**1549-1620: Catholic Footprints in Feudal Japan**

Jesuit padre St. Francis Xavier [1506-1552], his companions and the Japanese seamen who taught them simple Nihongo, left from Portuguese Goa in southwest India in April, 1549. The party landed in Kagoshima; incidentally, the seamen’s home port on Aug. 15, 1549.

Xavier preached for 2½ years with some success, conversed with Buddhist bonzes, distributed his small Japanese Catechism of 29 items, visited Kyoto hoping to meet the Emperor. Being a poorly-clad foreigner and without any gifts to present, he was denied. The royal palace that Xavier saw was “no different from a farmhouse… no walls,” as described by a Kyoto physician toward the end of the 16th century.

Xavier decided that in order to convert Japan, it must be through China and lest Japan in April, 1552, accompanied by his companions, servant and a Chinese interpreter. China was closed to foreigners, which meant landing secretly on a desolate island of Sancian, miles offshore and 100 miles south of Hong Kong.

As recounted in *Butler’s Lives of the Saints,* “Xavier fell sick, fever seized him on November 21 and took shelter on the ship, but motion of the sea was too much. Requesting to be taken ashore, the sailors did and left him on the sand to a piercing north wind till a friendly Portuguese merchant on Sancian (also wishing to land in China) let him into his hut. In high fever, being bled and praying ceaselessly, getting weaker by the day, till at last on December 3, when his Chinese interpreter Antony, seeing Xavier was dying, put a lighted candle in his hand.” The saint was only 46 years old, the last 11 years in India, Malacca and Japan.”

[Jesuit Father Mateo Ricci reached Beijing in 1598. His idea that veneration of Confucius and family ancestors was a form of civic respect and acceptable for Chinese converts. It resulted, as others disagreed, into the “Chinese Rites Controversy.” It raged for 150 years. This history is detailed by Father George Minamiki (’33) in *The Chinese Rites Controversy: from its Beginning to Modern Times* (Paulist Press, 1985).]

**1597: Crucifixion of the 26 Martyrs of Japan**

The feudal system in Japan, rule of shoguns, militant Buddhist sects, the emperor and his court in Kyoto barely surviving and begging from wealthy warlords and merchants, had plunged Japan into a series of civil wars. In his attempt to centralize Japan, Oda Nobunaga [1534-1582] welcomed the Portuguese to address Buddhist power, but Nobunaga was assassinated by a discontented general. His successor. Toyotomi Hideyoshi [1536-1598] accepted the missionaries by wearing a necklace bearing a cross but then changed his mind with an edict against all missionaries (1587). The ban was abruptly enforced in 1597 by crucifying six European missionaries and 20 Japanese followers in Nagasaki. ²

While Hideyoshi united Japan in 1590 and ruled until his death, he had chosen Tokunaga Ieyasu

[1542-1616] as one of four regents for his minor son. Ieyasu, in a struggle for power with fellow regents, totally subdued them at the Battle of Sekigahara (1600) and won complete control of government. His steps to open commerce with the outside world – Portugal, Spain, Britain and Holland – failed.

By decree in 1614, Ieyasu expelled all Christian missionaries and targeted Japanese leaders under threat of confiscation or execution. Yet, people were fascinated by advanced medical knowledge and Western culture as related to Christianity. His grandson, Iemitsu [1604-1651], a bitter enemy of Christians, closed Japan to foreign trade, forbade his subjects to leave the country under pain of death, suppressed Christianity (1620) by systematic search and inquisition of *fumie* (trampling upon plaques of the Madonna and/or Christ), and ordered the massacre of some 3,000 Christians at Shimabara Castle (1638).

By confining the Dutch and Chinese to a trading post off Nagasaki (1641), it was Japan’s only link with the outside world until Commodore Perry came in 1854. Tokugawa Ieyasu had founded a dynasty that lasted until 1867. Christianity was still unlawful under the new Meiji government until 1873 when pressure from western powers and form Japanese officials who had visited foreign countries spoke for freedom of religion. This guarantee was formally included in the Meiji Constitution of 1879.

**1549: Xavier’s Catechism – The 29 Items**

During the winter of 1549 in India, Xavier supervised Paulo Anjiro, the Japanese convert he had met the previous year at the College of St. Paul in Goa, to translate a small catechism which he had used in India before going to Japan. For use by missionaries, the sermon in Japanese was written in Portuguese letters and read before Japanese audiences who, unfortunately, did not fully understand, even Xavier, because of their foreign accent.

The text had to be corrected, since the translator consistently relied on Buddhist terms, there being no Japanese equivalent of Christian concepts. After dialogue with the lord of Yamaguchi and debate with several Buddhist bonzes whether or not God had taken any visible form in this world, Xavier decided to use “Deus,” the Latin term for God, abandoning the Shingon Buddhist adaptation, *Dainichi*, from the “Great Sun” sutra which, in India, meant “ultimate reality.” The bonzes began to counterattack the missionaries by calling Deus

“*dai-uso*,” a big lie. Dr. Neil Fujita, author of *Japan’s Encounter with Christianity* (1991), says in his epilogue that “the padres failed to comprehend the Buddhist notions.” The 29-item catechism (below) was used until 1556 when it was replaced with a 25-item version. ³

( 1) An Opening Prayer (14) A prayer of confession

( 2) The Apostles’ Creed (15) Seven capital sins

( 3) Acts of faith, hope and charity (16) Seven cardinal virtues

( 4) The Lord’s Prayer (17) Three supernatural virtues

( 5) Hail Mary (18) Four supreme virtues

( 6) Ten Commandments (19) Seven corporal works of mercy

( 7) Those who observe church laws are (20) Seven spiritual works of mercy

to ascend to heaven and those who (21) Five senses

do not are to be cast into hell (22) Three functions of the soul

( 8) A prayer of petition for grace to (23) Three enemies of the soul

observe the law this day (24) The consecrated host

( 9) A prayer to the Holy Mother (25) The consecrated wine

(10) A prayer to Christ, asking for the (26) The act of faith and restitution for

forgiveness of sins for this day unbelief

(11) A prayer to the Holy Mother, asking (27) A petition for protection by the Holy

for the forgiveness of sins for this Mother and saints

day (28) A petition for the protection of the

(12) The commandments of the church Archangel Michael

(13) Salve Regina (29) A prayer before meals

**1610, 1614: Japanese set foot twice in Mexico**

Before Tokunaga’s policy of isolation jelled, diplomatic and prosperous trade missions across the Pacific have been recorded between Japan and New Spain (Mexico) in the early 17th century.

Spanish galleons were at the mercy of violent storms characteristic of the western Pacific that sank them easily or tossed them ashore in Japan or the Ryukyus. The ship carrying Spanish Governor Don Rodrigo de Vivero y Velasco [1564-1636] of the Philippines back to Acapulco was shipwrecked in 1609 off the Chiba Prefecture coast of Wada (near Onjuku-machi). They were rescued by fishermen and woman divers treated kindly at Edo by Hidetada, eventually the second Tokunaga shogun, who remembered the earlier generous treatment of 200 Japanese in the Philippines by Spain and brought them home. 4

Vivero navigated the San Banaventura back to Mexico. It was the first ocean-worth ship built in Japan by English navigator Will Adams. On board were his crew and 23 Japanese, dispatched by Tokugawa Ieyasu to learn about Mexico’s mining process and to establish trade relations. On Aug. 1, the ship stopped for water and provisions at Cape Mendocino, 5 and arrived in Acapulco in late October, 1610.

In 1611, the 23 Japanese departed from Acapulco on March 22 with California coast explorer Juan Sebastian Vizcaíno, who was named New Spain ambassador to Japan to thank them for the rescue and safe return of Vivero. Accompanying them were Franciscan friars from Cuemavaca led by padre Luís Sotelo. The *San Bonaventura*, accompanied by two other galleons en route to Manila, *Santa Ana* and *San Antonio*, arrived

in Japan on July 10. The Japanese merchants brought back clothes, velvet, wine and goods. While exploring the Japan coast, however, the San Bonaventura under Vizcaíno was shipwrecked off the northern coast.

**Hasekura Embassy: Japan’s first diplomatic bid in Europe**

Vizcaíno and the friars were delivered to Lord Daté Masamune [1567-1636], governor of Sendai. Interested in Christianity and Western civilization, Lord Daté ordered another ship to return Vizcaíno and crew to Mexico and at the urging of padre Sotelo, Daté put his trusted aide Hasekura Tsunenaga (Rokuemon) [1571-1622] in charge of a delegation of 140 samurai and merchants to join the voyage to establish trade relations with Spain. The many Japanese Christians aboard were also to be confirmed in Mexico City. Sotelo was the guide and interpreter.

The Hasekura Embassy sailed from Uraga in Tokyo Bay on Oct. 27, 1613 (Dec. 26 by the Gregorian calendar) and arrived at Acapulco on Jan. 22, 1614. Hasekura proceeded to Mexico City, departed from Vera Cruz, stopped at St. Augustine, Fla., before crossing the Atlantic, and arrived in Madrid in 1615. He was baptized Don Felipe Francisco in presence of King Philip II and court. That November in Rome, he exchanged gifts with Pope Paul V, which are now in the Vatican Library.

Hasekura spent the next two years in southern Europe, signed a treaty with Spain in early 1618. Some of the samurai remained in Spain. Hasekura returned by way of Manila in 1620. Christianity was now banned in Japan. A trusted retainer and emissary, he was never asked to recant his faith. He died in retirement in 1622. 6

**1856: Japanese Christians survive without priests for two centuries**

In the history of the Catholic Church in Japan, the story of clandestine Christians [*kakure kirishitan*] during the Tokugawa era (1614-1867) is unbelievable for their faith had survived for two centuries by oral tradition and a camouflage of Shinto and Buddhist symbols at home.

When the French were allowed in Japan in 1856, Father Bernard Petitjean had built a Catholic church in Nagasaki (Oura) for his colony. 7 One day [March 17, 1865], he discovered the *kakure kirishitan* community through a woman from her village, Urakami, north of Oura. 8 Other Christians in islands off Nagasaki were also found. A letter to his mission board in Paris estimated there were 50,000 Christians and urged a reinforcement of missionaries. 9

**FOOTNOTES:**

1. Neil S. Fujita, *Japan’s Encounter with Christianity: The Catholic Mission in Pre-Modern Japan*, Paulist Press, (1991), p.26. See also *Smithsoniam*, May 1975, describing and with color photographs the last time St. Francis Xavier’s body uncorrupted was exposed in 1975 at the Church of Bob Jesus in Goa.
2. Tapestry depicting the “communion of saints” in the new Los Angeles Cathedral of Our Lady of Angels, features two of the 26

Martyrs of Japan, St. Paul Miki and St. Luis Ibaraki.

1. Fujita, *ibid*., p. 19-20.
2. In 1982, the Mexican government erected a 50-foot high monument at the rescue site of the Don Vivero. Japanese in Mexico revere this rescue as the opening of their Nichi-Boku (Japanese Mexican) community history.
3. Journalists have noted this expedition of 1610 was the first time Japanese set foot in California – Tamotsu Murayama, 1954 *Pacific Citizen* Holiday Issue.
4. *Biographical Dictionary of Japanese History*, Tokyo: International Society for Educational Information; Kodansha Internal (1982), p. 182. Story of the Hasekura Mission in Europe was not until the Iwakura Embassy was visiting Venice in 1873. – Tamotsu Murayama, 1954 *Pacific Citizen* Holiday Issue.
5. This historic church at Oura (near Glover’s Mansion) was partially destroyed by the atomic bomb in 1945.
6. Urakami was the crucifixion site of the 26 Martyrs. – Richard Imon, *A Primer of Japanese Christian History* (1989).
7. Fujita*, ibid*., 9. 245