

Early Jesuit Missionaries in Japan 3

Gaspar Vilela: The Apostle of Miyako

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Gaspar Vilela, the founder of the mission in Miyako (Kyoto), was not so much an example of the trail blazer who plunges boldly into the unknown as he was of the incomparably larger group of missionaries whose persevering and sacrificial life prepares the way for others. They are, as it were, the foundation stones that are

tamped down deep into the ground so that others can erect a cathedral upon that foundation. For this reason, Vilela can be regarded as a typical example of those many other early missionaries in Japan who worked for decades in the midst of great hardship without seeing the ultimate and consoling fruits of their labors.

(1) FIRST BEGINNINGS

Vilela was already a priest when he joined the Society of Jesus in Goa in the fall or winter of 1553. After only a brief period of probation he was chosen in the following spring to accompany the Provincial, Father Nuñez, on his historic visit to Japan.

The trip was hectic and gave the young priest many opportunities to give proof of his many virtues. Storms at the sea delayed them so much that they missed their connections in Malacca and had to spend the winter there. It was not until April 1555 that they were able to resume their journey and this time, too, the hazards were such that, in the words of St. Paul, their days passed “in labor and painfulness, in much watching, in hunger and thirst in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.” (II Cor. 11,27). Several times they were in imminent danger of being lost and Father Nuñez was accustomed later to say that neither fasting nor scourgings nor other mortifications can be compared with the feeling a man has in danger of death.

They reached Sancian Island in July, and Father Nuñez took this occasion to say Mass at the grave of St. Francis Xavier. Here too, they had to spend a winter and it was not until June 1556 that they were able to set out again for Japan.

It was at Funai (now Oita) that they landed and were met by Father Torres and other confreres. Nuñez immediately began his visitation and returned to India that same year while Vilela remained in Bungo to begin his studies in Japanese life and the language.

His first mission trip was made after Christmas in 1557 when Father Torres sent him and Brother Fernandez to visit the Christians in Kutami and preach to the non-Christians there.

When Father Gago was transferred to Hakata in 1558, Father Vilela was named to succeed him as pastor of Hirado. This was his first real mission assignment and his joy and enthusiasm can be gauged from the description given of him by Father Frois in his *History of Japan*: “His zeal for the conversion of souls was very great and he was constantly searching for new methods by which he could do more for the service of God.”

Due to the opposition of the local Daimyo not much could be done in Hirado itself so Vilela looked for better opportunities in the neighboring islands of Takushima, Ikitsuki, Shishi, Ire and Kasuga. Thanks to the effective cooperation of a



Christian nobleman, Anthony Koteda, he succeeded so well that he was able in a short time to baptize 1300 persons.

Such results made him enthusiastic. He not only dreamed of the day when all of the people in the islands would be Christians but proceeded to have the temples cleared of all idolatrous symbols and these were then burned.

The bonzes in Hirado were naturally incensed about this and as a result of their petitions the Daimyo would probably have had Vilela killed had he not been afraid of the Portuguese. Even so, Vilela had to quit the area and return to Bungo, a wiser man but by no means discouraged. His work in the islands, however, was not in vain for the people in Ikitsuki remained true to the Faith even during those centuries after all the priests had been expelled.

(2) FOUNDER OF THE MIYAKO MISSION

After Father Gago was forced to leave Hakata in the following year all of the missionaries were again assembled in Bungo. Father Torres now felt that it was time to make another attempt to establish a mission in Miyako. Xavier's plan in this respect had never been forgotten and the experience of the missionaries since his departure showed how necessary it was to have a mission in the capital which was also the cultural center of the country.

As early as 1556, Father Torres had sent Lourenço, who later did such marvelous work as a lay Brother, to Miyako in the hope that the letter of recommendation he had received from two converted bonzes would give him access to the influential Tendai monks on Mt. Hiei. He did meet two of the more famous monks, Daizen-bo and his aged teacher, Shinkei, but though he was treated courteously he had but little success. Finding it useless to stay longer he went back to report to Father Torres who had meanwhile fled to Funai because of the political disturbances in Yamaguchi.

Since Torres was already too old and Gago had suffered something of a nervous breakdown in Hakata, Father Vilela was chosen for the Miyako venture. Although he was not the brilliant scholar Xavier would have liked to have for the apostolate among the educated classes, his selection for the task was very fortunate since his other virtues accomplished what his learning alone could not have achieved.



Frois tells us that Fr. Vilela “was a good man and well suited for this undertaking since he was so robust in health that he could stand the hardships. His personal appearance was such as to please the Japanese and he could not only speak Japanese fairly well but could write a little. Above all, he had a great zeal for the conversion of souls and was eager to endure great hardships for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Added to all this was the fact that his way of doing things was pleasing to the people. He was then 35 years old.”

Vilela's companions were Lourenço and Damian both of whom later became lay Brothers and another Japanese Christian from Sakamoto whose name was Diogo.

In Hirado, Vilela had learned that it is a mistake to be too boldly aggressive and in Kyoto we therefore find him following a policy which made of

him a pioneer in the field of far-reaching adaptation. In order to facilitate contact with the bonzes he now shaved both head and beard and clothed himself in a simple Japanese *kimono*. Since travel was dangerous and the future uncertain, the missionaries took very few things along and even left the Mass-kit behind with the result that they had to go without Mass for a long time.

After a highly adventurous journey of 44 days, they arrived in Sakai on October 18, 1559, and from there proceeded by way of Osaka, Yamashina and Otsu to Sakamoto at the foot of Mt. Hiei.

Vilela's immediate objective was to meet the chief of the Hiei-zan monks, not indeed for the purpose of preaching religion in the monasteries there but to obtain permission to preach the Gospel and establish a mission. The monks on the mountain, however, quickly realized that Christianity is totally different from Buddhism and they urged the priest politely but firmly to go back home.

Seeing that nothing could be accomplished there, Father Vilela and his companions left Mt. Hiei late in October or early in November. He now decided to try to establish a mission even without official permission but it is probable that if he had foreseen all the difficulties that would be put in his way, even he would have given up in discouragement.

The first problem was to find a place to live. Thanks to a letter of introduction received from a kindly Buddhist nun, one man was willing to let them stay at his place for four or five days on condition that they would remain in hiding. "He therefore admitted them to a tiny, low and dirty attic over a building at the back of his house which was used as a storeroom for straw and for junk" (Frois)

It was two weeks before Damian finally found a temporary home for them in a rickety building formerly used as a stable for horses in the Kawa-no-tana sector of the city. They moved in in mid November amid condition of utmost poverty. The building was "covered with straw but it rained almost as heavily inside as outside. The walls were made of reeds, much of the mud plaster had fallen off and the beds were nothing but mats lying on the ground." The Brother, however, bought a bundle of straw so that the priest could lie on it.

Thus established, Vilela and Lourenço set about doing their mission work. It was not long before the whole city knew about the foreign 'bonze' and enormous crowds of curious people soon gathered to see him. Since the 'house' they occupied was too small and poorly situated, the missionaries moved to a bigger building in Rokkaku-machi, Tamagura-no-cho but this was almost as uncomfortable as the place they had vacated. This did not, however, stop Vilela from plunging into his work with all the fire of his enthusiasm.

In order to get the ordinary people to accept these new and strange truths about God it was necessary to lead them on with outward signs and attractions. Vilela therefore used the available materials to decorate the house as best as he could. An old quilt was hung across the reed wall and a paper cross was

affixed to it. A prayer book and writing materials were laid out on a tiny table where Father Vilela sat, robed in a very old mantle and wearing a red cap as a symbol of higher learning. Lourenço sat at one side of the priest fingering a huge rosary while another assistant sat at the other side where the pots and bowls used for cooking and eating were also stored away. It was thus that the stage was set for the sermons to be given to the visitors. In the evening the missionaries recited the Litany and the quilt was then taken down so that the priest could use it as a covering for the night. Since the quilt was torn and frayed, pieces of cotton filling kept falling out and when the quilt was hung up again in the morning lumps of cotton would form at the bottom so that it looked like a bag of supplies. (Frois)

So great was the number of curious enquirers both day and night that the priest had no time to say his Office. “During the noon and evening meals, one of the assistants had to stand with his back to the door to keep people from forcing their way in, and as soon as the meal was over the people rushed in pell mell in a veritable scramble for a place.” (Frois)

Baptisms, however, were few since the bonzes were telling the people that the missionaries were goblins or foxes in human form, that they ate human flesh, that they blasphemed the gods and would bring hunger, pestilence and war upon Japan. As a result of this campaign, the landlord tried to get rid of these trouble some lodgers and on one occasion even threatened them with a sword.

Thus it came about that they had to move to another place in January and of this place Vilela said that it reminded him of the stable at Bethlehem since it had no doors, was practically without walls or a roof and exposed its inhabitants to the wintry cold. Here they remained for three months and were able to baptize about 100 persons. Vilela’s own health began to suffer and Lourenço was so worn out by continuous preaching that he vomited blood repeatedly and was hardly able to stand.

The new landlord, a wine merchant, feared that the enemies of the missionaries would start a boycott against him, so a Christian helped them rent an old barracks’ building in Shijo Karasumaru but they were able to stay there only one month.



It was in June 1560 that they were finally able to buy a large house from a bonze in Shijo-no-Bomon Ubayanagi and this became their center of activities for several years. It was there also that the famous St. Mary's Church was built 17 years later, the memory of which survived centuries of persecution.

(3) TROUBLES AND STRUGGLES

Vilela had attempted from the very beginning to obtain an audience with the Shogun, Ashikaga Yoshiteru. Thanks to the help of a friendly bonze he succeeded in this at a surprisingly early date and had his first audience in December.

Dressing for the audience was a problem but the priest's inventive genius stood him in good stead. "In order that people might know he was a bonze from Namban (India and the Southland) he not only wore the Japanese kimono but also donned his Portuguese mantel, old and threadbare though it was, wore a red cap and held a book in his hands. Lourenço, as interpreter, wore one of Vilela's old cotton cassocks, but this was much too long for him, and since it was raining at the time and since Lourenço was nearly blind, the lower part of the cassock became so muddy that the tatami on which he walked in the house were also soiled." (Frois)



The Shogun seemed quite pleased over the sand-clock presented to him by the priest but otherwise the audience was distinctly 'formal'. The audience, however, and the priest's strange costume did call attention to him and increased the number of his visitors.

Preaching, answering all kinds of questions and disputes with the bonzes kept Vilela busy from morning till night, but baptisms were few in number and the bonzes were doing all in their power to drive him out of the city. Since insults and slander were ineffective, the priest's enemies began to pelt his house with stones both day and night.

To ward off the dangers that now threatened his work, Vilela with the help of some of his friends sought an official permit and succeeded in obtaining it in the summer of 1560. This permit also exempted him from taxes, the quartering of troops etc. and stopped all open opposition to his work.

Intrigues, however, continued and since his enemies could not have his permit cancelled they sent him word through a nobleman who was regarded as his friend that an edict of expulsion had already been drafted against him and would soon be published. He was therefore advised to leave voluntarily and go to Yawata south of Kyoto.

The unsuspecting Christians were thunderstruck and the priest actually did leave the city. When the Brother, however, sent in a petition to have the edict of expulsion delayed it was discovered that the Shogun knew nothing about it and that all talk about it was simply a trick of Vilela's enemies. When Vilela came back and called on the Shogun to thank him for his protection, the latter not only confirmed the earlier permit but gave him one that was still more favorable.

The next move on the part of Vilela's enemies was a boycott against the mission which stopped practically all visitors from going to see him. This, however, gave the priest a good chance to train his Christians more intensively and to make proper preparations for Christmas and the Lenten season of the next year.

Since little could now be done in the Capital, Vilela decided in the fall of 1561 to spend some months in Sakai and start a new mission there. He was warmly welcomed there by Hibiya Ryohei who had given hospitality to St. Francis Xavier ten years earlier and who now became a very fervent Catholic together with his whole family. This family became, in fact, the mainstay of the Church in Sakai and it was at their home that the Sakai Christians were accustomed to assemble until a regular mission was established in the city 18 years later.

Though results in Sakai were not as great as the priest had hoped, he was able to baptize about forty persons during the year he spend there.

Vilela had hoped to stay in Sakai for only a few months and to be back in Kyoto by Christmas but civil war had made that impossible. It was not until the fall of 1562 that he got back to Kyoto. Since he had meanwhile received a Mass-kit from Bungo, he was able to say the first Mass ever said in the city on September 8.

During the following months he concentrated on the intensive training of the Christians and during Advent he also preached the Jubilee Indulgence proclaimed seven years earlier by the Pope in behalf of peace in Christendom. At Christmas time the Christians were able to attend a Midnight Mass for the first time and were deeply impressed by it.

“All of the Christians went to Confession in preparation for the Feast. A special course of instructions was given beforehand and those who were ready received the Body of the Lord with extraordinary devotion and many of them had tears in their eyes. The priest again explained the Sacred Mystery and the Christians spent the whole night in the Church giving praise to God. Seeing their simplicity and devotion, the priest was reminded of the early Church when the Christians assembled in a spirit of love to celebrate the feast with spiritual joy.”

Another attempt was made to crush the Christian movement after Easter in the year of 1563. This time the enemies addressed themselves to Matsunaga Sotai, an ardent member of the Nichiren Sect, who wielded all power in the area although he was only a vassal of Miyoshi Chokei. Matsunaga had indeed issued one of the earlier permits to Father Vilela but he was never at heart friendly toward the Christians. With a view to maintaining legal appearances, Matsunaga now appointed two knights of his entourage as judges to investigate the problem of the Christians. Urged by the latter, Vilela once more retired to Sakai in order that the situation might not be aggravated by his presence.

The enemies were too sure of themselves. Yuki Yamashiro-no-kami and Kiyohara Ekata, the very men who had been selected to judge the Christians, now became so convinced of the truth and the grandeur of Christianity that they asked for baptism! The same was true of one of their friends, Takayama Hida-no-kami. In fact, the noblemen who were baptized in Nara at this time numbered no less than seven but it was Takayama and his son Ukon especially who by their saintly lives became the pillars of the Church in Japan.



The conversion of these well-known and influential noblemen changed the situation entirely and freed the Church immediately from her former Ghetto-like existence. It meant also that the Church became a genuine spiritual and religious force in Central Japan during the decades that followed.

The newly baptized noblemen insisted on escorting Father Vilela personally when he returned to Kyoto and this fact also made a deep impression on the people. The priest himself was well aware of what these conversions signified and he felt that mission work in Feudal Japan could succeed only if the political and spiritual leaders of the people were converted. From then on he devoted special attention to those classes. It was in this same year, 1563, that he inaugurated the custom of inviting officials of the court and members of the Shogun's entourage to a meal at the mission at New Year's time. Among those present at such a dinner held in 1565 was no less a personage than the *kuge* Kanoe Taneie, the father-in-law of the Shogun who also introduced the priest to New Year's audience at the palace of the Shogun.

Another immediate result of these several conversions was the spread of Christianity in the neighboring provinces since the Christian noblemen did all in their power to bring their families and retainers into the Church. At their invitation either

Vilela or Lourenço visited the various castles with the result that many of the knights were baptized. Thus we find that 73 of these knights, including Miki Handayu, the father of the Jesuit Martyr, St. Paul Miki were baptized in the castle of Iimori in 1563. Two years later the Christians at Iimori numbered no less than 200. Within one year seven new christianities were established outside of Kyoto in the cities of Nara, Iimori, Sanga, Sawa, Tochi, Yono and Takayama.

(4) LAST CONFLICT

There was no serious trouble in 1564 and the missionaries were thus able to make steady and intensive progress. Since a number of new missionaries had also arrived from India, Vilela was able at long last to get some much needed help. During the early years he had not even been able to say Mass because he had no sacred vessels and during a period of more than five years he had never met a priest, could not go to confession and had to get along without priestly advice and encouragement. It is quite probable that the lack of such spiritual comfort was harder for him to bear than were the physical hardship he had had to endure.

What joy must have been his, then, in January 1565, when he was able to welcome Father Frois and Brother Almeida to Kyoto. Frois had traveled with Vilela from Goa to Malacca in 1554 and he was terribly shocked when he saw that his traveling companion had been turned into an old man within this short decade. He tells us that though Vilela "is only 40 years old, he has the white hair of seventy and he is completely emaciated".

As this was the period of the Japanese New Year's celebration, Vilela took Frois along to the formal audience at the Shogun's palace. In order that they might make a better impression at the palace as well as in the city, the Christians urged them to dress up as well as possible.

Since the Japanese generally judge strangers by their external appearance and dress, and since the honzes do everything in their power during these days to strengthen their position by outward pomp, the older Christians in Miyako, on whose experience the priests had to depend, urged them to give expression to their dignity as far as possible in fine apparel. They made the point that the great men they would meet are proud and regard it as an insult if any one appears before them in ordinary every day clothes. Such external show contributed also to the prestige of the Christians, at least in those early days when the non-Christians had no idea of the priestly dignity or of the Christian religion. Vilela had visited the Shogun on two previous occasions, once in surplice and stole and again in cassock and Portuguese mantle. For this third visit he donned a camlet garment and old surplice adorned with Ormus brocade and a birettum while Father Frois wore a cassock and mantle along with slippers of threaded silk such as are used by officials in China. The priests were conducted to the palace in separate sedan chairs and each was

accompanied by a group of 15 or 20 Christians. Since Father Frois was a newcomer and was making his first visit he also brought a number of gifts including a large crystal mirror, a black sombrero, a quantity of musk and a Bengalese reed. Father Vilela brought paper and a gilded fan. (Frois)

After the New Year's festivities Father Vilela left the Miyako Christians under the care of Father Frois while he himself undertook to visit the Christian groups of the surrounding area. He was back in time for Lent and Easter and since Brother Almeida was also in Miyako, the Holy Week ceremonies could be celebrated with great solemnity.

The murder of the Shogun on Trinity Sunday brought on violent disturbances and the missionaries were in imminent danger of death on several occasions. It was only the determined stand taken by the Christian noblemen that kept the enemies of the Church from starting an all-out campaign for its destruction.

Most of the religious articles and sacred vessels had been sent to Sakai for safety and the missionaries themselves were beginning to feel safe again when a new incident brought on a veritable explosion. The oldest son of Yuki Yamashiro-no-kami who had been baptized at Nara two years earlier together with his father had just been killed by jealous relatives. Since the Catholic members of his family were among the greatest benefactors of the mission, Fr. Vilela felt, in spite of the tense situation, that a solemn funeral was in order. As the funeral cortege marched through the street it seemed as if the whole city had turned out for the occasion and Frois estimated the crowd at 10,000. This amounted therefore to a great Catholic demonstration and the infuriated bonzes made frenzied efforts to have the hated foreigners expelled from the city.



The enemies succeeded in getting an imperial decree banning the missionaries from the Miyako area. Fr. Vilela thought it best to retire to Iimori castle even before the decree was promulgated but Frois stayed longer and left for Sakai on the day of promulgation. Vilela also went to Sakai some time

later.

Although the Catholic nobles did their utmost to have the decree annulled it remained in force for nearly four years and it was not until March, 1569, that Wada Koremasa's influence made it possible for Frois to return to Miyako.

Vilela never saw Miyako again since he was called to Funai in April 1556 to help the aging and sickly Torres in Kyushu.

(5) IN KYUSHU

Having arrived in Bungo in May, 1566, Fr. Vilela was soon sent to the Daimyo of Omura and thereafter spent most of his time in that area. He spent two years in Kuchinotsu but made occasional mission trips to other areas also. Thus in 1568 he went to Shiki in the island of Amakusa where Brother Almeida had established a small Christianity and was able to baptize 600 persons during his stay there. In this same year, Father Torres sent him to Nagasaki, then only an unimportant fishing village, and since there was as yet no church in the town he took up his residence in a pagoda which had been placed at his disposal by the Daimyo of Omura. He immediately called the people together and so impressed were the farmers and fishers by his sermons that he was soon able to baptize 400 persons. Within one year the entire population of 1500 souls was converted and Vilela won for himself the title of 'Apostle of Nagasaki'.

He now proceeded to have the pagoda torn down and instead erected the famous church of All Saints. Though these people were different from the nobles of Miyako, Vilela must have found great satisfaction in having a completely Christian community and worked with might and main to solidify Christian life among them. In place of the pagan festivals he introduced new practices based on the liturgical life of



the Church. At the end of two years during which he had also made mission trips to various neighboring places he held the Holy Thursday ceremonies in All Saints' Church and washed the feet of 12 poor Christians while a Japanese Brother read the text of the 'Mandatum' in Japanese. Many wept at seeing this act of humility and during the scourging which followed many beat themselves so violently that the floor was spattered with blood. A procession in the evening also attracted a large number of curious non-Christian on-lookers.

Another practice introduced by Vilela and maintained for many years in various places was inaugurated on Good Friday when the priest had 15 boys line up in the front of the church wearing crowns of thorns on their heads and holding a cross or

some other symbol of Christ's passion in their hands. Turning to the people the boys raised up their respective symbols one after the other and each one told of the part that symbol had played in the work of Redemption. So touched were the people that many of them wept. At the end, all of the boys slipped off their upper garments and, scourging themselves, proceeded in procession to a cross set up far from the church and returned to the church again in the same way.

Thanks to the annual visit of the Portuguese merchant fleet, Nagasaki developed into an important trade center but the results of Vilela's work were apparent in the fact that all of the 30,000 inhabitants of the city were Catholics.

In July 1570 the new Superior, Father Cabral, called a meeting at Shiki on the island of Amakusa which was attended by all the missionaries except Frois who had not been able to come from Miyako. One feature of the meeting was a touching general report on the Japanese mission made by Father Vilela. Reports had to be made also to the Provincial in India and since Vilela was the only one who could speak of all the missions from personal experience he was chosen for this task. Another reason for the choice was his failing health. He never went back to Nagasaki.

While waiting for his ship in Shiki he was able to administer the Last Rites to Father Torres in October, 1570, and to officiate at the funeral. Leaving Japan shortly thereafter, he arrived in Cochin in February 1571 and later in Goa where he spent the last years of his life.

Not as gifted as some others, Vilela was nevertheless endowed with remarkable qualities which enabled him to achieve great things. By dint of patience, perseverance, dogged determination and the ordinary Christian virtues, he succeeded in winning not only the esteem of the common people but also that of nobles and the Shogun himself and he succeeded also in establishing a mission in Miyako, a feat which the '*divina impaciencia*' of Xavier himself might not have accomplished.

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