

St. Paul Miki and Companions

BORN 1562 (ST. PAUL MIKI); DIED 1597

MARTYRS

FEAST DAY: FEBRUARY 6

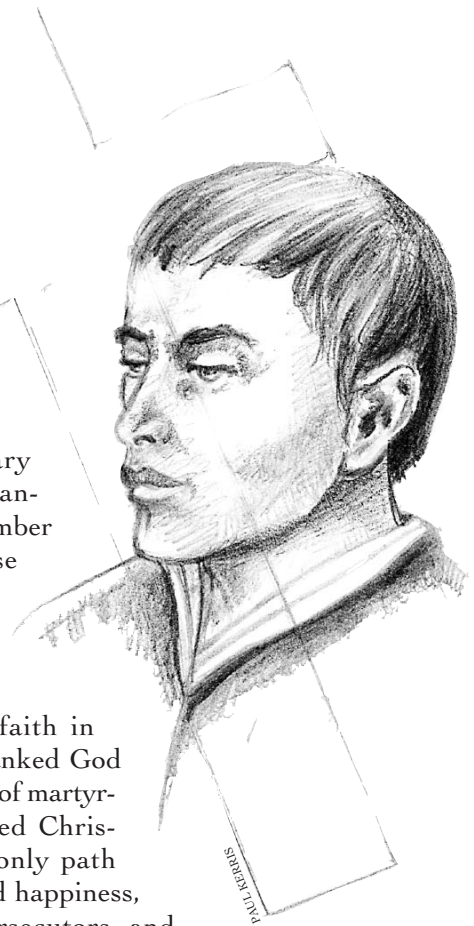
THE NATION OF JAPAN first heard the Gospel when the Jesuit St. Francis Xavier arrived in 1549. In the two years before his recall to India, he converted and baptized more than seven hundred Japanese. Jesuits, Franciscans, and others followed up. Within forty years, there were about two hundred thousand Japanese Catholics and two hundred fifty Catholic churches, mostly on Kyushu, the southernmost of the four main islands of Japan.

In 1587 the regent of Japan, Hideyoshi, ordered all missionaries to leave Japan. Many did not obey the order. In July 1596, a ship from the Philippines was driven onto the coast of Japan. The ship was confiscated and the crew and passengers, including several missionaries, imprisoned. The Spanish captain of this ship — perhaps out of bravado — said that the missionaries were there only to make a later conquest of Japan easier. This infuriated Hideyoshi, who put under house arrest those at the Franciscan monastery at Myako (now Kyoto), on the main island of Honshu. On December 30, they were transferred to prison. Four days later, their ears were cropped and they were paraded through Kyoto and then marched through much of Japan as a way of terrorizing other Catholics into abandoning their faith. Far from being cowed, the captives sang hymns. They finally arrived at Nagasaki, where on February 5 they were taken to a hill overlooking the city and tied to crosses with ropes, chains, and iron collars around their necks. Each of the twenty-six crosses was then lifted in the air and dropped into holes about four feet apart.

Paul Miki, a Jesuit brother, was the son of an

affluent military leader, Miki Handayu, and a member of the Japanese upper class. A catechist and an eloquent preacher, he professed his faith in the Gospel, thanked God for the blessing of martyrdom, proclaimed Christianity as the only path to salvation and happiness, forgave his persecutors, and hoped that his blood would fall on his “fellow men as a fruitful rain.” Another martyr prayed the Our Father and the Hail Mary, one prayed Psalm 112, and others simply prayed, “Jesus! Mary!” They died by means of simultaneous execution with lances.

Fourteen of the twenty-six men and boys that were martyred were Japanese Franciscan tertiaries (laymen observing the Franciscan rule). Seven were catechists: Cosmas Takeya, Francis of Myako, Joachim Sakakibaram, Michael Kasaki, Paul Suzuki, Peter Sukejiro, and Thomas Dauki. Five were laymen: Caius Francis, a soldier; Gabriel de Duisco, the son of the porter; John Kisaka, a silk-weaver; Matthias of Miyako; and Ventura, who had left the faith and then re-converted. Finally, two of the Franciscan tertiaries were altar boys: Antony Deynan, thirteen, and Thomas Kasaki, son of Michael, fifteen. Three additional Franciscan tertiaries were Korean-born: catechists Leo Karasumaru, his brother Paul Ibaraki, and their nephew Louis Ibaraki, a twelve-year-old altar boy. In addition to Paul Miki, two other martyrs were Japanese catechists: James Kisai, and John Soan



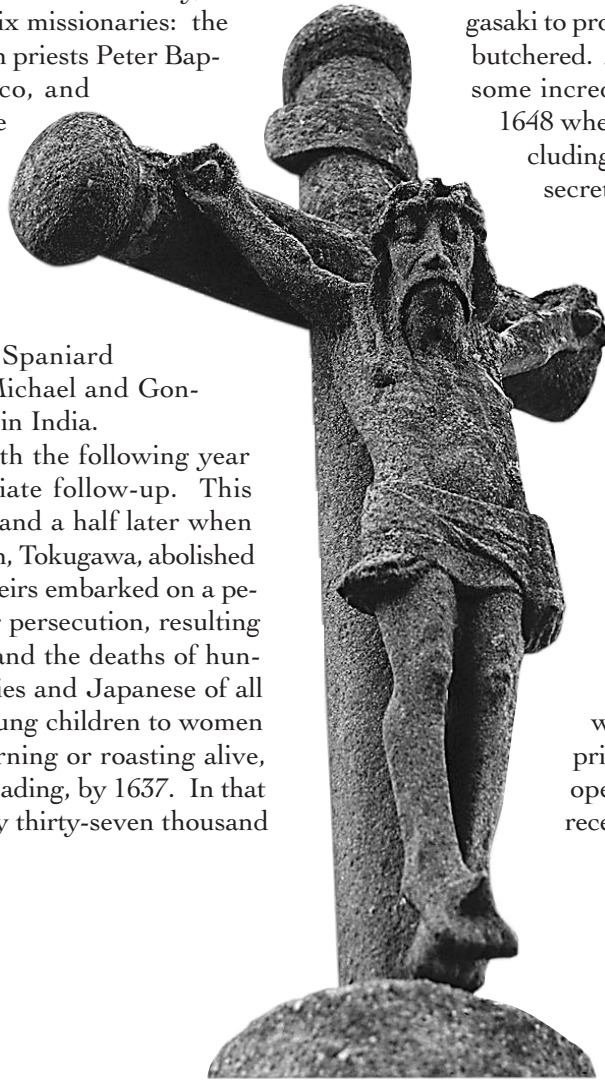
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de Goto, both of whom became Jesuit lay brothers while imprisoned. Finally, the martyrs included six missionaries: the Spanish Franciscan priests Peter Baptist, Francis Blanco, and Martin Loynaz de Aguirre; a Mexican Franciscan ready for ordination, Philip of Jesus; and two Franciscan lay brothers, Spaniard Francis of Saint Michael and Gonzalvo Garcia, born in India.

Hideyoshi's death the following year ended any immediate follow-up. This changed a decade and a half later when the shogun of Japan, Tokugawa, abolished Catholicism. His heirs embarked on a period of intensifying persecution, resulting in imprisonments and the deaths of hundreds of missionaries and Japanese of all ages, from very young children to women over eighty, by burning or roasting alive, crucifixion, or beheading, by 1637. In that year, approximately thirty-seven thousand

Japanese (Catholics and supporters) who had entered a fortress a little east of Nagasaki to protest the persecution were all butchered. Martyrdoms of missionaries, some incredibly cruel, continued until 1648 when every priest was dead, including those who had been caught secretly trying to enter Japan, or had been driven out.

When missionaries returned to Japan late in the 1860s, they discovered with astonishment and joy thousands of secret Christians in Nagasaki. They were the living representatives of a faithful remnant who had, in the face of one of the worst persecutions in Christian history, secretly kept the faith for over two hundred years, waiting for the return of their priests and the opportunity to openly profess their faith and receive the sacraments.



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