

Takayama Ukon

A hero of faith in Japan
'Rock solid for Christ'



St Francis Xavier strode manfully from a small boat into feudal Japan on the feast of Mary's Assumption, 15 August, 1549, the day he had taken his vows as a Jesuit. There was no semblance of a dictionary that translated Japanese words and ideographs into Roman letters. Trying to get Japanese words to express Christian concepts was a huge task, but Xavier's sheer holiness won him some very important Japanese converts. One was a physically handicapped musician who had been making a living by travelling around towns playing his lute and reciting old folk stories. This eloquent wandering minstrel was baptized by Xavier and eventually became the able catechist Brother Rorenzo S.J. On one occasion Rorenzo

spent several whole, uninterrupted days arguing, counter arguing, evangelizing and finally converting a "Daimyo" --the Japanese title for a feudal lord. This minor Daimyo Takayama Dario lived in a small castle in Nara Prefecture. In 1563 Br. Rorenzo had the joy of accompanying Fr. Vilela S.J. to the castle for the baptism of the whole Takayama family, including eldest son Takayama Ukon, then 11 years old. It was 1563

Takayama Ukon would become a great and famous Daimyo early in his adult life, and would end up living in a grand stone castle commanding extensive holdings in what is today Kobe City. He would lead many to baptism- aristocrats, samurai, farming folk and town dwellers. The Jesuits wrote enthusiastic letters back to Europe about this Takayama Ukon, letters also expressing great hopes for the future of the small but quickly spreading communities of Japanese Christians. Xavier had earlier written to Jesuit headquarters in Rome describing the Japanese as a highly cultured people, predicting that they would become great Christians.

But then disaster struck, initiated by the lies and boasts of the Spanish captain of the ship San Felipe. On its voyage from the Philippines to Mexico it ran into a roaring cyclone that tore off the masts and sails and dumped it on the Japanese coast—

with most of the cargo and crew intact. By Japanese custom the local Daimyo looked after the crew, but the cargo was his. When the ship's captain was told this he responded with a lie and a threat. 'You've seen the Spanish missionaries in Japan. Well they are the forerunners of the Spanish Army who will soon come and make Japan a colony. You will be in big trouble then if you have stolen my cargo.' This threat was relayed to Shogun Hideyoshi, the generalissimo and real ruler of Japan--the Emperor was a powerless symbol, eking out cultured boredom in a gilded cage in Kyoto. The Shogun looked apprehensively at the Philippines and Mexico, and the seemingly unstoppable armies from Europe. This set the scene for the persecution of Christians in Japan.

The Shogun waited because he wanted to continue trade with Europeans via their ships. But early in 1597 he struck a fierce blow: a total ban on Japanese Christians and western missionaries. He had risen to prominence from humble beginnings by ruthless violence. He now decided to terrorize every Japanese Christian and foreign missionary by very public and gruesome executions in Nagasaki, where Christians were numerous. Famous Christian Daimyo Takayama would head the list of about 20 missionaries and Japanese Christians to be executed. These "criminals" would have ears sliced off, loaded into open carts, and paraded around the capital city Kyoto. Then guarded by unmerciful samurai they would be force marched to Nagasaki, 30 days away, during the coldest time of the

year. There they would be fastened to **crosses** in mockery of this foreign Christian religion. The local governor was ordered to make as many citizens as possible attend. Everything was to be unhurried and drawn out, to heighten the terror for both the crucified and the onlookers. Finally the two samurai, who had been standing right under each of the crucified, with the steel tip of a lance very visible, would thrust the lance deep and up under the rib cage of the crucified. The last punishment was the refusing burial to their corpses that would remain on the crosses until they rotted away.

The Shogun's advisers did not oppose the gory executions but they advised the Shogun that Daimyo Takayama was too highly respected, famous throughout Japan as a man of great courage and ability, and a lover of the highest expressions of Japanese culture—the Way of the classical Tea Ceremony, haiku poetry, fine calligraphy and a brilliant designer of Daimyo castles. The advisers dared not raise raises with lecherous Hideyoshi another reason for Takayama's fame... his total faithfulness to his wife Justa Kuroda, in an era of sexual abandon among the powerful men of the land. His advisers suggested that crucifying Daimyo Takayama like a common criminal could cause dangerous resentment and possibly harm to the Shogun's "great reputation." So Shogun Hideyoshi took Takayama off the list of those to be executed on 6 February 1597. However the merciless Shogun was very angry that Takayama still lived publicly as a Christian, despite the Shogun outlawing Christianity.

To backtrack some years. Sen no Rikyu, still today venerated by most Japanese, was the acknowledged creator of the fully developed Japanese Tea Ceremony, “Chado,” The Way of Tea, which was fast becoming the quintessence of Japanese refinement and culture for the ruling classes. The Tea Ceremony is not like a casual cup of tea with friends! The Tea Ceremony is conducted mostly in silence, taking an hour or more, and is acted out according to a solemn ritual full of spiritual symbols. Often when Japanese Tea Ceremony people attend Mass for the first time they will say the Mass reminded of their much loved Tea discipline. This famous and venerated Sen no Rikyu had publicly named the young Daimyo Takayama Ukon as one of his seven “mana deshi”-- “most beloved disciples”--among the many Japanese who now practised the Tea cultural expression Rikyu had created.

Shogun Hideyoshi was also a follower of this Way of Tea and of course knew Sen no Rikyu personally. He called Rikyu to his castle, and ordered him to visit Takayama with this stern warning. ‘I order you to renounce your Christian beliefs. I am your liege lord. If you do not obey me you are betraying “bushido,” the Way of the Samurai. The whole warrior class in Japan, from the Shogun to humblest samurai, vows to follow this Way until death. Bushido demands total obedience to your liege lord. I as Shogun am your liege lord and order you to renounce this foreign religion. If you refuse to obey you are breaking your bushido vow, and will have to suffer the consequences.’ The consequences the Shogun referred to was

to was the duty of *hara kiri* (seppuku), the ritualistic disembowelling of oneself with a short sword. Samurai history up to the Emperor Meiji era that began in 1868, has many famous examples of hara kiri as “atonement” for breaking the bushido vow of obedience etc. to ones liege lord. So the Shogun was telling Takayama to reject Christianity or commit hara kiri. If Takayama died by hara kiri there would be no backlash against the Shogun.

Sen no Rikyu had no alternative but deliver the Shogun’s orders. To crafty Hideyoshi’s command the spirited Daimyo Takayama replied immediately and masterfully, neither rejecting bushido nor his Christian faith: ‘I accept Shogun Hideyoshi as my liege lord on this earth. But, higher than my earthly bushido obligation is my totally absolute obligation to obey Jesus, my Divine liege Lord, the Heavenly liege Lord of all earthly lords. I cannot renounce Him from whom I have received life itself, and the promise of eternal salvation.’ Sen no Rikyu made no effort to persuade his Way of Tea disciple to renounce Christ. He later whispered to another Tea disciple that Daimyo Takayama had not betrayed the samurai code, nor the highest ideals of Chado, the Way of Tea. Probably this refusal of Sen no Rikyu to urge Takayama’s obedience to the Shogun was one of the reasons why the Shogun ordered Sen no Rikyu to commit hara kiri, four years later in 1591. The heroic Chado leader obeyed his liege lord Hideyoshi, called close Tea friends to a final Tea Ceremony, handed his Tea utensils to them as keepsakes, bowed peacefully, and left them to

commit hara kiri alone-to the immense chagrin of all noble minded Japanese from that time right down to the present day.

When Shogun Hideyoshi received Takayama's reply from Sen no Rikyu he was infuriated. He ordered the immediate seizure of Takayama, his castle, lands and all his possessions, reducing him to the ignominious, lowest rank of a samurai, a masterless "ronin," whom no Daimyo could employ or shelter. Takayama, his wife and family were banished to an inhospitable area of Kanazawa in present day Ishikawa Prefecture. Homeless ex-Daimyo Takayama first went to the Jesuit house at Arie, asking to be allowed to do a week's retreat based on St. Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises. Takayama was a great admirer of the Ignatius who once was a knight, filled with love for chivalrous tales of knights who saved fair princesses. The converted Ignatius chose poverty to follow Christ. Samurai Takayama told his wife and family that they now had the opportunity to do the same for Christ. Fortified by the Ignatian retreat, and at peace, Takayama asked the prayers of the Jesuits and then led his family to what became a hand-to-mouth existence in a hostile environment. However as soon as he arrived there he began a fearless and free life of spreading knowledge and love of the now outlawed Christ of the Gospels, despite living in poverty..

Shogun Hideyoshi died the next year, 1598. Brilliant military strategist Daimyo Tokugawa Ieyasu, determined to become the new Shogun, waged a series of battles to the death of all rivals. He destroyed the

last of them at Sekigahara in the year 1600, and became the Shogun. He wanted to unite the whole war-torn land by declaring Shinto the religion all must follow. After consolidating his position he re-issued the ban on Christianity and began a merciless war against Christians. The year was 1614.

He knew ex-Daimyo Takayama was spreading Christianity in the provinces and sent a grim message to him. Takayama ignored it. Some new friends advised Takayama to save himself and his family by a "seeming" obedience to Tokugawa's order. Takayama replied:" For a man who has a sense of honour, and is firmly convinced of his Christian religion, it is inadmissible to even speak of such cowardice." Shogun Tokugawa then sent samurai to arrest Takayama and bring him bound to Kyoto. There Tokugawa worked on the still famous Takayama for seven months, alternating between enticements of rewards and savage death threats. Takayama remained rock solid for Christ. On 8 November Takayama, his faithful wife Justa Kuroda, their daughter and their five grandchildren, 350 missionaries and Japanese Christian laymen were put on a small boat and deported to Manila. By now Takayama's physical body was broken. 40 days after arriving in the Philippines he died during the night of 5 February, 1614.

On 7 February, 2017 the Archbishop of Osaka will hold a Mass in his cathedral, represent the Holy Father and name Takayama Ukon among the ranks of the "Blessed." So the announcement goes.

Some hopeful Japanese Catholics have wondered aloud: Wouldn't it be marvellous if Francis, the Pope of surprise was in Osaka for the Mass of Takayama Ukon's beatification.