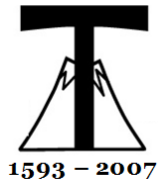


Friars Minor in Japan



Franciscan Province of Japan
2007

FOREWORD

In the closing years of the 16th century, through a mysterious series of events four members of the Order of Friars Minor began to work as missionaries in Japan. Their numbers soon increased, but four years later six of them were put to death along with three Jesuits and 17 lay Catholics. Undeterred, missionaries continued to arrive, and their gospel message was accepted by thousands. And then a fierce and unremitting persecution broke out in 1614. All missionaries were banished or martyred, an uncountable number of believers gave their lives in witness to their faith, and eventually all vestiges of Christianity in Japan were wiped out. The friars had been there less than fifty years, seemingly to no purpose.

In the mid-1800's Japan opened its ports to foreign commerce, and missionaries were able to come again. Another series of unforeseen events led to the Franciscans' return to Japan in 1907 after an absence of nearly 300 years. This year, 2007, marks the 100th anniversary of that event.

That original mission in Hokkaido was followed by another in Kagoshima and Okinawa, eventually growing to twelve independent missions belonging to foreign provinces. The historic merging of all twelve into one Japanese Province took place just 30 years ago, in 1977.

To commemorate this double anniversary we present here a brief history of the life of the Friars Minor in Japan from its beginnings in 1593 up to the present day. It is a revision and up-dating of a booklet that was originally composed in 1993 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the arrival of St. Peter Baptist and his companions in the first mission to Japan. It has been compiled from information found in historical publications, and rounded out with my personal recollections and interpretations.

As I read and thought about our history I experienced a profound sense of awe and gratitude for our forerunners in faith. I also marveled at the mysterious ways in which the Lord has accomplished his plans in even the most adverse situations. Today, when once again the picture is dark, those unpredictable ways give hope for the future of the Franciscan Order in Japan.

August 25, 2007

Callistus Sweeney, OFM

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16th and 17th Centuries

1. Beginnings

The first Franciscan's arrival in Japan was typical of the way God has written straight with crooked lines throughout the 400 year saga of the Order of Friars Minor in the Land of the Rising Sun. Unexpected persons, unlikely events and adversity, perhaps most of all adversity, seem to enjoy a preferred role in the coming of his kingdom.

John Pobre Diaz Pardo, a few months after making first vows in Manila at the age of 68, had gone to Macau. There he hoped to rejoin the friars whose lives had inspired him to give up considerable wealth for the habit of St. Francis, and eventually begin a mission in China. In Macau he found their house destroyed and the friars gone. As if that blow were not enough, on the way back to Manila his ship was forced to detour to Hirado in southern Japan, with results no one anticipated.

During his two months there, this elderly lay brother's humility and poverty made such a deep impression on the local Christians that they wrote letter after letter to Manila asking for Franciscan missionaries. The pleas took effect, but in the midst of preparations to send a group of friars to Japan, a papal brief arrived reserving the evangelization of that nation to the

Society of Jesus. The mission was halted, for a time at least.

Another person deeply impressed by John Pobre was Gonzalo Garcia. Born in India of a Portuguese father and an Indian mother, he had worked as a lay catechist for the Jesuits in Japan for eight years. He was so attracted by the friar's life that he left Japan and eventually entered the Order in Manila. He was to become one of the founders of the Franciscan mission in Japan.

Christian missionary activity in Japan had begun with the arrival of Francis Xavier in 1549. In less than 50 years the zeal of the Jesuit missionaries and a special working of the Holy Spirit had given birth to a strong Christian movement, and the conversion of several influential local lords. Some writers estimate that there were as many as 300,000 Catholics in Japan by the end of the 16th century. In spite of frequent disruptions caused by the political and economic intrigues of those in power, the Society's more than 100 missionaries continued to make progress, with a combination of hope, determination and flexibility in adverse situations.

The opportunity for the Spanish Franciscans in the Philippines to enter this promising field was provided, oddly enough, by the expansionist policies of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, military dictator of Japan. The Philippines were threatened with invasion, and after one legate, a Dominican, had perished at sea, the governor of

Manila selected the Franciscan priest. Peter Baptist Blazquez, to be his envoy to Hideyoshi.

2. Arrival

In 1593 Peter Baptist sailed to Hirado, Japan in the dual role of emissary to negotiate a treaty of peace, and of missionary of the Philippine Province of St. Gregory the Great. With him were the priest Bartholomew Ruiz and two lay brothers, Francis of St. Michael and Gonzalo Garcia, their providential interpreter. They succeeded in gaining an audience with Hideyoshi, who agreed to a pact of peace with Manila, and also permitted the friars to remain in Japan. Eventually they were given a piece of land in Kyoto, and on October 4, 1594 they dedicated their new house and church to Mary Queen of Angels.

These were followed by two 50-bed hospitals next to the friary. From then on, wherever they went they cared for the sick and lepers. This, and their life of strict poverty and prayer, attracted a multitude of catechumens to their doors. Many Christians helped to care for the sick and to catechize. Some began to share the daily life of the friars, and were admitted to the Third Order. Secular Franciscans were among the associates who eventually joined the friars in martyrdom.

In 1987 the Franciscans marveled to learn that the place which they had just obtained in central Kyoto was located on the very site of this original foundation

of St. Peter Baptist and companions. Its successor today is a center of prayer and dialogue with other faiths.

3. Martyrdom

New missionaries arrived in 1594 and 1596, enabling the little band to open places in Nagasaki and Osaka. Then adversity arrived, brought by the San Felipe, a Spanish ship that had been driven to Japan in a typhoon. Opponents of Christianity used the incident to persuade Hideyoshi that missionary activity was a preparation for Spanish conquest of Japan. The enraged ruler ordered the arrest and execution of the Franciscans and their immediate helpers.

Six friars and fifteen associates of the Franciscans, including three children 12-15 years old, were rounded up. The friars were Peter Baptist Blazquez, Martin of the Ascension de Aquirre, Francis Blanco and Francis of St. Michael, all from Spain; Philip of Jesus from Mexico, who had been aboard the San Felipe on his way home for priestly ordination, and Gonzalo Garcia from India. The Jesuit scholastic Paul Miki and two Jesuit catechists were also arrested. After having their left ears mutilated, and being paraded through the streets of Kyoto, Osaka and Sakai, they underwent a 26-day torturous journey to Nagasaki. On the way they were joined by two others, associates of the friars and the Jesuits.

On the morning of their arrival, February 5, 1597, soldiers led them to the executions grounds overlooking the harbor, tied them to crosses and then pierced their chests with spears. By 10 a.m. the 26 martyrs had consummated their sacrifice. Eyewitnesses spoke of their cheerfulness and calm, their thanking the Lord and encouraging the bystanders to prefer life in eternity, and the beauty of their faces after death.

St. Peter Baptist and companions were beatified in 1627, and canonized in 1862. Today a church and museum on that site commemorate these first to shed their blood for the faith in Japan, as well as the thousands of others who followed their example in the succeeding years.

4. Refounding

At the command of Peter Baptist, a friar who had not been seized, Jerome of Jesus, remained underground to care for the Christians. In 1598 Hideyoshi died, and power was seized by Tokugawa Ieyasu. Wanting to reestablish trade with Manila and Mexico, Ieyasu looked for someone to help gain the good will of the Spanish. Rumor of the priest's presence led to an intense search, and his being brought before Ieyasu.

Instead of martyrdom, friar Jerome's call was to write letters of commendation for Ieyasu's envoy. In return

he was permitted to remain in Japan and to build a church in Edo, the first in what is now Tokyo. When negotiations broke down in Manila, Ieyasu sent Fr. Jerome in person. The friar not only succeeded in pleading the shogun's cause, he also was able to bring back new missionaries with him in 1601. Jerome is considered to be the second founder of the Franciscans in Japan. He died that same year, in the hospital the first friars had erected in Kyoto.

From 1601 until the outbreak of general persecution in 1614, more than 30 friars arrived in Japan from Manila and Mexico. They established ten central missions and seven hospitals, and several secondary stations. Except for one church and hospital in Nagasaki, the Franciscans concentrated their efforts in the Osaka-Kyoto area and around Edo (Tokyo). Later, in 1611, Louis Sotelo first preached the faith in northern Honshu (Sendai area), and prepared the delegation sent by Date Masamune, ruler of the area, to Madrid and Rome in 1613.

5. Persecution

Intrigues by some Christian lords, and anti-Catholic accusations by Dutch and English traders, influenced Ieyasu to change his original permissiveness to suppression. He culminated it with an edict to deport all foreign priests, destroy all churches and compel all Japanese Christians to renounce their faith. The edict was carried out ruthlessly. Diego of St. Francis, superior during the persecution, wrote from Japan:

"The Franciscan mission in Japan was most flourishing at the beginning of 1614. The edict of banishment promulgated by Ieyasu in 1613 and made effective the following year, managed to destroy all Franciscan institutions in the land."

During this persecution 28 members of the First Order, two Japanese priests of the Third Order Regular and several hundred Secular Franciscans won the crown of martyrdom. In 1867 the Pope beatified 205 martyrs, among whom were 17 Friars Minor, one TOR friar, and about 40 Secular Franciscans. In 1987 a group of 16 martyrs of the Dominican Family were canonized. Another 188 martyrs were declared blessed in 2007.

The bitterness of the persecution notwithstanding, missionaries continued to arrive, and people continued to risk their lives to embrace Christianity. Diego of St. Francis writes about northern Honshu: "In 1626 we had 5000 Christians there. Three years later the number had risen to more than 13,000."

The authorities eventually wiped out all the missionaries. The last friar martyr probably died at Edo in 1640. But even after that, with a hatred and persistence that seemed diabolic, they continued to hunt out Christians and either kill them or force them to apostatize. Finally Japan was sealed off from contact with the rest of the world. To all appearances Christianity had been exterminated.

Early 20th Century

6. Rebirth

In 1853 an American naval squadron compelled Japan to renew relations with the outside world. Nagasaki, Yokohama and Hakodate were opened to shipping, and foreign powers were allowed to erect churches in those ports for traders and seamen.

On March 17, 1865 at the Nagasaki Church, a group of Japanese approached Fr. Petitjean, M.E.P. and confided that they were of the same faith as he. This led to a discovery that electrified the Catholic world: tens of thousands of hidden Christians had preserved their faith through 250 years of persecution.

Under pressure from European nations, in 1873 the Japanese government granted a veneer of freedom to preach Christianity. However, restrictions, harassment and even martyrdom continued until the end of World War II in 1945. In the Catholic Church, the Paris Foreign Mission Society was the exclusive evangelizer of the nation at first.

7. Franciscans Return

The 20th century arrival of the Order of Friars Minor in Japan was, like their first one, through the back

door: as chaplains for the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary in Hokkaido, the northernmost island.

The minister general assigned Maurice Bertin. As a French naval officer Lt. Bertin had visited the Nagasaki site of St. Peter Baptist's martyrdom in 1895, leaving with a resolve to become a friar and somehow bring the Order back to Japan. The next year he entered the Franciscans in Montreal, Canada. After ordination, letters he wrote to stimulate interest in a return of the friars to Japan led to his dream being realized.

Wenceslaus Kinold of the Fulda (Germany), Province, who had been prevented from going to a mission in Africa, was appointed to go with him. The two arrived in January 1907, and were joined in June by two Canadian friars, Peter Gauthier and Gabriel Godbout. Father Kinold was appointed superior of the mission in the following year.

Not all the pioneer missionaries of the area were pleased to open it to outsiders. However, from the start Bishop Berlioz, M.E.P. of Hakodate (Hokkaido) expected more than chaplaincy work from the friars, and gave them a place in the growing city of Sapporo. The first friary in modern Japan was dedicated there on September 14, 1908. A parish was begun that the friars still care for today. As the missionaries increased, the bishop turned over to the Franciscans more and more of his territory.

8. Hokkaido Mission

New missionaries joined them in rapid fashion, so that when World War I broke out in 1914 they numbered 14. At first it was an international mission. Although the majority came from Fulda, there were friars from the provinces of Montreal (including French Maurice Bertin and an Englishman), Tyrol, Bavaria, Metz, Ireland and Silesia.

Wenceslaus Kinold, however, realistically insisted that "if the mission is not entrusted to a single province, no one can or will take the responsibility for maintaining it." In 1911 the Mission of Hokkaido was given to the Fulda Province. The Holy See made it an apostolic prefecture in 1915, and apostolic vicariate in 1929, naming Kinold prefect and then bishop in turn.

Five years after their arrival, the friars began a minor seminary, accepting vocations for the diocesan clergy and the Franciscans.

The priests and brothers continued to increase, reaching about 35 in 1940. Actually over 65 friars arrived, but their numbers were regularly depleted by death, return home and assignment to other missions. They came mostly from Fulda, and evangelized not only Hokkaido, an area the size of Austria, but the adjacent peninsula of Sakhalin as well.

9. Goals and Methods

The soil of Japan had radically changed since the 16th century. It was rocky with suspicion and misunderstanding, and the gospel seed did not take root easily. Each conversion was a small miracle of grace and courage.

Parish churches were gradually built in each city and large town, but not simply as places of worship. More like bases of operation, they produced an astounding variety of activities, anything which the imagination, talents and zeal of the missionaries could develop in order to meet people, make friends and gain understanding. This, with the witness of chastity and sacrifice in their lives, slowly made people more receptive to what they said about Christian belief.

The friars soon learned that most Japanese, although nominally Buddhist, truly had a need for the joy and hope that come from knowing Christ and his saving power. Their main goals, then, were to announce the good news of Jesus, to catechize and baptize those who requested, and to build up the faith of Christians so that they might renew society from within.

In essence, these methods and goals were the same for the entire parish apostolate in Japan, and remain so today.

Of course the friars saw other needs of the people, and tried to answer them with hospitals, schools, and work among the poor and rejected. Yet, here too they sensed an incompleteness in their work if

it did not lead somehow to a relationship with Christ.

10. Karafuto Mission

Agnellus Kowartz (Silesia) began to visit Sakhalin from Hokkaido in 1911, and later resided there with other friars. In 1932 Polish Franciscans under Gerard Piotrowski took responsibility for the mission. In 1938 it was made an apostolic prefecture, headed by Felix Hermann.

It was a difficult place to work, due to a harsh climate and severe restrictions put on missionary activity. The foreign missionaries were compelled to leave in 1941, and with the takeover by Russia in 1945 the mission ceased to exist.

11. Kagoshima Mission

When the Hokkaido mission was entrusted to the Fulda Province in 1911, it was proposed that the Montreal Province begin its own mission in Japan. This became a reality in 1921. Maurice Bertin and Urbain Cloutier left Hokkaido to take over evangelization of the civil prefectures of Kagoshima and Okinawa at the most southern tip of Japan.

While the total land area was smaller than Lebanon, the mission embraced numerous islands that stretched in a 1000 km line between Japan and Taiwan. Most of

the Christians (about 3500) were living on the island of Amami Oshima, and the friars concentrated their work there at first.

New missionaries arrived from Canada in good number, 36 in the next 12 years, although some died or returned. Egide Roy was appointed superior in 1926, and apostolic prefect in 1927. He moved to the city of Kagoshima, the civil center of the area.

The man who had initiated the return of the Franciscans to Japan, Maurice Bertin, was sent to France in 1928 to make arrangements to begin a community of French friars in Tokyo. Once again divine designs were drawn with strange lines: plans were changed, and he was sent to Indochina instead, thus becoming also the originator of the future Province of Vietnam

Montreal, itself made a province only in 1927, hoped to start an independent entity, and so it set about forming communities. It took over the Tokyo project and opened a house in Den-en-chofu which the friars still staff today. This was followed by a minor seminary and novitiate in Nagasaki, and a community in Kagoshima. In 1936 the minister general officially erected the Canadian Commissariat of Japan.

12. Urawa Mission

In the 1930's expansionist fever drove the Japanese army to war with China. For the military, Kagoshima

and the islands to Okinawa were strategic areas, and all foreigners were possible spies. Anti-Church sentiment was fostered, which developed into a cruel persecution. The missionaries were ultimately forced to leave, first the islands and then Kagoshima itself.

The uprooted friars went at first to Nagasaki and Tokyo. Then, in 1937 they expanded to a new area just north of Tokyo. Expulsion from Kagoshima meant blessings to this sparsely evangelized territory. It comprised the civil prefectures of Saitama, Tochigi, Gumma and Ibaragi. The city of Urawa became the center of the mission, and the seat of the apostolic prefecture erected in 1939. Ambroise Leblanc, besides heading the Franciscan commissariat, was mission superior and the first apostolic prefect.

The dispersal of the Kagoshima friars had another unexpected spin-off. Justin Bellerose was sent with some others to Korea, becoming the originator of the Franciscan presence there.

13. Nagano Mission

Agnellus Kowartz, while working in the Hokkaido mission, had long hoped to have a mission for his own province of Silesia. In 1935 he and two others were given a territory in Nagano Prefecture, a mountainous area northwest of Tokyo with two Christian centers. They started a third before the war brought everything

to a standstill.

14. World War II

As the military took more and more power in Japan, the Church was hampered with increasing restrictions and official hostility. Finally in 1941 all the foreign ordinaries were forced to resign, including Bishop Kinold in Sapporo and Monsignor Leblanc in Urawa, and Japanese apostolic administrators were appointed by the Holy See. The Church of Japan had no choice but to transfer responsibility to the diocesan clergy; traumatic at the time, the event now appears as a providential propulsion into indigenization.

With the outbreak of the Second World War all the Canadian missionaries were interned. The 14 Japanese novices they had just received were conscripted into military service. The German friars were not confined, but their activities were severely limited.

During the war years less than ten Japanese Franciscan priests and lay brothers in both missions struggled heroically to help the Christians keep their faith, to preserve the churches and friaries, and to assist the missionaries. The Christians who cooperated with them were rewarded for their courage with intimidation by the police.

Late 20th Century

15. Revival

At the end of the war in 1945, anti-religious laws were repealed, and for the first time in 400 years Japan enjoyed true religious freedom. Everyone, missionaries not excepted, suffered from lack of food and other necessities for several years. But there was also a spiritual hunger abroad, a desire for truth and meaning to life, and it brought large numbers of seekers to the churches. The news of great conversions in Japan spread throughout the world. Missionaries began to come again from Fulda and Montreal. Most of the Japanese novices returned and started novitiate anew. But the harvest needed a great many more workers.

16. Franciscan Rejuvenation

Just at that time, 1948-9, hundreds of missionaries were being expelled from China as the communist regime took power. In still another quirk of divine providence, many of these displaced missionaries were redirected to Japan. The man of the hour for the Franciscans was Alphonse Schnusenber. As delegate general for the Far East, he set about changing the expulsion from China into an opportunity to build up the Church in Japan. Using persuasion, and other stratagems, he sent to Japan dozens of friars coming

out of China, and young men he had combed from other provinces.

Some went to the existing missions of Hokkaido, Urawa and Nagano. In a few years these friars had convinced their home provinces to contract for their own missions with the bishops, who were desperate for personnel. Between 1950 and 1956 ten provinces did just that, resulting in a total of 12 separate districts in the care of Franciscans. With the injection of young friars and material assistance, Franciscan parish bases increased to almost 100, and the number of Christians took a giant leap forward.

Other men went to work in three important institutions in Tokyo which the delegate general set up and staffed in short order: St. Anthony Seminary for philosophy and theology students, the Franciscan Studium Biblicum to translate the bible, and St. Joseph's Japanese Language School for missionaries.

All three provided valuable service for many years. Although the language school had a reputation for excellence, a drastic decrease in new missionaries led to its close in 1998. The seminary has formed over 100 Franciscans, as well as students from other religious institutes, including sisters. Highly valued for its quality education and religious atmosphere, it now suffers from a steep drop in religious vocations. The Studium Biblicum, while lending key help to the ecumenical common bible translation, has continued its own translation with commentary and is due to publish the whole bible in one volume soon. Its New

Testament is a constant best-seller. From these institutions the friars have branched out into apostolates like university lecturing, writing and research. Likewise under Father Alphonse, the minor seminary of the Fulda friars and the novitiate of the Montreal friars were opened to all Franciscans in Japan. In 1957 Alphonse was called to Rome to become secretary of the missions.

17. Movements towards Unity

In step with the Church's growth, more and more young men asked to enter the Order. In the formation houses they received a solid religious training, but the situation they entered afterwards became worrisome.

A major problem was that no Japanese Franciscan organization existed to which a local friar could belong. Each candidate was a member of an overseas province, the one in charge of the district from which he came. Once his formation was over he went back to that district. He had strong feelings of belonging and indebtedness to the overseas province, and to the missionaries of the district where his vocation was first nurtured. Moreover, absorbed in the evangelization of his own district, he had little contact with his brothers in other areas. Finally, in the district, life as a Friar Minor was generally sacrificed for the sake of work as an evangelizer. Likewise, doors seemed closed to any desire for apostolic work outside of parishes.

All of these conditions worked against what the Church and the Order were saying: true evangelization must implant religious life in mission regions. The 12 independent mission districts had achieved much, but their future growth called for a more united structure rooted in Japan, and a deeper religious spirit that could develop an evangelization enhanced by Franciscan life.

This was clear to Apollinaris van Leeuwen, the succeeding delegate general. He insisted vigorously on the need to set up Franciscans units, in Japan and in all Asia, that would be independent of foreign provinces. It was largely because of his vision, and his persistence at the 1967 general chapter and afterwards, that the Order created provinces and vicariates in mission territories. These new units, small but with promise of growth, steadily added Oriental and African faces to general chapters, and dramatically expanded the Order's self-awareness as a worldwide fraternity.

A movement to unify their various groups began to stir among the friars in Japan, and was pushed in the late 1960's by the new delegate general, Sigfrid Schneider. However, in spite of many discussions as well as encouragement from the General Curia, the friars were far from united about unity. The proposal to become an independent entity elicited strong reactions. To many it seemed like a call to walk on water, to others like a prodigal son's rejection of the founding provinces. Still others worried that evangelization

would suffer. Even many of those in favor felt it was too soon.

18. Franciscan Federation

In 1970 the minister general, Constantine Koser, gave Japan's reluctant Franciscans a forceful push. He announced that the primary task of the new delegate general, Callistus Sweeney, was to complete the negotiations towards unity. Consultations with all the friars produced no clear results, and so, in November of that same year, the superiors of all 12 missions decided to form the Franciscan Federation of Japan. When it was formally erected in the following year, it was the first of its kind in the Order. Callistus Sweeney was elected president.

Within the federation the mission districts retained their autonomy, and still belonged to the overseas provinces, but they agreed to jointly pursue three goals: to promote unity of spirit through practical collaboration, to improve the quality of Franciscan lifestyle, and to prepare for complete unification. During its six year lifetime it helped the friars to get to know and trust each other.

In 1974 the federation elected Franciscus Sato as president, and set the goal of erecting a province in three years. To make it easier for the districts to accept integration, the minister general advanced the idea that they become custodies of the new province, with considerable autonomy. Put into practice, it did

help to overcome the friars' hesitation, but in the long run autonomy turned out to hinder unity, and by mutual agreement those custodies eventually became regional houses of the province.

19. Franciscan Province Erected

The Province of the Holy Martyrs of Japan was erected on December 16, 1977. Franciscus Sato was named the first minister provincial. Completing his term in 1983, he was made bishop of Niigata in June 1985. The next ministers provincial were Pius Honda, Andreas Fukuda, Joachim Maekawa, and Michael Yuzawa.

The friars were quite satisfied that they had succeeded in creating a province. In reality, however, it was a province long in name but short in substance. Due to the compromises about autonomy, what had been erected was only a basic foundation and framework. Many more years of patient labor would be needed in order to build a true provincial brotherhood.

20. Growing as a Province

The process of building and growing took place in many ways. Most visibly, positions of responsibility shifted to Japanese friars. The make-up of the membership also changed, from a predominance of expatriates to a majority of local friars.

Another development quietly took place in the area of Franciscan lifestyle and mentality. Starting in the time of the federation and continuing until the present day, in a variety of formats, the friars of all age groups have engaged in reflections on the specifically Franciscan aspects of their style of living and evangelizing. At first this seemed a waste of time to most friars, who thought of themselves as missionaries first and last, and had hardly thought about Franciscan life since novitiate. After the erection of the province these reflections gained more acceptance, and eventually became an essential part of the on-going formation program. As a result the friars slowly developed a greater awareness of their Franciscan identity. Also, by coming together from various parts of the country they strengthened their bonds as a provincial fraternity.

From the 1980's the friars of Japan increased their involvement with poor, rejected and neglected people. Several friars had been doing special works among poor or homeless laborers in slums of Osaka and Tokyo for years. Now the whole Order adopted a "preferential option for the poor" which opened the eyes of the Franciscans of Japan to other forms of injustice, discrimination and poverty at home. To its call for solidarity with those victims by action and a humbler lifestyle, many friars responded enthusiastically and in concrete ways. Unfortunately, many others saw that enthusiasm as a rejection of their own work and life, and antagonism was born. The resulting division gradually changed into mutual acceptance, but the

healing process took several years. While the experience was painful, perhaps it was a necessary part of growing.

In another conspicuous area of growth, the province became mission-oriented, sending altogether 14 missionaries, as well as material assistance, to other provinces. Especially memorable was the missioning of five friars to the Africa Project.

At the same time, the provincial leadership worked hard to create more places where friars lived together, an idea not easily accepted by many who were accustomed to living alone. A further obstacle to communal living was the decrease in membership that compelled many priests to care for two or three parishes, with consequent loss of time for fraternal life.

A ritiro of prayer-centered life was begun in 1978. Although its value was recognized in theory, only a handful of friars actually took part, and after 20 years it was closed

Perhaps the most formidable and long-lasting barrier to development as a brotherhood was independence in financial matters. Concretely, this meant that the income of the friars of a mission district stayed in the district, and its use was decided by the friars of that district. Attitudes changed somewhat over the years, as the districts agreed to share administration and formation expenses, to contribute to a common building fund, and to submit an annual financial

report. These steps did serve to increase mutual trust and a sense of responsibility for the whole fraternity of Japan, but the big question, control of the purse strings, remained untouched.

21. Diminishing Membership

Fewer and fewer Japanese men asked to enter the Order. The drop in vocations was linked to stagnation in Church growth that began in the mid 1950's. In the first ten years after World War II Catholics grew annually by ten thousand or more. But as the general economy improved, in step with the rise in per capita income, the number of adult baptisms fell, and remained at a barely self-sustaining level of around 4,000. For almost 50 years Catholics have numbered no more than 0.3% of the population (Protestants and Catholics combined make only about 1%). Fortunately, this lack of so-called success has stimulated a broader view of evangelization. Numbers are secondary, and stress is placed on living out the good news of Christ, on changing society's values, and on being in solidarity with the poor and marginalized.

Vocations to religious life followed a similar downward trend. Here the decline was even more severe because the foreign missionaries, who had founded and staffed most of the post-war parishes, schools and charitable works, dwindled to about one fourth of their original strength.

During that period many friars departed for heaven, or homeland, or households of their own. The 265 friars in Japan in 1970 decreased by more than 50 percent over the next 30 years, and the future looked even grimmer. The situation was much the same as that taking place in other provinces around the world. Acute observers were saying that a major cause was the widespread adoption by religious of secular values like security and success. The leadership of the Order saw the only solution to be a return to our origins, to a new orientation founded on prayer, minority and fraternity in lifestyle and methods of evangelization. The friars of Japan, however, appeared unable to face up to the challenge of change.

Into the 21st Century

22. Making Progress

The friars of Japan entered the 21st century staggering under the weight of these seemingly unsolvable problems. At the provincial chapter of 2001 the new leadership under Michael Yuzawa vowed they would not pass on those burdens to the next administration.

The first task was to merge the finances of all the districts. Already at the chapter the delegates had shown basic agreement to the idea, and within four years the merger had been implemented smoothly. Furthermore, the annual financial reports and budgets were being submitted for scrutiny and approval. It was a momentous step: at last this was a province in substance as well as name.

In another area, the mentality of many friars has turned unexpectedly in favor of communal living. The fraternities that feel able to accept and care for elderly friars have also increased. Not only fraternal living but also fraternal evangelization has begun to show progress. Even if it is limited to a few pilot projects, the evidence of change in mentality is undeniable

Ongoing formation has been enriched with a well prepared program which each friar must attend once every three years. The content of the program has

been designed to serve also as preparation for the provincial chapter, thus gaining the involvement of all in planning and deciding their future.

23. Unsolved Problems

In 2007 the friars number 85 Japanese and 36 expatriates, including eight missionaries overseas (Brazil, Korea, Pakistan, Philippines, Russia, and the Holy Land). Although young Japanese men continue to feel drawn to St. Francis' way of life, and one or two may enter the Order each year, they often do not continue.

New foreign missionaries are extremely rare. Today 121 friars are trying to carry on most of the institutions that were in the hands of 265 far younger men 35 years ago, as well as the new ones that have been added since. Statistics promise continued decrease in personnel.

The fewness in members is felt most keenly in parochial ministry. Friars are responsible for close to 70 parishes, many of them without a resident priest today. All the dioceses of Japan suffer the same shortage. The problem is not simply one of numbers. There is a great lack of lay Catholics who can lead their church so that it remains alive and growing even without a resident priest.

A long tradition of one-man leadership by the priests of the parishes, with noteworthy exceptions, has

tended to produce a passive laity, and stagnation when the churches are deprived of their priests. Now a major effort is needed to form Catholics to become evangelizers of their own locality and administrators of their own parish, under a much looser form of leadership by priests. A lesser number of clergy providing the pastoral care and overall direction for an active laity should result in a much healthier Christianity.

24. Crooked Lines Today

The friars have made remarkable progress recently, overcoming obstacles once thought to be insurmountable. With an aging and dwindling membership, however, do they have the strength to solve the great problems that still remain?

The answer is suggested by St. Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." (12:9) The friars' present state of impotence, if accepted in Paul's manner, can become the way for divine power to lead the friars into new forms of living and evangelizing. Is not God waiting to write straight with crooked lines once again?

Friars Minor in Japan 1593-2007

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