



February 5

Commemoration: The Martyrs of Japan, 1597

The Martyrs of Japan were Christians who were persecuted for their faith in Japan, mostly during the 17th century.

The shogunate and imperial government at first supported the Catholic mission and the missionaries, thinking that they would reduce the power of the Buddhist monks, and help trade with Spain and Portugal. However, the Shogunate was also wary of colonialism, seeing that in the Philippines the Spanish had taken power after converting the population. The government increasingly saw Roman Catholicism as a threat, and started persecuting Christians. Christianity was banned and those Japanese who refused to abandon their faith were killed.

On February 5, 1597, twenty-six Christians—six European Franciscan missionaries, three Japanese Jesuits and seven-

teen Japanese laymen including three young boys—were executed by crucifixion in Nagasaki. These individuals were raised on crosses and then pierced through with spears.

Persecution continued sporadically, breaking out again in 1613 and 1630. On September 10, 1632, 55 Christians were martyred in Nagasaki in what became known as the Great Genna Martyrdom. At this time Roman Catholicism was officially outlawed. The Church remained without clergy and theological teaching disintegrated until the arrival of Western missionaries in the nineteenth century.

While there were many more martyrs, the first martyrs came to be especially revered, the most celebrated of which was Paulo Miki. The Martyrs of Japan were canonized by the Roman Catholic Church on June 8, 1862 by Blessed Pius IX and are listed on the calendar as *Sts. Paul Miki and his Companions*, commemorated on February 6. Originally this feast day was listed as *Sts. Peter Baptist and Twenty-Five Companions, Martyrs*, and commemorated on February 5.

Drawn from the oral histories of Japanese Catholic communities, Shusaku Endo's acclaimed novel *Silence* provides detailed accounts of the persecution of Christian communities and the suppression of the Church.

It will never be known for sure how many Christians were executed in Japan as records were either destroyed or not kept. There are varying thoughts about this. Some views are indicating to determine that the amount of executions was so vast, extending to an amount as high as 1,000,000 (one million) Christian converts.

The Twenty-six Martyrs of Japan refers to a group of Christians who were executed by crucifixion on February 5, 1597 at Nagasaki.

On August 15, 1549, St. Francis Xavier (later canonized by Gregory XV in 1622), Fr. Cosme de Torres, S.J. (a Jesuit priest), and Fr. John Fernandez arrived in Kagoshima, Japan, from Spain with hopes of bringing Catholicism to Japan. On September 29, St. Francis Xavier visited Shimazu Takahisa, the daimyo of Satsuma (containing the city of Kagoshima), asking for permission to build the first Catholic mission in Japan. The daimyo agreed in hopes of creating a trade relationship with Europe. Within a year, however, he relented on this promise and made it illegal for people to convert.

A promising beginning to those missions—perhaps as many as 300,000 Christians by the end of the sixteenth century—met complications from competition between the missionary groups, political difficulty between Spain

and Portugal, and factions within the government of Japan. Christianity was suppressed. By 1630, Christianity was driven underground.

The first Martyrs of Japan were canonized in 1862. They are commemorated on February 5 when, on that date in 1597, twenty-six missionaries and converts were killed by crucifixion. Two hundred and fifty years later, when Christian missionaries returned to Japan, they found a community of Japanese Christians that had survived underground.

The Christian martyrs of Nagasaki. 16-17th century Japanese painting.