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The Life of a Witness for the Love of Christ: a story of the first Japanese person to be ordained a priest in the Order of Saint Augustine.

By Thomas Masaki Imada O.S.A., Fukuoka, Japan.

When the beloved late Holy Father, John Paul II, came to Japan in February of 1981, Nagasaki was his last leg before he left the country. While there, he visited a small hill ("I came here as a pilgrim" was his very word) overlooking the railroad terminal and the port of Nagasaki. Nishizaka Hill as it is called is always associated with the well-known story of the 26 Martyrs of Nagasaki or Saint Paul Miki and his Companions as they are known in the universal calendar of the Church, who died there on February 5th, 1597.

However, on that same hill, there were countless others who died for the Faith. One of them was our own Father Thomas Jihyoe or Father Thomas of Saint Augustine, the first Japanese to be ordained a priest in the Order of Saint Augustine, who died for the love of Christ on November 6th, 1637. Father Thomas Jihyoe was and is better-known in Nagasaki as "Kintsuba" Jihei or Jihyoe; "Kintsuba" literally means "golden sword-guard" because he is said to have often carried a sword with a golden sword-guard engraved with a cross.

Nothing much has been written about him and few of his words have ever been recorded. But his name and life had been deeply engraved in the hearts and minds of the hidden Christians in the peninsula named Nishi-Sonogi and were handed down through the generations right up to the present. His life was one of a continuous journey lived entirely with and for his brothers and sisters in Christ on the way to God.

Jihyoe was born in 1602 in the castle town of Omura when the shadows of more violent and systematic persecution were gradually encroaching upon the lives of Christians after the ban by Hideyoshi on Christianity in 1587. His parents were Leo Ochiai and Clara Okia, both devout Catholics who later were martyred for their faith. Back then, Omura was the cradle of Christianity in Japan. In 1563, Sumitada Omura became the first daimyo or samurai lord to be baptized and following his conversion, so many followed suit and received baptism that by 1582 there were about 150,000 faithful, with some 60,000 in Omura alone.

Baptized "Thomas" soon after his birth and raised with his brothers and sisters in a family of deep faith (in fact all of them along with their parents eventually laid down their lives for the faith), he entered at six years of age a "seminario" or a minor seminary in Arima, about 50 kilometers to the south-east of the City of Nagasaki. Founded and staffed by the Jesuits in 1580, the seminary provided its students with approximately six years of the basic course in the fundamentals of Latin and Japanese. Besides, students studying for the priesthood or to become catechists had studies in astronomy, natural science, psychology, theology, music and other subjects which added a few more years.

As the persecution gradually became more severe, the local daimyos or samurai lords who had protected the Christians earlier caved in and left the Church one by one. For that reason, the seminary was transferred to Nagasaki, where it continued until Ieyasu Tokugawa issued his edict of suppression and banishment in 1614: "All missionaries, catechists and anyone who gives shelter to missionaries, and all seminarians, are expelled from the country." The seminary in Nagasaki was closed immediately and the students were either sent to Macao or to Manila and the rest were scattered to different parts of Japan. Thomas was with the group sent to Macao, where he continued his studies under the Jesuits. However, the conditions under which the students lived there were far from ideal: they could not go outside for recreation, nor could they do anything in public because China then was still a closed country.

Having already learned Latin, Thomas was helping the priests by teaching Latin to the younger students, but by the year 1617, the study of Latin was forbidden, effectively closing the road to the priesthood to the exiled students. Finally, when the seminary in Macao was totally closed in 1620, most of the students were sent back to Japan including Thomas. Upon returning to Japan, he began to work as a catechist and preacher, and in doing so, he experienced the first taste of the insecurity of a missionary's life, for he often had to flee from place to place and hide in caves. Living a dangerous life in that way aroused within him a burning desire to dedicate his entire life to God. It was during this time that he met an Augustinian whose life inspired him to become a member of the Augustinian Order by going to Manila.

Thus Thomas went to Manila in the Philippines in 1622 when he was twenty years old and sought admission to the priesthood in the Order. He being the first Japanese to apply, the Augustinian community at Intramuros (Manila) was sharply divided as to whether he should be admitted or not, but the provincial at the time, Father Alonso de Mentrída, discerned the light of a vocation in the young man. So on November 26th, 1623, he conferred on him the habit of the Order and exactly a year later Thomas Jihyoe took his first vows in the Order.

Then he was sent to Cebu, where he studied arts and theology. At the Basilica del Santo Niño he often prayed in front of the statue of Santo Niño for the grace to return to his homeland to be of assistance to the persecuted and tormented Christians. Either in 1627 or 1628 he was ordained a priest in Cebu by Bishop Pedro de Arce, O.S.A. and went back to Manila.

No sooner had he returned there, he started to miss the statue of Señor Santo Niño, and he asked to be reassigned to Cebu. His request was granted and he boarded a ship headed for Cebu. However, on his trip back, he suffered many hardships; the ship sank and Thomas barely escaped with his life, swimming to the nearby island of Panay. When he finally managed to get back to Cebu, he learned of the renewed outbreak of persecution with the appointment of Uneme Takenaka as the magistrate of Nagasaki, who began to arrest missionaries one after another in order to deprive the Catholics of all spiritual support.

The news tore the heart of Father Thomas apart and he immediately petitioned his superiors to let him return to Japan. It was readily granted and in February of 1630 he set out for Japan to help his brothers and sisters beset by terrible persecution. However, this voyage was ill-fated; shortly after leaving port, the ship was broken into two by a huge storm, and Thomas, left only with his life, lost all the supplies and vestments he was taking for his work back in Japan. Undaunted by this catastrophe, the young priest begged again and again to sail to Japan but the permission was not forthcoming.

Now the rest was legendary. In a desperate decision, Thomas directly appealed to the Prior General by writing him a letter of petition dated August 2nd, 1630, asking him to grant his request, which arrived on May 29, 1633 in Rome. This letter of Thomas, written in beautiful Latin, has been kept in the General Archives of the Order in Rome. However, a long before it ever reached Rome, the writer, having disguised himself, successfully set foot on Japan again by the end of the year 1631 after meeting still another shipwreck.

Shortly after his return, Thomas found out that Father Bartolomé Gutiérrez, the Augustinian superior at the time, was incarcerated in jail, at first in Omura and then transferred to the one in Nagasaki. To make contact with him, he came up with a daring plan; he got himself hired as a groom taking care of horses in the magistrate's headquarters, thus he visited Padre Gutiérrez everyday in prison, encouraging and supporting him. By day he played the role of a dense stable hand, while at night, as Father Thomas, he moved secretly from house to house, strengthening the weak, encouraging them, hearing confessions, celebrating Mass, and even making new converts. With the martyrdom at Nishizaka of Father Gutiérrez along with the two Augustinian Recollects, Fathers Vicente Simoens and Francisco de Jesús Terrero and three others in September 1632, Father Thomas went in hiding to minister to the Christians under persecution.

What made it very difficult for him to work was the fact that the officials displayed the picture of Thomas in one place after another, with the notice, "Do not harbor this person! If you know where he is, turn him in." It was the first time such a "wanted poster" was used in Japan to track down a fugitive. His likeness or portrait was so widely distributed that how he looked like became known all over the country, which made it extremely difficult for him to hide. At first, he hid himself deep in the mountains in a place called Jiheiwa or Jihyoe's Rock today. It is about an hour ride from downtown Nagasaki in a region called Sotome facing the East China Sea. Hiding in this cave, he would visit the people at night, administering the sacraments, instilling courage and strengthening each one of them.

The officials of the Nagasaki magistrate's office, mobilizing soldiers, sometimes as many as 500, searched the sea and the mountains but they were unable to capture him. For one thing, he disguised himself in various ways so that no one recognized him as he moved stealthily from place to place. It is said that as safe places were fast disappearing, he even went as far as to Edo or present-day Tokyo to work as a servant of the Shogun for several months, preaching the Gospel within the castle and leading his retainers and their children into the Church. Thomas was a man constantly on the run, climbing mountains, crossing valleys and skirting around various checkpoints in the main roads. Even when the officials seemed to be closing in on him, he would disappear all of a sudden. How he eluded capture was such a feat that the officials and others literally believed that he could escape by using magic he learned while living abroad.

Having returned from Edo in 1636, Thomas hid in another cave in Tomachi, (which is part of present-day Nagasaki City) from which he would still manage to go in and out of the city of Nagasaki. The magistrate's office was desperate and offered incentives to betray him, but no one did so. Finally, on November 1st, 1636, a spy apprehended Father Thomas in present-day Katafuchi-Machi within the City of Nagasaki, thinking he was just another Christian. When the officials began questioning him, he said to the great amazement of all, "I am Father Thomas of St. Augustine Jihyoe, of the Order of St. Augustine."

Thus, his missionary effort came to an abrupt halt. His capture was followed by over six months of interrogation and torture starting with “mizuzeme” or “water torture” in which the victim was forced to swallow great amounts of water. When he could take no more, the water was forced down his throat with a funnel, until his belly was distended like a barrel. Then he stretched him on his back while the guards beat his belly with bamboo rods so hard that water mixed with blood would burst out, not only from his mouth, but also from his nose, ears and eyes. They did so until he lost his consciousness.

He was dragged back to his cell half-dead, where he was revived, only to have this torture repeated three times. The next torture was for them to force iron pins into the fingernails up to the joint; they did the same with his toenails, again continuing it until he fainted. When they saw that the priest endured all these with incredible strength, the tormentors became even more infuriated that they devised another horrible torture: Bamboo rods with metal harpoon-like tips were used to pierce and rip the flesh, much like a ragged knife or a large fishhook might do. Father Thomas was covered with ragged wounds and blood all over the body but they were short of killing him because the purpose of all these tortures was not to kill him but to break his spirit. After all these tortures, notwithstanding, they were unable to make him recant. Not only was he among the most hunted priests of the Japanese persecution but he was the one subjected to the most ferocious torture inflicted on any of the martyrs in Japan.

Finally, the magistrates decided to execute Father Thomas by the “anazuri” torture where the victim was suspended upside down until death. It is said to have been on August 21st, 1637. Going with him to execution were twelve other men and women, mostly Tertiaries and members of the Confraternity of the Cincture who had given him shelter. Father Arnulf Hartmann, O.S.A. describes this type of torture in the following way in his major work *The Augustinians in Seventeenth Century Japan*.

“The death in the pit was the ultimate refinement of the fiendish technique to break the human spirit introduced by Takaneke Uneme-no-sho. Some writers call it the torment of the fosse, in Japanese it was called ana-tsurushi. The victim was hung from the cross beam of a gallows, head downward, into a pit five or six feet deep. The body was tightly bound in order to slow down the circulation of the blood. The holes were sealed off with planks about the victim’s loins. The pits were often partly filled with offal. There in those black holes many hung for as long as a week, exuding blood from mouth and nostrils, maddened by the fearful pressure on the brain, until death released them from almost unsupportable anguish. In order to prevent a speedy death by congestion, to prolong the torture and give more chance to recant, – Takenaka wanted apostates rather than martyrs – often the victim’s temples were pierced. Some who had recanted under this torture later declared that neither the pain caused by burning with fire nor that of any other torture, deserved to be compared with the agony produced in this way.” (pp. 140-141)

Two days later, however, when seven of them had already died, Father Thomas, who was unconscious but had not expired yet, was taken down from the pit and carried back to his cell where he was given treatment to revive him for further questioning. There were basically two reasons for doing this. First of all, a Japanese apostate named Shozaemon, who had a Portuguese name João Ribeiro, was sentenced to be burnt alive for sheltering Father Thomas when he returned to Japan from the Philippines. Wishing to be pardoned, he gave the names of several Portuguese he knew had contributed to Thomas. The officials had hoped that he would corroborate the statement of João Ribeiro. The questioning turned out to be a complete failure. Despite the ingenuity of the tortures inflicted on Thomas, he did not say anything. So, the officials circulated the rumor that

Father Thomas had been removed from the pit because he had abandoned the Faith in the hope that this would discourage the Christians and cause them to give up the faith.

But what followed two months later spoke for itself. Father Thomas, along with four Christians who had provided shelter for him, was once again condemned to death in the pit. Had he actually recanted, he might have been beheaded or burned at stake at another location but would never have suffered the same fate. As soon as he left the prison, he began to shout in a loud voice, "Faith in Christ lasts for ever," and "I am going to my death because I love Jesus and believe in him." So, to silence him, the executioners gagged him and a herald was ahead of the procession shouting, "Thomas had given up the Faith," but Thomas vehemently denied this by shaking his head in disagreement. When he arrived again at Nishizaka Hill, his emaciated, shredded and beaten-up body could take no more, and he was the first of the five to die after being strung up in the pit.

It was on November 6th, 1637 when Father Thomas was 35 years old. His priestly ministry which lasted approximately ten years was executed, largely living in caves and enduring cold nights in the woods, always in flight from persecutors. There might be various epithets we can use to describe the life and person of Father Thomas of St. Augustine; for example, a man of dogged determination, of fearless courage, and of incomparable patience, a dynamic and creative pastoral minister, so on and so forth. But he was first and foremost a witness for Christ.

For two hundred and fifty years without the assistance of a single priest, the underground church handed down the flame of faith from generation to generation with various individuals taking on the ministries of baptism, catechesis, community leadership and with all being aware of their responsibility of being 'church': it was their church and everybody had a share in community building and safeguarding. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that it was the concrete witness and teaching of someone like Father Thomas Jihyoe which had upheld the morale of generations of the underground faith community throughout the period of fierce persecution. For Christians in Nagasaki and especially those in Sotome, he was a veritable hero.

According to Sicardo, a historian of the Order of Saint Augustine, there were 637 faithful who were arrested and martyred for supporting the ministry of Father Thomas in one way or another such as giving him shelter and feeding him. You might look on them as miserable souls for losing their lives the way they did. But they did not die for nothing. Their martyrdom was an act of faith and love inspired by the witness of love for Christ that Father Thomas Jihyoe of Saint Augustine gave with nothing short of his life.

With the hard work of Fr. Fernando Rojo, O.S.A., the Postulator of the Order and the strong backing of the Episcopal Conference of Japan, the beatification of a group of 188 Japanese martyrs including Father Thomas Jihyoe of Saint Augustine is considered to be materialized and celebrated somewhere in Japan within two to three years by a conservative estimate, which is very good news for all of us. However, this writer imagines with regret that the event will probably be largely unknown and come to pass without attracting much media and popular attention in Japan. Even within the Catholic Church of Japan, there is a great deal of both regional and individual or personal variation as to the devotions to these martyrs. Some have little or practically no interest, and I feel the need for the Japanese Church to reclaim its glorious past in its entirety and take more pride in it. After all, we would always do well to remember that *sanguis martyrum semen christianorum*.

In the case of Father Thomas of Saint Augustine, Mr. Masayuki Yamasaki, a parishioner from Kurosaki, part of Sotome, 'discovered' or verified with another parishioner in 1983 the cave where, according to the local tradition handed down through generations, Father Thomas hid himself when

ministering to the Christians in the region, and the same Mr. Yamasaki has been instrumental in nurturing and popularizing the devotions to Father Thomas; since its 'discovery' there has been a flow of pilgrims to the cave where there now stand two monuments, one erected by members of the underground church before the ban on Christianity was lifted and one erected by the then pastor of Kurosaki, some parishioners and a local religious community of Sisters in 1986, and in 1997 a statue of Father Thomas Jihyoe was erected, too, a statue with the same shape but only smaller scale than the one we have at our friary garden in Our Mother of Consolation, Nagasaki.

I have visited it three times myself, once each with Fr. Michael Hilden, O.S.A. and my relatives, with all the members of the Augustinian community in Japan, and with a group of Catholics from a couple of parishes. Every time we stand before the cave, it reminds us of the singular witness of a friar whose entire life was a fragrant sacrifice of praise offered to God and whose martyrdom was one of the outstanding examples of Christian heroism in the great persecution of Japan and indeed in the entire history of the Church; his dauntless faith never ceases to be an inspiration to us all.

Bibliography

Basically, I relied on the following three sources when I wrote that article:

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Hartmann, Arnulf, O.S.A., *The Augustinians in Seventeenth Century Japan*. (Marylake, King City, Ontario: New York Augustinian Historical Institute, 1965)

The first two publications are small booklets. Needless to say, the third one is the major source of information for anyone interested to study the history of the Order of Saint Augustine in Japan during the 16th and 17th centuries.

Thomas Masaki Imada O.S.A.
Vicariate of the Augustinian Martyrs of Japan.