**A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN JAPAN**

**The Christianity of Japan**

On August 15, 1549, St. Francis Xavier disembarked on the Japanese coast with Fr. Cosmo de Torres, Brother John Fernandez and three Japanese who had converted on Malacca. Shimizu Takahisa, daimyo or feudal lord of Satsuma, received them cordially and gave them permission to preach the Gospel. Xavier, who dreamed of conversing with emperor, set out for Kyoto and arrived there in January 1551.

Xavier did not realized that the emperor was a mythic personage whom only the highest-ranking people could approach. He did perceive that the emperor exercised no authority. Even the shogun, theoretically his politico-military minister, was at the mercy of all the daimyo. He concluded that he had to approach the daimyo and the samurai and try to convert them to Christianity. With the intention of returning to Japan with reinforcements, he left for India in September 1551.

Prior to returning to Japan, he planned to visit the emperor of China in order to open new apostolic area there. On the island of Sancian (Shang-Ch’ uan Tao), just at the gated of China, he developed a malignant fever and died on December 3, 1552.

Xavier did not achieve mass conversions in Japan but identified the tactic for christianizing the country and pointed it out for subsequent missionaries. His tactic promptly yielded abundant results. Some years later, several daimyo and samurai, and with them almost all their subjects, had embraced the faith.

By 1587 there were more than 200,000 Christians. Ten years later the number had grown to 300,000.

These thirty-five years of Christianity in Japan make up what we may call the charismatic period of the Japanese Church.

From that point onward, progress was achieved only with increasing difficulty and with the aid of new bands of missionaries provided by other religious orders. Until the end of the sixteenth century, only missionaries of the Company of Jesus had labored in Japan. Later the apostolic field was opened up to

other religious orders. Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustinians of the old observance came in, followed

in 1623 by the Augustinian Recollects, Francis of Jesus and Vincent of St. Anthony.

**The persecution of Christians**

Historians agree in asserting that the Japanese persecution was much more systematic, refined and cruel than was persecution in the early centuries of the Church. The Japanese did not want to create

martyrs, since they would thus have depopulated many cities. They were more interested in creating

apostates. To this end they invented the most satanic and refined tortures that only an oriental mind could imagine.

Toward the end of the sixteenth century, a climate of torture began to make itself felt. Buddhists

and Confucianists did not look benignly on the favor that Catholic enjoyed before the people and the authorities. Moreover, the central authority began to get suspicious about the foreign missionaries. The shogun Hideyoshi (1582-1598), who at first had favored Christians, changed his attitude at the instigation

of his personal physician, the former bonze Seyakuin Zenso.

In 1595, the San Felipe, a galleon en route to Acapulco with captain Landecho at the helm, bearing

a cargo of a million crowns with 234 people on board including seven religious ran aground in the port of Urado. The governor of the region, covetous of the cargo, had gone to Hideyoshi with the story that the Spaniards had bad intentions and were bent on seizing power over Japan. This calumny unleashed the

wrath of the shogun, leading him to swear vengeance against the missionaries. On February 4, 1597,

twenty-six Christians, among them three Jesuits and six Franciscans, after exposure to public ridicule and harsh imprisonment, were crucified at Nagasaki.

The death of Hideyoshi was followed by a period calm. Christianity, with new reinforcements

of missionaries, proceeded to increase its ranks. From 300,000 in 1,600, the number went up to 500,000 in 1614. Old resentments and suspicions were stirring in the mind of Ieyasu (1598-1616). A convinced Buddhist, but at the same time quite shrewd, he put up with missionaries in order not to lost the commerce with the Portuguese.

In 1600 he allowed Dutch merchants to come in, and in 1613, the English, who fed fuel to the fire

by saying that the Portuguese and Spaniards wanted to take power over Japan. The “papist missionaries” were spies sent there to do the spadework.

Calumnies and accusations against the Christians continued to accumulate. They were charges

with corruption and with having venerated the relics of Christians condemned to death as rebels.

The governor of Nagasaki wrote to Ieyasu that the Christians of that city had venerated a criminal. The matter involved a Christian who had acquired some contraband bars of silver and had been condemned to crucifixion. At the moment that a soldier made ready to pierce his heart with a lance, Christians knelt to pray for him.

This act of charity was interpreted as “adoration of a criminal.” Upon hearing this, Ieyasu

exclaimed, “A law that teaches such things can only come from the demon.” That was in 1913. Some promulgated on the fourteenth of the following month.

The edict called for the elimination “of all Christians with no waste of time, so that they will have

no place to set their feet.” Whoever would refuse to renounce Christianity would be sentenced to death.

The foreign missionaries were ordered to leave the country immediately. At that time in Japan there were 166 Jesuits, fourteen Franciscans, three Augustinians and six Dominicans. Nearly all were concentrated in Nagasaki and were placed under guard. In early November the missionaries departed in several junks destined for Macoa and Manila. Forty-two missionaries from the various orders remained hidden in Japan. The expulsion was followed by the destruction of churches, crosses, cemeteries, and of every kind of Christian symbol.

When the government learned that some hidden missionaries remained, that others had entered the country disguised as merchants, and that thousands of Christians went on professing their faith, he unleashed a terrible persecution throughout all the fiefs. He placed a bounty of 30 bars of silver on the heads of the missionaries he decreed the death penalty for families that harbored any priest and for the four

neighboring families as well. He obliged all heads of families to recite a formulary of apostasy in the presence of magistrate. He required suspects to trample an image of Christ or of the Virgin Mary.

Soon the first missioners and Christians began to fall. The blood of martyrs was drenching all regions of Japan. Pagans and protestant were struck with admiration for the Christians’ heroic fortitude.

**Extermination of Christianity**

The persecution raged so virulently that by 1644 not even one missionary was felt. More than 200,000 Christians had been placed under torture or despoiled of their possessions. More than 4,000 had

their throats slit or were beheaded, crucified, burnt to death by slow fire, or ended their lives in the torment

of the gallows and pit.

Nevertheless, the hatred of the tyrants could not completely suffocate Christianity. The faith,

brought to them by St. Francis Xavier and the missionaries who followed him, had taken such deep root in the Japanese soul that, in spite of systematic persecution and of the police control exerted by the authorities, a great number of Christians remained faithful to Christ.