

MESSAGE FROM JUSTO TAKAYAMA UKON For the Canonization

A MAN WHO WALKED THE PATH OBEDIENCE
JUSTO TAKAYAMA UKON (1552-1615)



Bronze statue of Ukon (by Yasutake Funakoshi, The Museum of the 26 Martyrs in Nagasaki)

The Catholic Church in Japan, from its very beginning, has had a history quite unique among other nations of the world. The gospel introduced by Francis Xavier in 1549 spread throughout the land and records show that within some 40 years the number of the faithful surpassed about 300,000. However, in 1587, while the Church was still young, the powerful Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598) made Christianity the target of a policy of persecution. This policy only hardened as the years advanced, and at the beginning of the 17th century, if anyone was discovered to hold the Christian faith, not only he himself but also his whole family were executed. This policy of prohibition continued for more than 280 years, until 1873. It is said that under this policy more than 20,000 were martyred. Despite these conditions, the Church in Japan did not die out. From the beginning of the 17th century, when the persecution became intense, throughout the more than 200 years that followed, the faithful,

deprived of support by priests and religious, held on to their faith.

THE LIFE OF UKON

The famous Christian feudal lord Justo Takayama Ukon (1552-1615) laid the foundation on which the Church described above was solidly built. Ukon is known as a typical feudal lord active in the middle of the 16th century, during the latter part of Japan's century of civil wars. Ukon met up with Jesuit missionaries and was baptized at the



The title page of "DOCTRINA CHRISTAM" published in 1600 from Bensei Publishing



Catholic Church of Takatsuki where Takayama family lived for over 13 years.

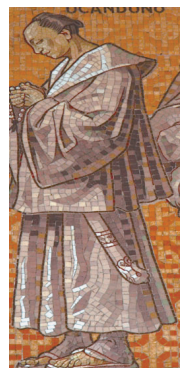
age of 12 along with his father Dario. Ukon was an active and trusted vassal of Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), who finally subdued the long drawn-out civil wars, as well as of Hideyoshi, Nobunaga's successor. These two Shoguns made major moves toward concentrating their own personal control over the whole of Japan. However, although Hideyoshi had previously shown understanding

toward the Church, in 1587 he suddenly did an about-face in his religious policy, ordering the deportation of missionaries, destroying churches in Kyoto and Osaka, and urging the Christian feudal lords to renounce their faith. Ukon, refusing to renounce his faith, was deprived of his rank and his fiefdom was attacked.

After the death of Hideyoshi, the Tokugawa family took control of the whole country and established their shogunate government in Edo (present-day Tokyo). They continued to pursue a policy of prohibiting Christianity. The shogunate feared the influence of Ukon, and in 1614 exiled him to the Philippines along with more than 300 Christians. On reaching Manila, they were given a national welcome, but before long Ukon fell gravely ill and died in Manila during the night of February 3, 1615, some 40 days after his arrival there. He was given a national funeral and was buried in the Philippines. Immediately after his death his reputation as a martyr spread, and the investigation for his canonization began. At that time it was difficult to collect data in Japan, so the process could not be continued. Now, however, the Church of Japan, in cooperation with the Church of the Philippines, is actively pursuing the cause of Ukon's canonization.

UKON'S MESSAGE FOR US TODAY: THE PRINCIPLE OF CHOICE

Ukon was often placed in situations where important and decisive life choices had to be made which could not be avoided by a military commander belonging to the powerful ruling class. He stood at the very forefront where the values of God and that of the world come into greatest conflict. Decisive choices that cannot be avoided have to be made by any Christian leader in whatever age. Ukon held clear principles for choosing the path that would lead to God and would lead to correct decisions. To answer to the love of God who, in order to love without limit and to save we sinners, took on himself mankind's



Portrait of Ukon (a part of mosaic in the Jesuit Church in Santa Cueva de Manresa, Spain)

destiny to die—this was Ukon's basic principle. That was the only thing he kept in view. This alone was the standard of the major decisions he made throughout his life. There was no room for compromise. What moved Ukon was the belief that remaining in the love of God was the road to human happiness.

In 1578, Araki Murashige, Ukon's liege lord, turned against Nobunaga, to whom he was allied. Murashige urged his powerful subject Ukon to also revolt. Ukon's dilemma was severe. If he adhered to Murashige, the Church and the missionaries would be persecuted by Nobunaga. If he adhered to Nobunaga, the lives of his son and his younger sister, whom Murashige was holding as hostages, would be endangered. He was forced into conflict with his father Dario, who supported Murashige. As a result of his prayer in the face of this suffering, Ukon made a decision to pay a visit to Nobunaga. Murashige, realizing his own defeat, returned the hostages to Ukon.

The greatest decision of Ukon's life was in 1587. The most powerful leader of the time, Hideyoshi, declared the prohibition of Christianity. At the same time he gave strict orders to Ukon to abandon Christianity, and if he would not do so, his fiefdom would be confiscated and he would be banished. If he simply formally renounced the Church, he would receive further advancement. If he did not renounce his faith, he would lead a pitiable life of destitution. To the messenger who brought this order from Hideyoshi, Ukon said he would visit Hideyoshi unarmed and convey his thoughts, adding that if he should be killed, he would be quite satisfied. Ukon was banished and led a wanderer's life. When Tokugawa Ieyasu came to power after Hideyoshi's death, he continued to enforce the prohibition of Christianity and ordered Ukon, who still retained his faith, to leave the country. He departed from Nagasaki on November 8, 1614. On arriving in Manila, he fell critically ill and during the night of February 3, 1615, was called to the Lord. Not only banished but also dying in exile, Ukon gained high honor in Manila as a martyr immediately after his death. At present, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan is petitioning for his canonization as a martyr.



Marble statue of Ukon (by Nicolao Arrighini, Catholic Church in Takatsuki)

DOWNWARD MOBILITY

During the 16th and 17th centuries, when Ukon lived, Japan was still violently agitated by civil wars. It was a time when powerful go-getters maneuvered to attain wealth, power, and fame. It was a time when society sought upward mobility. Ukon was the type of person blessed with the resourcefulness to seek a better life. However, Ukon was not deceived by visible and attainable fortune and continued to keep his pure vision set on



Stone statue of Ukon (by Masayoshi Abe, Cathedral of Osaka)

the invisible and true, even if distant, happiness. Ukon was not mistaken regarding the road to be chosen. It was the road of downward mobility as a disciple of the Lord. In that warring age when everyone strove to climb upward, Ukon chose the path of abasement. Through his choices at each of life's junctures, Ukon became visibly poorer. However, Ukon's heart became richer. The downward path that Ukon took was the way of Christ, the way of the cross. On this downward path one meets God, who is waiting there. Firm hope is found there, because as Christians we know that God lowered himself and chose to become poor for the salvation of mankind. Ukon ascended with Jesus and was

received into the presence of the Father.

Those who live close to the ground know that God is near. Ukon teaches us that.

In the present age, when we are urged to make choices from among various values that promise happiness, people who adhere to Jesus can learn from the life of Ukon to follow the Lord directly, without deviation or error.

