

Japanese martyrs lived under series of dictators

FUKOKA, Japan – The 188 Japanese martyrs whom Pope Benedict XVI cleared for beatification June 1 lived under a series of dictators.

St. Francis Xavier arrived in Japan in 1549 in a Chinese junk. The wind had driven it to Japan – against the will of captain and crew – to Kagoshima, his interpreter's hometown on the island of Kyushu, and St. Francis saw God's hand in it all.

His first report from Japan stated, "Firstly, the people whom we have met so far are the best who have yet been discovered, and it seems to me that we shall never find among heathens another race to equal the Japanese."

Jesuit Father Alessandro Valignano had a different perspective three decades later, reported Michael Cooper in his 1995 book, "They Came to Japan."

"They have the most peculiar form of government in the world," he quote Father Valignano as saying of the Japanese. "Each man enjoys absolute power over his family and servants, and he may cut them down or kill them ... as he pleases, without having to give an account to anybody."

Father Valignano had arrived in July 1579, when the warlord Oda Nobunaga was in power. Nobunaga built a shrine to himself, ordering solemn monthly celebrations of his birthday and promising all who worshiped him health and wealth and life to age 100. He was assassinated months later.

The next dictator was Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who took his massive army to heavily Christian Kyushu island in 1587, after his conquest of central and western Japan, to subject the whole island to his rule. There he saw with his own eyes the fervor with which so many Japanese – a great many of them samurai, and some of them feudal lords – embraced the Catholic faith. He banned the Catholic faith and ordered all missionaries out of the country.

"He was afraid of the Christian lords," said Jesuit Father Diego Yuuki, founding

director of the Museum of the 26 Martyrs in Nagasaki, Japan. "He was afraid that they could topple him."

To Hideyoshi, Christian union seemed to threaten his own absolute rule; yet he had often praised the virtues of the priests. He eventually relaxed his stranglehold on Catholicism, and the church survived in Japan by lying low.

A decade later, though, on Feb. 5, 1597, he ordered the roundup, mutilation and crucifixion of selected Catholic missionaries and laymen: the 26 Martyrs of Japan – now saints – were marched more than 600 miles from the capital to Kyushu to die. Hideyoshi had declared to the governor of Kyoto: "I do not want this religion, a religion of love and union, which is therefore harmful for this kingdom."

But it was the next ruler, shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, who really brought down the axe on Japanese Catholicism. While Hideyoshi had struck out at the church in fear, says Father Yuuki, ideology was Ieyasu's motive – an ideology he built to keep his family in power. He instituted a rigid caste system in Japan, a social pyramid with himself, the shogun, at the top.

"Christianity, on the contrary, was all men equal," Father Yuuki said. "Those two mentalities could not coexist."

Ieyasu issued his Expulsion Edict of Feb. 14, 1614. Three ships left Nagasaki that November, crammed with Catholic priests, brothers and catechists forced to abandon their flock to shogun's new social order. Among them was Peter Kibe Kasui, who became a Jesuit.

Father Kibe eventually returned in 1630 when Japan was ruled by Shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu. He and other missionaries of the time risked capture and torture: Iemitsu was said to derive pleasure from cross-examining Christians under torture.

The shogun's torture-masters often wrapped a victim in tight coils of rope and hung him by his heels in a pit – probably containing filth – his waist pinched in a wooden clamp to cut off his circulation. The victim was tempted with promises of relief if he would chant to Buddha and renounce Christ.

Father Kibe was hung in a hole with two catechists and continually encouraged them

to maintain loyalty to Christ to the end. The executioners, fearing the contagion of his faith, pulled him out and finished him off by burning firewood on his belly.

While Father Kibe was enduring this final torment, the shogun's torturers asked him why he did not just give in, and he told them, "You cannot understand this; therefore, it is no use guiding you."