, with \$1000 and the goal of bringing Marist education to a new nation, one struggling to recover from the devastation of WW2 (Kobe, a major industrial port city, had been largely destroyed by US bombing raids). After meeting with other Catholic congregations in Japan, the Brothers learned that a Benedictine Sisters' convent in Kobe was being vacated. Rather than opening a Japanese-language school, Brother Charles and Brother Stephan, coming from an "international school" background, decided to continue with what they knew best. At that time, only one international school was still operating in Kobe – St. Michael's International School in Sannomiya – so there was both opportunity and need. The Brothers, after borrowing some additional funds, decided to purchase the former convent.

A fresh start

On September 17, 1951 the doors of the Marist School in Kobe opened for the first time. The former convent was high on the slope of Higashi Suma (near Rikyu Koen), so the original sixteen students had to travel up a narrow, steep, and twisting path, far from the nearest train line. When they arrived, they sat at second-hand desks and opened borrowed books. Although the Marist Brothers had a school, it was clear that its location was far from perfect. In autumn of the following year, a new opportunity presented itself.

Also in Suma was a special center for the infirm, run by Brothers of the order of St. John of God. These Brothers were looking for a quieter, more isolated location – and so a property swap seemed an ideal proposition. The center was a former home and property belonging to Viscount Kuki, the fifteenth daimyo of Sanda. The Kuki daimyos were known for being open to Western ideas and influences, and the progressive Viscount Kuki, a Christian convert, had long supported the religion and education in the Kobe area. The two large wooden Japanese houses on the property served as classrooms and offices for several years.





Enrollment at the school had been steadily increasing, doubling by the re-opening of school in 1952. This meant a need for more teaching staff, and Brother Charles and Brother Stephan were joined by Brother Raphael and Brother Vincent, who had also served at St. Louis College. The new location allowed for a greater range of activities, including the first Sports Day.

The following few years saw many new milestones reached. In December of 1953, the Junior class took the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate Examination. Marist followed the well-regarded British curriculum, and would do so for many years to come (indeed, the school houses, now Ninja, Sohei, Samurai, and Kensei, were originally Oxford and Cambridge). The first graduating class was 1954, and 1956 saw the first PTA and inaugural extra-curricular activities.

In his autobiography, Robert Melson, a Holocaust survivor, gives a wonderfully candid insight into the early days of the school:

“In the morning before going to school, I’d see the city stretched out before me, and beyond that, the port. At exactly 7:00am the train from Hiroshima would crawl north along the coast like a caterpillar circling a puddle of water. By the time it reached Sannomiya, the main railroad station, I’d be dressed and on my way. From the windows of the train you could see the ocean, and when it pulled into Suma station, we’d pass old Japanese women bowing and clapping in front of a Shinto shrine.

Brother Charles was the headmaster – a gruff, fat, but jolly old German priest from Bavaria. He wouldn’t discuss the war when I brought it up in European history class. He insisted German history had ended with Bismark. “Hitler? Hitler wasn’t even a German. He was an Austrian upstart. There’s nothing more to say.” I was acutely conscious that Brother Charles was a German and a priest, but for some reason he took a shine to me, and I couldn’t help liking him. Marist Brothers had mandatory Bible instruction, but I insisted that as a Jew I wished to be excused, and I was. While my class pored over the Gospels and the crucifixion, I sat in Brother Charles’s office and read back issues of Time magazine.”

The student body continued to expand rapidly, and soon outgrew the existing buildings and facilities. In 1955, a large new building was constructed. At the time, it housed a two-storey assembly hall with classrooms on the third floor. Today this building still stands, and is primarily used for the school office, library, and cafeteria facilities. By 1957, the student population had passed 140, and it was time to expand again. In 1961 a new wing was added, eighty meters in length, with fourteen new classrooms. In that year, the Marist Brothers also established a new school – Marist High School in Kumamoto. Beginning with four Brothers, this Japanese-





language school grew even more rapidly, with enrollments of over 1,000 students. In 1966 a different kind of milestone was reached, with the first second generation (child of alumni) student enrolled. In 1978 a large gym (including a cafeteria, which has now become the music room) was added, and, in 1980, another classroom wing. By 1995, the ageing facilities were in need of renovation, and the administration had plans in place for a large fundraising appeal. However, once again, a cataclysmic change was about to shape the future of the school.

January 17, 1995

At 5:46, on January 17, 1995, the Great Hanshin earthquake struck. Measuring 6.9 and lasting for 20 seconds, the quake resulted in 6,434 lives lost and widespread devastation in the city and surrounding region. The school was not spared. The experience of the Brothers on the campus was recorded in the Boston Globe:

BR. VINCENT MORIARTY ('56) of Westfield, Massachusetts, was taking his morning shower in the residence at the Marist Brothers International School near Kobe when the earthquake hit this week. "It was like being a ping pong ball in a bottle," he said with a small laugh on the telephone yesterday. "I don't know why I wasn't cut by flying glass and tile. One of the Brothers came in to help, and I grabbed a blanket and got out." ...Brothers Vincent and Augustine spoke of the terror that surrounded them. "There was an 80-year-old woman trapped in a house near us," Brother Vincent said. "It was an old style home that just collapsed. Brother Gus tore away the timbers, and we got the woman out. She's now staying in our gymnasium. So are a dry-cleaning couple whose shop was near the school; their house was on fire and the neighbors pulled them to safety." Though the school has a huge crack down the middle, much structural damage, and one wing separated from the main building, its gym remained intact! Everything around the school just flattened," Brother Gus said, "but our gym is quite sturdy. Now we have 800 people sleeping there or living in our school bus or anything else that's livable." After the quake the Brothers set up a soup kitchen. "We had earthquake soup," Brother Vincent said. "Anything you could find to mix together." Brother Landry, who has been at the school for 27 years, was asleep on the third floor of the residence when the quake hit. "They always tell you to get under the doorsill in an earthquake, but they never tell you how to get to the doorsill. Everything was flying through the room. We always thought Kobe was safe from the quakes," he said. The Brothers are trying to account for the 275 youngsters who attend classes there. "Some of our children live in areas completely devastated by fire," Brother Vincent said. ..."It will take some time before things get back to normal at the school," the Brothers said, "but first we must tend to the living."





Although the administration building and gym had withstood the quake, the two classroom wings were damaged beyond repair. An ambitious renovation plan had now turned into a near-impossible reconstruction dream. The Marist Brothers organization simply could not provide the funds required to rebuild the school. It seemed as if the school's doors would close forever, and, thus would end its history. However, the school community rallied, and with amazing fortitude and determination, they secured loans and funds that would literally raise the school from the ashes.

On February 20, 1995, a mere five weeks after the earthquake, students returned to their school. Prefabricated classrooms were in place and students had to contend with the sounds of construction all around. This would continue until March, 1997, when a new classroom building was officially opened. Other struggles would remain, including a 30-year repayment plan that would severely limit any further growth. The Brothers would also gradually withdraw their formal involvement with the school, and by 2004, the school was operated and staffed by lay administrators and teachers. The Brothers still retain a presence on campus, as the rebuilding also included the construction of a Mission Centre. One of the first Japanese Brothers, Brother Yoshida, still resides at the Mission Centre, and Brother Ramon, who served in Japan for over 60 years, returned to Spain in 2018.

Regrowth

The economic recession in Japan, beginning in the 1990s, coupled with the financial crisis of 2008, has had a significant impact on international education in Japan. Kobe itself has yet to regain its position as a top commercial center in Japan. Nevertheless, MBIS has rebounded strongly. The British curriculum was replaced with an American one, and in 2017 the school added an international component, becoming an IB World School, and offering the International Baccalaureate Diploma as a graduation pathway. In 2018 it became one of the fastest-growing international schools in the region, with a record number of students, testing the capacity of the current buildings and facilities.

