**Saint Felipe de Jesus**

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Praying to the martyrs can give us strength to be brave in　witnessing to the Faith in our lives. I just read an interesting book about a martyr named St. Felipe. He was born in New Spain, as Mexico was called at the time, in 1575. Between twelve and fifteen years old he joined the Franciscans, but he left after one year. Three months later Felipe travelled by boat to Manila in the Philippines to develop a trade business with Mexico. Three years later he entered the Franciscans stationed in Manila. On May 22, 1594, Felipe was professed adding to his name "de Jesus."

Two years later Felipe was put on a boat bound for Mexico to be ordained by the bishop there. Three typhoons reduced the ship to a wreck. In a miraculous manner the ship made it to the Japanese coast. The ship accidently grounded on a reef. The Japanese took the cargo and crew to land. They confiscated the cargo and held the crew as prisoners. Felipe was allowed to travel with some others to see the ambassador. Eventually he went to see Fr. Bautista in Miako, Franciscan superior of Japan, who decided that Felipe should return to his community in Manila.

Meanwhile the warlord of Japan, Taikosama, desperately needed money. He was interested in the merchandise from Felipe's ship. To justify his confiscation of it he accused the crew of piracy. Later he accused them of exploring Japanese ports in preparation for an invasion. The friars and priests were accused of helping the King of Spain win the Japanese people over to prepare for a Spanish invasion.

Before Felipe could leave Miako Japanese guards had surrounded the Franciscan house. After a few weeks of house arrest Felipe, two Franciscan priests and two brothers, along with twelve Japanese Christian associates were all condemned to death. They were thrown into a common cell. The next day the Franciscan, Fr. Martin and three Japanese Christian associates from the Franciscan Osaka house, along with three Japanese from a Jesuit house, joined them in prison.

Soon all of them were led to the public square in front of the principal temple of the city. The twenty-four of them had a piece of their left ear cut off. Then they were paraded through the streets of the imperial cities with a man shouting their crimes. This began a thirty-day Way of the Cross in Winter. Its destination was Nagasaki, where they were to be crucified. Along the way two more Christians joined the condemned bringing the total to twenty-six. The Fathers and brothers had been accused of preaching Christianity, which had been forbidden by the Japanese warlord. If they renounced Christianity they could be spared, which they refused.

On February 5, 1597, they arrived at the crucifixion place called Tateyama, which means "Hill of Wheat." Felipe embraced his cross. Instead of being nailed the Japanese style was to put iron clamps around the wrists, ankles and throat. A straddle piece was placed between the legs for weight support. Then the person was pierced with a lance up through the left and right ribs toward the opposing shoulder. Death would immediately follow.

In Felipe's case the supporting straddle piece had been put too low. When they raised his cross the throat clamp began to strangle him. With great effort he lifted himself up long enough to shout, "`Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!'" The executioners, seeing that he was suffocating, decided to lance him at once. After two lance thrusts his body sagged on the cross. Fearing the body weight would break the clamps, a third lance was employed impaling his body to the cross. The others were executed one by one.

On February 5, 1629, Mexico celebrated the beatification of Felipe de Jesus. St. Felipe was made the patron of Mexico City. In June, 1862, all twenty-six martyrs were canonized in Rome. Their feast day is celebrated on February 6th. In 1990, on my way to the International Eucharistic Congress in Seoul, Korea, I was graced to visit the shrine of these martyrs in Nagasaki, Japan. Let us look to this first canonized saint of North America to strengthen us to share in Our Lord's Passion this Lent.