

Catholic Missions in Japan and China

During the 16th and 17th centuries Catholic missionaries made great progress in the two largest Asian countries of Japan and China. Both countries presented enormous challenges, not only due to language and cultural barriers, but also to the fact that both countries were highly civilized and had well respected and long established religious traditions of their own. In spite of tremendous effort and the successful conversion of thousands of souls, both missions collapsed so by the end of the 17th century, almost all progress had been lost.

In Japan, the Catholic efforts to evangelize ended dramatically when a new emperor chose to persecute and execute his Christian subjects and all westerners were forbidden to enter the country for almost 200 years. In China, the collapse of the Ming dynasty did great harm to the missions but their killing blow was self-inflicted: Jesuits and other religious orders disagreed on whether to forbid Ancestor worship and the conflict led to the withdrawal of Chinese missions.

Christian Persecutions and the '26 Martyrs of Japan'

Japan opened its doors to St. Francis Xavier, but the clever intellectual people of Japan were not so easily converted as the simple pariahs of India. Long and learned discussions with the Buddhist priests of Japan were necessary before they would yield to the preaching of Xavier. His austerity of life, his commanding eloquence, his miracles, and an irresistible charm of manner, won him many converts; but the pride of the Bonzes and the dissolute habits of the people, were, at times, insurmountable obstacles.

After the death of St. Francis Xavier Christianity made rapid progress in Japan. The number of Christians soon rose to two hundred thousand. During the reign of the Emperor Taikosama (1587) a persecution broke out which continued, with slight interruptions, for fifty years. In order to identify Christians during this period, anyone suspected of being a Christian was forced to trample an image of Jesus, called a **fumi-e**. Thousands of Japanese natives and missionaries chose martyrdom rather than degrading an image of God. One Jesuit missionary who famously apostatized and became a Buddhist monk was **Christovao Ferreira**(1580-1650), but many more went willingly to their deaths.

The last vestige of the once flourishing mission in Japan was destroyed by 1637. Even afterward, however, a handful of Christians remained in the country, practicing their religion in secret. They handed on their faith to their children and children's children, until the arrival of fresh missionaries more than two hundred years later.

In 1862 Pope Pius IX canonized **Twenty-six Martyrs of Japan**, missionaries and natives, who had been crucified in 1597 on a hill near Nagasaki, after being forced to walk for over 600 miles from Kyoto. These were among the most famous of tens of thousands of Catholics who perished during the Japanese persecutions. In addition to these twenty-six, hundreds of other Japanese martyrs are being considered for canonization in five separate groups. In many cases, however, little is known about the individual martyrs. Most known martyrs were members of religious orders, either Japanese natives or foreigners sent as missionaries to Japan. Several of the best known Martyrs of Japan are listed below.

- **Paulo Miki** (1562-1597) — Native Japanese Jesuit who was a well-known preacher and converted thousands of souls. Martyred in 1597 by crucifixion as one of the leaders of the **26 Martyrs of Japan**.

- **Philip of Jesus** (1572-1597) — Native Mexican Franciscan who was *en route* from Mexico to the Philippines when his ship entered Japan waters. He stayed there until he was martyred in 1597.
- **Gonsalo Garcia** (1556-1597) — Franciscan lay brother from Portuguese India who was a missionary to Japan.

More about Christianity in Japan

Adapted from Sister of Notre Dame, Leading Events in Church History, Vol. IV

The work of **St. Francis Xavier** in Japan was continued by his religious brethren with equal zeal. At first kingdom after kingdom was won to the faith, and it seemed at one moment as though the whole people would enter the true fold, so rapid was the process of conversion. While things were in this prosperous way, a sudden change of government was the means of wrecking the Church in Japan for a time. The Emperor Nobununga, who had protected the Christians, was killed in a popular rising. The Christians supported the claims of the son of the late emperor, but their party was not strong enough to hold its own, and the prince fled. One of the victorious lieutenants caused himself to be proclaimed, taking the title of Toyotomi Hideyoshi. The Christian party submitted to prevent a civil war, and for some years the new emperor favored them throughout his dominion.

But eventually Hideyoshi urged on by Buddhist monks, turned against the Christians and began persecuting them. Ucondono, the leading Catholic shogun, made a magnificent confession of faith and was exiled with his whole family. A feudal sovereign apostatized and shed the first Christian blood to convince the emperor of his fidelity. The severity exercised on the Christians had the contrary effect to that anticipated — multitudes hastened to give in their submission to the Church. The persecution was interrupted for a time by the return from Rome of an embassy which the Jesuits had sent thither. The envoys, four young Japanese, gave such enthusiastic reports of their reception, and of the wealth and strength of the Western world, that the Hideyoshi was appeased, especially as the accounts were accompanied by magnificent gifts from Europe.

About this time the tale was spread that Western' monarchs were accustomed to send missionaries to prepare the way for armies, and this fabrication destroyed a flourishing Church. A second persecution was set on foot, and several Jesuits and Franciscans were put to death. As at the first, outburst of persecution, new crowds entered the Church. There was a short lull in the storm when Tokugawa Ieyasu became emperor, but he was worked upon by Spaniards, English, and Dutch to regard the Portuguese Jesuits as endeavoring to a secure commercial monopoly for their sovereign. The most terrible persecution yet experienced began, and the fervor of the Christians went to an extraordinary length. They formed a Confraternity of Martyrdoms, they added their own names to the lists of the proscribed, and signed a resolution in their blood that the Jesuits should not be exiled. This document fell into the hands of the governors, and all but twenty-six Jesuits were immediately deported. Those who remained lay hidden away in forests and caverns and awaited better days, while their flocks showed heroic courage.

An imprudent attempt of other missionaries to work openly in favor of Catholicism provoked the fury of yet another emperor, and again a terrific storm was let loose on the Christians. No less than twenty thousand five hundred and seventy persons are said to have been put to death, yet the neophytes again multiplied daily. The most frightful tortures were employed, but in vain. The Jesuits were given up to incredible sufferings. The ardor of persecution was constantly fanned by English and Dutch traders, who, desirous of transferring the rich commerce of Japan from the Portuguese to their own marts, constantly excited the sovereign against the Catholics. By 1634 all

the missionaries had been killed, only one European remained, the Jesuit **Christovao Ferreira** and he had apostatized. The population was decimated, and it seemed as though Catholicism had been stamped out of the soil. No merchant could enter a Japanese port save by trampling on a crucifix. The Jesuits, with characteristic devotedness, sent men to try to win back their apostate brother. They were martyred, but their efforts were not lost. At eighty years of age Ferreyra recanted, and died a martyr — the last of the Jesuits (1652) — and the story of Catholicism in Japan was interrupted for two hundred years.

Jesuits in China

Adapted from John Laux, Church History, pp. 467-468.

St. Francis bequeathed to his Order his own ardent desire to Christianize China. For nearly thirty years insurmountable obstacles prevented the realization of this ambition; but at last, in 1578, some Portuguese merchants obtained permission to reside at Canton. They were immediately followed by three Jesuits, one of whom was the celebrated **Matteo Ricci**. Ricci became a thorough Chinese scholar. His command of the Chinese language was so perfect that his treatise on the "True Doctrine of God" found a place among the Chinese classics. He made himself useful to the learned world of China by his lectures and writings on Mathematics, Arithmetic, Astronomy, Geography, Music and Philosophy, gradually introducing into them instructions on the Christian religion.

Instead of attacking the doctrines of the famous Chinese philosopher Confucius, he often made them the starting-point for his own teachings, and permitted the Christians to pay special honors to him. In 1601 Ricci obtained an audience with the Emperor Wan-Li, and presented him with watches, music-boxes, and musical instruments and finally also with his own writings on the Christian religion. The Emperor asked him to write books on geography and to draw maps for him, but never manifested any inclination to become a Christian. Ricci died at Peking in 1611.

After Ricci's death the German Jesuit **John Adam Schall**, a learned mathematician and astronomer, enjoyed the favor of Chinese Emperors. He attracted the attention of the court by calculating eclipses of the sun and moon. The Emperor Shun-Chi appointed him director of the imperial observatory and president of the Mathematical Institute, raising him at the same time to the rank of Mandarin. During the reign of Shun-Chi Christianity was tolerated and many high officials embraced it openly. Schall became their spiritual director. In 1664 the last Emperor of the Ming dynasty was succeeded by a Manchu, a deadly enemy of the Christians. Father Schall was thrown into prison and condemned to death, but pardoned at the last moment. After his death his memory was held in high esteem by the Chinese.

Not long after the Jesuits, the Franciscans and Dominicans entered the Far Eastern mission field. Unfortunately the progress of missionary work was retarded by ill-feeling between the Jesuits and Dominicans, growing out of the controversy on Chinese customs. The Jesuits, as we have seen, permitted their converts to pay honor to Confucius and to retain their ancestor cult, regarding these practices as civil, not religious, ceremonies. This the Dominicans opposed. The Popes, appealed to by both parties, decided in favor of the Dominicans.

Notable Jesuit Missionaries in China

- **Alessandro Valignano** (1539-1606) — Jesuit missionary who founded a school at Macau to train missionaries in Chinese language and customs.

- **Michele Ruggieri** (1543-1607) — This Italian Jesuit was one of the first to establish a mission in China, and to thoroughly master the Chinese language. As an associate of Matteo Ricci, wrote a catechism in Chinese and developed a Latin-Chinese dictionary
- **Matteo Ricci** (1552-1610) — Most famous of the 17th century Jesuit missionaries to China. Respected scholar and cartographer, who mastered the language and lived as a Mandarin. He won over Chinese nobles with his maps and technological wonders from the west. Known for translating Confucius into Latin, and Euclid into Chinese.
- **Adam Schall** (1591-1666) — German Jesuit missionary who gained a great reputation as an astronomer. Helped revise the Chinese Calendar and resided in China for over 50 years. Schall served as head of a school of astronomy and mathematics and serving as an advisor to both Ming and Manchu emperors.
- **Ferdinand Verbiest** (1623-1688) — Carried on Father Schall's Astrological work in Peking and wrote a book on Astronomy in Chinese. Won the trust of Manchu emperors and so benefitted the work of all missionaries in China.
- **Xavier Friedel** (1673-1743) — Made a cartographical survey of China, traversing the whole Empire from south to north.

Jesuits in China

Adapted from Sisters of Notre Dame, Leading Events in Church History, Vol IV.

China, the land which had excited the zeal of St. Francis Xavier, was only opened to the influence of Christianity by a long patience. Every early attempt had met with signal failure, and the Jesuits, taught by experience, began to discover that zeal alone is not enough to insure success. **Valignani**, a Jesuit who was the very soul of the Eastern mission, founded a special novitiate where future missionaries could study the manners and spirit of the Chinese.

Matteo Ricci, an eminent pupil from this school and a brilliant mathematician, presented himself to the Chinese as teacher of astronomy, geography, and mathematics. His first endeavors were to win the higher classes, as only through them could the lower be reached. When discussing problems in science, he inculcated the first ideas of truth. He led his hearers gradually from truth to morality — from morality to God. His inventions won him an introduction to the court of Peking, and his prestige was secured. After seventeen years of patient toil the Jesuit could work openly as a missionary. The nobles and the learned were converted in large numbers.

The people begged that the Word of God might be announced to them. But the upper classes, not yet imbued with the spirit of a Gospel which was to be announced to poor as well as to rich, opposed themselves strenuously to such an innovation. Ricci, however, overcame all obstacles. He was soon able to open a novitiate at Peking, and to admit Chinese youths among the aspirants. Hardly anywhere else had it been allowed, or even possible, so soon to commence to form a native clergy, but with the intelligent and docile Chinese the experiment was successful. Father Ricci died in 1610, and Father **Adam Schall** succeeded him at the head of the Jesuit mission in China.

Just then broke out a most lamentable dispute which imperiled the very existence of the Chinese missions. After long examination the Jesuits had felt convinced that the reverence given to Confucius and other illustrious Chinese of bygone days was merely ceremonial, and contained no idolatry, therefore they did not prohibit it. On the other hand, they made a very restricted use of the crucifix, which the Chinese mind could not appreciate. When in 1633

Dominican and Franciscan missionaries arrived to aid with the work, they were immediately struck by what appeared to them a dangerous innovation, and they denounced the action of the Jesuits to headquarters. While the question was being examined in Rome, the Chinese also got hold of the matter in dispute, and so highly incensed were they at the insult offered to their ancestors that they exiled the newly-arrived missionaries, together with several Jesuits.

It was just at this time (1644) that a revolution occurred by which the Chinese dynasty was overthrown, and a Tartar prince from Manchuria was placed on the throne. He was favorable to the Christians, but on his death the regents who governed during the minority of the succeeding emperor, instigated by the Buddhist priests and Mohammedan authorities, gathered together all the priests and other religious in China and shut them up in prison. While confined together, the Dominicans and Jesuits discussed the Chinese customs, and the former attested by a formal document that the Jesuits had acted prudently in the course they had taken with regard to the honor given to Confucius, and that they had not concealed the Mystery of the Cross as had been supposed. The prisoners were liberated when the young emperor attained his majority, but Father Schall soon succumbed to the sufferings he had undergone. Father **Ferdinand Verbiest** succeeded him in command of the Jesuit missions, and through his great influence with the emperor, there was almost entire liberty for the development of the faith. Numerous converts were received, and for a few years the state of the Church in China was highly satisfactory.

The discussion on "Chinese Customs," however, came up again, to the detriment of the missions. It was impossible for the Chinese to have confidence in teachers who appeared at variance among themselves. At length, in 1693, the customs were condemned by the Holy See, and the Jesuits immediately submitted. Not so their flocks, and the prohibition had to be confirmed in 1715 and 1742. When the Chinese began to refuse the public signs of veneration to ancestors, which before they had not scrupled to use, a general outcry arose, which deepened into a persecution in 1722. For a hundred years Chinese Christians of every rank suffered with heroic courage — many enduring martyrdom, the horrors of which equaled the worst inflictions of Roman tyrants. But the faith has never been stamped out.

Spanish Missions in the Philippines

The Philippines and neighboring islands were converted by Spanish Augustinians, Dominicans, and Franciscans. As early as 1579 there was a bishop at Manila, and in a very short space of time the native population was converted. After a brief, but severe, persecution, during which a very large number were martyred, there was a steady development of Christianity, though a fairly large proportion of the people are still Mohammedans.

A very early reunion of Arabic schismatics with the Holy See occurred in 1533, when a Nestorian bishop submitted to papal authority, and was named Patriarch of Chaldea. A large number of Nestorians came over a little later: they are known as Chaldeans by those who still retain heretical tenets. In 1577 the Malabar Christians, or Christians of St. Thomas, also a Nestorian body, were received back into the unity of the Church.

In 1609 Henry IV. of France obtained from the Sultan permission for the Jesuits to settle in the Levant. Franciscans joined them in 1625. In a few years Greece, Syria, Persia, and Armenia, had a numerous staff of missionaries, and many conversions followed. The Maronites of the Lebanon were at this time won back to the faith.