

# The Martyrs' Hill Nagasaki

## *1. February 5, 1597*

**Diego R. Yuki, S.J.**

(A Booklet from Francis Britto's *All About Francis Xavier*)

February 5, 1597. Very few history books will mention this date, although it should appear in all of them. It opens a new chapter in the history of the Japanese Church, a chapter written with blood by the 26 Martyrs on the rock of this hill in Nagasaki. It only took a few hours to write this page, but the message is still alive, after almost four hundred years.



1. Martyrs' Memorial, Nagasaki

Let us first introduce the main characters in the play. The one to pass sentence on the martyrs is Toyotomi Hideyoshi, better known as Taikosama, absolute ruler of Japan and living at Osaka Castle. On Nishizaka Hill, Terazawa Hazaburo, brother of the governor of Nagasaki, performs the execution. Leading actors in this drama are the 26 men doomed to die, worn out after a grueling thirty day march. And with them, sharing the tension of their last hours, the common folk of Nagasaki, Jesuit missionaries and Spanish seamen, traders from Macao, soldiers, executioners.

It is ten o'clock in the morning. The place, the high-way to Tokitsu and Omura, next to the gate of Nagasaki. All around us the surging crowds, a swelling rumble of distant thunder, tense with uneasiness and expectation.

Mt. Mubonzan—or Kompira as it is called today—towers over Nagasaki City, coming down to meet her in a descending pattern of undulating hills. Nishizaka, the lowest hill, resembled a galleon's prow jutting into Nagasaki Bay.

The road to Omura cut right through the hill. On that day the traveler from Nagasaki could see a field of wheat on his left. Part of the hill was facing the city and Nagasaki Bay, the other looked out on a murky place, a ravine scattered with human remains, a haunt for wild dogs and birds of prey. Common criminals were executed there.

It was in such a place that the martyrs' crosses had been hoisted but some influential Portuguese prevailed on Terazawa Hazaburo, the Governor's brother not to deal with the

martyrs as common criminals and suggested the field of wheat on the other side of the road as a better place for execution. Terazawa Hazaburo was happy to oblige.

Terazawa was already there waiting for the 26 condemned to die. It was a painful task to perform. One of the martyrs Paul Miki was a close friend of his and he had often listened to his sermons. These men were guilty of no crime, and Terazawa Hazaburo knew it. Therefore much as he was afraid of Taikosama, he was willing to make concessions on minor points. One of them was to allow two Jesuits, Frs. Pasio and Rodriguez, to minister to the martyrs.

It was half past ten when the long procession finally reached Nishizaka. First, an escort of soldiers pushing their way through the waiting crowds. After them, the martyrs, divided into three groups each of them headed by Franciscans saying the rosary. They had been walking all the way from Urakami—the old road is still in use at some places—their hands tightly bound, their feet leaving a trail of blood along the road.

Let us have a close look at them. They had their left ears cut off a month ago, just before leaving Kyoto. It has been a long Way of the Cross, renewed every morning, in the heart of winter, a month of spiritual growth. All along the way, the wind in the pine-trees has been suggesting the old chant of the psalm: "He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing." It is true. They have been sowing the seed of the gospel all the way from Kyoto. Sowing it with their mouths, which could never be chained, with their meekness of heart when blessing their torturers, with their songs of praise to God while struggling forward through the snow. A glance is enough to show that they are neither criminals nor traitors. They are only sowers.

A few witnesses will help us to recreate the scene. Fr. Francis Blanco was bleeding from his left ear. Fr. Peter Bautista kept on walking with vigorous steps, eager to reach Golgotha. He did not seem even to notice the wounds in his feet. Br. Philip of Jesus looked pale and emaciated.

A few onlookers managed to come near the martyrs and exchange a few words with them. Somebody asked Br. Francis of St. Michael for his rosary as a memento. The good Brother could only apologize: "Sorry, wait a little more. I have not finished yet."

Francis Rodriguez Pinto, a Portuguese born in India, was greeted by Br. Gonzalo Garcia with these words: "My good friend, God be with you. I'm going to heaven. A hearty hug to Fr. Sebastian Gonzalez on my behalf."

The emaciated face of Br. Philip of Jesus broke into a smile. With a touch of humor he tried to comfort one of his friends: "The galleon San Felipe [St. Philip] was lost so that Friar Philip may be saved."

The martyrs know that each has his own cross, because they have been made to measure. Fr. Ganzalo, the first to arrive, goes straight to one of the crosses: "Is this mine?" It is not. Taken to another cross, he kneels down and embraces it. The others, one after another, start doing the same. "That was quite a sight, the way Br. Philip was embracing his cross. . ." comments one of the witnesses.

The 26 crosses were already on the ground, a carpet of light green blades of wheat appearing above the surface of the ground. They had been neatly sawn and tailored. Most of them were over two meters high, with two crosspieces and a prop where the victim would sit astride.

After the arrival of the last martyr, the escort joined the other guards, trying to keep the crowds at a distance. One by one the prisoners were fixed to the poles. No nails were used. Hands and feet and neck were kept in position with iron rings and a rope around the waist kept the victim tightly bound to the cross. For Fr. Peter Bautista, iron rings would not be enough. "Nail them down, brother," he asked the executioner, stretching out his hands.

Fixing Paul Miki to the cross proved to be unexpectedly difficult. The Japanese Jesuit was too short and his feet would not reach the lower rings. Under the pressure of time, the executioner had to do without the rings, and strapped Miki's chest to the cross with a piece of linen. When he stepped on the martyr to tighten up the knot, a missionary standing in the crowd could not help himself. "Let him do his job, Father," the martyr said assaugingly. "It does not really hurt."

Once the martyrs had been tied to the crosses, all twenty-six were lifted simultaneously. A sudden thump dropped them into the waiting holes, sending a shock of pain through the victims' bodies.

## 2. The Cross Becomes a Pulpit



2. Xavier preaching in Kagoshima

All of a sudden, Nishizaka had grown a new forest, a long row of 26 trees spanning the length from the highway to the sea, at intervals of two or three yards. The crosses were facing Nagasaki, the nearer houses being within a stone's throw.

Far away one could see the Jesuit College, where Bishop Martins was staying at the time with most of the Jesuit missionaries. Nagasaki Bay lay to the right, with the San Antonio—ensign ship of

captain Rui Mendes de Figueiredo, first commander of Macao—anchored there. To the left, St.Lazarus' Hospital—today the Buddhist temple Honrenji—and filling the hill to capacity, like the crowds in a Roman theater, more than four thousand Christians crying and praying, mesmerized by the crosses, their eyes tense with anxiety.

Anthony of Nagasaki could see his parents in the front row. They could not control their tears, and the boy told them a few words of encouragement. He then joined his fellow martyrs in a chorus of orchestrated prayer, where each had his part to play. Br. Gonzalo had started to say the *Miserere*. Fr. Martin of the Ascension broke into thanksgiving with a vigorous *Benedictus*: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people . . .” Others sang the “Te Deum” and the “Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus” echoed across the hill. The children contributed their own refrain with the psalms learned at catechism: “Praise, O ye servants of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord . . . From the rising of the sun unto the going down of the same, the Lord's name is to be praised.” Fr. Francis Blanco was leading the singing, the rest were singing too, an orchestrated oratorio in which prayer, hope, faith and anticipated triumph had been blended together. Time was running short for words; the heart had to take over.

Frs. Pasio and Rodriguez go round the crosses comforting the martyrs. By accident they get some of the blows intended for the pressing crowds.

John of Goto had taken his first vows as a Jesuit that very morning, at the lepers' hospital of Urakami. He still reflects in his eyes the glittering sea of his native Goto Islands. Back again in Nagasaki, where he first heard the calling of Christ, he is ready to offer up to God a life without blame, a heart which is young, full of promise and bursting with joy. A short time ago he said good-bye to his old father, eager himself to give his son to the Lord. Now it is time to turn to his fellow martyrs and comfort them. Not that they need it, it is John that cannot control his heart. Approaching his cross, one of the missionaries exhorts him to keep firm. Heaven is just close at hand. “Do not worry, Father,” answers John with an engaging smile. “I'm quite aware of that.”

Next to John is Louis Ibaraki, only twelve years old. When somebody mentions heaven to him, the child strives to get loose from the ropes, eager to fly into the open, a captive bird longing for freedom. His high-pitched soprano rising above the humming clamor of the crowd: "Paradise, paradise . . . Jesus, Mary!"

The sentence of death has been attached to the shaft of a lance. Paul Miki can see it from his cross:

As these men came from the Philippines under the guise of ambassadors, and chose to stay in Miyako preaching the Christian law, which I have severely forbidden all these years, I come to decree that they be put to death, together with the Japanese that have accepted that law.

Paul was still the same composed man he always was, in full control of himself, always alert to the smallest details. His instincts as a preacher made him take a cue from the last sentence for a final profession of faith. He straightened himself on the cross, looked at the crowds and said in a loud voice: "All of you who are here, please, listen to me. "

One could feel the weight of silence on the hill. The same manly, vigorous voice thundered again:

I did not come from the Philippines, I am a Japanese by birth, and a brother of the Society of Jesus. I have committed no crime, and the only reason why I am put to death is that I have been teaching the doctrine of Our Lord Jesus Christ. I am very happy to die for such a cause, and see my death as a great blessing from the Lord. At this critical time, when, you can rest assured that I will not try to deceive you, I want to stress and make it unmistakably clear that man can find no way to salvation other than the Christian way.

Witnesses tell us that some of the guards kept edging nearer to Paul's cross, spellbound by his words. A really inspiring motif, this picture of the soldiers tensely clutching their lances, edging nearer to the cross, as if bewitched by their victim.

Paul saw them. He also saw Terazawa and the executioners. For all of them he had a final message:

The Christian law commands that we forgive our enemies and those who have wronged us. I must therefore say here that I forgive Taikosama. I would rather have all the Japanese become Christians.

Paul fell silent. His task as a preacher had been completed. His martyrdom gave the lie to those bent on tarnishing his reputation. He died a Christian, a Jesuit, a Japanese, a proof that one could adhere to the samurai's code of honor even though faithful to Christ to the extreme of death itself. He then turned to his companions, the ones nearer to him, exchanged a few words with them and greeted a friend he could identify among the

crowd. And then lifting up his heart to heaven: Lord into thy hands I commend my spirit. Come to meet me ye Saints of God . . .”

St. Martin was singing the “Glory be to the Father” of his second psalm: “O praise the Lord, all ye nations . . . ,” a truly missionary psalm. Br. Gonzalo was saying the Our Father. The rest alternated between songs and prayers, words of encouragement and supplication. Soon the whole hill—bystanders included—was ablaze with acclamations: “Jesus, Mary . . . Jesus Mary” chanted all in unison.

But not all. One of the martyrs, Br. Philip of Jesus, could not sing. The sitting prop in his cross was too low, and the whole weight of his body hung from the ring around his neck, choking him to death. With the little strength he had left, Philip invoked three times the name of Jesus. Terazawa saw him dying. It was too late to fix the cross now, but he did not want to prolong the martyr’s agony. He gave an order and the two executioners put an end to the sufferings of the Mexican martyr. A final spasm on the cross, and twin jets of blood gushed out of the martyr’s chest. Far away in his native Mexico his mother was preparing a set of vestments for his first Mass. The fig tree in the garden of his parents’ home had suddenly grown new leaves.

The death of Philip signals the start for the executions There are four men to carry them out, two for each end of the rows. Their lances have long, sword-like blades protected with sheaths. After taking positions, they remove the scabbards and stand at attention. A guttural yell, a sudden thrust, and the two spears cross each other in the chest of the martyr. Sometimes the blades come through the body at the shoulders. The death is almost immediate. If the victim does not die, another thrust to the neck will give the coup de grace.

As the executioners gradually approach the center, the voices of the martyrs are silenced, but the clamor of the crowds grows in a frenzy. “I heard a uproar from the crowds when the martyrs were being executed” says Bishop Martins.

When Fr. Blanco’s turn came, a spasm made him contract one of his arms and his hand broke loose from the ring. With a supreme effort he pushed it back into position. Now he could die a crucified martyr like Jesus Christ. When Fr. Martin was lanced, the shaft broke loose from the spear, stuck in the martyr’s chest. The executioner climbed up on the cross, thrust his hands into the wound and unstuck the spear. Without the slightest movement, Fr Martin kept waiting for the final blow.

The last to die was Fr Bautista. All through the executions he has been motionless, ecstatic and absorbed in prayer. One of the boys Anthony kept asking what hymn he should sing next, but Fr. Bautista was not listening anymore. Now, seeing the lances dripping blood and the executioners in front of him, Fr. Bautista opened his lips for a final prayer: “Lord, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” and became motionless again.

Not even a quiver when the spears broke his chest. Blood gushed profusely, but he gave the impression of being still alive, and the rumor spread that he had not died on the cross. Some people watched him move a few days after martyrdom others even saw him say Mass at St. Lazarus.

Fr. Martin of Leon, O.P, a passenger on the ill-fated San Felipe, arrived in Nagasaki a few weeks after the event and went to see the martyrs still hanging from their crosses. There he was, that holy prelate, a major captain on the battlefield. To see him that way filled you with awe.

The Portuguese and the Japanese Christians attending the executions could not be kept in check any longer. Breaking through the guard, they pressed forward to the crosses and started soaking pieces of cloth in the martyrs blood gathering lumps of the earth sanctified by them, tearing up their habits and kimonos for holy relics. The guards kept on beating them, pulling them away. The blood of the wounded mixed with that of the martyrs. Order was finally established, and Terazawa positioned guards all around the hill, with strict orders not to allow anybody near the crosses. After completing his task Terazawa withdrew from the hill. Many could notice that even the tough soldier was crying.

### ***3. Conquerors of Death***

It is sunset already. The last rays of the sun leave a golden halo on Mt. Inasa and bend down to reach the martyrs' crosses. There they stop, smoothly caressing the broken bodies in a chiaroscuro that sets them up into bold relief. They seem to be testing if the martyrs are really dead, because they all look asleep, like tired travelers resting after a long journey.

Not even one has missed his appointment with death. All twenty six are here, their arms stretched out in a brotherly embrace, their lips half open with the last joyful song, the last loving prayer they could finish.

The twenty-six martyrs . . . Curiously enough, all the contemporary writers give the same careful description of the crosses. The order is given here starting from the end farthest from the sea.



**3. Paul Miki, S.J.**

1. ST. FRANCIS, a carpenter from Kyoto, resolute and loyal, who insisted on following the martyrs until he was arrested and could join the group. Some of the chronicles call him Adauctus, after a similar case in the early church.

2. ST. COSMAS TAKEYA, a sword-maker from Owari. He had been baptized by the Jesuits and worked as a catechist with the Franciscans in Osaka.

3. ST. PETER SUKEJIRO, a young man from Kyoto, sent by Fr. Organtino to care for the martyrs on their way to Nagasaki. His devotion to duty secured for him the

grace of joining them.

4. ST. MICHAEL KOZAKI, a native of Ise, 46 years old and a bow maker. He was already a Christian when he first met the friars and his skill as a carpenter was a great help in building the Franciscan convents and churches of Kyoto and Osaka. He also trusted them with something he treasured over everything else: his own son Thomas.



**4. James Kisai, S.J.**

5. ST. JAMES KISAI, a Jesuit lay brother, a man of deep devotion to the Passion of Christ. Sixty-four years of age, he had known a life of hardships, and excelled for his kindness and peace of heart. Born in Okayama, he had been in charge of the guests at the Jesuit residence.

6. ST. PAUL MIKI had been born in Tsunokuni district, the son of a brave soldier, Miki Handayu. Educated as a boy in the Jesuit schools of Azuchi and Takatsuki, he had witnessed the ups and downs of the Church in Japan. Paul Miki treasured his vocation to spread the gospel over everything else, and was near being ordained as a priest. The best preacher in the country, he fell silent when the executioner's blow shattered his heart. He was only thirty years of age.

7. ST PAUL IBARAKI, born in Owari, of a samurai family. Baptized by the Jesuits, his faith went through a time of testing, and only in his final years could he find peace of soul, thanks to the Franciscans in Kyoto. He led a poor man's life near the Franciscan convent of Our Lady of the angels, running a small sake brewery to support his family, and could still afford to help others poorer than himself. He was also native as a preacher.

8. ST. JOHN OF GOTO, a portrait of innocence and joy, a short life of 19 years fully used in the service of God. Born in the Goto islands from parents already Christian, he studied with the Jesuits in Nagasaki, and then at the Jesuit school in Shiki(Amakusa), a training center for catechists who also help the missionaries as painters or musicians. His next post was Osaka where he worked under Fr. Morejon until the Lord offered him the crown of martyrdom.

9. ST. LOUIS IBARAKI, the youngest of the group, only 12 years old. He had been born in Owari and was the nephew of Paul Ibaraki and Leo Karasumaru. An endearing boy who kept singing and laughing when they cut off one of his ears, all through the long march to Nagasaki and on the cross too, he proved his mettle when he refused pointblank to be cajoled into apostatizing. "We have little Louis with us—wrote Fr. Francis Blanco on he eve of martyrdom—and he is so full of courage and in such high spirits that it astonishes everybody.



5. Louis Ibaraki

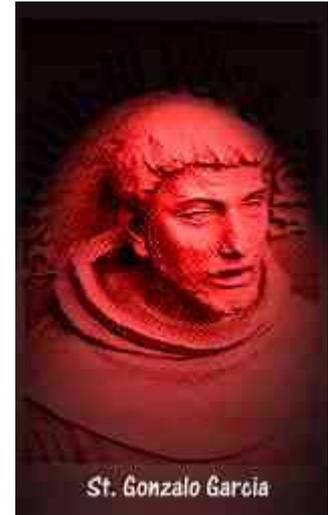
10. ST. ANTHONY, born Nagasaki of a Chinese father and Japanese mother. An artless boy 13 years old, he had received his first education at the Jesuit school in Nagasaki and went then to the Franciscan convent in Osaka. The bitterest thing the boy was to see was his mother crying not far from his cross. He died a singing martyr.

11. ST. PETER BAPTIST. Superior of the Franciscan Mission in Japan, former ambassador from Spain, a father to the poor lepers, a captain of martyrs. From San Esteban del Valle (Avila, Spain) where he was born, to Nishizaka Hill, his life of 50 years is too rich in merits and holiness to be summarized here.

12. ST. MARTIN OF THE ASCENSION, born in Guipuzcoa, Spain. He was 30 years old, His purity of heart was extraordinary, and this may be a clue to his fondness for singing. Told by his superiors to be ready to go to the Philippines, he went to Seville. In the old Franciscan convent he used to spend the nights in prayer, taking turns with another friar. His missionary work in Japan (Osaka) was short lived, but his death was most outstanding.

13. ST. PHILIP OF JESUS, a Mexican, 24 years old. A vase of sterling silver, which God knew how to emboss. His young life had been a maze of conflicting roads, a contest of strength between Christ and Philip, neither of the two willing to concede defeat. In the end Christ had emerged the victor, and Philip is now anxious to make up for the lost time: he will be the first to die.

14. ST. GONZALO GARCIA, 40 years, born in the remote Bazain, (India) of a Portuguese father and an Indian mother. A catechist with the Jesuits and a trader in Macao, he entered the Franciscans as a lay brother, and was the right hand of St. Peter Baptist. He spoke Portuguese with a stutter, but when he confronted Hideyoshi, absolute ruler of Japan, his Japanese came out without a hitch. He is the patron saint of Bombay.



6. Gonzalo Garcia, S.J.

15. ST. FRANCIS BLANCO was born in Monterrey (Galicia, Spain) and came to Japan with St. Martin of the Ascension. Like him, he had also traveled on foot to Seville before boarding a ship for Mexico and proceeding to the Philippines. A quiet, soft spoken man and extremely intelligent.

16. ST. FRANCIS OF ST MICHAEL, 53, born in La Parrilla (Valladolid, Spain). He was so unassuming in life that he well deserves a special eulogy after death. "Seeing his good heart, physical strength and simplicity, he was accepted into the Order as a lay brother," say an old chronicler appropriately. Br. Francis had his own brand of humor too: "The bell for dinner will toll tomorrow," he used to answer when asked to break his fast. When he was in Manila he enjoyed breathing "the winds from Japan" but once he set foot on the Japanese mission he had to go through a dark night of the soul feeling that he was useless and had better return to the Philippines. He died in silence, just as he had lived.

17. ST. MATTHIAS. We know nothing about his age, place of birth or date of baptism, only his name and the reason why he joined the martyrs. The soldiers were looking for another Matthias who could not be found. Our saint offered himself and the soldiers gladly accepted him. God accepted him too.

18. ST. LEO KARASUMARU, from Owari, younger brother of St. Paul Ibaraki. a bonze in his youth, he was converted by Japanese Jesuit and always led an exemplary life. When the Franciscans arrived, he became their main support. When it as a matter of building a church, buying a piece of land or running a hospital, the friars could always count on Leo. A zealous catechist and a man of prayer, he was a leading figure among the lay martyrs.



7. Matthias

19. ST. BONAVENTURE. His young life bears the seal of inscrutable ways of Providence. Baptized as an infant, he soon lost his mother, and his stepmother sent him to a Buddhist monastery. One day he found out about his baptism, and came to visit the Franciscan convent in Kyoto, his place of birth, eager to have further information. There he found again his peace of soul. On his way to the cross he prayed for his father's faith and the conversion of his stepmother.

20. ST. THOMAS KOZAKI. With the rugged manners of a country boy, this fourteen year old had a beautiful heart, much like the Pearls of his native Ise. He was already Christian when he became acquainted with the Franciscans while helping his father as a carpenter, and stayed at the Franciscan convent once the job was finished. He was straightforward, unhesitant and totally committed in his service to God. His farewell letter to his mother, written from Mihara castle is one precious stone more in the saga of the 26 Martyrs.

21. ST. JOACHIM SAKAKIBARA, 40 year old, a native of Osaka. In gratitude for his baptism, received from a catechist when he was gravely ill, Joachim helped out in the construction of the Franciscan convent in Osaka and stayed on here as a cook. A man of very strong character, he excelled for his kindness and readiness to serve, a fitting preparation for the martyrs' crown.

22. ST FRANCIS. Born in Kyoto, 48 years old. He was a physician and a zealous preacher. While still a pagan he used to wear a rosary that had belonged to Otomo Sorin, the Christian lord of Bungo. Divine Providence brought him into contact with the Franciscans, and after his Baptism and the conversion of his wife, he lived next door to the Franciscan convent, treating the sick without pay, and leading them to Christ.

23. ST THOMAS DANGI. A druggist, with an extremely violent disposition, he mellowed with God's help into a kindhearted catechist. A Christian of many years, he opened his shop next to the Franciscan convent of Our Lady of the Angels, and while selling medicine he also took care to show the customers the way to heaven.

24. ST. JOHN KINUYA, 28 years old, from Kyoto. A silk weaver and trader, he had recently been baptized and moved his shop next to the convent. His silk fabrics, smooth and brightly colored, expressed the quality of John's prayers and love. And God graciously accepted John's life of work and prayer.

25. ST. GABRIEL, a native of Ise, 19 years old, another young life ungrudgingly offered to God. Converted by Br. Gonzalo, he made quick progress in his way to God, overcoming all kinds of obstacles. Gabriel worked as a catechist.

26. ST. PAUL SUZUKI, 49 years old, from Owari. His cross was at the end of the row and his voice, all fire and zeal, could be heard unimpeded. He had received baptism 13 years before. A man of impetuous character—and many a scar on his body to testify to that—he excelled for his apostolic zeal and was one of the best catechists helping the Franciscans. He was also in charge of St Joseph's Hospital in Kyoto.

Night is closing down on the hill, shrouded again in peace. It is a strange peace, joyous and painful at the same time. The guards have already retired. Only the biting cold and the bodies still on their crosses remain on the hill. And yet, one can feel tension in the air, as if a thousand eyes kept a tense vigil through darkness and silence.

All of a sudden, the hill is awake again: a silent row of shadows keeps moving from cross to cross with a murmur of prayer. Bishop Martins heads the pilgrimage, giving the support of his authority to the popular veneration of the martyrs. Other missionaries follow suit, and after them the lords of Omura and Arima, who had only known of the martyrdoms when the sentence had already been carried out. Christian soldiers on their way to Korea also come to pay their respects, together with humble peasants of nearby villages.

The bodies of the martyrs had to be clothed again. Their dresses had been cut out to pieces by the Christians, eager to have relics. Terazawa cordoned off the hill with a bamboo hedge and reinforced the guard, but to no avail. During the day, many Christians would go up the path seemingly on private business, and then stop midway and not move until forced to by the guards. At night, small boats moored by the cliff, shrouded in silence. All Nagasaki had its eyes fixed on Nishizaka, the Martyrs' Hill.

Writes Fr. Francis Calderon, a Jesuit missionary and former Superior of St. Paul Miki:

Although 37 days have passed since they were crucified, we still have before our eyes, here in this harbor-town of the (Portuguese) ship where I am writing this letter, this holy display of the martyrs' bodies, still on their crosses.

And the last glance of the stranded crew of the San Felipe, when they finally managed to leave Japan, was directed at the magnificent spectacle at the hill: "We left Langasac

(Nagasaki) for Manila, leaving in that place the 26 holy martyrs, each of them on his cross at the seaside, near the sea, just about a hundred yards inland.”

The martyrs were still preaching. The 26 men had no bodies of their own any more. Their bodies had become one with their crosses, and refused to part with them. The crosses they had so eagerly longed for, loved and embraced while dying. They had deep eyes, those martyrs, and could see the beauty of the cross, see the cross as the key to eternal life, as the turning point where death opens out to resurrection. They trusted Christ's words that the day He was lifted up from the earth He would draw everything to Himself, and resolved to make those words the motto of their lives.

Their deaths definitely had a shock effect, but not the one intended by Taikosama. The final result was to strengthen the Christians' faith. Now every Christian in Nagasaki was dreaming of dying a martyr. Writes Fr. Calderon in the letter quoted before:

I can tell Your Reverence that these deaths have been a special gift of Divine Providence to this church. Up to now our persecutor had not gone to the extreme of shedding Christian blood. Our teaching therefore had been mostly theoretical, without the corroborating evidence of dying for our Christian faith. But now, seeing by experience these remarkable and most extraordinary deaths, it is beyond belief how much our new Christians have been strengthened, how much encouragement they have received to do the same themselves.

The people of Nagasaki wanted to make the hill a place of cult and build a church there. This they could not do, but their ingenuity and love for the martyrs found another way to honor them. The “Holy Martyrs,” or the “Martyrs' Hill,” as the hillock between the highway and the sea came to be known, had by all means to keep alive the memory of the twenty-six crucified on February 5, 1596. In 1598 an envoy from the Philippines was authorized by Toyotomi Hideyoshi to gather the last remains of the martyrs and their crosses. Only the holes of the crosses remained, and they too would soon be covered with mud and disappear. Before it was too late, the Christians opened the holes again, and planted a tree in each of them. They were evergreens with beautiful flowers, perhaps the red camellias typical of this region. Right in the center, they also built a big cross. On Friday nights they used to come in big groups, decorate the trees with candles, and to their light pray and sing to the martyrs. Every year on the martyrs' anniversary the place was bustling with pilgrims.

This situation continued until 1619, when the general persecution of Tokugawa Ieyasu was already in full swing. The axe of the executioner did not spare the martyrs' trees, but they were no longer necessary. The hill was blooming again with the blood of new martyrs; it was ablaze once more with the sacrificial pyres of the many children Nagasaki was offering up to God.

It is already three hundred and eighty-two years since the fateful event, two hundred and seventy-six of them under the sign of persecution. During this period of trial Nagasaki

went on contributing its quota of martyrs. We know the names of more than 650 Christians and missionaries put to death on this hill of Nishizaka and its surroundings.

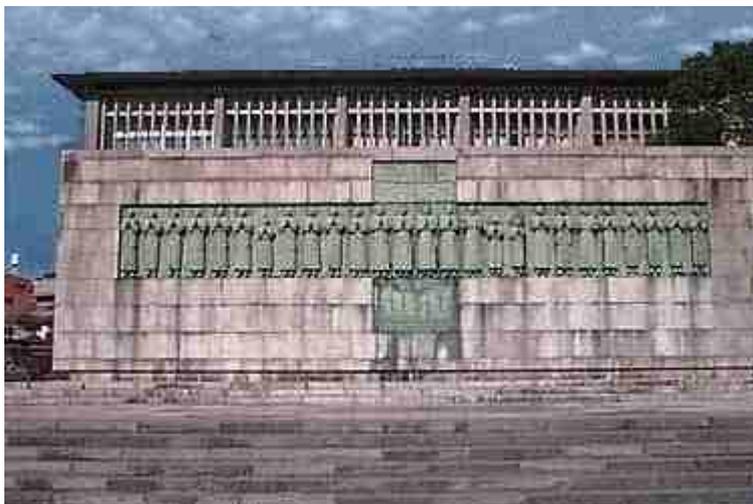
But the Church did not die in Nagasaki. She had to go underground, and her Christian message was passed from parents to Children by way of mouth, while the footsteps of her torturers could be heard in the street. And one day, March 17, 1865, the Nagasaki Church came back into the open before the altar of Mary, "Our Lady of the Discovery of the Japanese Christians." Who could ever dream of a better title for Our Lady?

The Church in Nagasaki had to weather a long history of storms, imprisonments and holocausts. Rooted on the Martyrs, Hill, she has grown to her present promising situation: an archdiocese with more than 70,000 Christians with a Japanese clergy of more than eighty priests headed by a Japanese Archbishop and Cardinal. Many priests from Nagasaki are working in other dioceses and religious congregations in Japan.

Little by little the Nagasaki Christians came to realize that the time was ripe for the great dream of their ancestors to come true: a shrine had to be built on the Martyrs' Hill. On June 10, 1962, the centenary of the canonization of the 26 Martyrs, the dream ceased to be a dream. Before pilgrims from all parts of the world, the Mayor of Nagasaki unveiled the monument that will perpetuate the Martyrs' message. Next to the monument, a small fig tree—with luxurious foliage bred in the tropical sun of Mexico—took root in a plot of Spanish soil, brought from the mountains of Guipuzcoa.

Sometimes at sunset when the sun, demurely caresses the bronzes of the monument and brings them back to life, I have seen a Japanese old lady kneeling on the steps. Time had frozen still. She could have been praying here on the Martyrs' Hill the very night of the holocaust.

## ***4. The Monument***



**8. The Martyrs' Monument**

Granite and bronze. The stone—a yellowish gray speckled with red—comes from the Okayama quarries, the birthplace of St. James Kisai. The bronzes are the work of Angelico Y. Funakoshi.

The steps are inlaid with marbles portraying instruments of martyrdom: spears, ropes and fire. And, rising from the platform on top of the steps, a solid granite wall, seventeen meters by six, framing a huge bronze cross with the 26 Martyrs in high relief.

It took four years to complete, Each bronze is a work of art in itself, has its own personality, so to speak, but the sculptor has grouped them together into a singing choir, mid-flight from their crosses into heaven.

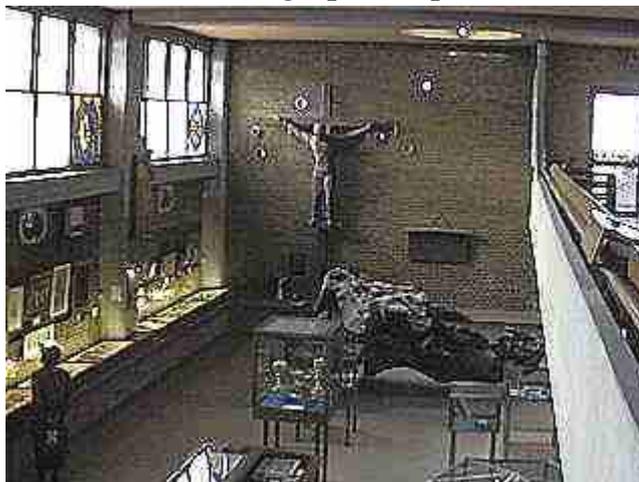
The monument faces south and the sun turns around the statues, beaming at them from all possible angles.

It was a drizzly day in June. For the first time Professor Funakoshi could quietly contemplate his work in the rain. Minute drops of water kept sliding down the cheeks of the three child martyrs. This made his heart ache. He loved the boys as if they were his own children. And yet, even on a rainy day one can savor greatness here. It is the ecstatic singing of these 26 men alone in the rain, a song echoing through the ages, bursting into life when the drizzle smothers every little noise around.

“You have to be a believer to produce something like this,” was the usual comment on inauguration day. True; to do this you need faith and love. The artist himself indicated the same, when, referring to his work, he said: “I will be happy if people look with understanding at this work of mine, and see in it the honest effort of a man of weak faith,

who has tried to portray, at least to a certain extent, the external appearance and heart of a group of martyrs 365 years ago.”

The reverse of the monument presents an entirely different picture. Architect Kenji Imai had it inlaid with stones symbolizing the martyrs' route, an exhausting pilgrimage of one month, which brought the 26 saints from Kyoto to Nagasaki. Here too a powerful motif has been forcefully expressed. The martyrs are a bunch of grapes. Squeezed in the winepress of the cross, they have turned into precious must, ready for use at the sacrifice. “Sursum corda” (“ lift up your hearts”), “Deus in itinere” (“May God accompany your journey “). The two mottoes span the whole length of stones, a silent reminder of the martyrs' prayer spreading through the fields of Japan in their long way of the cross.



9. The Martyrs' Museum

Halfway between the monument and the museum, and supporting a mosaic that speaks of heaven and looks up to heaven, a stout pillar, patterned after an old camphor tree, symbolizes the undaunted fortitude of the martyrs.

## The Martyrs' Museum

A three-storied building in ferro-concrete, the museum walls offer a splendid display of mosaics. The whole is the work of architect Imai of Waseda University.

HOPE is the name for the mosaic facing East. The morning star shines supreme against a background of subdued color, symbolizing Nagasaki at dawn. A beam from the star spotlights a young tree—a symbol of Christ—just at the middle of the lower section of the wall, and reflects upwards in a vigorous curve to flood with light the symbols of martyrdom: palm leaves and the martyrs' blood.

FAITH is the mosaic facing West. A big cross, that of Christ, emerges from a crater of blazing flames, surrounded by 26 small crosses, those of the martyrs. The, same motifs of the morning star, beams of light, palms and blood are obvious here.

CHARITY is the general theme for the whole ensemble of mosaics on the main façade, featuring the mysteries of the rosary. They are half-concealed by a latticework of concrete: the martyrs' voices filtering through the prison bars.

The columns on the front of the building are shaped like Japanese lances, those that tore through the hearts of the martyrs.

The museum itself not only tells the story of the 26 martyrs, but of the whole Japanese Church, her days of glory and holocaust, her changes through history, her cultural impact on the Japanese nation as a whole.

Under a splendid carving in wood of St. Paul Miki on the cross, a work of Masahiro Sawada, the visitor is treated to one of the best displays of historic and religious material connected with Christianity in Japan: authentic documents of great value, such as a letter of Francis Xavier to John III King of Portugal, pieces of silk with traces of the Martyrs' blood, carvings, paintings.



10. Paul Miki, S.J. on the cross

The interior of the building is an invitation to prayer- It recreates at places the close atmosphere of the catacombs, while rising and expanding everywhere else, the way a hymn ascends into heaven.

## The Shrine

The memorial church is dedicated to St. Philip of Jesus. Of beautiful, modern lines, it stands on top of the hill, its two towers reaching out to heaven like arms stretched in prayer. Finding inspiration in the work of the Spanish architect Antonio Gaudi, Professor Imai sees in one of the towers going up to heaven, in the other, God's gifts answering man's prayers.

The all-embracing theme of martyrdom unites all architectural elements on the hill. Pilgrims from all over the world converge here, all with the same heart, and the Sacrifice of the Cross, the cross of the martyrs, the cross of Christ, continues to fulfill its mission of bringing man closer to God.

## ***5. Where They Sowed***



**11. View of Nagasaki from the Martyr's Hill**

Today is harvest day for us. The martyrs' message is a life-giving seed, a searching beacon. The Martyrs' Hill has started to irradiate the true light of Christianity. I can see it reaching with different shades of intensity to three concentric spheres.

The outer one embraces the whole of Japan and spreads out beyond the seas. An ambitious international project from the very beginning, the Martyrs' Hill has been fully successful: visitors from all parts of the world converge on the hill. Back in their countries they will always remember the big cross of the monument, and their hearts will always treasure the teaching of the martyrs.

These visits leave even a deeper impression when hundreds or thousands of pilgrims come to Nishizaka on special occasions to honor the Martyrs, and the effect is compounded by extensive coverage from press and television bringing the event to every Japanese house.

The middle sphere is made of a whole series of apostolic activities here in Nagasaki. It is specialized work, bringing the Church into contact with sectors where its influence has been small and its presence becomes all the more necessary.

To give but a few examples, the Nagai Student Center—named after Paul Nagai, a victim of the atomic bomb and a famous physician and lay apostle—strives to spread among students the message of the Sermon of the Mountain, and the hope and radiance of the risen Christ.

The Martyrs' Museum and the Association for the Study of Christian History, closely connected with it, bring the Church into contact with the intellectual elite of Nagasaki, its civil authorities, literary men, artists and researchers. They also bring the Church closer to people in the countryside, where so many traces of the Christian Century in Japan and its many martyrs can still be found, keep the door open for further contacts

with the mysterious world of the Kakure Kirishitan—crypto-Christians—and provide a bridge for them to come back to the Father's house.

On Tateyama hill, commanding a superb view of the city, always quiet and welcoming, you can find the Retreat House. It is under the advocacy of St. Paul Miki, and the holy martyr still continues to preach the gospel to his fellow-countrymen from this pulpit on Tateyama hill.

And now we can withdraw to the inner sphere, the one giving life and meaning to the rest, the Church of St. Philip: its baptismal font, the confessionals, the altar.

Old dreams have already come true. With each new work bringing new hopes and new challenges, the Martyrs' Hill can already boast a whole litany of praising titles, too many to be catalogued here. I will only choose one, the opening sentence of the documentary on inauguration day, the one that reveals its truest meaning. I want to call it **RESURRECTION HILL**.

## ***6. Pilgrim to the Hill of the Martyrs***

### **The Message of Pope John Paul II in Nagasaki**

Dear friends

1- Today, I want to be one of the many Pilgrims who come to the Martyrs' Hill here in Nagasaki, to the place where Christians Sealed their fidelity to Christ with the sacrifice of their lives. They triumphed over death in one unsurpassable act of praise to the Lord.



**12. Pope John Paul II praying at the Martyrs' shrine**

first of a rich harvest of Martyrs, for many more would subsequently hallow this ground with their suffering and death.

In prayerful reflection before the Martyrs' monument, I would like to penetrate the mystery of their lives, to let them speak to me and to the whole Church, and to listen to their message which is still alive after hundreds of years. Like Christ, they were brought close to a place where common criminals were executed. Like Christ, they gave their lives so that we might all believe in the love of the Father, in the saving mission of the Son, in the never-failing guidance of the Holy Spirit. On Nishizaka, on February 5, 1597, twenty-six Martyrs testified to the power of the Cross; they were the

2- There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13). "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12:24). Christians died in Nagasaki, but the Church in Nagasaki did not die. She had to go underground, and the Christian message was passed from parents to Children until the Church came back into the open. Rooted in this Martyrs' Hill, the Church in Nagasaki would grow and bloom, to become an example of faith and fidelity for Christians everywhere, an expression of hope founded in the Risen Christ.

3- Today, I come to this place as a pilgrim to give thanks to God for the lives and the death of the Martyrs of Nagasaki—for the twenty-six and all the others that followed them—including the newly beatified heroes of Christ's grace. I thank God for the lives of all those, wherever they may be, who suffer for their faith in God, for their allegiance to Christ the Savior, for their fidelity to the Church. Every age—the past, the present and the

future—produces, for the edification of all, shining examples of the power that is in Jesus Christ.

Today, I come to the Martyrs' Hill to bear witness to the primacy of love in the world. In this holy place, people of all walks of life gave proof that love is stronger than death. They embodied the essence of the Christian message, the spirit of the Beatitudes, so that all who look up to them may be inspired to let their lives be shaped by unselfish love of God and love of neighbor.

Today, I, John Paul II, Bishop of Rome and Successor of Peter, come to Nishizaka to pray that this monument may speak to modern man just as the crosses on this hill spoke to those who were eye-witnesses centuries ago. May this monument speak to the world forever about love, about Christ!

Nagasaki, Nishizaka, February 26, 1981

**Yuki, S.J., Diego R. 1993. (3rd ed.) The Martyrs' Hill Nagasaki. Nagasaki: 26 Martyrs' Museum. (1st ed. in 1979)**

*© Jesuits of Japan. All Rights Reserved. Not to be modified or marketed without permission, in any form whatsoever. Free distribution of unedited copy permitted. Weblished with the permission of Fr. Yuki. Spanish by birth and Japanese by citizenship, Fr. Yuki is a Jesuit historian who has done many years of research on Japanese martyrs and early Christian missionaries in Japan. He's currently the Director Emeritus of the 26 Martyrs' Museum, whose Director is the young and energetic Fr. Renzo de Luca, S.J.*



*WebCraft: Arthur | Page Keeper: Francis Britto*

**Posted first:** 04/10/2001 **Updated:** 11/5/2005

Brittonia

SJ\_Japan

Dan McCoy

SJ\_USA

SJ\_WorldWide

Top