**THE TWENTY-SIX MARTYRS OF JAPAN 1597**

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In Japan, the Feast Day of the Twenty-Six Martyrs is celebrated on 5 February, the date of their crucifixion in 1597, although their crucifixion is celebrated on 6 February under the title of St Paul Miki and Companions.

The martyrs, whose leader was a Franciscan, Father (now Saint) Peter Baptist Blasques, comprised Franciscan and Jesuit priests and brothers, laymen (including children) and members of the Third Order of St Francis. Among the laymen were catechists, doctors, artisans, and servants. The six Franciscan friars consisted of four Spaniards, one Spanish American, and one Portuguese Indian. There were three Japanese Jesuits.

St Francis Xavier and two fellow Jesuits had been the first Christian missionaries to set foot in Japan in 1549. St Francis Xavier soon realized that real power lay in the hands of the local Daimyos (feudal lords) rather than with the Emperor, so he undertook to win the goodwill of local rulers as the first step to establish Christianity in Japan. His methods proved successful, but they aroused the hostility of many Buddhist religious.

**Missionaries**

By the early 1580s, there were more than eighty missionaries in Japan and 150,000 baptized Catholics. In 1593, Franciscans arrived and were followed by Dominicans and Augustinians.

The new missionaries were mostly Spanish who had come from the Philippines. They favoured more direct methods of conversion to converting leaders first. This lack of uniformity and some subsequent disputes among the Orders were to arouse the suspicions of the most powerful ruler in Japan, Daimyo Aiko Hideyoshi.

Fr Peter Baptist, leader of the Franciscans, had previously been sent to Korea. They were successful there and were given permission by a local daimyo to open a house in Japan, which they did in Kyoto. The mission grew and in the nearby village of “Our Lady of the Angels” there were soon more than two hundred Christians.

Fr Peter Baptist’s aim was “to make Jesus Christ and his perfectly holy life known.” The Christian faith was to be based on poverty, humility, and the Cross. In Japanese culture, however, the cross was scandalous, being associated with criminals; but Peter Baptist insisted on it and solemnly celebrated the services of Holy Week and Good Friday. The Third Order of St Francis flourished, the members transforming themselves into exemplary Christians with daily Mass, weekly confession, Rosary and all kinds of penance.

For three years, the faith continued to spread, but the circumstances changed.

During 1596, there was a number of natural disasters in Japan for which the Christians were conveniently blamed. At abut that time also, a Spanish captain had been heard to remark that the Christian mission work was a prelude to European conquest.

The order went out for the arrest, execution or expulsion of the Spanish Franciscan friars and the other Orders. On 8 December, guards arrived at the house of the Jesuits. The faces of the Franciscans and some of their followers were mutilate and they were paraded around Kyoto, Osaka, and Sakai, prior to making the long journey to Nagasaki to be crucified.

The 800 kms journey by sea and land from Osaka to Nagasaki lasted twenty-six days and all suffered much from cold on the way. While there were twenty-four on the official list for crucifixion, two more were added on the way. One, Francis Kichi, was the carpenter of the friars in Kyoto who had accompanied them on their way to Nagasaki until he, too, was finally arrested and put with the others. The other was Peter Sukejiro, sent by one of the Jesuits to provide money for the martyrs along the way.

Also among the group of condemned Christian were three boys aged 12, 13, and 15 respectively. They had been servers at the missioners’ Masses.

The place of execution was Nishizaka, a hill overlooking Nagasaki, where crowds gathered to witness the event. The youngest of the martyrs, 12-year-old Louis Ibaraki, was tempted to renounce his faith by a nobleman. Louis responded, “Where is my cross?” And when shown which was his, he immediately embraced it.

At the top of the hill, the twenty-six martyrs knelt and sang, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel because he has visited and redeemed his people” (Lk 2:68-79). They were then fastened with cords and iron rings and raised up on their crosses. Four executioners stood at the ready with spears.

Fr Peter Baptist then intoned the *Te Deum* and the others joined in. Brother Paul Miki, the Japanese Jesuit, called out to the crowd that his only crime was to preach Christ: “I obey Christ. After Christ’s example, I forgive my persecutors …” After two of the boys had sung *Laudate, pueri, Dominum* from their crosses, they were pierced by spears.

The last to die was Fr Peter Baptist. As he witnessed the deaths of his companions, he urged the Christians among those assembled to remain steadfast in the Faith, and the rest to be converted to Christianity. Before being pierced by a spear, he pardoned his executioners.

The twenty-six martyrs of Japan were beatified in 1627 and canonized by Pope Pius IX on 8 June 1862, in the presence of a hundred thousand people.