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## Catholicism in Japan

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# Catholicism In Japan

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## I

**C**ATHOLICISM in Japan owes its start to the Society of Jesus, as it was St. Francis Xavier, a great Jesuit missionary, who was the first to introduce Christianity to Japan. The story of the Catholic Church in Japan makes one of the most colorful chapters in the entire history of the Church. This story, in which elements of glory and tragedy are closely interwoven, covers three distinct periods.

The first period began with the coming of St. Francis Xavier to Japan in 1549, only six years after the discovery of Japan by the Portuguese, and continued for about sixty-five years till the outbreak of persecution and the expulsion of missionaries. The second period was the era of violent persecution, when to be a Christian meant death by torture. This period lasted for about two hundred and fifty years, and the greater part of that period is known in our history as the era of national isolation since all communication with the outside world was forbidden. With the reopening of Japan to foreign intercourse in the latter part of the nineteenth century, we entered the third period, when the message of the gospel could once again be preached in Japan.

## II

When St. Francis Xavier was still staying at Malacca in Malaya, he met one day a young Japanese called Anjiro (or Yajiro), who is said to have already been able to understand Portuguese. This Anjiro had been suffering from the pains of self-reproach as he had committed "the crime of killing a man," and, having heard about the greatness of St. Francis Xavier, went to him to confess the crime and ask for his guidance. At the suggestion of St. Francis Xavier, Anjiro entered a missionary school at Goa in India. There he was baptized and given a Christian name, Paul. While studying Dogma and Latin, Paul Anjiro devoted himself to the Christian life with all his faith. Having been impressed with the sincere personality and enthusiasm of Anjiro, St. Francis Xavier became interested in the Japanese people and determined to visit Japan with Anjiro. Thus the first important contact of Japan with Europe was initiated by this meeting of an apostle of the Christian gospel and a criminal fugitive who was subsequently converted in a foreign land.

It was on August 15th, the Feast of the Assumption in 1549, that St. Francis Xavier arrived at Satsuma, the southernmost province of Kyushu Island, accompanied by Paul Anjiro and two other missionaries. At first the new missionaries were met by the mere curiosity of the Japanese people. Then, they were welcomed as the people whose countrymen and associates would supply new commodities, particularly fire-arms. Finally, they were awed or even hated as propagators of a religion which was entirely different from any of the religions existing then in Japan.

At that time, the Japanese people were yearning for something authoritative and unifying instead of the shaken and divided Buddhism of those days. There was a latent demand among the people for palpable evidences of salvation in contrast to the somewhat vague idealism of Zen Buddhism. Also, the people had admiration for the self-sacrificing lives of the missionaries which made a striking contrast to the usual cor-

ruption of the Buddhist priesthood of the time. These circumstances induced many a Japanese to accept the new religion introduced by St. Francis Xavier. On the other hand, there was a tenacious attitude among others prejudiced by the patriotic idea of indigenous deities. It caused them to take a hostile stand against the uncompromising deity of Christianity. The doctrine of "original sin" with all its implications was repulsive to some people, particularly Confucian rationalists and Shinto optimists. Besides these doctrinal issues, semi-religious, moral and liturgical matters such as the questions of monogamy and chastity, or the feelings about sacraments, litany, music, images, decorations and other related matters had also a determining impact on the reactions of the people. Thus, one can well imagine that in this initial contact of Japan with Europe, nearly all conceivable motives and circumstances exercised their influence.

When St. Francis Xavier arrived in 1549, Japan was divided into many contending feudal powers, and each feudal state was ruled solely by the will of its lord called *daimyo*. St. Francis Xavier succeeded in securing the favor of at least two of the *daimyos*, namely OUCHI Yoshitaka of Yamaguchi state and OROMO Yoshishige of Bungo state. During his stay of two years and three months, the great apostle not only visited many places including Kyoto, the then capital of Japan, but also won a number of converts among the *samurais*, Buddhist priests, and common people. When he departed from Japan in November 1551, he left behind him an able missionary, Father Cosmo de Torres. On the other hand, he wrote to the Jesuit headquarters to have some of its most capable missionaries sent to Japan, explaining that the Japanese had the best religious quality among the pagans he had ever met in the Orient and that the missionary work in Japan would be highly fruitful though strenuous.

Neophytes increased with the arrival of new missionaries. Their preaching and educational activities were reinforced by works of charity. Churches, colleges, hospitals and leprosaria were established. Though the fate of missions in different places took varied courses at the caprice of their respec-

tive *daimyos*, the general progress of the "propaganda" was quite steady despite the opposition of Buddhist priests and minor local persecutors, and in the course of about thirty years some 150,000 were baptized. Among them, was Justo TAKAYAMA Ukon, an intelligent *daimyo*, who later proved to be instrumental in obtaining a number of powerful supporters for the Church. He remained faithful to his new faith throughout half a century of hardship and vicissitude. He was banished to Manila in 1614 and died there the next year at the age of sixty-three. The life of Justo TAKAYAMA Ukon exemplifies a happy union of the valor of a Japanese warrior and the fidelity of an ardent Catholic. His brilliant military achievements, his moral integrity, his deliberateness in critical moments, his dauntless spirit combined with a gentle heart, his earnest zeal for piety which was embodied in his generosity and charity — all these superior qualities of character in Justo TAKAYAMA Ukon should be noted as a fruit of Christian teaching.

Besides Justo TAKAYAMA Ukon, there were more than twenty Christian *daimyos* at one time. Three of those *daimyos*, namely OTOMO, OMURA and ARIMA, sent envoys all the way to Rome to pay their respects to the Pope. The envoys consisted entirely of teen-agers. They left Japan in 1582 and after visiting Macao, Malacca, Goa, Lisbon, Madrid, Pisa, Florence and Siena, they entered Rome in 1585 and were received in audience by Pope Gregory XIII (who died soon after this historical event at the age of eighty-four) and also by Pope Sixtus V who succeeded him. They were the first Japanese mission to set foot on European soil and their pious attitude and fervent aspiration for Christianity deeply moved the Europeans who came into contact with them. They returned home in 1590 after an absence of eight years.

### III

The number of Christian converts among the Japanese steadily increased. It was estimated at 750,000 in 1605. Besides the Jesuits, the Franciscan missionaries were first sent to Japan in 1593 by the Spanish Governor of the Philippines as his envoys. In the wake of the growing popularity of Christianity in Japan, TOYOTOMI Hideyoshi, the actual ruler of the coun-

try at that time, began to feel a menace in the allegiance of his Christian vassals to a certain foreign power. Then an unfortunate incident known as "The Affair of the *San Felipe*" took place in 1596. The *San Felipe* was the name of a Spanish merchant ship stranded off the coast of Tosa province. One of the crew, as he was not treated satisfactorily by the local authorities, tried to intimidate them by boastfully recounting the power and territorial expansion of Spain. It seems that the report of his remarks was sufficient to convince Hideyoshi and his government that the missionaries were nothing but a tool for the territorial aggrandizement which had already been achieved to some extent by Spain in other parts of the world. The result was the capture and crucifixion of twenty-six missionaries and converts. They were the first martyrs of Japan and were canonized later by Pope Pius IX. Out of these twenty-six martyrs, twenty were Japanese.

After this blow, however, there was a period of temporary relief, chiefly due to the death of Hideyoshi in 1598. TOKUGAWA Ieyasu, who succeeded to power, wanted first to secure the commercial profits of foreign trade for himself and tried to use some Franciscan missionaries as his tools. By that time, missions had been established by four religious orders, namely, Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustinians. Undoubtedly, the discord among them on such questions as the united control of the missions and episcopal authority, culminating in a severe contest for episcopal succession, not only did harm to the missionary cause but also worked to instill mistrust on the part of feudal rulers. The situation was aggravated by the coming of the Dutch and English merchants whose countries were then opposed in Europe to Spain and Portugal, and who tried to supply alarming information on the political intentions of Spain and Portugal. These circumstances gradually led Ieyasu to believe the alleged evils of the new religion, chiefly from the political viewpoint. At last a decisive step, known as The Great Banishment of 1614, was taken by his government. More than four hundred missionaries and devotees including some *daimyos* such as Justo TAKAYAMA Ukon and Juan NAITO Tadatoshi were exiled to Manila and Macao. All support from outside

the country was blocked, and the young Church which was just about to grow in Japan found itself practically deserted like an orphan. Of course, the mother Church tried everything to come to help, and a number of missionaries were smuggled into Japan despite the strict vigilance of the government. Yet, they were sooner or later arrested and executed together with the hosts who had harbored them. The converts suffered similarly, and all kinds of torture were inflicted upon them.

In spite of these pressures, however, hundreds and thousands of Christians, mostly converts, withstood temptations, threats, terrors, tortures, and finally died as martyrs with amazing fervor. Their faith was simple and sincere. They believed in the future destinies, *Paraíso* or *Infierno*, as taught by the Church, as if all these were tangible realities at hand. Some of them saw in vision Holy Mary inviting them to heaven while they were hanged on the cross soon to be consumed by the surrounding flames; others lost all sense of distress or pain in the imminent prospect of reaching the heavenly realm on being beheaded; others heard voices encouraging them to bear the agony with the promise of celestial bliss.

The persecution continued. In 1637 there occurred in a northern province of Kyushu a furious agrarian riot, the nucleus of which was a group of Christians and other people angered by the extremely bad administration of their *daimyo*. Although the rioters resisted with great stubbornness causing several thousand casualties to the government forces, they were finally crushed the following year after a siege of seven months. Essentially, it was not a religious rioting, since no missionary had anything to do with it. But the government capitalized on this incident to intensify the suppression of Christianity in Japan. In 1639 the "Closed Nation" policy, a policy of complete national isolation, was finally established. Intercourse with the outside world was thoroughly forbidden with the only exception of the Dutch and Chinese merchants who were permitted to carry on their trade through the port of Nagasaki. The search for Christians was conducted anew throughout the country. This had a killing effect upon the new religion.

## IV

In 1853, after more than two hundred years of Japan's isolation, an American naval squadron under Commodore Perry startled the country with its "Black Ships" equipped with modern armament. In the following year, the Japanese government, having realized the folly of resisting the modern armament of the western powers, agreed to open relationship with the outside world. In accordance with the terms of treaties of commerce with Japan concluded a few years later, foreign powers were authorized to erect churches at the open ports in Japan for the benefit of their traders and seamen. Thus, the first Catholic church to stand on Japanese soil since the seventeenth century was built at Yokohama in 1861.

When the foreign missionaries returned to Japan, they rejoiced to find in Nagasaki a number of Japanese Christians who emerged from hiding after having kept their faith alive in secrecy through the centuries of severe persecution. But the reopening of the country did not mean the end of all the troubles of Christians. Notices proclaiming the prohibition of Christianity still stood in every public square. In 1871, about 4,000 Japanese Christians in Nagasaki, who had publicly declared their faith, were banished to thirty-four outlying parts of the country. Despite the attempt to make them abandon their faith, most of them stood firm in their beliefs. It was only in February 1873 that the ban on Christianity was lifted.

As a result of the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution in 1889, religious liberty was legally guaranteed. This new situation brought to Japan a flood of foreign missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant. They planted their missions, began social welfare schemes, and built schools and monasteries. The number of converts gradually increased. In reality, however, Christianity was still under a considerable amount of pressure from the then prevailing nationalistic sentiment toward the Shinto Shrine, because the worship of the Shinto Shrine as a state religion was virtually made compulsory for the people. The Catholics were often attacked by the ultra-nationalists for not worshipping the Shinto Shrine. The situation became particularly worse at the outbreak of World War II.

Fortunately, the present Constitution which was made soon after the War has provided Christianity in Japan with favorable conditions. The abolition of the special privileges granted to the Shinto religion and the complete separation of religion from politics gave a great impetus to Christianity. In the spiritual chaos and mental frustration caused by the loss of ultra-nationalistic belief, a large number of people came to seek the Christian faith after the War. They read the Bible. They went to Church. Among them were not only those who had previously chosen to stay away from the Church because of the heavy suppression of Christianity, but also many who had hitherto been indifferent to religion. In both Catholic and Protestant churches all over the country, between a half and two-thirds of the congregations consisted of the people who were seeking after Christianity for the first time in their lives.

Under these circumstances, the Catholic Church has made solid achievements by means of a multitude of activities, such as individual instruction, school education, social welfare work, mass-communication media including radio and cinema. The number of converts increased at the rate of some 10,000 a year and the total number of Catholics at present is more than 250,000 as compared with the pre-war figure of approximately 100,000. Also they have now one archbishop, eight bishops, about 600 priests, and some 3,000 nuns, from among the Japanese.

Thus the great expectation which St. Francis Xavier had cherished about Japan is being realized. The precious blood of the thousands of martyrs was not shed in vain. The sufferings and sacrifice of those who endured persecution were gloriously rewarded. The earnest prayers of the faithful all over the world have been divinely answered. Hallowed be God's name.