

Early Jesuit Missionaries in Japan 1

St. Francis Xavier

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The work of most of the early Jesuit missionaries in Japan must be interpreted in part, at least, in the light of the policies and traditions set up by St. Francis Xavier. It was Xavier who blazed the trail and gave the first analysis of the problems to be faced

and it was he who made the first attempts to solve those problems. Though some of his tactics and ideas were modified or unproved by his successors, it still remains true that their work must be understood in the light of the traditions and methods he had inaugurated. This is the reason why no series of notes on the early Jesuits in Japan can be complete without a preliminary survey of the Saint's work.

So many books have been written about Xavier and so familiar are the missionaries of Japan with his work that most of the ordinary biographical facts can be passed over with only a very brief mention if not in absolute silence in this preliminary article. What must be expected here is a brief sketch at least of the problems as Xavier saw them along with an outline of the methods he used to solve them. It seems advisable, therefore, for our present purpose, to select those facts and comments that best illustrate Xavier's missionary strategy. Sanctity, of course, was his greatest missionary asset, and evidences of his sanctity deserve top priority treatment.

Xavier, then on his return journey from the Moluccas, was officiating at a marriage in Malacca in December 1547 when Captain Jorge Alvarez entered the church in company with Anjiro, the fugitive samurai from Kagoshima, and his two companions. So impressed was the Saint by the character and cultured bearing of Anjiro that he felt that this was indeed another 'Macedonian' calling him to Japan as that other Macedonian once called St Paul to Europe. During the months that followed, the Saint snatched every opportunity to collect more information about Japan and what he heard convinced him that here indeed was a great opening for the apostolate. Japan had an emperor in Miyako, its society was feudal in structure, its universities were centers of culture. These and other facts were the material on which Xavier based his great 'plan' to convert the whole country with one bold stroke. If he could convert the Emperor, the feudal lords and the intellectual leaders, the rest of the county would follow. For the work in the universities he would

canvassed all the universities of Europe and especially that of Paris in order to rouse the people there "out of their indifference so that they may no longer be content merely to acquire knowledge for themselves while forgetting all about the ignorance of the non-Christians". He realized, of course that he had to know the facts first from personal observation and hence this appeal would be made only "when I know Japan from personal experience." As a first step he had Anjiro and his companions thoroughly instructed in the college in Goa and it was not until April 15, 1549, nearly sixteen months after that Malacca episode, that he set out from Goa with the Japanese and two Jesuits, Father Torres and Brother Fernandez.

Arriving in Kagoshima on August 15, he was well received by Anjiro's relatives, friends and acquaintances as well as by Shimazu Takahisa, Daimyo of Satsuma, by whom he was received for the first time on September 29. The Daimyo was anxious to cement his good relations with the Portuguese traders and gladly permitted the Saint to preach Christianity in Satsuma without restriction.

Even before leaving Goa, Xavier had prevailed upon Anjiro to translate St. Matthew's Gospel into Japanese and he now felt the need of more Christian literature. In Kagoshima, Anjiro was able to start preaching immediately but the missionaries were handicapped for lack of the language and Xavier, for the convenience of everybody had Anjiro translate his *Doutrina Crista* as well as his *Declaração da Fe*. The first of these works was an almost literal translation of the catechism of John de Barros along with certain prayers added by Xavier; while the second was the Saint's own detailed explanation of the Creed.

Japan at that time had no Christian vocabulary and Anjiro therefore tried to express many of the Christian ideas with words borrowed from the *Shingon* sect of which he had himself been a member. His translation was therefore defective not only from the literary point of view but also from the viewpoint of doctrine and had to be corrected later.

Xavier copied out Anjiro's Japanese text in *Romaji* [roman letters] and, thus armed, proceeded to read selections in public but the crude style as well as Xavier's own faulty pronunciation caused many people to laugh. Some were converted, however, and during this first year, thanks to the work of Anjiro and the missionaries, the number of Christians rose to approximately 100. Not included in this figure, apparently, were fifteen converts won over in Ichiku Castle seven miles from Kagoshima by an aged servant.



In his sermons, Xavier had boldly attacked the immoral conduct of the bonzes with the result that they sought to stir up the people against him and brought it about that the Daimyo issued a decree forbidding further conversions under pain of death.

In his first interview with the Daimyo on Sept. 29, 1549, the Saint had asked permission to go on to Miyako (Kyoto), but the Daimyo demurred on the plea that the winds would be unfavorable for six months. After his decree forbidding further conversions, the Daimyo not only gave the Saint permission to depart but also accorded him a ship for the trip to Hirado. With further progress made practically impossible in Kagoshima, the Saint was more eager than ever to be on his way towards the accomplishment of his great plan with regard to converting the Emperor and obtaining from him a decree that would give the missionary access to all the daimyos of the country. He appointed Anjiro as head of the Christian group in Kagoshima while those at Ichiku castle were left under the direction of the aged servant who had converted them. The Saint also left them a picture of the Blessed Virgin, copies of his two books in Japanese, and precise directions for the guidance of the Catholics, the observance of the ecclesiastical seasons etc. It was late in August when he bade the weeping Christians farewell and set out for Hirado in company with Father Torres, Brother Fernandez, the three Japanese, John, Anthony and Bernard, and Amador, a Malabar servant from India.

In Hirado, Xavier was welcomed by the Portuguese amid the thunder of cannon salvos and was kindly received also by the daimyo, Matsuru Takanobu, who evidently wished thereby to cement his good relations with the Portuguese. Under these favorable circumstances, the Saint again began his direct mission work by public readings from his



'book', while Brother Fernandez, who already had some facility with the language, also gave additional sermons. The number of converts soon reached the hundred mark and among them was Xavier's host, a man named Kimura, whose son was none other than the Blessed Sebastian Kimura S.J., Japan's first Catholic priest who also died as a martyr.

Leaving Father Torres and the others in Hirado, Xavier set out with Brother Fernandez and Bernardo late in October for Kyoto. Eager as he was to get to the Capital, he nevertheless braved the hardships of winter travel in order to visit Yamaguchi, then the political and cultural center of Western Honshu. Having arrived there, he promptly resumed his public readings from the 'book' and had Brother Fernandez serve as interpreter for his sermons. He boldly attacked such vices as idolatry, sodomy, and the killing of children, and in a few days he and his companions were the talk of the town. Invited to an audience with the daimyo, he found Ouchi Yoshitaka sufficiently interested and well-disposed to listen for a whole hour as Brother Fernandez read selections from the 'book'. Hearing the selection on sodomy, however, in which it was written that anyone

guilty of this sin is 'filthier than an irrational animal' the daimyo's face darkened, but he controlled his temper and merely made a silent motion to indicate that the interview was ended.



Disillusioned again, but not discouraged, the Saint and his companions left Yamaguchi and continued on their way to Kyoto. They travelled light since they had been warned against pirates for fear of whom even the Mass equipment had been left behind in Hirado. En route to the nearest port, which may have been Iwakuni, they had to wade through snow that was knee-deep and often had to ford streams in which the water reached up to their cinctures. At night Xavier's feet were bleeding and since they had only one blanket they suffered much at night from the cold.

The journey to Sakai was made by ship and a letter of introduction received en route assured them of a welcome in the house of a man named Kudo whose son, Hibiya Ryokey, was baptized in 1564 and whose house was later to serve as a parish center for Sakai. It was Kudo also who obtained permission for Xavier to travel to Kyoto in company with a travelling nobleman.

Though he suffered much during this last stretch of the journey, Xavier was so happy in anticipation that he sometimes jumped with childlike glee and threw an apple into the air so as to catch it on the run. With tears of joy in his eyes he thanked God for the privilege of preaching the name of Jesus in the presence of kings and princes.

GREAT DISILLUSIONMENT

The fabulously rich and powerful capital of Xavier's dreams turned out to be a battered and rickety relic of numerous civil wars. Worse still, the Emperor upon whom he had pinned his hopes turned out to be only a powerless figure-head. The monks of the Tendai sect on Mount Hiei to whom he had gone immediately upon his arrival refused to see him and his impoverished appearance merited for him a blank refusal at the imperial court. All this meant that the hopes the Saint had cherished for several years along with the keystone of his great plan for the conversion of Japan were all dashed to the ground. It was perhaps the greatest disappointment of his whole life!

If Xavier could not restrain his tears at this thought, he was still Saint and realist enough not to give up hope for the future. If Japan could not be converted through its Emperor, it could still be won by means of the feudal lords. This change of perspective was accompanied by another. The non-Christians could not appreciate the poverty of Christ's ambassador. After a hurried trip back to Hirado, Xavier, therefore, appeared in Yamaguchi again as an ambassador of the Viceroy of India, clad in beautiful garments and fortified with royal gifts so numerous and weighty that they had to be transported by beasts of burden.

These gifts had been destined for the emperor, but Ouchi Yoshitaka, the Daimyo of Yamaguchi, was delighted to receive them and granted full permission to Xavier to preach the Christian doctrine. Now, the house where the Saint lived was crowded with visitors who asked all kinds of questions about the earth, the sun, eclipses, comets, weather etc., etc., and were astounded at the vast amount of knowledge the stranger possessed about all these things. The Saint, of course, used these natural topics simply as stepping-stones to a discussion of the God of nature.

For two months, the Saint continued with this work, but there were no conversions until the day when one of the Japanese spat Brother Fernandez in the face. The marvelous self-control shown by the Brother in merely wiping away the spittle and continuing with his sermon was decisive in winning over the first convert and after that many others followed. Included among them was a blind minstrel whom Xavier baptized with the name of Lawrence (Lourenco) and who, as the world's first Japanese Jesuit, was to render tremendous services to the Church in this country.

DAINICHI

One of the things that surprised Xavier in Yamaguchi was the cordiality with which he was treated by the Bonzes of the Shingon Sect. This sect shows so many similarities with Christianity in its liturgical functions that some scholars have suspected that it took over many Christian practices from the Nestorians in China. Xavier, who was invited repeatedly by the bonzes, felt at first that these religious similarities might be traced back to the work of St. Thomas in India. Further study, however, convinced him of the essential differences existing between Catholicism and the Shingon sect and he found also that the term "Dainichi", which Anjiro had used as a Japanese name for God, in no way designated the Creator of the Universe and even had certain immoral connotations.



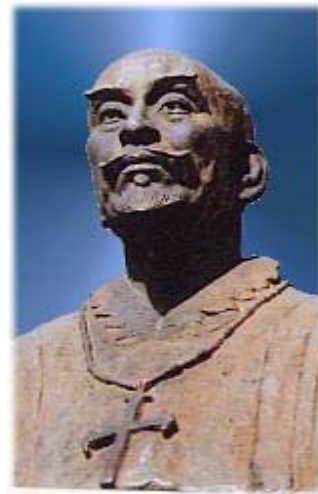
Xavier's reaction was instantaneous and drastic. If he had hitherto cried out in the street "Pray to Dainichi", he now cried, "Do not pray to Dainichi". Instead he told them to pray to "Deus", thereby inaugurating the practice of transliterating Latin words for Christian ideas.

This was a declaration of war, since the Saint not only attacked the worship of 'Dainichi' but also openly castigated the immoral life of the bonzes of those days. The bonzes, on the other hand, accused the Christians of eating human flesh and, bewitching people. They added that the God of the Christians was called "Daiuso" (a great lie) and that Christianity would spell the downfall of Japan. In spite of the conflict that precipitated,

conversions increased rapidly and within two months about 500 persons were baptized, mostly samurai and people connected with the daimyo court.

FUNAI (Oita)

During the month of August 1551 Xavier heard that a Portuguese ship had landed in Bungo and at the same time he received an invitation from Otomo Yoshishige, Daimyo of Funai (Oita) to visit that city. As Provincial Superior of all the Far Eastern Missions of the Society, including those in India, he was anxious to get whatever mail the Portuguese might have brought and he therefore called Father Cosme de Torres from Hirado to replace him in Yamaguchi. He himself set out for Funai in September and was welcomed there with a solemn procession and cannon salvos by the Portuguese. This reception of course impressed the 22-year-old Otomo but far greater was the impression made upon the young daimyo by the personality of the Saint himself. He did not become a Catholic at that time but when he was baptized twenty-seven years later he chose the name of Francis in honor of the first missionary he had met.



The Saint was greatly disappointed at finding that the Portuguese had brought no letters from India and since he was responsible for all the affairs of this Far Eastern Province of the Society of Jesus, he felt that he simply had to go back to India. He did go back to India but one of his plans was to send more priests to Japan. He himself never saw Japan again but died in a vain attempt to open up China to Christ as he had already opened Japan.

RETROSPECT

Xavier's Herculean endeavors along with the difficulties and disappointments he experienced during his two and a half years in Japan had left him a gray haired man but he himself wrote that there was great satisfaction in working among such intelligent people who are eager to learn. His converts, about a thousand in number, were fewer than those he had won in India, but he felt that the Japanese mission was supremely important and he felt that this was the only people discovered so far that was so highly developed that the faith could be implanted there by means of native personnel. He therefore asked St. Ignatius time and again in his letters to send men of high intellectual calibre to Japan so that they might carry on an active apostolate in the universities as well as among the educated laity and bonzes.

The importance of Xavier does not lie so much in his own direct apostolate but rather in the fact that he was the trailblazer who explored new fields for the Gospel and prepared the way for other workers. A man of quick perception and sound judgment, he was enthusiastic without losing his realistic grasp of the facts. To him it was given to see the possibilities and to outline a suitable strategy in accordance with those possibilities.

Recognizing the feudalistic structure of Japanese society, he hoped to convert the whole nation by winning over the leaders first. By leaders, however, he meant not only those who were foremost in the political arena but also the intellectual classes. For his campaign among the educated people, he also envisioned the establishment of Christian schools and presswork, and by having his own 'book' translated into Japanese he set a precedent for the creation of a Christian literature and laid the foundation of a mission method.

Foiled in his attempt to contact the Emperor and finding that the Emperor had been shorn of all real power, the Saint aimed to win over the feudal lords who were after all the only ones possessed of any real power. This policy was also followed out by his successors, one of whom, Father Frois, declared that

to do effective work for the conversion of these souls, one of the most effective means—a human means, indeed, but one which is necessary next to the grace of God—is to win the favor of the kings and princes who rule the country in order that the ordinary people may see with what love, respect, and esteem the missionaries are regarded. Without this help the results of our work will, humanly speaking, amount to little or nothing. Indeed, if the influence of the princes were not favorable to us, the bonzes and the others who oppose us would be able in a short time to destroy what it has taken us years to build up in the souls of the Christians.

Due to his great love for the Japanese and his great esteem for their culture, the Saint was opposed to any attempt to force European culture upon them. He insisted that missionaries should adapt themselves to Japan's culture as far as possible. "It seems best", he wrote, "to chart nothing that is not offensive God unless a change will be more conducive to the service of God. That this was no empty theory on the part of the Saint can be seen from the fact that he himself sought to live and eat the Japanese did."

Such, in brief outline, is the analysis of the mission problem in Japan according to the mind of Francis Xavier, and such was the strategy outlined by him. Some of the smaller men who followed in his footsteps failed grasp his vision in full but his ideas received a glorious vindication thirty years later when another man with a genius similar to his was placed in charge of the mission work being do by the Society of Jesus in Japan. That man was Alexander Valignano.

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Fr. Hubert Cieslik, S.J. was born in 1914 and died in 1988. One of the most respected historians of Japanese Christianity, he has written numerous books and articles on Japanese Church in German, English, and Japanese. He wrote the present article for an English journal—now extinct—in Japan sometime around 1954. Fr. Cieslik's printed articles were compiled by Francis Mathy, S.J., Ph.D. The digital version was prepared, edited, and composed for PDF by Francis Britto, S.J., Ph.D.