

A close look at Japan in the writings of Jesuits in the 16th and 17th centuries

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My topic is a close look at Japan and the writings of the island country by the Jesuits, as members of the Society of Jesus were known, in the 16th and 17th centuries. Certainly, St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552) would have been proud of the fact that from the time he came here as the first Jesuit in 1549 until today, we talk so much about Jesuits and the work that had been done in Japan.

In this presentation I intend to refer to the books of Luis Frois, *Historia de Japam*; Fernao Guerreiro, *Relacao annual das coisas que fizeram dos Padres da Companhia de Jesus ns suas missoes*, vol. 2 (1604-06); Luis de Guzman, *Compania de Jesus en la India Oriental en la China y Japon desde 1540 hasta 1600*; Francisco Souza, *Oriente Conquistado a Jesus Christo pelos Padres da Companhia de Jesus da Provincia de Goa*, Vol. I, Bombay: Examiner Press, 1881; *Documenta Indica*, edited by Josef Wicki, SJ, ; and *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier* edited by Henry J Coleridge, SJ, vols. 1-II.

Overall, the books cited above and others show the different approaches to a study of Japan and to the problems there with regard to evangelization. Non Jesuits would narrate happenings and how the Christian faith was developing but with a different slant. In the writings of the Jesuits, we come across a serious dealing with issues than what appeared on the surface.

Frois in the 17 chapters of his book, *Historia de Japam*, mentions different experiences regarding how the faith in Japan was carrying on. For instance, he mentions that in Nagasaki there were 120 Jesuits and two colleges, two rectories, one seminary, and 23 residences. The Catholic faith flourished and in 1605 for the first time, the priests and people celebrated the feast of the Most Holy Sacrament and carried the Blessed Sacrament in procession through the city, which was a big event then.

There is a chapter on the life and death of Don Costantino, king of Bungo, a very illustrious and exemplary convert to the Christian faith. It tells us about his family too. Chapter 4 speaks about the missions of Nagasaki and of how on the island of Gotō, the priests visited the Christians and brought about great consolation to them and among the other people; and how more than 60 people had been converted.

There is also a chapter on how somebody who was actually dead returned to life and that had created a big stir. 37 people who were under the sway of the devil were then converted. Other chapters narrate how some of the Christians were imprisoned and suffered for the faith. Chapter 12 speaks of a blind person, Damiao by name, who was 20 years old, was a great musician, played the viola and could narrate the histories of the place. He was martyred on orders of the king in Yamaguchi. There were many blind people in that kingdom. In Bungo there were two resident priests who worked on conversions and managed to bring about 800 to the faith⁽¹⁾.

The issues of *Documenta Indica*⁽²⁾ speak of the great role that the Italian, Father Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606) played in the formation of Christian Japan. He had been appointed Fr. Visitor by the Jesuit Order and in his letters he details what should be the relationship between the Fr. Provincial of the India province and the Fr. Provincial of the Japan vice province.

(1) Luis Frois, *Historia de Japam*, ed. Josef Wicki, Lisbon: Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, 1976.

(2) *Documenta Indica*, ed. Josef Wicki, Rome: Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu, vols 16, 1984, pp. 503-509, vol. 17 (1988), pp. 259-88, vol 18 (1988). Pp. 483-92, 504-6

After the Jesuits arrived in Goa, India, in 1542 in the person of the Spaniard, St. Francis Xavier, in the course of the sixteenth century they grew into a very large province known as the province of Goa. It spread geographically over Goa and parts of south and north India. It became rather unwieldy to manage. So there were ideas of how to divide it. It eventually divided into the province of Malabar and the vice-provinces of Japan and China. The main Goa Province remained a kind of controlling force over the other three in terms of personnel and finances.

After the divisions by the beginning of the seventeenth century, there were always ways in which the Indian province would make Japan subordinate to it. So Fr. Valignano was very clear that in many administrative matters, Japan should be independent of Goa.

But it was not possible to fully implement the above plan. There was no money coming into Japan for the missions, and much of the money that did come in, came from Goa. Christianity in Japan was actually aided immensely by money coming from India. Many properties in India bought in the name of the Japan province would provide lucrative rents and that money was sent to Japan helping the church there to grow. For the purpose, the Jesuits had a person appointed, called Fr. Procurator. He was a kind of an economist or somebody who procured goods. Though belonging to the Japan province he would be based in Goa, collecting money and rents for the Jesuit activities in Japan. Fr. Valignano in his letters would speak about how this person could not come under the sway of the India province and was to be accountable to the vice provincial in Japan alone.

There were various stipulations mentioned in these letters that one finds in the volumes of *Documenta Indica*. The vice-provincial of Japan should have the freedom to not act on the orders of the Provincial of India. Nor could the latter command the vice-provincial of Japan to obey by virtue of holy obedience. The Provincial of India could not recall to India any Jesuit from Japan without the consent of the vice-provincial there. The provincial of India should not have any power over the capital of the vice-provincial of Japan. The vice-provincial of Japan should have a procurator of its own who would obey in all matters told him by his vice-provincial. The Jesuits in Melaka would need to collect any money given them for the Japan mission and send it to the vice provincial there.

Fr. Valignano insisted that Japan should not be asked to pay for the expenses incurred by the officials proceeding to Rome for meetings. Books printed in Rome with the contribution of Japan ought to be sent to Japan separately from those books that were meant for India.

Financial matters was one of the irritants in the relationship Jesuits had among themselves in their four provinces. Though it was one unit, each of the provinces of Goa, Malabar, China and Japan worked trying to be successful in their own way. There was a well known case in Goa where there was a large property in Goa that had been donated to the Malabar province but it was managed by the Goa province. The Jesuits fought over this issue over many years, not just verbally or among themselves, but in the civil court of Goa, and finally had to accept the solution offered.

In the same way, the provinces of Goa and Japan had many irritants in their relationship. Unlike the India provinces, the Japan province could not own any property. So, whatever money they got came from India. At the same time Fr. Valignano as the Visitor of Japan was very clear that he did not want India to have any control over the assets of the Japanese province.

On other matters, Fr. Valignano wrote to Father Acquaviva (1543-1615), the superior general of the Jesuits in Rome saying that there were certain abuses supposed to have been introduced in the practice in Japan. They were considered abuses but they were not because one could not have the same yardstick for the Japanese people as one had for the people of Europe. He then quoted a passage from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians chapter 3: 1-2, where the Apostle says that the people are still infants and are fed milk, but the time will come and they will be ready for something more serious or for something most helpful.

Many of the letters in *Documenta Indica* speak about the troubles that came under the rule of Hideyoshi to the Christians and how God had also been very helpful to them in many ways. One important point that came up was

that Japan did not have enough money. The matter was referred to the king of Portugal and also to the Holy Father. Both of them pointed out that there were wars in Europe and so money was not forthcoming. Yet the king gave an injunction that about 2,000 cruzados should be given to the province every year; 1, 000 from Malacca, and 1, 000 from the income in Salsete , Goa, and this should be extended for five years.

Volume 16 of *Documenta Indica* speaks about the difficult situation of the mission under Hideyoshi. Although many Jesuits had to live in hiding, the work continued in some form or the other. One notices that somehow though the Jesuits were doing good work, there was a great tension between a couple of the Jesuits, in particular between Fr. Valignano and the Portuguese, Fr. Francisco Cabral (1529-1609), the former superior of the Japan mission and later resettled in Goa. In his letter, Fr. Valignano would write to the Fr, General in Rome telling him about some of the problems that he faced in this regard.

For instance, he comments on the reluctance and coolness of the Jesuits in India toward Japan for which Fr Cabral was responsible. He had been in Japan for 13 years and had wielded great authority. Fr. Valignano did not speak about this until now because it was not he who had removed Fr. Cabral from Japan and had little knowledge of his influence in India. Japan was very different from Europe. Fr. Cabral handled the Japanese with an iron rod and with a top down attitude. He demeaned the Japanese, which was not the right approach. He noted that in India, many spoke ill of the customs of the Japanese. Fr. Cabral did not want the Japanese brothers to study much, or languages like Latin or Portuguese, and he was opposed to founding a seminary for the Japanese youth. He was against any basic form of Japanese learning for them. As the person in charge, Fr. Valignano was more open, more forward looking and wanted a different approach. Under him the number of Japanese brothers rose to 70. Thanks to the efforts of him and other Jesuits and Catholic missionaries, there were 300, 000 converts in a country of 15 million at the beginning of the 17th century.

So different had been the approach and insights of St. Francis Xavier about Japan. He was on the island between 1549 and 1552. He believed the people there to be intelligent, noble, manly, liberal, anxious to learn and ready to be convinced of the truth. The field, he believed, was open and free from many of the obstacles which were perceived differently in India. Very soon after reaching Japan he would write letters to his fellow Jesuits about how the people listened to discourses of God with great avidity. They were averse to theft and did not worship any gods under the form of animals. They listened to things in keeping with nature and reason and willingly acknowledged their guilts⁽³⁾.

Non Jesuit writers of the time would write more about how the church in Japan was developing, and what were the successes and failures in the mission. But from Jesuit documentation, one gets an inside view of how the mission was unfolding and what were the practical problems the men had to deal with. It was not about just recruiting men but it was about people of different nationalities, Portuguese and others, and their unique viewpoints and the tensions between them. It was also a question of how to manage the expenses and the finances of the Japanese mission. For that Fr. Valignano in particular, laid down some very important rules about where money and resources of the Japanese mission should go and strategies for the mission to develop in a healthy and economically beneficial manner.

A few references from the books and letters cited above are a great mine of information about the Jesuit missions in India and Japan. They certainly praise the work they were doing, the consolations they received, the number of people that were converted. But, at the same time, there were a lot of difficulties they had to face given the fact that, at least in the 16th century, they had to manage economically on their own and devise ways and means in which they could further the mission, both in India and to some extent, in Japan.

(3) *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier* edited by Henry J Coleridge, SJ, vols. II, London: Burns and Oates, 1874, pp. 101, 239. Reprinted by Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1997.

The Jesuits were not the only missionary organization to work in Japan from the mid 16th century onwards. The Spanish Franciscans arrived later than them and their methods at conversion were different. They tended to work with the poor and the illiterate rather than the ruling classes or the intellectuals primarily. They were often in open defiance of the imperial edicts to stop preaching whereas much caution was exercised by the Jesuits⁽⁴⁾.

Andrew Ross believes that the Christian missions in Japan was one of the best success stories of the Catholic Church. After 1612 under the Tokugawa regime, the faith remained alive solely with the commitment of the indigenous Christians many of whom heroically died for their beliefs. The Jesuits had managed to grow a plant that had flourished independently in Japanese soil⁽⁵⁾.

(4) John Z. Bowers, *Western Medical Pioneers in Feudal Japan*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970, p. 15

(5) Andrew C. Ross, *A Vision Betrayed: The Jesuits in Japan and China 1542-1742*, New York: Orbis Books, 1994, pp. 115-16.