

Early Jesuit Missionaries in Japan 8

Blessed Jerome de Angelis (1568—1623): First Missionary in Hokkaido

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(An article from Francis Britto's *All about Francis Xavier*)

(1) Early Apostolate

“Nostrae vocationis est diversa loca peragrare et vitam agere in quavis mundi plaga ubi maius Dei obsequium et animarum auxilium speratur.”

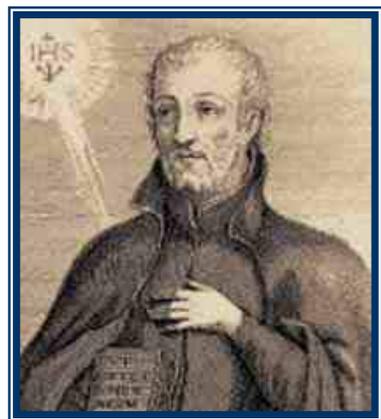
These words, inserted in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus by St. Ignatius, can be well applied to the life of Blessed Jerome de Angelis.

Blessed Jerome made the trip to Japan together with Blessed Benedict Spinola, and his travelogue will be given more in detail in connection with the story of Blessed Benedict. Suffice it here to say that it was one long series of adventures.

Blessed Jerome was born in 1568 at Enna in Sicily and entered the Society of Jesus at the age of 18. While still a scholastic, he volunteered for the Missions of India.

It was in 1595 that he set out with Spinola and three other confreres for the College in Goa where he was to have completed his theological studies and to have been ordained as a priest. En route, the ship was severely damaged in a series of violent storms and had to take refuge in Brazil. From there the captain set sail for Portugal again, but the ship was captured by the British and taken to London, and it was not until 1598 that the young students were able to return to Lisbon. From there they hoped to set out again for India almost immediately, but were held up by the local superiors for a whole year, and De Angelis was ordained there.

Embarking again in March, 1599, on a ship destined for India, they were able to proceed without mishap and arrived safely at their destination. On June 30, 1600, we find them in Malacca and from there they proceeded a week later to Macao, where they were to spend a year in studying the language at the central college established by Valignano for the East-Asiatic missions. It was not until 1602 that they finally arrived in Japan.



1. Valignano

After an additional year spent in the study of the language, Blessed Jerome was assigned in 1603 to the mission of Fushimi, just south of Kyoto, where he remained for the next eight years. It was here that he achieved his first positive results as a missionary. The frequent contacts he also had here with nobles and scholars in the Kyoto area, then the

cultural center of the realm, also gave him that deep understanding of the Japanese spirit and customs as well as his great ability in dealing with the Japanese for which he was later renowned.

Under the circumstances, it is not surprising; that Blessed Jerome was the one designated to establish the new mission in Sumpu (now Shizuoka). It is recalled that when Ieyasu resigned from the Shogunate in 1605, he established himself in Sumpu, the capital of Suruga province, and managed from there to control the political destiny of the country. Thus



it came about that Sumpu (Shizuoka) along with Edo, the headquarters of the Shogun, Hidetada, was one of the most important centers in the Empire . It was highly important, therefore, that a mission should be established in that place. This was especially true since the missions everywhere did indeed make great progress during the early days of the Tokugawa regime, but their entire future was being threatened by Ieyasu's increasingly unfriendly attitude. The Franciscan Fathers had already established a mission in Tokyo in 1599, and some of them, notably Blessed Louis Sotelo who was endowed with

2. Ieyasu

much diplomatic skill, often visited Sumpu where the Franciscans also established a house at a later date.

During their annual mission trips, the Jesuits from Osaka or Fushimi likewise made regular visits to Sumpu and were able to make a large number of converts there. During his mission trip in 1611, therefore, the priest was able to hear 1200 confessions in the Suruga area as well as to baptize 270 adult converts. The Christians asked him repeatedly to do what he could to get a residence established in Suruga, and when he returned to Fushimi, a number of them went along to present their petition directly to the Superiors and promised at the same time to meet the expenses both for a building and for support. Blessed Jerome was therefore sent to Sumpu together with one of the Brothers to establish such a residence. It was certainly an important assignment and one that required a man of wisdom and experience, of tact and practical ability.

Once he was established in Sumpu, Blessed Jerome also sought to establish a house in Edo. By 1613, success seemed to be assured, but persecution broke out against the Church there on the very day when the purchase of the property was to have been made, and the priest was forced to return to Sumpu empty-handed.

February of the following year brought the general proscription of Christianity, which wrought havoc everywhere, and after another decade of bitter suffering and trials, left the Church in Japan on the road to almost total extinction. Blessed Jerome was recalled by his Superiors to Nagasaki whence he too was to be deported along with the other missionaries to Macao. He received permission from the Superiors, however, to remain secretly in Japan.

(2) Apostle of the Northland

In 1615, after only a brief period spent in Nagasaki, Blessed Jerome was sent to the new mission field in Northern Japan. Though he was not the founder of this mission, he can be described as its principal organizer and the one whose tireless work brought it to a flourishing, though brief, period of development.

The so-called Tohoku mission was established in 1611 by the Franciscan Blessed Louis Sotelo. The Franciscans already had a leper asylum at this time in Edo, and it was there that Blessed Louis met Date Masamune, the daimyo of Sendai, in 1610. It was at Date's invitation that he went to Sendai in 1611 and was able, with the generous encouragement of Date, to carry on a very active apostolate: He had many opportunities to explain the doctrines of Christianity to Date, and though the Daimyo never became a Christian himself, he did issue a decree on November 23, 1611, in which he granted full permission to the missionaries to carry on their work and empowered all of his subjects to embrace the new religion if they so desired. Blessed Louis spent about a year in Sendai and baptized no less than 1800 converts there.



3. Date Masamune

In 1613, Sotelo left Japan as the head of Date's celebrated embassy to the Vatican, but before his departure, he spent several weeks in the city of Sendai where he carried on a most active apostolate together with his confreres Ignatius of Jesus and Diego Ibanez. Meanwhile, the catechists whom Blessed Louis had already engaged were busy establishing new mission centers and chapels of which two were in the city of Sendai, while a third was situated in the district of John Goto (Goto Juan) in Miwake (now Mizusawa), and a fourth was established in the district of Kusakari Gemba.

Before his departure for Europe, which occurred in October, 1613, Blessed Louis had written to Nagasaki asking that a priest be sent to carry on the work in the Northland. Before anything could be done about this, however, Ieyasu's Edict of Proscription appeared with the result that everything was held in abeyance.

Paradoxical as it may seem, it was this decree that was the real occasion for new and flourishing mission developments in Northern Japan. Anti-Christian tendencies had made themselves felt for several years already in Central Japan, and in 1612 the Tokugawa regime had inaugurated a kind of 'purification' campaign among its vassals. As a result of this campaign, a considerable number of Christians set out for the Northland, where they carried on a very active apostolate. One of these men, Peter Hitomi Munetsugi, a native of Fushimi, succeeded in one year (1613) in winning over 600 converts in the Akita district—all of them instructed and baptized by himself.

After the publication of Ieyasu's decree in 1614, seventy-one Christians of Osaka and Kyoto were banished to Tsugaru (Aomori-ken) in Northern Japan. Many other Christians of Central and Southern Japan did not wait for a decree of banishment but left of their own accord for this Northern area where they would indeed have to live a life of poverty

but where they would be free to practice their religion. These people were welcomed by the Northern Daimyos since they were conscientious and religious people and many of them belonged to the nobility. They were, therefore, far different from the ordinary fugitives who had either fled or been banished from their own districts because of their crimes. Not a few of the Christians were even appointed to responsible positions, but most of them received an allotment of land, where they could work for their living and practice their religion freely. They were, however, forbidden to work for the conversion of others.

In spite of this prohibition, the Christians showed great zeal for the apostolate and before long new and flourishing Christianities sprang up everywhere, and in some places almost the entire population was Catholic as can be seen from many of the local traditions, the records of persecution, and the documents drawn up later by renegades who were charged with the surveillance of their neighbors.

The Christians were naturally eager to have a priest in their midst to preach the doctrine and administer the Sacraments, and a number of touching letters were sent to Nagasaki to ask for a missionary. When storms and bad climatic conditions led to a crop failure and hunger in 1615, the people suffered not only in spirit but also in body. "If this letter reaches you, please send some one to help us. It is true that a physician (priest or catechist) came last year, but he brought us no medicine (Eucharist) and was only able to feel our pulse. Since the danger persists, we beg of you most earnestly to send us a physician."

Such a plea for spiritual and bodily assistance could not be ignored, and though missionaries were few due to the fact that some had been banished in the previous year, Blessed Jerome was sent to the Northland with money and other gifts contributed by the Christians of Kyushu.

The trip was difficult. Roads and other means of communication were poor in this Northern area, and the difficulties of travel were increased by the fact that the priest had to maintain his incognito. How hard it was for him to travel under the circumstances is revealed by a fragment of his travelogue which has come down to us:

I had to cross two very steep mountains where the paths were so slippery and the slopes so abrupt that it was almost frightening merely to look at them. It was so bad that perhaps the whole of Japan has nothing to compare with it. There were thorny forests to be traversed and snow-covered crests that had to be crossed on horseback. At times it seemed impossible to find a foothold and I had visions of myself rolling down into the abyss to be buried at the bottom of the valleys. Sometimes it seemed impossible to go forward since the snow was so deep that it almost formed an impenetrable barrier. There I talked without food and without any kind of shelter since the tops of these mountains are entirely uninhabited.

I went to Oshu (district of Sendai) to see Yaemon and his wife since they were sick and wanted to go to Confession. Instead of merely two confessions, I heard the Confessions of two hundred who had never been to Confession before because they had never seen a priest. I wanted also to visit the Christians in Tsugaru—comforted them as best I could and divided them into sodalities with prefects of

their own to preside over the common exercises. The place where I am now is very dangerous and plagued with robbers. In the distance, as far as the eye can see, there is a vast region devoid of all habitation and of all vegetation. It is necessary here to sleep lightly, but I do sleep calmly in the cradle of God's Providence. We certainly must not give up, for though the people here are crude and lacking in a moral sense, they are docile and suitable subjects for that culture which comes with the Faith. Among them also are to be found gentle folk as well as men of war.

I should still like to write a number of other letters, but there is not a single scrap of paper left.

Blessed Jerome visited all of the scattered Christianities during this trip and saw an appreciable number of Christians, such as Peter Hitomi, whom he had known in Fushimi. Everywhere, among the mountain people as also among the coal miners in the valleys, he did what he could to organize his mission work in a systematic way



4. Tsugaru (Wikipedia)

In a document drawn up in 1617 and signed by the leaders of the various Christian communities in Oshu, we find the names of seven Christianities in the domain of Date Masamune as follows: Sendai, Miwake (now Mizusawa), Yamori (now Maesawa), Shizu, Ichinoseki, Sannoseki, and Ishizumori.

Happily, other missionaries came to Blessed Jerome's assistance during the years that followed. The first of these was the Japanese Jesuit Diego Yuki, who made the rounds of all of the Christianities as far as Tsugaru in 1617 but then returned to Central Japan. After him came three other Jesuits: Diego Carvalho, John Matthew Adamo, and the Japanese, Martin Shikimi.

Blessed Jerome had meanwhile been named regional Superior for this area, and the whole district was divided between the four of them in such a way that every Christianity could be visited at least once a year.

Indispensable aid was provided for the missionaries by the catechists (*d juku*), who accompanied them on their journeys, preached, taught the catechism, and made all the necessary arrangements with the customs officials, innkeepers, etc., in order that the foreign missionaries might not be recognized as such.

The Annual Report for 1619 gives us a vivid picture of the adventurous and often dangerous life the missionaries then led. It is quite probable that the missionary mentioned there was none other than Blessed Jerome himself. It was June when he crossed the snow-capped mountains to enter the province of Dewa (now Akita-ken). The report tells us that when he came down from the mountains, he came upon various cities and towns. The report then continues:

One solitary Christian family lived in one of these villages, but in order to manage a visit to them, the priest had to think up a new trick. He disguised himself as a miner who had very special business relations with that family and was therefore received by the family as a guest. His host, warned in advance, went out to meet him, invited him to his house, talked about various metals and succeeded perfectly in mingling this simulation with the most exquisite charity. Even after he had entered the house, the priest kept up the pretense because of the non-Christians who were present, and during this conversation it was the *d juku* who spoke up as middle-man. Once the non-Christian had left, he ministered to the Christians who, however, were able to assemble only under cover of darkness.

In this way he spent a month and a half in the two provinces of Semboku and Akita. He thereupon changed his disguise so as to be able to visit the lepers in a hospital. This was situated on a public street and was open to the gaze of all. The priest, therefore, pretended to be a dealer in furs since the lepers were engaged in that kind of business. As he approached the hospital, his guide enquired in a loud voice which could be heard by everyone whether the furs for which they had recently bargained were ready. Receiving an affirmative answer, the priest went in on the pretense of inspecting the furs and there heard the Confessions of the people.

Meanwhile the priest sent a letter to the Christians in Tsugaru, which was a distance of a three days' journey, to advise them of his arrival. Here, however, the border patrol was so strict that nobody could get through without having everything, including personal letters, inspected. The letter, therefore, was written in the ordinary business style of a merchant who was going to Tsugaru to enquire about prices, but a distinctive signature was used so that only the Christians would understand its significance. The trick was successful, and when the Tsugaru Christians received the letters they designated one of their number to serve as a guide and brought him some money so that he could actually buy some merchandise and make his disguise as a merchant realistic. Suitable new names were adopted, the priest calling himself Wata Kanemon and the catechist Itaya Kihyōe. Arriving at the first patrol post, the priest excused himself on the plea that he was indisposed and with the permission of the inspectors took refuge in an inn while they were inspecting his goods. The catechist meanwhile answered all the questions of the inspectors while the priest, using his Breviary as a pillow, took a short rest.

When all the formalities had been completed, the travelers went on to Takaoka (now Hirosaki), the residence of the Tono, where a small group of exiled Christians had established themselves. There they took up their residence with the most prominent of the Christians, and word was immediately passed around that a merchant had arrived from Akita at the house of Antonius (name of the host) and that the sons of Antonius would undertake the sale of the wares the merchant had brought. This was done in order that non-Christians buyers would see as little as possible of the priest and make it easier

for him to maintain his incognito. In case prospective buyers wanted to deal with the 'merchant' in person, they were put off with the excuse that he was absent or unable to appear for some other reason. Thanks to this arrangement, the priest was able to spend eighteen days there, much to his own consolation and that of the Christians. After everyone had gone to Confession and received Holy Communion once or twice, they thanked God for His kindly Providence and praised the Society of Jesus in the most glowing terms for all that it was doing for souls at such a great sacrifice and amid such great dangers. After having distributed the alms to each and every one of the people, the priest returned to the mission district of Akita. The return trip was very difficult since he had developed a very bad abscess during his journey.

The Franciscans also resumed work in the North in 1618. Blessed Louis Sotelo was still being held up in Manila, but the new Superior, Father Diego Pardo de la Cruz, sent Father Francis Galvez to Sendai with letters and a gift from Blessed Louis for Date Masamune. The Daimyo received Father Francis with the greatest of kindness and permitted him to remain and to work in the Sendai area. When Father Francis Barajas was also sent to the North in 1620, he remained in the Oshu district while Father Galvez went to the province of Dewa. In later years, other Franciscans also came to help in the work.



5. Province of Dewa

With six priests in the northern provinces actively engaged in mission work during the years 1620 to 1623, excellent results were obtained among the settlers, the farmers and the mountain people so that completely Christian villages and hamlets were to be found in many places.

(3) On to Unknown Hokkaido

In 1618, Blessed Jerome ventured for the first time to make a trip to the island of Ezo (now Hokkaido) and was thus the first European ever to set foot on that island and to make a detailed report concerning its land and people. He also drew up a map of the island, which is, however, very imperfect. He himself gives us three reasons for the trip as follows: (1) to study the mission possibilities of the island; (2) to visit the Christian emigrants and refugees; and (3) the orders he had received from his Superiors.

This undertaking was not easy. Hokkaido was looked upon as a foreign country, and it was only in Matsumae that there was a Japanese nobleman, and he was quite independent. Communications between Japan and Ezo were very limited and were rendered very difficult by many detailed regulations so that for all practical purposes none but miners and merchants were allowed to visit the island.

In our day, a trip to Hokkaido is easy since ships run regularly from Aomori to Hakodate, but this short route was out of the question for Blessed Jerome since political rivalries made it difficult to cross the borders of Oshu, Nambu (the domain of Morioka), and

Tsugaru. Even the ordinary Japanese had to submit to such rigid examinations at the border patrols that the term “Tsugaru no Seki” (Tsugaru Pass) became proverbial throughout the country for its strict border control. How much more difficult it must, therefore, have been for a foreigner and a priest of the despised Christian religion to get by!

Under the circumstances, Blessed Jerome thought it best to travel by way of Kubota (Akita) and to go disguised as a merchant from Sakai. As such, he had, of course, to take along some merchandise, and it is probable that the Christians in Kubota provided him with all that was necessary. With all his preparations made, he was able to set out from Kubota in the sixth month of the Japanese calendar (July) in company with two Japanese catechists, Simon Empo, who shared his martyrdom five years later, and a man by the name of Zenkei. Here is his own account of a risky encounter he had during the journey:

The devil made desperate efforts to prevent my trip. When our ship arrived in Fukaura, one of the harbors of Tsugaru, we were held up by unfavorable winds for 22 days and during this time the other travelers (more than 80, including two bonzes) decided to collect money for prayers to be said for a happy and speedy landing. The man who instigated this collection was one of the bonzes, whose name was Shukai. Since Zenkei was sick at the moment, they presented my catechist, Simon Empo, with a written request for money to be contributed for the three of us. Without asking me, the catechist answered that I had already spent all of my money in the course of my journey and had none left. They were not satisfied with this and said that they knew I was no ordinary traveler and that therefore I must have money with me. It was only at my urgent request that Simon laughingly told me about the affair. I told him that if it were a question of providing money for something to eat or drink, I would gladly give some money as I had done a few days previously for the ship’s crew, but if they wanted alms for their prayers, I’d never give a penny. For this reason, I added, it was useless to enter upon any further discussion.

When the people had heard my answer, the bonze called together all the people who had been with me before we set sail and said to them: “Do you want to know why we have this contrary wind—and will have it in the future also? It is because this business man from Kami (Kyoto area) is aboard together with his companions. The very fact that they refuse to give any money for our prayers proves that all of them are Christians.” The bonzes therefore advised the people to have me put off the ship at Fukaura. Some of the people agreed with the bonzes, but others argued that since I was the most prominent man aboard—the others were all poor and belonged to the lower classes of society—the captain would not agree to the plan, so it was useless to argue about it.

The priest was thus enabled to continue his journey, but though the bonze had hitherto looked upon him as “a man of distinction” and often tried to establish relations with him, he now adopted a consistently hostile attitude.

that the water to the west of Hokkaido represented a huge current that registered both high and low tide and must, therefore, be an ocean current. He noticed also that the Ainu, unlike the Tartars of the mainland, had no social or political organization and concluded from this fact that there was no contact between the two peoples. For these geographic and ethnological reasons, he concluded in 1621 that Hokkaido was really an island and promised that on his next trip, he would try to make a more detailed study of the matter in order to give a definitive answer to the question. Unfortunately he was never able to get back to Hokkaido.

Aside from these geographic problems, Blessed Jerome was particularly interested in the culture and the customs of the people. Here he gives an account of the Ezo people as he observed them:

During my stay in Ezo, I had occasion to talk with a number of the Ainu. In some cases I had to use an interpreter, but with those who knew Japanese I could speak directly. I discovered that they have no knowledge whatsoever about the salvation of their souls. They venerate the sun and the moon, but their attitude has nothing to do with their souls since they look upon these heavenly bodies simply as something that is necessary for human life. They bury their dead in a way that is no different from our Christian custom. The rich have a large coffin, which is buried in the earth, while the poor put the bodies of their dead into a sack, which is then buried in the same manner. They hate the *kami* and the *hotoke* of the Japanese.

They are a wild and courageous people and like to fight. But they are quick also to make peace and then do no more fighting. When facing an enemy, they exchange mutual apologies and then engage in battle. Their drinking bouts seem almost interminable, but I was very much surprised to find that they do not become intoxicated.

They use bows and poisoned arrows, short daggers and javelins as well as clubs reinforced with metal. In a fight, they throw these clubs at one another with the result that the combatants are all covered with blood. I was present at one of these fights and found that after it was over they did not consult a physician to heal their wounds but simply treated them with salt and sea-water.

They are short of stature but of sturdy build and covered with hair. The hair of their head reaches down as far as the hips. One half of the head is shaved, but the rest of their hair is allowed to grow as is the custom among the Japanese children. The men as well as the women wear ornaments on their ears. The people are very skillful in riding. They are simple but does not mean that they are stupid—they are really clever.

Their clothes are similar to the gowns of the Moors but are adorned here and there with long strips of cloth such as we are accustomed to use, on our surplices. They sit on their heels and use chopsticks after the manner of the Japanese.

So far as the prospects for Christianity are concerned, I do not believe that it will be very difficult to convert these Ezo people. They have no bonzes, are unable to read or write, and are not as avaricious as are the Chinese. Though there are many gold mines in the area, they don't bother about digging for it.

It is obvious that Blessed Jerome was quite optimistic in his outlook on mission work among the Ainu. The Japanese Christians to whose care he could devote himself without restriction were still very few at this time. The beginnings of Christianity in Hokkaido seem to date back to 1613 when a Japanese physician, a disciple of Father Camillo Costanzo S. J., went there and baptized a few people. Though he asked that a priest should be sent there, his plea went unheeded because of the persecution which broke out in the following year. When Blessed Jerome went to Hokkaido for the first time in 1618, he found only about 15 Catholics, most of them immigrants, who had evidently been there for some time already since they had not been to Confession for years.

Since Blessed Jerome had brought no Mass kit along with him, he had to be satisfied with hearing the Confessions of the Christians and teaching them their religion and baptizing a few catechumens. He was, however, greatly aided by his catechists in the work of teaching and instructing both Catholics and catechumens.

Blessed Jerome was able to spend only ten days in Hokkaido during his first visit, but he was able to send Father Carvalho there in 1620 and himself visited the island again in 1621. Though some have claimed that Blessed Jerome himself visited Hokkaido three times, their contention is based on a false interpretation of some ambiguous texts in the Annual Reports. In point of fact, he visited the island only twice.

(4) Martyrdom

It was in the year 1620 that Date Masamune changed his attitude towards Christianity. During the first eight months of that year, the Jesuits in Oshu were able to baptize 966 converts, but on September 4, a general decree was issued which ordered all of Date's Christian subjects to apostatize.

There seem to have been various reasons for Date's sudden change. On the one hand, it is clear that the authority of the Tokugawa regime was gaining so much in strength that even such powerful daimyos as Date Masamune had to bow. On the other hand, it seems that there was an anti-Christian party in Sendai itself and that this party was bringing pressure to bear on Date both directly in Sendai and indirectly through the Shogun's court in Edo. It was thus a foregone conclusion that Date would have to take a stand against the Christians sooner or later.

Immediate occasion for Date's decree seems to have been the news that his ambassador to Europe, Hasekura Rokuemon Tsunenaga (1571~1622) was soon to return. The very fact that Date, who was only a feudal lord, had sent such an ambassador abroad had already excited the suspicions of the Tokugawa, and the matter was complicated still more by the fact that Hasekura and his companions had all embraced Christianity. It was to allay all

suspicion, especially that of the Tokugawa, that Date issued his decree of proscription against the Christians.

The edict itself seems to have been intended at first as a mere formality. The authorities apparently wanted nothing more than a written but general declaration of apostasy and were not concerned about the real beliefs of the Christians. For convenience sake, the officials simply drew up a list of the Christians adding in each case that the one listed had given up his religion. When the Christians heard about this, however, they protested and the authorities were forced to take sterner measures with the result that some were put to death as the first martyrs of this area.



7. Hasekura

Blessed Jerome was in Sendai at the time and considered the advisability of professing his faith publicly so as to encourage the Christians. The Catholics, however, considered the priest's life more important and urged him to remain in hiding.

A special consolation was still in store for the Christians during this first phase of the persecution. When St. Peter's Basilica was dedicated in 1617 Pope Paul V had proclaimed a special Jubilee Indulgence by which he hoped to promote a deeper spirituality and greater zeal among Catholics the world over in view of the dangers that threatened the faith of many of them.

The first copy of the Pope's decree reached Japan in 1620 and with it came a special letter in which the Holy Father sought to comfort and console the Japanese Christians. The Jesuit Provincial, Father de Couros, immediately had these documents translated into Japanese and sent copies thereof to various parts of Japan. Particularly active in publishing the Jubilee was Father Porro, who visited the various Christianities in Chugoku and after visiting Shikoku set out for northern Japan.

Great was the happiness of the Christians. The Jubilee brought about a real spiritual renewal and provided the people with added grace and strength for the trials that were still to come. To show their gratitude, several Christians wrote directly to the Pope as we can see from the fact that five of their letters written both in Japanese and Latin and signed by the leaders of the respective groups are still preserved in the Vatican Library. It is especially in the Japanese text, which is sometimes appreciably different from the Latin, that their "joy in the midst of sorrow, but also their sorrow in the midst of joy" (Anesaki) is most clearly expressed. These letters also provide touching proof of the loyalty shown by the Japanese Catholics to the Vicar of Christ, especially in view of the fact that not a few of the signers were destined to seal their faith with their blood within the next few years.

The letter written by the Catholics of northern Japan on September 29, 1621, also gives striking proof of their love and gratitude towards their spiritual shepherd, Blessed Jerome de Angelis:

The beginnings of Christianity in this area date back seven years to the time when Father Jerome de Angelis of the Society of Jesus came here and began with great zeal and ability to visit the several

districts and to spread the teachings of the Gospel. It is true that the Christians here are still nothing but children, nourished at the breast of their mother, but with the help of God's grace they have already given proof of their courage during several persecutions and have glorified the name of God in presence of the non-Christians. We wish hereby to express our most sincere and heartfelt thanks for the help of God's grace. At the moment we have three priests of the Society of Jesus in our midst, and they are assisted by a number of other people who are helping them to convert the non-Christians and to preserve the faith of the Christians. Even when Date Masamune's persecution broke out, Father Jerome de Angelis did not leave the city of Masamune, but encouraged the Christians in their hour of trial and brought back those who had become weak in the faith. Disguising himself, he visited our people everywhere, and the relief work he carried on in secret was by no means small. We have the greatest esteem for the work the Fathers of the Society have been doing in this difficult period for the Christians of Dewa and Oshu.

It was in 1621 that Blessed Jerome, in accordance with instructions received from his Superiors, left his difficult but fruitful mission in the North in order to go to Edo. After long and painstaking effort and at great expense, he was finally able to buy a house in Edo, which



8. Jesuit Catechizing

provided him with a safe resort for the next two years. During these years, he also managed to make a number of mission trips into the neighboring provinces, including such distant places as Kai and Izu. The rigors of this "underground" existence, however, were such that he became so emaciated as to be almost unrecognizable.

In 1623, the Franciscan Father Galvez was also transferred from Oshu to Edo in order to take the place of Father Diego de la Cruz who was then sick. Before the end of that year both, Father Galvez and Father de Angelis died as martyrs.

It was in August, 1623, that the Shogun Tokugawa Hidetada resigned from office in favor of his son Iemitsu, who was formally invested by the Emperor in a solemn ceremony on August 21. Since Iemitsu had cultivated friendly relations with the missionaries as a young man in Sumpu and had shown no special aversion towards them in the intervening years, his elevation was regarded by them as a happy omen. In this, however, they were sadly disappointed. It was thus same Iemitsu who, during his long reign from 1623 to 1651, not only crystallized the legal system of the Tokugawa regime but also created that nation-wide organization which, in accordance with his anti-Christian policy, served to destroy all but a faint vestige of Christianity throughout the land.

It was only a short time after his elevation to the Shogunate that Iemitsu declared that he would do nothing to change the anti-Christian laws that were already on the statute books. He not only ratified those laws but took steps to enforce them more rigidly and decided, after the arrest of Blessed Jerome, to make an example of him for the whole country so as to bring pressure to bear on those daimyos who were still lenient in their attitude towards the

Christians. In this he was highly successful. The annual letter of the Jesuits for 1624 begins with a general survey of the situation which reads as follows:

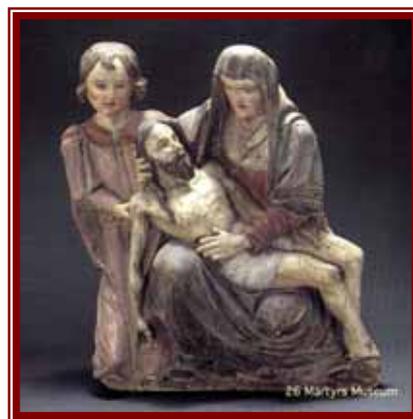
Although, the Shogun of Edo, the Lord of Japan, transferred his power and government to his son and was himself elevated in dignity (he received from the Emperor the title Dai-gosho, and was from now on called Kubo, the title of a retired Shogun), there was still no change in our Christian affairs, as we had hoped. For the son succeeded not only to his father's high office, but also to his hatred and cruelty toward Christians. As a matter of fact, in this one year more blood flowed than hitherto: between December 1623 and the following November, 165 Christians suffered martyrdom for Christ. Among them were 8 religious: Dominicans, Franciscans and Jesuits; the others were lay folk: men, women and children, as we shall relate later on. This persecution began at Edo, where the Shogun has his residence, and took on such proportions that there was not a single Christian who did not in some degree or other bear the marks of its fury. Many were put to death, many cast into prison, many more driven into exile. Others retired into hiding; others again abandoned their homes rather than run the risk of apostasy in the pagan community. Many, however, remained in their difficult situation, manifesting steadfast courage and readiness to bear every manner of torture for their faith, and these have encouraged the weak. It is impossible to describe the terror inspired by the severity of the persecution in various localities, especially since day after day new officials arrive whose sole duty, at the order of the Shogun, is to break the spirit of the Christians by threats and torture. For this reason, their chief care is to spy upon the missionaries and prevent all intercourse with the Japanese. This situation has rendered fruitful work practically impossible, so that we and our helpers could baptize only a few thousands. Nevertheless, we hope that this country, sown with the seed of so many martyrs, will in the years to follow render an abundant harvest.

The new persecution broke out even before the new Shogun's return to Edo, which took place on October 18. Attracted by the money which had been offered to all who would betray the whereabouts of priests or Christians, a traitor in Edo told the authorities about the hiding place of Blessed Jerome. This man had formerly been in the service of the Christian nobleman, John Hara Mondo but was then deep in debt because of his gambling and other vices. He went to the governor of the northern district of Edo to tell him that Hara Mondo was still a zealous Christian, indicated Hara Mondo's hiding place and drew up list of the principal Christians in the city. The governor had a number of them arrested and took steps to get additional information about the other Christians in Edo. Under torture, one of the victims also revealed the hiding place of Blessed Jerome.

Warned before hand, Blessed Jerome was able to make his get-away, but pressure was brought to bear on the master of the house to force him to betray the whereabouts of the priest. This man admitted that he was a Christian and refused to betray the priest, but in the end, the pressure was such that he promised to use his influence to get Blessed Jerome to present himself to the governor. With this, the minions of the law seemed to be satisfied.

When Blessed Jerome heard what had happened, he decided to appear before the governor on the very next day so as to keep the other Christians from being endangered. As had happened several years previously in Sendai, the Christians tried to dissuade the priest from giving himself up, but their efforts were in vain. Several of the Christians including long-time companion, Simon Empo, wanted to give themselves up along with the priest, but he forbade them to do so, and told Simon Empo to do what he could to guide and strengthen the other Christians. In the end, however, Blessed Jerome yielded to the entreaties of Simon and allowed him to give himself up also. During his last night of freedom, the priest again visited the Christians who had been accused of giving him shelter in order to encourage them and strengthen them in the faith, and on the following morning, he went with Simon to see the governor and was imprisoned immediately after the first preliminary hearing.

The Franciscan, Father Galvez, was at this time in Kamakura, and when his host, Hilary Magozaemon, the syndic of the Third Order of St. Francis, heard of the new persecution, he immediately hired a boat to send the priest to a place of safety. The man who was entrusted with the rescue, however, left the priest in the lurch and absconded with the money given by Magozaemon. The priest and his two companions were then captured on the beach at Kamakura; his host was also arrested together with his whole family and his house and property were confiscated. All of the captives were then taken to Edo, and after a brief hearing, were imprisoned together with Blessed Jerome and his companions. The priests heard each other's confession and then prepared themselves and their companions for martyrdom.



9. Pieta (Jesuit Museum, Nagasaki)

The municipal prison was then in Kodemma-cho (now in Chuo-ku), but at that time it was more like a stable than a prison, and the captives were simply penned in there. The Franciscan Diego de San Francisco, who was imprisoned in 1615 and held there for a year and a half, wrote a very detailed description of this prison, and his description is still extant.

Blessed Jerome and his former host, Leo Takeya, who seems to have belonged to the lower nobility and was acquainted with the governor of Edo, were separated from the other prisoners and were lodged in the building which housed the guards.

They were thus relatively free and were able to receive many visitors. When Father Galvez was also brought to the prison a few days later, he, too, was kept for a time in the guardhouse but was later transferred to the building in the rear where the other Christians were then held.

When the news of Blessed Jerome's arrest reached Kyoto, the Jesuits there sent one of their number—whether a priest or a Brother is not clear—to Edo to visit him. The Edo Christians also visited the prisoners as much as possible and provided them with such help as they were able to give. The Annual Letter tells us also of a nobleman who had been baptized in the north by Blessed Jerome and was at this time returning to Kyoto. Hearing that the priest

had been imprisoned, this man, together with his son, made the greatest efforts, even at the risk of his own life, to visit his spiritual father.

The priests made use of their time in prison not only to prepare themselves for martyrdom, but also to preach the Gospel to the other prisoners and in this they were so successful that they were able to baptize many of their fellow-prisoners. The Annual Letter tells the story as follows:

In accordance with Japanese usage, there is at the entrance of the prison a special house for the guards. A double wooden door separated this from the common jail, which is about 20 feet away. Fr. de Angelis was put in this house by a special concession because he was a foreigner and because Leo, the Father's host, was a friend of the governor. Both were shackled with ankle-chains.

The others were kept in the interior part. All suffered a great deal from the darkness of the place, the over-crowdedness and other discomforts. For food, they had only a bit of rice cooked in water with salt. The zeal of Simon especially reaped an abundant harvest, for he preached Christ day and night so that 40 non-Christians, who had been condemned for other crimes, were won to Christ. He hoped, were ten more days of life granted him, to bring the others, too, to embrace this religion which was then the object of such hatred and abhorrence. While he worked among the non-Christians this way, he in no way neglected the Christians, but aroused in them the courage to meet death. The results of his activity were evident in the great joy that all manifested on the day of martyrdom. Fr. Jerome as well was lacking neither in zeal nor courage but only in opportunity, since but eight non-Christians were shut up in the same room with him; these he instructed in the faith and baptized. And since he was seldom permitted to mingle with the other prisoners and console them, he undertook another charitable work, and despite the weight of his chains, managed to construct a sort of mat out of paper, so that he was able to be of at least some material help to those to whom he could not minister spiritually. It was in this work that he was discovered by one of Ours whom the Superior from Kami (Kyoto) had sent to visit the prison. He had tied his chains about his neck with a cord so as to be the freer in his charitable occupation. At first many friends came to visit them, being allowed in under the pretext of visiting Leo. But when the governor got wind of it, he became afraid of possible untoward consequences, so he had Leo thrust into the rear-jail. De Angelis spoke with the guards and other visitors only about heavenly matters, instructing all in the Faith and exhorting them to seek the things of God alone and to attach no value to the rest. He also heard the confessions of the Christians, who seemed to be overflowing with joy; all except one, who ceaselessly lamented his sin of betraying the names and whereabouts of others. His remorse was so bitter that his tears, which flowed all night and even during the day, left visible traces in his cheeks.

The arrest of the priests and Christians took place shortly after the return of the new Shogun from Kyoto which occurred on October 13. The final decision concerning the

prisoners could not, of course, be made by the governor of Edo. Even Iemitsu did not dare to proceed on his own initiative and waited until his father, Hidetada, arrived in Edo on October 30. When Hidetada was asked about it, he left the matter, to all appearances at least, to the judgment of the Shogun, who then decided to make such an example of the Christian prisoners as would set a precedent for the whole country. The whole group of fifty was, therefore, sentenced to death by fire. The captives, of course, expected the death penalty and had been preparing themselves for martyrdom, and with the exception of one man, who weakened under the strain, all looked forward with joy to this final consummation.

Another month elapsed before the prisoners were executed, and during this period, Simon Empo, who had been with Blessed Jerome for such a long time, asked and received permission to be admitted to the Society of Jesus. He made his profession in the prison and is therefore listed among the Jesuit martyrs.

On the morning of December 4, the captives were taken out of the prison and led according to custom in a long procession to the execution grounds. The fifty of them were divided into three groups, the first of which was headed by Blessed Jerome, who was on horseback, and was followed by Simon Empo, his host Leo Takeya and fourteen other Christians, all of them walking. At the head of the second group, was Father Galvez, also on horseback, and behind him walked 16 other Christians. The third group was headed by Hara



10. Medal (Jesuit Museum)

Mondo, likewise on horseback, and included all the rest of the captives. Placards with the death sentence inscribed upon them were carried in front of each of the groups, while guards and executioners marched at both sides and at the rear of the several groups. The people of Edo were, of course, accustomed to such scenes, but they must have been quite surprised at seeing such a large group taken out to execution at one time. The procession made its way through the busiest sections of the city from Kodemma-cho to Fuda-no-tsuji (near the present Tamachi) by way of Muro-machi, Nihonbashi, Kyobashi, Ginza, Shimbashi, Hamamatsu-chō, and Mita. Arriving at what was then the outer edge of the city, they passed through a large gate which, because of placards which were posted upon it, was called Fuda-no-Tsuji, and thus they reached a wide open space where they were to be put to death.

A large number of daimyos from all over Japan were at that time staying in Tokyo, and it would seem that the execution was planned in such a way as to issue a warning to them. This may be the reason why the Christians were not put to death at the usual place of execution in Asakusa, where others had been martyred in 1615, but just outside the city gate and in plain view of the busy Tokaido. Overlooking this spot was a tree-covered hill which, because of its natural beauty and because it afforded a splendid view of the bay, was a very popular resort for holiday-makers. As was to be expected, a large number of knights and nobles were there beforehand to satisfy their curiosity. Under the circumstances, it is not at all surprising that the execution of this large group of martyrs was featured more than any other

similar event in the annals and in the general history of Japan. The martyrs were indeed spectacles “unto men and unto angels”.

The Annual Letter gives an eye-witness account of their death as follows:

Outside the city, along the road that runs toward Kami, 50 stakes had already been set up on the place of execution. Three of them, those nearest the city, stood a little apart from the others. All were heaped around with faggots. The firewood was placed in such a way that when it burst into flames the fire would blaze at least one ell away from the stake. The crowd of onlookers, who streamed in from all directions, was enormous. The place, which was of no mean dimensions, and the neighboring mountain were filled with spectators, among them many nobles and princes who had assembled in Edo just at that time. One could believe that it had been so arranged by God’s providence in order to reveal the more widely what power the Christian Religion brought to those who embraced it.

As soon as they reached the spot, the Christian heroes were all bound to the stakes—except the three who, as we have mentioned, were on horseback—and were not permitted to dismount. Those at the stakes lifted their eyes to the Heaven they yearned for and, filled with hope, they begged strength and courage for the last battle.

Fr. Jerome, however, began to preach with glowing fervor to show that the Faith of the Christians was the only true belief, that all others were false and empty illusions. Simon Empo did likewise in his burning zeal, not only when he was bound to the stake but all along the way, urging all passers-by to accept the Faith of Christ and remain steadfast therein.

We must not omit mention of the fact that 51 had been sentenced to death by fire and that this number had been led out from prison, but the last of them was passed over here because he seemed to be weakening in his faith on the road, and so was held back by the guards at the place of the great battle.

The sentence and cause of their dying were written on a huge signboard hung high in full view and ran somewhat as follows: These men are concerned to so severe a punishment because they are Christians.

Then when the police applied the torches and the faggots caught fire, the flames blazed aloft on all sides while the happy souls called aloud upon the holy names of Jesus and Mary. Words cannot tell what constant and invincible spirit they showed amid such torment. There was not a one that complained, or moaned, or even betrayed in his face the slightest sign of pain. The onlookers were so deeply impressed by the sight of such amazing constancy that even the non-Christians murmured that such courage was more than natural, for it was normal for condemned criminals to experience pain at the loss of at least something.

The Fathers were watching it all from horseback, but with unbroken spirit so that by God's grace their courage might not sink. For that is what the judges had hoped and for that reason had delayed their execution; that the horrible burning might shake their purpose. But far from letting themselves be terrified by so frightening a death, they became all the more enthused. Not only they, but also two of the spectators, a man and a woman, who when the fire was at its height ran of their own free will to the place of the judges and shouted for all to hear that they too were Christians and followers of the same Way as those who were already in the flames. However, they were not cast immediately into the fire, as aflame with a heavenly ardor they had desired, but at the order of the authorities were bound and thrown into prison. There they were kept in chains and made all who saw them wonder at the power of the divine Law in the hearts of men and at the heaven-sent strength given to those whose only desire on earth is to follow God, the supreme Lawgiver.

When the flames had died out, and so too the lives of all, the others were made to dismount and were bound to the stakes. To the first, that nearest the city, Hara Mondo; to the second, Fr. Jerome; to the last, Fr. Galvez. As soon as the fire was kindled, these brave crusaders of Christ greeted one another and shouted mutual encouragement. And Fr. Jerome reminded Hara Mondo how short-lived the pain would be in comparison with the eternity of glory awaiting them. As the fire flared up and began to enwrap them, these servants of God could be seen through the flames braving the first onslaught of the blaze with surpassing valor. Fr. Jerome could be seen first turning toward the city praying for it briefly, then turning where the flames, fanned by the wind, attacked him the most fiercely, partly to show that he did not fear it, partly to say some last words to the folk who stood there in greater numbers. He remained always the same, ever erect and exhorting the crowds with great zeal, until he succumbed to the might of the fire and rendered his spirit back to his Creator, falling to his knees as he died.



11. Blessed Jerome

As to John (Hara Mondo), what was particularly striking and a sign of great spirit was that as a flame raged upon him with particular force, he put his arms about it as though it were something cherished. He stood unmoved the whole time until he fell forwards together with the stake and lay out stretched upon the ground.

But Fr. Francis, who was the last to remain alive, remained standing upright even in death, leaning on the stake from which he had not shrunk even amid the most excruciating torments. Thus ended the terrible tragedy. We cannot describe the varied feelings the people carried back from this spectacle of blood. Some felt one way, others

another. But all voices and minds agreed on one point: no praise could match the bravery and noble constancy of the martyrs. And they extolled above all Fr. Jerome, who their leader as he was in life, so in the face of death outstripped them all in spirit.

The bodies, which were all more or less consumed by the flames, remained lying in the open field guarded by soldiers through the next three days. But as soon as the guard was lifted, the Christians carried off the bodies of the two Fathers. They intended to do the same for the rest as well, had not news of their deed leaked out and a still stronger watch been set.

Jerome de Angelis, Simon Empo, and Father Galvez were beatified by Pope Pius IX on July 7, 1867, and their feast day is observed on the anniversary of their death, December 4. It has been the custom for some years now for the Catholic men of Tokyo to assemble on the evening of that day at the scene of the martyrdom to honor their memory and to pray in the spirit of Blessed Jerome for the conversion of the people of Tokyo.

Bibliography

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Fr. Hubert Cieslik 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 defunct. Fr. Cieslik's printed articles were collected by Francis Mathy, Ph.D. The digital version was prepared, proofread, edited, and composed for PDF by Francis Britto, Ph.D.

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