February 6: St Peter Baptist and Companions (Mt 16:24-27)

 **WAY OF THE CROSS**

Jesus has just predicted his passion and has scolded Peter who wants to dissuade him from it. Now Jesus speaks of the conditions for following him.

The words used, “renounce,” “take up his cross,” “follow”, “lose his life”, are shades of the same reality: if we want to follow Christ, we must decisively give up everything that obstructs us in order to share with Jesus his destiny that culminates on the cross. However, the mention of the glorious Son of Man (Mt 16:27) shows that the last word must be reserved for the resurrection.

We Christians have to be ready for any sacrifice if we are to live like Jesus Christ and find true life in him. To accept Jesus, the “Suffering Servant” of Isaiah, means to follow him and to behave as he did, in the concrete situations of everyday life. The prospect is “narrow”, but, as Matthew comments, it is “the hard road that leads to life” (Mt 7:14).

Jesus does not deceive us who want to become his disciples. He promises sacrifice, not easy triumphs. However, he does not disappoint us because our sacrifice will result in “the glory of the Father,” which everyone will participate in “according to his [or her] present actions”.

These were the convictions that motivated St Peter Baptist and his Companions, crucified at Nagasaki. There were six friars, fifteen Japanese Secular Franciscans, and three Japanese connected with the Jesuits. One of these, Paul Miki, was a professed brother.

The Franciscan Calendar names the memorial after St Peter Baptist. The Roman Calendar names the same memorial after St Paul Miki, in order to give prominence to more Asian saints than to the many European saints, and indeed to the Franciscan saints, who predominate in the Church’s calendar.

Their long forced march and martyrdom demonstrate that the imitation and following of Christ is along the way of the cross. As St Paul tells the Philippians, the way to life is “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death”, hoping to take our place “in the resurrection of the dead” (Phil 3:10-11).

 This conviction sustained the prisoners and even made them joyful during their bitterly cold trek over hundreds of miles to their deaths.

 Let us pray that all the Japanese people may be blessed with the gift of Christian faith through the intercession of the martyrs of Nagasaki.