

Holy Martyrs of Nagasaki

SAINT OF THE DAY

06_02_2024



By postponing their liturgical memory by one day, to avoid the coincidence with that of Saint Agatha, the Church today remembers the martyrdom that took place on February 5th, 1597 on a hill near Nagasaki, where 26 crucified Christians glorified Christ to their last breath.

Hardly half a century had passed since the winter of 1551, when Saint Francis Xavier left Japan after converting over 1000 people during his two years' tireless mission.

Other religious soon followed in his footsteps, and were able to preach unhindered. This led to the Catholic community growing rapidly: in 1587 it already counted over 200,000 baptised; but in that year the *daimyo* Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the lord who had the greatest influence on the emperor, issued the first edict against Christians, banning all missionaries from the land. Nevertheless, this measure was largely disregarded and the apostolate went on. Hideyoshi's action was based on several reasons: the Jesuits' refusal to provide a ship for Japan's invasion of Korea, the steadfastness of the Christian virgins, the suspicion that the missionaries, committed to spreading the Gospel and doing other works of charity, were actually intent on opening the way to a foreign invasion.

Eventually, in November 1596, Hideyoshi resolved to carry out a persecution

and ordered the governors under him to arrest all Christian religious. Many found refuge in the countryside, but 26 were captured. These were 6 Franciscans of Spanish or Portuguese origin, 3 Jesuits and 17 Japanese Franciscan tertiaries. Among them was Paul Miki, leader of the group in the Martyrology, born of a noble Japanese family, who became a charismatic Jesuit preacher, capable of converting many fellow-countrymen. The prisoners were first taken to a public square, where they suffered the cutting of a piece of the left ear. This was only the beginning of a very long ordeal. To intimidate all Japanese Christians and discourage other conversions, Hideyoshi marched the 26 Christians from Kyoto to Nagasaki, the city with the largest Catholic community, where the condemned arrived after 30 days and about 600 kilometres of exertion.

Contrary to the tyrant's expectations, those days were a triumph of faith. The group, which marched to the tune of the *Te Deum*, also included three children of 12, 13 and 14 years of age, namely, Louis Ibaraki, Antony Daynan and Thomas Kozaki, who moved many hardened hearts and refused to deny Christ. The 26 were able to confess before the execution which had been intended to make them an example for the people. 4000 Christians went up the hill just outside Nagasaki where the crosses had been prepared and, as the prisoners walked by, prostrated themselves to ask for prayers. When the future martyrs saw the crosses bearing their names, they knelt and kissed them. The executioners tied them with ropes and iron rings, then raised them simultaneously on the crosses, under which samurai stood armed with sharp bamboo spears. The execution order was delayed to increase the terror of the torture.

At that moment, the voice of one of the crucified suddenly rose and began to intone the *Benedictus*. Then the 13 year-old Antony sang *Praise, Children, the Lord*, followed by Luis and Thomas. A Franciscan began reciting the litanies to Jesus and Mary, repeated by the crowd, while the officer in charge of the execution began to worry

about what he should report to Hideyoshi about such an impressive Christian testimony. Paul Miki prayed for the forgiveness of the executioners, urged everyone to convert and invited them to look on the faces of the crucified, who showed no fear of death, because of their faith in the risen Christ. Finally the order came. The Franciscan Philip of Jesus was the first to be pierced with two spear blows. The last one was Father Pedro Bautista, who earlier on had baptised a mute woman, who recovered the ability to speak after touching his cross.

The faithful rushed to collect the blood of the martyrs with cloths, but they were prevented from burying the 26 bodies, which remained on the crosses for weeks, with several sentinels keeping guard. Among the various prodigies that occurred on the hill (from apparitions to globes of fire descending on the remains of the saints, to the birds of prey who dared not approach their bodies), numerous witnesses saw Father Pedro Bautista move 62 days after his death: as had happened on the third day, a great amount of blood flowed from his wounds. The Japanese proto-martyrs were beatified by Urban VIII in 1627 and canonised by Pius IX as had happened on the third day in 1862.

These are their names: Paul Miki, James Kisai, John Soan di Goto (Company of Jesus), Francisco Blanco, Francisco of Saint Michel, Gonsalvo Garcia, Martin of the Ascension, Pedro Bautista Blásquez, Philip of Jesus (**Order of the Friars Minor**), Antony Daynan, Bonaventure of Miyako, Cosmas Takeya, Francis Kichi, Francisco of Nagasaki, Gabriel de Duisco, Joachim Sakakibara, John Kisaka, Leo Karasumaru, Louis Ibaraki, Mathias of Miyako, Michael Kozaki, Paul Ibaraki, Paul Suzuki, Pedro Sukejiroo, Thomas Kozaki, Thomas Xico (**Franciscan tertiaries**).

Patrons of: Japan