

in 1639, and he was taken to Edo (present Tokyo), where he was subjected to cruel tortures and, when he refused to renounce his faith, he was killed.

The power of Christ was shown forth in the Japanese martyrs of the seventeenth century as clearly as it was in the Christians of the first centuries. There is the same clear eyed awareness of their choice, the same unflinching conviction in the face of demands to renounce their faith, the same unbowed and even joyful spirit in the face of cruel suffering, the same more than human strength that witnessed to Another who suffered in them. Torments and death could not overcome them; they were killed and they conquered.

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The 188 Japanese Martyrs, Like the Martyrs of the Early Centuries

Fr. Mark Tardiff

There are many resemblances between the Christians killed by the shogun and those Diocletian had killed. The future Japanese blessed include some samurai, a few priests, and many laity. 60 of them are women; 33 were under the age of 20; 18 were children under the age of 5.



On November 24, 2008 in Nagasaki, at the Big-N Baseball Stadium, Fr. Peter Kibe and 187 other Japanese martyrs will be beatified. They were killed between the years 1606 and 1639. The ceremony will be presided over by Cardinal José Saraiva Martins, as the envoy of Benedict XVI and prefect emeritus of the congregation for the causes

of saints. There is great anticipation among Japanese Catholics, and about 25,000 people are expected to come to Nagasaki to participate in the beatification Mass.



The 188 martyrs cover only a brief period of the history of persecution in Japan. After the first promising beginnings of evangelization in the second half of the 1500's, in the 1600's the persecution of Christians began, to the point of prohibiting Christianity, driving out foreign missionaries, and implementing absolute persecution, among the cruelest ever seen. It was only in 1873, under Emperor Meiji, that the end of the persecution was decreed with an edict of tolerance. The story of the 188 Japanese martyrs is interwoven with that of the country, with its problems of domestic politics, the struggles among feudal lords and for the unification of Japan; with the relations, alliances, and betrayals with colonial powers. But it also clearly shows the attempt of political power to dominate completely the life of the population and of Christians, and the brilliance of the faith of these latter, who were killed even amid the admiration of their countrymen.

Among the 188 to be beatified, 4 are priests, one is a religious, and the majority - 183 - are laypeople: some nobles, some respected samurai, common people, farmers, and even adolescents and children. Of them, 60 are women, 33 were under the age of 20; 18 were children under the age of five. They include entire families who faced martyrdom together. This is a presentation of some of these figures by Fr. Tardiff of the PIME, who spent 11 years in Japan as a missionary.

The stories of the Japanese martyrs to be beatified November 24 take us back nearly 400 years, but reading their stories takes us back to the Acts of the Martyrs of the early Church.

St. Francis Xavier reached Japan in 1549 and began the preaching of Christ in the land of the rising sun. Within sixty years the Shogun (the military ruler of Japan) unleashed a persecution of the young Church which rivalled in fury that of the Emperor Diocletian at the beginning of the fourth century.

Women and children were caught up in the maelstrom, and their stories remind us of St. Perpetua, St. Felicity, and St. Agnes. On December 9, 1603, Agnes Takeda watched as her husband was beheaded, and then reverently picked up his head and held it to her chest. The chronicler tells us that, at the sight, not only the crowd but even the executioners were moved to tears. The separation of the devoted couple was brief, because Agnes was martyred later the same day. In 1619 Tecla Hashimoto, pregnant with her fourth child, was tied to a cross together with her three year old daughter and the wood

piled around them was set afire. As the flames rose around them, her thirteen year old daughter, tied to a nearby cross, cried out, "Mom, I can't see anything any more!" Her mother answered, "Don't worry. In a little while you will see everything clearly."

Peter Kibe, whose name is mentioned in the liturgical title of this martyrs' group, had a story as adventuresome as that of St. Cyprian. Already a seminarian, he was exiled with the missionaries to Macao in 1614. His burning desire was to become a priest and return to his people, so he left Macao by ship in 1618 and went as far as Goa in India. From there he set out alone, crossing the present Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and Jordan to arrive in the Holy Land. After a visit to the holy sites, he continued on, reaching Rome in 1620. After being ordained a priest, he set out on the return journey, which was complicated by the fact that in the meantime the Shogun had declared the country closed to all but a few strictly controlled contacts with the Dutch.

Fr. Peter managed to re-enter Japan in 1630, though, beginning a life as a fugitive priest ministering to the Christians in hiding. In 1633, hearing that the missionary Fr. Ferreira had apostatized, he came down from the mountains and sought him out. "Father," he said, "let us go together to the station of the military police. After you take back your apostasy, let us die together." Fr. Ferreira refused, and after that Fr. Peter moved his center of activities to the northeast region of Honshu, the main island of Japan. The military police finally caught up with him