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Blessed Sebastian Kimura (1565-1622)

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

(1) Seed that was Fruitful

It was in the fall of 1550. St. Francis Xavier had already spent more than a year in Kagoshima and had succeeded in establishing a small Christian community there. He was eager to get away, however, and to get to Miyako where he hoped to realize his Great Plan for the conversion of all Japan. The Plan itself failed, but the seeds he had scattered here and there en route brought forth fruit a hundred-fold. One of these seeds had fallen on good ground in Hirado.

It was in the middle or the latter part of September that the Saint and his companions landed in the port of Hirado. The Portuguese merchants who had been anchored there since June welcomed him with waving flags and the thundering salute of their cannons. Such a reception could not but make a deep impression on the young Daimyo, Matsura Takanobu, and on all of the people of Hirado and as a result thereof the simple Padre in his dusty cassock quickly became the cynosure of all eyes.

The Daimyo himself assumed the responsibility of host to the distinguished visitor and assigned to him the house of one of his retainers, a man named Kimura. Thus established, the Saint immediately began to carry on his apostolate. While still in Kagoshima, he had, with the help of his associates, translated his simple catechism into Japanese. He was, of course, no genius in the language, and the years he spent in Japan were too few to allow him to become proficient, but his zeal and confidence in God were such that he persevered in reading selections from 'his book' to all and sundry while Brother Fernandez, who knew more of the language, gave the necessary explanations.

Far more effective than his broken Japanese was the Saint's personality and example. Though he spent only a few weeks in Hirado, he was able during that short period to baptize about 100 converts of whom the first was his host, Anthony Kimura, along with his whole family.

Xavier himself never went back to Hirado but entrusted the care of the Christians there to Father Cosme de Torres. Stormy days were ahead for this little community due to the fact that the Daimyo, Matsura Takanobu, was far more interested in trade with the Portuguese than he was in their religion. Since his attitude changed repeatedly, mission work in his district made splendid progress at times but at other times it was severely curbed and on a number of occasions had to be stopped completely.

The Kimura family, however, was constant in spite of all reverses and provided the Church with a number of outstanding religious and martyrs, several of whom are venerated as Saints. Two of Anthony's grandsons entered the Society of Jesus, and one of them, Sebastian, was ordained as a priest, while Leonard, his cousin, who was also a printer, entered the Society as a Lay Brother. Both of these men died as martyrs, as did also the Blessed Anthony Kimura, a nephew of Sebastian. Blessed Mary Koteda, the wife of Thomas Koteda, who was beheaded on the same day as was Blessed Anthony, was also a Kimura by birth. "It would seem, therefore, that the Kimura family has given birth only to such children as remain faithful to the heroic virtue of their spiritual ancestor, St. Francis Xavier." Such was the estimate made of them by Father Majorica as he ended his report on their martyrdom in the Annual Letter for 1622.

(2) Preparing for Ordination

Sebastian Kimura was born in Hirado, apparently in 1565, and was baptized in infancy. It was his good fortune to be born and raised in a deeply religious family and it is not surprising, therefore, that he wished at an early age to devote himself completely to the service of the Church.

When he was only twelve years old, Sebastian became a *D juku* and from that time on he devoted all the rest of his life to the work of the Mission. These *D juku* 童塾 (co-residents or members of the household) were Japanese lay-helpers, similar to the so-called Oblates who were formerly received into the European monasteries, and intended to devote themselves forever to the religious life. A Japanese counter-part to the *D juku* were the *Koz* 小僧 (student bonzes), who were sent by their parents to the Buddhist monasteries in this country. The early Jesuits in Japan had accepted a considerable number of these *D juku*, who lived a life similar to that of religious, wore a black cassock (*D buku* 道服) and had their hair cut short after the manner of the student bonzes. Concerning the work of these lay helpers, the Vice-Provincial, Father Pasio, wrote in 1604 as follows: "These *D juku* are indispensable to the missionaries not only for the celebration of Mass, the administration of the sacraments, and the solemn observance of funerals and other ceremonies but also for preaching and religious instruction." They were, therefore, very much like our catechists, but they were mostly unmarried men and lived with the missionaries. Father Pasio in his report for 1604 tells us that they then numbered more than 150.

In the early days, it was practically impossible for the *D juku* to study for the priesthood. It is true that St. Francis Xavier had recognized the superior qualifications of the Japanese and had visions of a self-sufficient Church in Japan.

Since Japan is so well prepared that Christianity can spread by itself among the people here, every effort that is made in its behalf will be well worth while. I ardently hope, therefore, that you, Reverend and dear Father, will send saintly men to Japan, for of all the countries so far discovered, these people alone are

sufficiently well qualified to spread the faith among their own fellow-citizens though it must be admitted that even here great difficulties will have to be overcome. (January, 1552).

Unfortunately, Father Francis Cabral, who was named Superior in Japan in 1570, was of a different opinion in this matter and felt that the Japanese neophytes were not mature enough for the priesthood. Though he himself was deeply religious and possessed of a very apostolic spirit, Father Cabral, who had once served as an officer in the Portuguese colonial army, was narrow in outlook and never succeeded in adapting himself to the Japanese mentality. One big reason for this was that he had only a very imperfect knowledge of the language, which prevented him from getting access to the hearts of the Japanese. A few tragic failures and the unpleasant experience he had with a number of his lay helpers were sufficient to confirm him in his negative attitude. He thus became more and more distrustful, and as a result of this he was inclined to treat the Japanese lay brothers and lay helpers as servants or even as slaves. Things got so bad that there was real danger of an open break between the foreign missionaries and their Japanese collaborators.

Such were the conditions in the Japanese mission when Father Alexander Valignano arrived here as Visitor. Broad-minded and gifted with keen perception and a pleasing personality, Father Valignano was quick to see the danger of such a situation and provided the Church here with new directives which were of decisive importance for the future. Valignano's foresight provided financial security for the mission and streamlined its organization, but his greatest contribution was his policy of far-reaching adaptation which, though not originated by him, became, through his instrumentality, one of the guiding principles for the whole mission.

Valignano realized full-well how important it was to develop a native clergy along with outstanding lay leaders. For this purpose he worked out an elaborate educational program and proceeded as early as 1580 to establish two 'seminaries' for training in the humanities, one in Arima for southern Japan and the other at Azuchi on Lake Biwa for central Japan. According to his plan, these establishments were to serve as the groundwork for two colleges of higher learning, one for religious and clerical studies and the other for training in secular subjects. For the training of Japanese members of the Society of Jesus, a novitiate was also established in Usuki in 1581, and this was followed by the establishment of a college in Funai (Bungo) in 1583. Unhappily, Valignano's plan could not be carried out in full because of political disturbances and the Edict of Proscription which was published in 1587. The Kyushu seminary, however, which was maintained in spite of all difficulties until the outbreak of the general persecution in 1614, gave the Church many excellent Japanese workers, both religious and priests.



1. Alexander Valignano

It was in the Arima seminary that Sebastian Kimura received his earlier training. It is not known whether he was one of the first group of 22 seminarians who began their studies in October, 1580, in the former Buddhist monastery which the Daimyo of Arima had placed at their disposal. It is certain, however, that he studied the humanities there during the 1580's. The course of studies had been adapted to Japanese conditions and included not only Latin and Portuguese as the gateway to European learning, but Japanese literature and calligraphy also. Nor were sports neglected since Valignano in choosing a site for the seminary had not thought only of scenic beauty and healthfulness but had also wanted an ample playground and had likewise even installed a swimming place.

The establishment of the novitiate at Usuki in 1581 and the admission of six Japanese and six Portuguese to the Society of Jesus may well have stirred in Sebastian Kimura the desire to devote himself to the religious life. It is certain that he was admitted to the Society of Jesus in 1585 when he was about 19 years old, and we know that he spent the following months under the direction of the pious and experienced novice-master Father Pero Ramon. In the training of his novices, Father Ramon emphasized not only asceticism but apostolic zeal also, and he not only took them along with him on some of his apostolic journeys but sent them out to the neighboring missions to help out especially during Lent and Holy Week.

The peaceful tenor of life in the novitiate was rudely shattered when new wars broke out in Kyushu in 1586. Shimazu Yoshihisa, the Daimyo of Satsuma, seeing that the feudal lords in the northern part of the island were fighting among themselves, hoped that he might be able to get control of the whole island for himself. By October of that year, 1586, he was already master of Arima, Omura and Nagasaki, and in the month of December he entered upon a campaign against



2. Shimazu Yoshihisa



3. Kuroda Yoshitaka

Bungo. Seeing the danger that threatened them, the Jesuits at the Novitiate in Usuki and at the college in Funai (Ōita) now asked and found a refuge in Yamaguchi, thanks to the help and mediation of Kuroda Yoshitaka.

It was apparently at this time that Sebastian Kimura, who had just completed his year of novitiate, was sent to Kyushu to help out with preaching there. The mission in Kyushu where Vilela and Frois had met with so many difficulties was now enjoying a decade of unprecedented, peaceful expansion.

This happy growth was rudely interrupted, however, in the following year since Hideyoshi issued

his Edict of Proscription on July 24, 1587. He thereby branded the Christian religion as inimical to the State, ordered all of the missionaries to be banished from the realm, and called for the destruction of all of their churches. Thus it happened that the Kyō missionaries also were compelled to leave for Hirado whence they were to be sent back to India.

The Jesuits, happily, found ways and means of delaying the execution of Hideyoshi's decree, and though three of the clerics were sent to Macao to receive their priestly ordination, the other Jesuits succeeded in finding places of refuge with the Christian daimyos in Kyūshū. According to the annals of the mission for 1589, Sebastian Kimura spent part of his time in Mie and a part of it in Shimabara (Shirabara Peninsula).

Since large-scale mission work was impossible in the years immediately following upon the Edict of Proscription, the missionaries employed their enforced leisure in an attempt to provide the Japanese members of the Society with a more complete spiritual and intellectual training. The Vice-Provincial, Father Pero Gomez, who was himself a disciple of the famous Fonseca and had himself taught for a time at the University of Coimbra, personally composed three textbooks for the students to help them in the study of the natural sciences, philosophy and theology. An apologetical work dealing with the religions and the sects of Japan was also prepared with a view to helping the students in their apologetical work later.

Sebastian Kimura, meanwhile, was sent to the college in Amakusa, where he studied Japanese literature under the direction of the two Brothers, Fabian, a former bonze, and Cosmas. It is probable that he also began his philosophical and theological studies in Amakusa, for the records show that he was sent to Macao in 1595 (or 1596) to complete those studies and to receive his priestly ordination. The fact that he was the first Japanese to be chosen for such an assignment shows how pre-eminent he must have been among his associates both spiritually and intellectually.

After arriving in Macao, he went on with his studies and was ordained as a sub-deacon in 1598. Setting sail for Japan again in July, 1600, he arrived in Nagasaki on August 13 and was ordained as a deacon by Bishop Cerqueira either in September or in October.

The Church in Japan had been organized as a hierarchical entity since 1598, when Bishop Louis Cerqueira S.J. arrived here. Several others had been named and consecrated as Bishops of Japan, but with the exception of Bishop Martinez, none ever set foot on Japanese soil. Bishop Martinez had arrived in 1596 but was forced to leave in the following year because of the persecution and died en route before reaching Macao. With Bishop Cerqueira now in residence, it was no longer necessary to send the theological students abroad for the reception of Holy Orders.

With peace restored in Japan in 1600 after the battle of Sekigahara, the Church could look forward to a period of peaceful expansion, and the question of developing a native clergy was now pushed vigorously. The Jesuits, of course, already had a

seminary for their own candidates—it was situated in Nagasaki at that time—and Bishop Cerqueira now established a new seminary for the secular clergy in his own residence in that city. He began with eight seminarians, who were taught for the most part by the Bishop himself.



4. Battle of Sekigahara

An epoch-making event for the Church in this country was the ordination of the first two Japanese priests, which took place on an Ember Day (September 21 or 22), 1601, in Nagasaki. Those ordained were two Jesuits, Father Sebastian Kimura and another, who is known in the records as Louis and whose home was in Nagasaki. A few days after the ceremony, Father Pasio, then Vice-Provincial, wrote a report in which he described the ceremony as follows:

The Bishop has taken steps for the development of a (secular) clergy and has himself begun with the training of eight young seminarians, two of them Portuguese and the other six Japanese. They are also being taught moral theology in order that they may carry out their duties more effectively in the future. We hope that this venture will be successful since these are the first (secular) clerics of the Japanese Church.

Mention must be made also of the fact that two Jesuits were ordained as priests in September—the first Japanese ever raised to the priestly dignity. A sermon delivered before the assembled multitude just before the ceremony outlined the number and dignity of the various Holy Orders, the office and duties of priests and the great blessing that was conferred by God upon the Japanese people by the elevation of two of their own sons to this great dignity. So impressed were the faithful that many of them were moved to tears and after the ceremony there was an endless succession of guests come to thank the Bishop and the Superiors of the Society for the

unique blessing that had been conferred upon the Japanese people. (Letter of Sept. 30. 1601)

Sebastian Kimura was 36 years old at the time of his ordination. He had already spent more than 20 years in the service of the Church and was destined to work for two more decades before ending his career of service and love in martyrdom. While the records credit him with no outstanding achievements, they do reveal him as a “good and faithful servant” who did his duty to the utmost down to the time of his death. The slightly quaint sketch written concerning him after his martyrdom by Father Majorica describes his character as follows:

God adorned the soul of Sebastian with a wonderful spirit of simplicity and innocence, and in all his doings he aimed only to serve God and made little of everything else. He had an extraordinary love for poverty with the result that everybody, members the household as well as outsiders, looked upon him as a shining example of the contempt of the world and of everything that was merely human. He never omitted his accustomed prayers and meditation, no matter how crowded he was with work, and always carried a sand-clock with him so that he could always devote the scheduled time to prayer. His sermons were marked by a fiery zeal for the eradication of every evil. The love for God and the zeal for His Glory that animated him was such that it created a real thirst for the conversion of souls, which prompted him to work all day and sometimes all night in the service of others. Never did he give in to fatigue and never did he seek to escape from any danger that might threaten either his health or his life.

The earlier years of his missionary career were spent in northern Kyushu, and according to the records for 1603, it would seem that his first assignment was to his own home district since he was then listed as a missionary in Kawachi-no-ura in Hirado. In 1606 he was in Bungo, but according to the two *catologi* of the Society for 1607, “Father Sebastian of Hirado” was then in Katsusa in the Shimabara Peninsula. In 1613 he was stationed as preacher and confessor in Fudayama (in present day Saga-ken), which was then an out-mission affiliated with the college in Nagasaki.

(3) Martyrdom

February of the following year saw the outbreak of the general persecution, which also marked the beginning of the death struggle of the missions in Japan. Most of the foreign missionaries were deported to Manila or Macao in the course of that year, and only a few of them succeeded in carrying on their work in secret. Since even they were in constant danger of being recognized as foreigners in spite of every disguise, their work was greatly hampered and had to be carried on for the most part under cover of darkness. So much the greater, therefore, was the responsibility that rested upon the Japanese priests, many of whom rendered sterling service during these trying years, and most of them achieved the ultimate triumph of martyrdom after a life of hardships and difficulties. Sebastian Kimura, who was the first among them to be ordained, was also the first to receive the crown of martyrdom.

It seems that he remained in Nagasaki after the outbreak of the persecution to carry on the work of the apostolate there, and it is possible that he did so with the consent of the local governor. This man, Hasegawa Gonroku, is often referred to in the annals of the persecution as a cruel tyrant and son of an apostate, but in point of fact he tried to avoid bloodshed as much as possible and took action against the Christians only when formal charges had been preferred against them. Even then, he not infrequently sent the accused a secret warning so as to enable them to make good their escape.

According to the records for 1620, Father Kimura had a companion in Nagasaki in the person of Father Anthony Ishida, who had been released from a prison in Hiroshima at the time of an amnesty in the preceding year. The records also tell us that Father Kimura was permitted on February 9, 1620, to pronounce his final and solemn vows as a *coadjutor spiritualis* in the Society.

It was on June 29, 1621, the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul, that Father Kimura was betrayed by a Korean woman, a slave. Thousands of Koreans had been brought Japan during Hideyoshi's tragic campaign and were at this time trying to eke out a meager living in Japan either as servants or as slaves. Though the Portuguese also were involved in this slave trade, the Church never approved of it, and, in fact, came out against it on a number of occasions, but the most she could do in the end was to urge the Portuguese and Japanese Christians to treat the unfortunate captives in a truly humane way. In the one year, 1596, no less than 300 of these unfortunate Koreans were baptized in Nagasaki alone.

One of these Korean slaves, a woman, was living in the home of the Christian where Father Kimura and one of the *D juku* had found a refuge. Although she herself was a Christian, she was strongly tempted by the bounty which had been offered for the betrayal of a priest, as also by the hope that she might in this way regain her own freedom, and she therefore went to the police to tell them where they could catch Father Kimura. Both priest and *D juku* were thereupon taken captive, while their host was also arrested and suffered the loss of all of his possessions.

When the host's property was about to be confiscated, he intended at first to list this slave as one of his possessions, and if he had done so, she would not only have forfeited her chance for emancipation but would have become the slave of the *fiscus* and would have found herself, therefore, in an incomparably worse condition. In the end, however, her Catholic master refrained from such a vengeful proceeding and asked his relatives to do what they could to have her freed since it was to her that he owed his opportunity of offering up both his property and his life for Christ.

The captives were taken to Suzuta near Omura, where Father Spinola along with several Dominicans and Franciscans and a number of Christians had already been penned up in a narrow prison and were waiting for martyrdom. With the new arrivals, the number of prisoners in this one cell, which was only 16 feet wide and 24 feet long, rose to 32. The life which they led there has already been described in the earlier sketch concerning the life of St. Charles Spinola.

In this prison Father Kimura waited for a whole year for his sentence. Finally, orders were received from Edo to the effect that all of the Christians in the prisons of Omura and Nagasaki were to be put to death. Overjoyed at this news, these 'prisoners for Christ' joined in singing various psalms as they left their prison on September 9 and walked down to the shore whence a ship was to bring them to Nagayo on the other side of the Bay of Omura.

Mounted on horse-back and guarded by a strong escort of soldiers, they made their way across the mountains from Nagayo to Urakami. Large numbers of the Christians lined up along the road to bid them a final farewell, but due to the strength of the escort, they found it impossible to come near enough to the prisoners to speak with them.

In spite of all the obstacles, however, one of the Christians, Leo Sukezaemon, succeeded in pressing forward to the mount of Father Kimura on the pretense that he wanted to arrange the priest's stirrups properly, and he was thus able to ask for the priest's final blessing. He took this occasion also to cut a piece of leather out of the shoe of the priest, and this he wished to keep as a precious relic. His hardihood, however, cost him his life, for he was arrested and executed together with his whole family in the mountains of Omura on September 12.



5. Martyrdom of Kimura and Companions

It was evening when the prisoners reached Urakami, and here they were locked up in a bamboo pen where they were to spend the night in the open. Since it began to rain, however, they were transferred to a small house in the neighborhood.

On the following morning, three of the Christians received permission to speak to the prisoners. One of them was a former catechist of Father Spinola, and it was from him that they learned that they had been condemned to death by fire and that preparations were already being made for their execution in Nagasaki on the same hill where the Twenty-Six Martyrs had been put to death on February 5, 1597.

This hill, then a small peninsula jutting out into the bay and now known as Nishizaka—it is just opposite Nagasaki railroad station—had been cordoned off completely by the police and soldiers. The thousands who had come to witness the martyrdom were standing on the gentle slope of the Matsuyama just outside the restricted area. At the tip of the peninsula and within the cordoned area, a platform had been erected for Suke-dayu, who represented the Governor of Nagasaki. In front of this



6. Sebastian Kimura

platform two separate areas had been fenced off with bamboo poles, one for those who were to be beheaded and the other for those who were to die by fire.

The details concerning the execution have already been given in the biographical sketch concerning Father Spinola, and it will suffice here to quote the notes concerning Father Kimura's death as given in the Annual Letter composed by Father Majorica (Macao, Sept. 30, 1623):

As they approached the execution grounds, they found the place filled with an enormous crowd of people who had come from Nagasaki and the surrounding districts to witness the spectacle. The shouts, the noise and the tumult raised by this host of Christians and non-Christians were such that it was impossible to hear the pious discourses of the servants of God. Father Sebastian, whose face was suffused with supernal joy, was able, nevertheless, to raise his voice sufficiently to tell the people that he would be glad if he could reveal to them at least a small portion of the immeasurable joy that flooded his heart as the hour approached in which he could die for the Saviour. He added that the sight of the things that had been prepared for his execution was the source of inexpressible delight for him. Many other things he added to this with a joyful countenance, but the noise and the tumult made by the crowd were so great that it was impossible to understand what he said.

At the moment when the sacrifice was about to begin, Father Spinola intoned the Psalm *Laudate Dominum Omnes Gentes*, and all of the other victims joyfully took up the refrain while the by-standers wept in pity or in a spirit of holy envy.

A circle of fires was now enkindled, but the last words of these great lovers of Christ could not be heard because of the cries and the weeping of the Christians. The fires had been set at a distance of about 25 feet from the victims in order that death might be delayed and the bodies of the martyrs might be destroyed by slow torture, being roasted rather than burned. The heat thus penetrated their being slowly and consumed them amid indescribable torture. The martyrs were thus a spectacle of courageous and invincible suffering unto heaven and earth—a prey being slowly destroyed by the flames. With their eyes raised to heaven they remained immovable as they fervently offered up to the Divine Majesty the fragrant odor of their holocaust.

The fiery torture lasted for about two hours as the martyrs died one after the other. The last one to expire was Father Sebastian, who suffered longer than any of the others. His courage and composure were such that everybody realized that they could have come only from heaven, and his example was praised even more highly than that of the others.

More explicit details concerning the heroism of Father Kimura are contained in the short biographical sketch sent along with the above report by Father Majorica:

Having arrived at the scene of torture, he was unable to contain the joy that filled his heart. It is not surprising then that, replete with heavenly delight, he showed such wonderful constancy in the midst of the cruelest torture. With the heat and the flames coming nearer and nearer, he stood there utterly motionless for fully two hours until the moment of death had arrived. At the last moment he knelt down, bowing his head profoundly as if he wished to welcome death in the manner in which his countrymen receive an honored guest. Even non-Christians saw in his conduct a proof of the greatness of his invincible soul and admitted that only the strength received from heaven could have enabled the priest to remain erect and motionless in the midst of such torture.

The Christians tried to recover the remains of the martyrs, but this was impossible because of the strict guard maintained by the police. In order to prevent them from showing any respect to the sacred remains, the Governor had the bodies burned completely and had the ashes scattered in the sea. He even went so far as to have the soil which had been moistened by the blood of those who were beheaded gathered up in sacks and thrown into the sea also.

Sebastian Kimura along with 204 other victims of the great persecution in Japan was solemnly beatified by Pope Pius IX on July 7, 1867.

Reference

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7. Fr. Cieslik

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