The relationship between the Sisters of St. John of God and the Japanese Community in Broome began the day two Sisters arrived in Broome in June 1908. Archival records tell us that the Sisters went to the Japanese merchants who had shops in 'Jap Town' and they were given cooking utensils, stretchers and beds and other items. The two Irish women were dressed in long black flowing robes, completely covered except for their faces. From this first encounter the Japanese people and the Sisters of St. John of God held each other in great respect.

Almost immediately the Sisters started a school using the church for a classroom. Noreen Jones states that:

Young children could attend the State School but most of the Japanese parents opted for the Catholic School until the children were old enough for arrangements to be made to send them to Japan.1

In 1911 when the local community decided it was time to build a Catholic School the archival minutes of the meetings show that the Japanese Community contributed financially and that the school was built by a local ship builder, Hori Gorokitchi.

Bonds were strengthened as many from the Japanese community attended evening classes where the Sisters taught English, bookkeeping and music. A number of Japanese were interested in Christianity and there were some converts.

In 1910 the Japanese Club had raised funds to build their own hospital and Dr. Tadashi Suzuki arrived with his wife from Japan. However the governing body at the time, Broome Roads Board, required that European nurses be employed and this proved an obstacle. Dr. Suzuki approached the Sisters who agreed to take on the nursing and one of them would be the matron. This enabled the hospital to open. Research by Susan Sickert tells us that:

A change of name to the 'Maza-Antoni' hospital ensured that a compromise had been reached between the Broome Road Board and the Japanese community.2

Sr. Immaculate Leahy SSJG, one of the young Sisters, contracted typhoid while nursing a patient and died in 1912. A large stone Celtic cross above her grave was donated by the Japanese community in gratitude. The Sisters continued to nurse in the Japanese Hospital until it closed in 1928.

In 1925 the Sisters were fundraising to build a larger convent for themselves. Archival records show that the Japanese Community of Broome donated £134 toward this building which is now State Heritage listed and used as part of the Broome Heritage Centre. The convent was designed and built by Hori Gorokitchi and contains examples of Shinkabe external framing. This was an obvious and distinguishing feature of many Japanese built structures in Broome at that time.

The early Sisters formed close friendships with members of the Japanese community and this has continued over the years through the many families descended from those Japanese people who made their home in Broome. Even today St. Mary’s College (formerly St. Mary’s School) educates a large number of students who have Japanese ancestry. There are volunteers at the Heritage Centre with names such as Masuda and Hamaguchi. Displays acknowledge the Japanese people in the areas of health, education and friendship. The Sisters and volunteers welcome the annual exchange group from Taiji where this special story continues to be shared.

The strength of this relationship between the Japanese community and the Sisters of St. John of God is summed up by Margaret Zucker when she quotes an Irishman saying to Mother Antonia, "They'll put you with the Japanese in heaven, Sister."

Antonio’s reply was "I hope so."3

References: