

The Catholic Church in Japan

BY

THE REV. BROTHER MEMORIAN-SHEEHY, F.S.C. M.A.

(Note -Because of severe censorship, the writer was unable to bring a single written or printed document with him from Japan. Accordingly, the following pages cannot be considered as anything approaching an exhaustive treatment of the subject suggested by the foregoing title, but rather as a series of impressions drawn mainly from memory. B.M-S.)

The story of the Catholic Church in Japan is a strange one. As one comes to the closing scenes in each period, one expects to see the word 'finis' written in unmistakable characters at the end of it; but another chapter, and then another, will await his perusal. Each of them begins hopefully enough, but invariably ends with a tale of something not unlike disaster. A most interesting chapter was brought to a close on December 8, 1941, when all foreign missionaries were interned, while awaiting deportation. The end! said some. Not at all! echoed others. There will, of course, added the latter, be a painful hiatus of a few years, after which an unshackled Church will grow up, stronger and greater, in the Land of the Rising Sun. Then all will agree that our humble efforts, and those of the hundreds of others who have gone before us in the mission field, will have, at long last, attained to a state of permanent fruition ... Who Was right? Probably neither. In case the former were utterly wrong, the latter were not necessarily right. Who said that 'the sweet things of this life usually come only drop by drop?' Yes, drop by drop: that is the best that anyone, who has a nodding acquaintance with Japan and its people, will expect.

A State of Flux – At the present time, the religious situation in Japan, being in such a state of flux, one can very easily draw a false picture by leaning too far, either towards extreme optimism or extreme pessimism, in matters religious, as well as in matters of a purely secular nature. In that country, the two are never very widely separated. Again, since the future of the Church in Japan, at least humanly speaking – and history, even Church History, must needs take full account of human values and influences – since, I say, that future must depend on the outcome of the present struggle of world ideologies, speculations regarding it are of little avail. On the one hand, it is difficult to see how an allied victory would open a clear course to Christianity in that country. Perhaps it would. I doubt it. Had I not gone to Japan, possibly I should have quite another opinion. On the other hand, it is almost as hard to admit that an Axis victory would mean the end of all, at least for a generation or two; and that no matter how much one might incline towards

such a view. The past history of Christianity in Japan would not support any such sweeping conclusion. Personally, I am not wedded to either school of thought. My stay in Japan, while not a long one, afforded me valuable opportunities to associate with people of many walks of life, ranging from college presidents and government officials all the way down to the more humble strata of society, with scores of college professors, professional men, thousands of college and high school students thrown in for good measure. My impressions gathered from these contacts could be summed up in the following words: Whatever the fate of the Japanese arms in the present conflict, the Church is going to have 'up-hill' work in Japan for generations to come.

Proud of Her Pagan Heritage – May I try to explain? Japan is a highly-educated pagan nation. The advanced degree of education, and its great diffusion throughout the land, makes an essential difference between it and other pagan countries. The question is not so much as to why it should make such a difference; the fact is that it does. The tap-roots of her culture reach down to the very depths of her pagan past. During her period of isolation, up until 1853, she had built up a culture all her own. Of that culture, brought to a high state of perfection, without assistance from the outside world – so we are told by our Japanese friends – she is deeply proud. What she has added since Commodore Perry's 'black ships' dropped anchor in Uraga Bay, bearing a friendly message from President Fillmore, has in no way seriously affected the essentially pagan character of her national heritage. Yes, the bulk of Japanese nationals are not only satisfied with their social, religious, and economic set-up; they are not only deeply proud of it, but they will inform you that it is vastly superior to anything that the western world can offer them. True, they wish to raise their economic level; but, here again, they will assure you that, in the field of economics, as well as IN OTHER FIELDS, they have the best plan; and that, if they have been held back, it was not because of anything inherently wrong with their methods or systems, but that all their economic woes are entirely traceable to the rapacity of the 'seiyo-jin', or 'seiyo-no-hito', the foreigner. Everywhere, one finds the deep conviction that the Japanese mode of living, and all that it connotes, that has developed during the twenty-six centuries since Japan's first emperor, the Great Jimmu, the direct descendant of the sun goddess, ascended the 'everlasting' throne, is not only the best, but likewise the only one that suits the genius of the Japanese people.

Now, it may be difficult to grasp this; more difficult still to believe it. I am convinced, nevertheless, that a stay of some years' duration in Japan – especially if one is in close touch with the governmental scheme of education – will convince anyone that it will take more than a national overthrow to divorce the Japanese nation from its allegiance to its ancestral gods, 'from whom all blessings flow.' This might not be a bright picture; but I submit it as a fairly accurate one. There is a vast difference between the influence of a small group of devout Christians, who are sincerely attached to the faith, and who are praying that the light that has been

vouchsafed to them might be granted to their fellow countrymen, who have not yet been so blessed, and that of the millions, whose only knowledge of Christianity is that it is a foreign importation, which it is their duty, as good Japanese, both to resist and oppose. Herein lies, I think, the main difference, from a missionary viewpoint, at least, between highly-educated Japan and the poorly-educated missionary lands in other sections of the globe. This, I believe, gets us down to the very bedrock of the intensely difficult problem of bringing Christianity to Japan—whether that Japan is destined to rule East Asia, or to eat humble pie at an international peace conference in some years hence.

Beginnings of Christianity In Japan –

But, let us take a brief look into the history of the Church in Japan. Perhaps, in its fitful story, we may find some reason to hope that it may ride out the present storm, and finally emerge into calmer waters.

We know how St. Francis Xavier first brought the gospel to Japan, landing at Kogoshima, Kiusiu, on August 15, 1549. His memory is held in veneration to this day, not only among Christians of all denominations, but also among the pagan Japanese. He preached at Hirado, Yamaguchi, Bungo, and Funai. He was not allowed to see the Emperor at Kyoto, which was then the capital of the Empire.

On November 20, 1551, Francis set out for China, leaving 3000 faithful, and a number of missionaries in Japan. Some of the feudal lords were in favour of the new religion, and their conversion was frequently followed by mass conversions of their subjects; so that, in the year 1582, there were as many as 200,000 Christians and 250 places of Christian worship in the islands.

European Contacts, New Missionaries, and Persecutions –

In 1584, the three Christian princes of Bungo, Arima, and Omura sent an embassy to Lisbon. This same embassy journeyed on to Rome, which it reached on March 23, 1585. There its members witnessed the splendid ceremonies connected with a papal coronation—in the present instance, that of Sixtus V. But, that same year, back in Japan, owing to the influence of the bonzes, Christianity was proscribed. However, the work of the missions was carried on secretly, and not without success; for, we are informed that, by 1597, the number of adherents of the Christian faith had reached 300,000.

It was in 1593 that, at the request of the King of Spain, the Franciscan Friars made their first appearance in Japan. About the same time, a Spanish ship, the San Felipe, ran aground on the coast of Tosa. The Captain, in his first contact with the natives along the coast, foolishly enough boasted that the missionaries had been sent ahead to prepare the way for the conquest of the entire country by the armies of Spain. This began a violent persecution, under the Shogun Hideoshi, as a result of which twenty-six Christians suffered martyrdom by crucifixion in the following

month of February. Soon others were added to the list of victims. However after the death of the persecutor, the Christians enjoyed comparative peace for a period of fifteen years. During that time, the missionaries, whose numbers had been increased by the coming of members of the orders of St. Dominic and St. Augustine, continued their apostolic work among the inhabitants of the country, until another bitter persecution broke out in 1613.

Asakura-Roku-Yemon – Sotelo –

However, at that time, there lived in Sendai, the famous lord, or Daiymio, Date Masamune. Being an ambitious man, he thought that he might make use of the Christian religion to further his own aims of nationwide domination. Accordingly, he called Father Sotelo, a Franciscan, from the South, and sent him with Asakura-Roku-Yemon to Spain and to Rome as special ambassadors to the King of Spain and to the Pope. The mission, while not lacking in picturesque interest, bore little fruit. Sotelo was created first bishop of Sendai, but he never took possession of his see, and over three centuries were to pass before a Catholic bishop actually occupied the see of Sendai.

Another Persecution

As already noted, a persecution broke out in 1613. The following year, an edict announcing a general persecution of all those who practised the 'foreign' religion was issued by Ieyasu Tokugawa. It continued for several years. In 1622, what is referred to as the 'great martyrdom' took place at Nagasaki on September 2. On that day, fifty-two Christians were put to death, twenty-seven being beheaded, while the others were burned alive. In 1623, the persecution reached its height. The number of victims is unknown.

Things grew worse as the years went on. In 1637, 37,000 Christians shut themselves up in the fortress of Shimabara. The place was surrounded and taken by the soldiers of the Shogun. Not a soul escaped alive. Three years later, a number of Portuguese ambassadors with their followers, left Macao, near the present city of Hong-Kong, and came to Japan, presumably for trade relations. The chief men were put to death. The others were sent back to the Asiatic coast, with a warning that began thus: 'While the sun warms the earth, let no Christian venture into Japan.' Thus began the centuries of insular seclusion for Japan, that were brought to a close after the first half of the nineteenth century, as already referred to.

During the Seclusion –

There were, of course, occasional missionaries who defied the exclusion order. Among these were five Jesuits who stole into Japan in 1642. They were discovered and put to death, as were also a group of Spanish Dominicans, who arrived from

the Philippines in 1647. There is also record of a Sidotti, an Italian, who, in 1708, landed somewhere on the Japanese coast. He was conducted to Yedo, condemned to life imprisonment at Christian Zaka – the Hill of the Christian – where he died in 1715, after having baptized his jailors.

A long interval followed, during which it was impossible for anyone to take up the work of the missions in Japan. It was not until 1844, that a Père Forcade made another attempt. He was soon joined by a number of priests of the Missions Etrangères de Paris. When a treaty was signed between France and Japan in 1858, the missionaries already on the ground re-opened some of the old missions and commenced new ones. Thus Hakodate, Kanagawa, Yokohama, and Nagasaki soon became flourishing mission centers.

The Finding of the Old Christians

The seventeenth of March, 1865, is a date that is held in pious memory to-day by the Catholics of Japan. It was on that day that a delegation of 'Old Christians' who had not seen a priest among their people for over two centuries, came timidly to Nagasaki, where they told their heroic tale to Father Petitjean. They were the descendants of the martyrs of generations ago; they had heard that the Fathers were back, and wanted some of them to come among them and pray with them, as had the Fathers in the seventeenth century. They identified their fathers in the faith by three signs: they (the priests) looked upon the Pope as head of the Church; they honoured the Virgin Mary; they were celibates. Were these new priests the same? If they were, then the Old Christians, to the number of 50,000, would gladly accept them as their spiritual leaders. The Finding of the Old Christians is commemorated throughout the church in Japan each year on March 17.

The Dawn of a New Era –

The days of the bloody persecutions were over. But opposition to the Christian faith, under any form, had not entirely died out. In fact, it broke out openly on July 14, 1867. It assumed the form of proscription and exile for those who were known to favour Christianity. Between the years 1867 and 1873 this cruel law affected over 40,000 Christians, who were dispossessed of all they had and driven from their homes.

After the year 1873, until comparatively recent years, the government of Japan remained silent on the question of religion. Prejudice against Christianity diminished, and conversions were many. In 1884, an imperial decree declared that there was no state religion in Japan. From there on, the relations between the Church and the authorities became quite friendly. Missionaries arrived; vicariates were created; a first synod of the Catholic bishops was held in 1890; the Catholic hierarchy was established in 1891, when the bishop of Tokyo became archbishop and primate. In 1860, there had been but two missionaries in Japan. In 1900, there

was one archbishop, three bishops, one hundred and fifteen priests (foreign), thirty-two native priests, ninety-three missionary-associates, three hundred and eighty-nine sisters, and 55,091 Catholics.

The Fathers of the Missions Etrangères de Paris were almost alone in the Japanese missions until the end of the century. Other orders and congregations, such as the Marianists, the Trappists, the Trappistines arrived just before the turn of the century. Since 1900 the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Fathers of the Divine Word, the Jesuits, the Sulpicians, the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, the Sisters of St-Paul de Chartres, the Franciscan Sisters, and many others, carried on the work peculiar to their respective orders in the Japanese missions. Canada was somewhat late in the field. But, at the time of the outbreak of the present war, she was well represented in all the phases of missionary endeavour in Japan. She had her priests in the larger and the smaller mission centres; her teaching brothers in the schools; her sisters in schools, hospitals, orphans' homes, shelters, leper colonies – some even going to outlying districts as catechists, where it was not possible to set up a regular school or mission post.

A Few Figures –

A few figures about the Church in Japan might be of interest to the present gathering. They were taken from the 1937 Annual Church Report, and have been supplied to me by his Excellency, Bishop Lemieux, former bishop of Sendai, Japan. Let me first mention that the population of Japan proper is set at 75,000,000. The school population is 14,000,000, which means that one in about every five people is going to school. The Protestant Christians in Japan number 200,000.

Catholic Christians: 111,850; one archbishop; five dioceses; two vicars apostolic; seven prefects apostolic; 226 foreign missionary priests; 105 Japanese priests; 104 foreign brothers (mostly lay brothers); 127 Japanese brothers, mostly lay brothers; 489 foreign sisters; 672 Japanese sisters; 112 senior seminarians; 271 junior seminarians; 210 stations with resident priest; 181 stations without resident priest. During the year, there were 1757 adult baptisms; 3493 infant baptisms; 3875 deathbed baptisms; 65,295 Easter Communion; 1,912,384 other than Easter Communion; 647 marriages between Christians; 284 'mixed' marriages; 2,496 Christian deaths.

Conclusion – Such are a few scattered notes about the Church in Japan. In 1949, it will be four hundred years since St. Francis Xavier landed at Kogoshima. It may be pointed out that the foregoing figures do not make an imposing record for four centuries of endeavour. Let us hope, however, that the blood of the martyrs, shed so generously, and the dauntless faith of thousands of other Christians, in face of truly fearful pagan brutality, may yet triumph, and that the future history of the land of the Rising Sun may yet be a lovely story of the triumph of the Cross in a country that, for ages, has been the great stronghold of self-satisfied pagan superstition.