

New Year Pastoral Letter, 2008

A New Evangelization in the Light of the Great Kyoto Martyrdom - Part 2

~ Living out Martyrdom (“*Maruchiru*”) [1] in the Present Day ~

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1. *The Year of the Beatification of Pedro Kibe and 187 Martyrs*

A Happy New Year to you all! Once again this year may all the faithful of Kyoto diocese, ‘Everyone united’ (my episcopal motto), press on with collaborative ministry for mission.

On June 6 last year the papal Congregation for the Causes of Saints confirmed that Pope Benedict XVI had approved the beatification of Pedro Kibe and 187 Martyrs and, in September, announced that the ceremony of beatification will take place in Nagasaki on Monday, November 24, 2008.

I have decided, as I did last year, to take once again as this year’s theme ‘A New Evangelization in the Light of the Great Kyoto Martyrdom’ (Part 2), and would like the people of Kyoto Diocese to renew their decision to get to grips with the ‘new evangelization’ by taking the faith of the martyrs who are to be beatified as a model for ‘living the Mass in everyday life’.

2. *Consolidating the System of Parish Activity Sectors for the ‘New Evangelization’.*

It is now seven years since ‘Collaborative Ministry for Mission’ was introduced in all 56 parishes of Kyoto Diocese in 2001. Last year also saw the completion of a five year process of producing ‘Parish Codes of Practice’. I would like to express my gratitude to all of you for your understanding and the unstinting cooperation you have shown: thank you very much indeed. We now have a structure in place which should direct the management and activities of a church which bears responsibility for the ‘New Evangelization in the way of Collaborative Ministry for Mission. The next challenge is to find ways of keeping the sector system we have set in motion on the right lines. The goal the sector system is aiming for is ‘a Church community that becomes more and more missionary as all its members share responsibility for its activities’; sticking to this goal each church must devise ways of consolidating the sector system.

3. *A Year of Praying Together Reflecting on the Great Kyoto Martyrdom*

I have designated the period between October 6 last year, the commemoration of the Great Kyoto Martyrdom, and November 24 this year, the day of the ceremony of beatification,

as ‘A Year of Praying Together Reflecting on the Great Kyoto Martyrdom’. The purpose of this, as well as giving thanks for the decision to beatify them, is that we should learn about the history of Pedro Kibe and the other 187 martyrs, especially those of the Great Kyoto Martyrdom, and that by reflecting on the faith and martyrdom of the “*Kirishitan*” [2] Age we may be able to develop an understanding and awareness of ‘present day martyrdom’. To facilitate this I have sent copies of two booklets, ‘The Great Kyoto Martyrdom of October 6, 1619’ [3] and ‘Pedro Kibe and 187 Martyrs’ [4] to you all at every church.

Please read them carefully, learn about the historical background and events concerning the various martyrs and turn your thoughts to their way of life.

I have also established a special committee in the diocese for organizing events to commemorate the beatification of the victims of the ‘Great Kyoto Martyrdom’. This committee is planning various events to help the diocese as a whole to celebrate the beatification in a fruitful way. I would like to ask your cooperation in contributing to a special collection which will be taken to fund these events.

I also ask each Regional Pastoral Council, block and parish to organize events of their own to commemorate the martyrs.

4. *Living Present Day Martyrdom (Maruchiru)*

In *Kirishitan* [2] times, the Chinese characters 丸(maru), 血(chi), 留(ru) were used to spell in Japanese the Latin word for martyrdom ‘martirio’. In this word, ‘*maruchiru*’, whose characters convey meaning as well as sound, the faith and feelings of the martyrs are beautifully expressed. The martyrs who underwent severe persecution and earnestly looked forward to *paraiso* [5] and endured everything sacrificed themselves entirely (expressed by 丸ごと, one’s whole self), risked their lives (expressed by 血, the blood which they shed), and stood firm in their faith (expressed by 留, did not waver).

The persecution we experience in the present age is not inflicted by powerful people, but none the less it is there and creeps upon us insidiously. Little by little throughout the world a way of thinking that pushes Christian faith out to the periphery is gaining ground. There are dangerous sets of values abroad: subjectivism which gives rise to attitudes like, “If I think its good isn’t that enough?” moral relativism which asks, “As long as it doesn’t bother others isn’t it alright?” nihilism which insists that, and “There is nothing we can be certain about in this life”. These are a temptation to people to follow a way of life from which God is absent. This kind of present day temptation comes not so much from outside the Church as from within, from Christians themselves, so that even the salvation sought by the faithful is beginning to be secularized. This is a new type of persecution which we are faced with. In order to overcome the ‘spiritual persecution’ of this secular age we need now, more than ever, to bring to mind

Maruchiru, the martyrs of the *Kirishitan* Period.

5. ***The Heart of the Martyrs (Maruchiru) - Humility***

Martyrdom is not restricted to the momentous sacrifice of dying after enduring terrible torture. Any Christian might ask himself, “If it came to that point, I wonder if I could endure martyrdom?” Many, however, aware of their own weakness, would say they could never go through with it. That’s certainly honest, but they don’t understand the first thing about martyrdom. In fact, I don’t think anyone could declare himself ready to undergo martyrdom. Those people who faced persecution and finally were martyred didn’t do so by their own strength of spirit but were able to maintain their resolve only by trust in God and through His grace. It was not by their own effort but by earnestly depending on God, and only because they had this faith God, that in their hour of need the martyrs found sufficient human determination.

6. ***Martyrdom as an offering for Mission***

The origin of the martyr is the death of Christ. Christ never thought of living in order to save himself but lived simply for the salvation of other people, whom he loved wholeheartedly. This was ultimately accomplished by his death on the cross. We must not forget, however, that this way of life and death was the fulfillment of the will of the Father. In other words we can say that Jesus’ death was an offering, in accordance with the will of the His Father, for the sake of His mission to bear witness to the love of the Father. In the same way, the countless martyrdoms which have taken place throughout the history of the Catholic Church are a form of this offering for mission. The martyrs, even though they were killed, did not accept martyrdom in order to demonstrate fearlessly their strength of faith and bravery; they offered their lives to bear witness to the existence of God, His mercy and His love.

There are three points, therefore, to be made about present day martyrdom. The first is ‘proclamation of Jesus Christ’. For the person of faith his way of life is not one in which ‘anything goes’ but one characterized by belief in salvation through Jesus Christ and love which risks everything in the hope of eternal life. Secondly, the person of faith lives ‘with such a firm belief that he would risk his own death for it’. He constantly repents of lukewarm faith. Thirdly, the person of faith ‘does not live in secret’. Faith is not something of which we can say it is fine to live it in a hidden way, for ourselves alone; God’s gift of faith cannot be separated from the vocation to bear witness.

7. ***Give Back to the Lord what Has Been Given to You***

Saint Augustine says the following, in a sermon about martyrs: “The cost of buying back the death of a martyr is one person’s death. I wonder how many deaths the death of this

one person has bought back. If it had not been for His death, a grain of wheat might not have borne much fruit. The martyrs gave back to the Lord what had been given to them.”

That expression, ‘The martyrs gave to the Lord what had been given to them’ can be applied not only to martyrs but to all people. Different people have their own ways of doing this but they all return to the Lord what was given to them. To put it differently, we might say that there ‘martyrdom by death’ and ‘martyrdom without dying’. Either of these is a life offered to God. We usually think of our life as being our own. But can this really be true? Whilst it may seem to be my own it began and will end without reference to me, and it is beyond my power to extend it. People are saved by the redemption of Christ and our lives are a gift received from God.

8. *Living our promise to God*

From the time of their birth people are challenged to respond to the love of God. This love of God was perfectly revealed in Christ’s death on the cross. For us Christians, life is not a matter of destiny impervious to man’s will and efforts. We are able to see it from the point of view which asks, ‘how can we live in response to the unlimited love God pours out on mankind? The martyrs showed, by giving up their lives, that they were loved by God. We can say that the way of life expressed by a dying a martyr’s death, is living in a Covenant with God. Human life is an impenetrable mystery. There are people who, when hit by harsh and bitter events, far from having a purpose in life lose their hold on its meaning, their strength to live, and are driven to the brink of despair. Then there are those who, even when the matter is not so serious, have times when they tear themselves apart with questions like, ‘why has this happened to me?’, ‘why am I so unfortunate?’ or ‘why do I have to do this against my will?’. It is precisely at times like this that we recall the promise made at baptism, the promise of trusting in God’s love and strength and responding to it.

9. *The Courage to Follow Christ*

It is recorded that when, towards the end of his life, the late Pope John-Paul II was old and wracked with sickness he was asked by a journalist if he intended to retire. He replied, ‘Christ didn’t come down from the cross.’ The Pope had a firm desire to stay with his life offered to God and fulfill his vocation right to the end. We Christians, too, hoping and yearning to be genuine followers of Christ are seeking his way. There will be times when, because of harsh suffering, it seems humanly impossible. Calling to mind the way of life of our teacher Christ, however, and his figure on the cross, I think that, like the aged pope we will find the courage and humility to follow Christ with strong determination. We too are ‘living offerings to God’. How should we respond to God’s invitation? Should we respond as well as we can, or less than wholeheartedly, or

should we not answer at all? In a sense the faith is a unique way that carves itself into our lives.

10. *Living Everyday Life with an Eye to Eternal Life*

I wonder what was going through the minds of the Christians of Kyoto during *Kirishitan* times as they were taking part in the Mass in their church building known as Nanbanji ? It wasn't that the martyrs lived out their faith in order to be martyrs. It was, rather, that in the brief joy filled moments of their lives between sufferings and sorrows they never forgot that their 'lives in this world' would be exchanged for 'eternal life'.

The offering we call martyrdom was made possible by faith lived out in 'everyday life', which included daily prayer of praise and thanksgiving to God, life's sufferings of shared with the family, daily work and being of service to their neighbors. St Paul says: "...offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and acceptable to God" (Rom 12:1). The offering made by Christians is the whole of their daily lives. That is the meaning of the theme 'Living the Mass in Everyday Life'. In another sense, however, the same Mass transcends 'everyday life' and is a sublime ceremony in which your own final moments, your time of salvation is present in advance. Those who became martyrs lived their daily lives in this way with an eye to eternal life. When they faced persecution, therefore, they were able to make the ultimate choice for eternal life and did not abandon their faith.

11. *Evangelical Resolve*

Wealth, fame or preferment in this world, a comfortable way of life through economic affluence: these are not bad things in themselves and we might say they are useful for human welfare and advancement. When we pursue them, however, when they come into conflict with things that have universal value like human life, individual rights, the environment, peace, etc, and the gospel way of life we need to ask ourselves which to choose. If there are times when, for the sake of family, people in distress, oppressed people, justice, or peace, we may have to opt for parting with the money we now have, or throwing away the prospect of a brighter life in the future, even sacrificing everything we have; and there are such times.

We will have opportunities to choose the love of God until we die. Whether to live the life God has given us in affluence or more simply: that temptation lies hidden in every choice. Having a heart filled with love for all people, cultivated by prayer and penance, whether in the hour of need I choose the love of God, whatever the cost, or refuse it real persecution is just as close. The fifty two martyrs fastened to twenty seven crosses along the of the bank of the River Kamo at Rokujo did not refuse the opportunity to choose love of God and rose along the glorious road to eternal life with true resolve.

12. *Welcoming the 'Year of Saint Paul the Apostle'*

To commemorate the 2000th anniversary of the birth of Saint Paul the Apostle, Pope Benedict XVI has designated the year from the feast of SS. Peter and Paul 2008 (June 29) until the same day in 2009 the 'Year of Saint Paul the Apostle' [6]. Paul repeatedly said, 'I must not squander the grace of God'. May we too, not squander the grace of our faith as, commemorating the beatification of 'Pedro Kibe and 187 martyrs', we continue to be sent out in the spirit of the *maruchiru* with 'a new enthusiasm and attitude', 'new means', new expressions' on the 'New Evangelization', 'The blood of martyrs becomes the seed of the Church' (the work of *marutirio*). May we too, bravely living 'present day martyrdom', hand on to the next generation of the Japanese Church the spirit of *maruchiru*.

This year, once again, let us offer the progress of evangelization in Kyoto Diocese to God the Father through the intercession of Mary the Mother of God and continue to pray through peace through Her, the Queen of Peace for Peace throughout the world.

January 1, 2008, Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God

Notes

[1] *Maruchiru*. see paragraph 4

[2] *Kirishitan* is a transliteration of the Chinese characters, 切(kiri), 支(shi), 丹(tan), used to pronounce the word 'Christian' which became a Japanese word in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

[3] (結城了悟 Yuki Ryougo, published by the 26 Japanese Saints Commemorative Hall, 3rd edition, 2007)

[4] (Committee for looking into the beatification of Martyrs, Central Catholic Council, 2007)

[5] *Paraiso* is the Portuguese word for 'paradise' transported phonetically into Japanese

[6] Pope Benedict XVI announced this during a sermon at first vespers of the feast of SS. Peter and Paul, June 28, 2007. In fact, historians place the year of St Paul's birth anywhere between AD 7 and AD 10.