



Francis Xavier (First Christian Missionary in Japan)

On April 7, 1506 Francisco de Jasso y Azpilicueta (Francis Xavier) was born in Navarre, Spain.

He was born into an aristocratic family and spent his youth living in the family castle. However, the kingdom was conquered in 1512, most of the castle was destroyed, and the family lands were confiscated. Three years later, when Francis was only nine, his father died. Later, he was able to study in Paris, France at the College Sainte-Barbe. There he met the lifelong, faithful, friends with whom he founded the Society of Jesus (Jesuit). And like each of them, he took a vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience. After the Jesuit Order was granted papal-approval Francis was ordained to the priesthood. His life from then on

consisted almost entirely of foreign proselytizing. He had great success in the Maluku Islands and became known as the ‘Apostle of the Indies.’ In December 1547, he met a Japanese man—Yajiro—from Kagoshima, Japan. The acquaintance intensified Francis’ desire to preach the gospel to the Asian nation. And so, in August of 1549, at the age of 43, Francis Xavier landed on the Japanese island of Kyushu. In a letter Francis once wrote: “the very reason why I came to Japan is so that people, who were created in the image of the creator, could know their creator.” Many missionaries followed after him.

Early Missionary Work

The first Christian church was opened in Kagoshima, Japan with one hundred converts. This was possible because a local ruler had granted Francis Xavier permission to preach on the island of Kyushu. In 1551, Francis and his group wanted to take their missionary efforts to Japan's capital, which (at that time) was the city of Kyoto. For this purpose he travelled to Kyoto to meet with the emperor. However, wars and political turmoil made the meeting impossible. Francis returned to Kyushu and Christianity spread to Western Honshu

and the cities of Yamaguchi, Bungo, Hirado, and Chikugo. Before Francis Xavier's departure, in 1552, over seven hundred people had been baptized into the faith. Father ('Shinpu') Cosme de Tores and Father John Fernandez stayed on to further develop and guide the churches. They studied the culture and lifestyle of the Japanese people, and all the missionaries ate, slept, and dressed like the Japanese. They were especially diligent in researching the common religions of Japan: Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Teaching Christianity was difficult, and sometimes meant active debates with

the different religious leaders. The church in Western Japan grew; but so did the persecution—especially from some of the rulers that supported the Buddhist teachings.



Missionaries during the late period of 16th century in Japan

Rapid Growth of Christianity

During the 1560s, feudal rulers (largely interested in international trade with Spain and Portugal) started to encourage and protect Christianity. They believed that Christianity could help them obtain wealth, and greater support from the peasants and middle-class citizens of Japan. Some rulers even converted to Christianity. Because of the support of the feudal rulers, missionaries were able to build churches, hospitals, and schools, and

the number of Christian converts increased rapidly. Having communicated their successes and needs to Rome, the missionaries obtained funds necessary for their continuation of their work. By 1600 there were more than 200,000 Christians in Japan. Several Japanese seminary students visited Rome as ambassadors and many Japanese men were ordained as priests during this period.



The four Japanese sent by Alessandro Valignano to Europe, with Father Mesquita, in 1586.

Persecution Begins

In 1603, Ieyasu Tokugawa became the first Shogun of Japan and was the highest military general and political leader of the nation. In a short period of time, his government became concerned with the growth of Christianity in Japan—especially with the Christian principle of human equality. In 1612, the government established a law that prohibited Christianity in Japan. Missionaries were deported, and Tokugawa’s

leaders destroyed all the church owned buildings, including the hospitals and schools. Buddhism became compulsory and those who refused to “be” Buddhist were heavily punished. Fear led many Christians to practice their faith in secret. Still, the government was not satisfied and paid generous rewards to those that reported on the actions of the Christians, and supplied their names. The Tokugawa government also started a famous investigation method called Fumi-e. In Fumi-e people were asked to step on

(or sometimes to spit on) a picture of Jesus or Mother Mary. Those who refused to desecrate the images were severely punished.



Image of Fumi-e

Merciless Persecution and Torture



An illustration of torture in Shimabara

At the beginning of the Christian persecution, the Tokugawa government simply executed Believers. However, the government soon realized that martyrdom was considered a symbol of ultimate faith, and glorified by the Believers. Thus, they started to torture Christians. The goal was to inflict such excruciating pain that Believers would forsake the faith. Believers were routinely beaten, scalded with boiling water, blistered with fire torches, nailed on crosses, and maimed by other horrific violence. Sometimes the tor-

ture lasted for months. One form of torture was: Ana-tsurei. In Ana-tsurei a person was bound with several ropes, flipped upside down, and lowered into a very narrow pit (the bottom of which was usually lined with fecal matter). As the blood rushed to the head it caused small blood vessels in the brain to slowly burst. The pain was overpowering. Tokugawa's torture methods made it clear that Christianity was a perilous association for the people of Japan.

Faith of the Believers

The Tokugawa government's investigations of Christians were cruel and rigorous. But despite the sufferings, the faithful people united in charity and compassion. In the gloom and cold of prisons, they demonstrated characteristics taught by their God in His Sermon on the Mount—kindness, respect, and love towards one another. The persecutions were severe. And in time,

all the Christians leaders, along with countless of their members, were murdered. At one point, there were over 300,000 Christians in Japan, but in a short time period, Christianity entirely disappeared from the public realm. Still, a small number of Christians, scattered across the country, continued to believe. They hid their faith from the government, taught it to their children, and waited...waited...waited...for the return of the priests.



The first father and the chapel after the Edo period. People's wish finally came over 200 years later



Genocide in Edo, Kyoto, and Nagasaki



Between 1619 and 1620, the Tokugawa government increased Christian persecutions, deaths, and torture, and began mass genocide of Christians in Edo, Kyoto, and Nagasaki. Thousands of Believers were slowly burned to death in public places. In these mass executions the Christian's ropes were usually bound loosely. Then if a person renounced the faith, he or she could more easily escape the burning timbers. In this way the Tokugawa government accomplished two desired goals: 1. Killed the Christians 2. Secured public

renouncements of Christianity. Nagasaki had the most converts in Japan. The existing records indicate that around 4,000 people were burned to death on a hill on the East side of the city during this time. However, considering the number of records that have been lost, it is largely accepted that there were many more martyrs. In 1980, the Roman Catholic Pope visited Nagasaki and paid tribute to the early Christians that were murdered for their beliefs.

Hope for Eternal Life

Early Japanese believers retained their faith even at the expense of their lives. They believed that true happiness was obtained by being faithful to the end. If they renounced their faith, they would have been allowed to return to their normal lives. However, they had learned about God and felt love for their Savior Jesus Christ. They considered it a privilege to suffer because the Savior had suffered and died for them. They lost

everything. They lost their houses, their families, and their lives. But they believed they were choosing an eternal happiness over a temporal one. What follows are statements by three Christian martyrs—all children.

“I’ll choose eternal life with God instead of choosing a short life in this world.” (Rudobiko Ibaraki)

“I will not abandon my faith. A person who forsakes

faith cannot go to heaven.” (Marita)

“Jesus walked to Calvary. I will walk there, too.” (Diego Hayashida)