

The Martyrs of Japan, 1597: Mass February 5, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Galatians 2:19–20; Psalm 116:1–8; Mark 8:34–38

Last year while preparing a sermon for Palm Sunday, that is, the Sunday of the Passion, I came across an explanation for why the cross isn't found as a common symbol in early Christian art. Unfortunately, when I wanted to refer to later, I couldn't find the reference. I hope my luck is better this year.

The online Encyclopedia Britannica states that crucifixion was banned by the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century in honor of the cross. But realistic portrayals of his crucifixion do not begin until the early fifth century.¹ The explanation that I came across last year stated that crucifixion was such a cruel and horrible punishment that it needed to pass out of living memory before Jesus' suffering could become part of the devotional life of believers.

Crucifixion was introduced in Japan in the fifteenth century. Perhaps it arrived in that part of the world via the Silk Road trade route between the West and the East?² I was horrified to learn this morning that during World War II three starving Allied prisoners of war were crucified for stealing a cow. They were wired to trees and beaten with a baseball bat. Two died. One, an Australian, survived 63 hours before being taken down. Other prisoners had managed to give them food and water while they were alive.³

In my copy of *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* there is an entry for "Christianity in Japan."⁴ Francis Xavier, from a Spanish noble family,

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/crucifixion-capital-punishment>, (accessed 5 February 2021).

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crucifixion#Japan>, (accessed 5 February 2021).

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ringer_Edwards, (accessed 5 February 2021).

⁴ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. "Japan, Christianity in," 728.

was one of the group of seven persons led by another Spaniard from a noble family, Ignatius of Loyola, who took vows “to follow Christ in poverty and chastity, and to evangelize the heathen.”⁵ In 1542, he went to Goa, then a Portuguese outpost in India. He learned Tamil first. He also studied Japanese. He arrived in Japan in 1549 and established a church community. He returned to Goa in 1552. On the way China he died. His body was brought back to Goa. He is buried in the *Basilíca de Bom Jesus*—Portuguese for Basilica of the Good or Holy Jesus. He’s an important Jesuit saint.

Today we commemorate the witness of Japanese Christians who would be persecuted beginning in 1596, forty-seven years after Francis Xavier’s arrival. On February 5, 1597, six Franciscan friars and twenty converts were crucified in Nagasaki, known more widely as one of the two places where atom bombs were dropped. Persecution was revived in 1613. By 1640, “many thousands had suffered for their faith.”⁶

Anglicans, like most liturgical Christians, celebrate August 6, the date the atomic bomb was first used as the Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ. After America Japan opened to the West in 1854, missionaries returned. And so did persecution. There would be another period of repression from 1867 until 1873. Religious toleration was introduced in 1890.

In 1791, ten amendments were added to the United States Constitution. The first begins, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Where else in the world could one find religious toleration in the last decade of the eighteenth century? We cherish those that have gone before us in faith, especially the holy martyrs. There are too many countries in the world

⁵ Ibid., s.v. “Francis Xavier, St.,” 531–32.

⁶ ODCC, s.v. “Japan, Christianity in,” 728.

where Christians and others are persecuted for their awareness of their Creator.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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