

2017 Bishop Paul Otsuka's New Year's Pastoral Letter

Imitating Justo Takayama Ukon's Road to Holiness

Paul Otsuka Yoshinao, Bishop of Kyoto

Justo Takayama Ukon's Beatification

Servant of God Justo Takayama Ukon (from here on we will refer to him as "Ukon") will be beatified in Osaka at "the Osaka Castle Hall" on February 7, 2017. Having received this grace of having Ukon beatified, now we are encountering Christ, the Savior of the World, and our light. We join Ukon in praise singing his anthem: "Truly God is my Light." As the chairperson of the Committee for the Promotion of the Canonization of Ukon of Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan, I have learned much about him, and become aware of the abundant grace that God has bestowed on Japan through him. Approaching the ceremony for his beatification as we are now, I would like to consider with you what we could do to foster the grace of the beatification of Ukon in the Church of Japan.

1. The universal call to holiness in the church

Catholic Church canonizes people who by their example have been witnesses to the faith, and honors them with a special veneration. No matter what era or place, all the saints have their own unique witness of faith and universal message. The meaning of Canonization is that we who are living now imitate them in their example of witness and message, and we transfer them to future generations. Canonization and Beatification may be considered as the reward and conferment that the Church gives the great people of the past, but the Second Vatican Council understands the respect given these martyrs and other saints in a more spiritual and pastoral manner. The Constitution on the Church, nn.39-42, in defining the holiness to which all are called, explains the holiness in the Church "as expressed in many ways in individuals, who in their walks of life, tend toward the perfection of charity, thus causing the edification of others". Furthermore, it teaches that the way of the attainment of holiness is "love, by which we love God above all things and our neighbor because of God", and that "the Church considers martyrdom as an exceptional gift and as the fullest proof of love".

A saint is not necessarily a super human being in whom all are enthralled, nor a hero. If we think of the saints in this fashion, surely, they will seem distant from us. Rather the saints are people who have received the gift of love and putting it into practice have developed a degree of holiness to the extent that we recognize them as saints. Saints are not extraordinary Christians, but common Christians. Simply speaking to be a Christian is to be a saint. However, in some eras and in some places to be a common Christian appears as quite an uncommon way of life. That is, to be a Christian means to buck the common trends of society, as Jesus encouraged us in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5) to seriously live up to these teachings. We must take the example given us by the saints, not imitating as it is, but putting it into practice in our own life. Knowing it's historical circumstances and cultural background, we see it as a universal model and regard the saint as a spiritual guidepost. Now we are standing in front of a brilliant guidepost, Ukon.

2. Ukon and the Cross of Christ

By his most extraordinary, exceptional whole life, Ukon is being beatified, not as a confessor, but as a martyr. This is not to say that Ukon was a martyr because he was executed, but that because his whole life was a series of persecutions and exile. Ukon lived during the end of the 16th Century and into the beginning of the 17th Century, from the Azuchi-Momoyama Era, and into the Edo Period, when the country suffered civil wars, and then into the age when at

last the country enjoyed unification and peace. Any wise and clever person had the dreams of attaining success, power, fame, and glory. Ukon was born into a samurai family at that time, and was raised in an era of power-thirsty warriors caught up in an endless struggle for domination. Since the day when his father, Hidanokami became Christian the destiny of the household of Takayama became oriented to a dimension completely opposite of that of the prevalent trend in society. He received baptism with other members of his family when he was about ten years old, and was raised to be a samurai warrior. But when he was about twenty years old he became attracted to the Cross of Christ, thanks to the opportunity afforded him by the incident with Wada Korenaga (1573).

Francis Xavier and the missionaries of that time presented the people of that warring era with the Cross of Christ as the essence of Christianity, to let them recognize the Passion of Christ as the fullness of the revelation of God's love for human beings. They taught that facing the Cross of Christ, offering sacrifice to Jesus for God and all human beings might be the most honorable act of love. During similar persecution, most Christians who were executed longed for the same crucifixion as Jesus. Ukon, too, imbued with the teachings of Jesus, overcame the fear of death. And not only that, because of his faith he was ready to accept persecution, and even martyrdom. By his very nature Ukon wasn't a willfully virtuous samurai, nor of a pious faith. As a commander facing and struggling with difficulties and conflicts, he had been taught little by little to trust in God.

3. Ukon's agony and trials of faith

The beginning of Ukon's anguish was, no doubt, his outlook on life and death. In the era of Warring States, death was a common everyday affair. Kill or be killed. Even though one considered killing unethical, in order defend family and friends one had to become a monster. Because of one's innate samurai spirit, it is impossible to avoid bloodshed. Born into such an era, it is said that Ukon from his childhood had a delicate heart and non-aggressive temperament, and feared death. Sometimes the very thought of not knowing when he would be killed prevented him from sleeping well. And the thought that he could suffer a pitiable death even drove him sometime to the thought of cutting off his own life. However, as a Christian that would in no way be permissible. Together with his determination to live on was the haunting fear of his demise.

The one person in whom the young Ukon could confide this anguishing torment that drove him into daily depression was the Jesuit Brother Lawrence Ryouzai. Ukon confessed his dread of death and antipathy towards killing to Brother Lawrence. His distain of killing even though he was by profession a samurai who was expected to kill others, far from curing him, drove the young Commander Ukon deeper into despair, until he came to face the reality that this, indeed, was his personal cross laid upon him by the circumstances of his life. Nevertheless, the incident with Wada Korenaga was a bifurcation point of life, and from then on, he became enthralled with the Cross of Christ. Abandoning a depreciative attitude toward life, and an insatiable thirst for power and fame, he took up the imitation of the Cross of Christ, discovering the redeeming quality of a life dedicated to the love of God, and from then on offered his life to God's service.

In the world of faith, suffering that rips people away from God is a great temptation. But, the suffering that draws people closer to God and the deepens our bond with one others is a trial. There were three such trials that Ukon lived through. The first such trial was the Araki Murashige conflict (1578), the second trial was Hideyoshi's expelling all priests from the country (1587), and the third trial was the Edo Shogunate's banning of missionary activities (1614). Ukon had set out on his career with the intention of even offering his life to God, if needs be as a soldier of Christ, living on the foundations of interior faith, while from the worldly point of view he appeared to be a brilliant Christian Lord who had won the favor of Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

Nevertheless, immediately after Ukon's territorial transfer from Takatsuki to Akashi,

suddenly Hideyoshi reversed his stance on Christianity, starting by banning priests from the country and even put pressure on Ukon to apostatize. Ukon refused, and stripping himself of his status as lord, he was exiled. From Shodosima island to Higo (in present Kumamoto territory) after spending several years as a hermit, he took refuge in the territory of Maeda in Kaga (present Ishikawa prefecture, Kanazawa-city), with the result that he spends 27 years at Noto (Nanao). However, during the reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate he was exiled to the Philippines. He was received in Manila with much ado as a living martyr. However, being of advanced age, and suffering a trying journey, he became weak and succumbed to a high fever, arriving 40 days afterward, on February 3, 1615. He was 63 years of age when he left this world.

4. A Living Martyr

After the first trial of the incident with Araki Murashige, even at the cost of offering his own life, Ukon made a commitment to serve God, rather than serve the people of this world. However, at this time, he still was not aware of the desire for self-offering that God had bestowed upon him. Ukon was always ready to offer himself in martyrdom, and he even had the desire for martyrdom. But in the plan of God Ukon he was destined for a long road to the goal of martyrdom.

In the second trial, despite losing everything, he showed that his strong faith in the Savior had matured, and experienced a spiritual power and consolation to accept martyrdom. Nevertheless, at this point Ukon's faith was based on intellectual acumen and human strength. Ukon's deep religiosity and reliance on God were without trace of doubt. However, God was to liberate him from a false self-confidence, desiring to change him gradually into a selfless soul that would accept God's love. An exile, as he was, stoking the flame of his longing for martyrdom, not swimming against the current of the times, but persistently seeking the will of God, he accepted the destiny allotted him, and attentive to the leading hand of God, he continued to pursue evangelization as much as it was within his power. This was the path chosen for Ukon to accept on his way to living martyrdom.

Finally, Ukon was destined to undergo the third trial which was most excruciating and deepest of all in his positive endeavor to be martyred. As he set out for Kanazawa (Kaga-han) he envisioned his execution as a heroic sacrifice which would be offered to the Lord. Contrary to expectations, he was forcedly put aboard ship at Nagasaki headed for Manila, making him endure his final and excruciating voyage, which was to be his definitive and real martyrdom.

5. Martyrdom of Excruciation That Was to Give Witness to God's Work

Martyrdom is in no way a means showing one's strength. Martyrdom is the action of God in a weak human being. We don't consider the endurance of horrifying torture unto death to prove the martyr's greatness, nor is it something we people of the present generation display. Nor can we consider martyrs as victims for simply having passively endured the sufferings of violence. Rather martyrdom means that to last moment one freely leaves one's destiny in the hands of God. Rather martyrdom is to discern the will of God and freely respond to it until the last moment. This response alone verifies death as really being a witness to faith, as true martyrdom.

During the nine months before his exile, Ukon was ready and willing to be executed, which he accepted with a pure heart. It was here that God sent Ukon his final test. His land of banishment, Manila, was a place where a person could live a life of faith freely. Ukon, who was willing to ready to offer the life given him by God, could sense that his martyrdom would be a long and tedious suffering, a condition of being harassed to death, rather than coming to a sudden demise.

For Ukon this proved to be a voyage to death of self. As he arrived in Manila he realized that his destiny was no longer in his own hands, but in the hands of God. This dying to ones-self proved to be a spiritual advancement, as he became humbler, and a vessel willing to accept whatsoever God desired to give to him. Until he drew his last breath he was faithful to his determination to offer himself completely to God in an act of love. Ukon wanted to be a witness to Christ (martyr), and truly he was just that. This was the action of God in Ukon. The Jesuit priest Ledesma, who witnessed Ukon's death, ends his account of in his mission diary with these words. "Ukon was not the type of martyr such as we are accustomed to, who witnesses to faith by ending his life in a bloody death, but rather giving witness to faith through the horrible suffering he bore. His whole life was a long path of martyrdom."

6. Seeing the Spirituality of Martyrdom

Christian history is the story of people who prove their faith. Since persecution and martyrdom could occur in every era, "All profess faith in Christ before people, and stand ready to follow Christ on the way that leads to the Cross, in withstanding the inevitable persecution of the Church." (The Constitution on the Church, n.42).

What we learn from Ukon is that because we are tools in the hand of God, we must not rely on the ego that tries to do things under its own power, but offer ourselves up to God who in his mercy pours into our hearts the love to offer oneself in sacrifice. The world of faith is not one in which we demonstrate what we can accomplish with our own power. God is at work. It is a world where we place all our trust in him. We entrust ourselves to him so that he can change us unto people who are for others. This was the spiritual path of Ukon, and it is the common vocation that can be applied to all faithful followers of Christ.

Holiness is not achieving perfection with our own hands, but is a grace of Christ who draws us near him and presents us with the gift of imitating himself. Concerning this Paul says, "We know that God makes all things work together for the good of those who have been called according to his decree. Those whom he foreknew he predestined to share the image of his Son, that the Son might be the first-born of many brothers. Those he predestined he likewise called; those he called he also justified; and those he justified he in turn glorified." (Romans 8, 29-30) Indeed, Ukon lived up to his baptismal name, in that through God he became like Christ, and was justified.

In the present age, our sense of values has been tampered with by relativism, so that it is difficult to always live based on a determined belief. What is more, even though there are so many lifestyles to choose from, it is a world of the survival of the fittest, and one's ability to survive depends on self-responsibility, so that people are divided into the winners and the losers by their talents and skills. Living in such an era, we look to Ukon as a signpost to show the way to holiness, so that no matter what kind of a condition we find ourselves in we select that way that leads to God and the appreciation of other people's life. Without hesitating, we want to continue in following the path of the gospel.

Ukon is the gift of love and grace to the Japanese Church. God sent Ukon to us as a tool of evangelization, so He keeps on working through Ukon so that we may receive his grace in this era. Like the heart of Martyrion let us resolve to renew our resolve to live a life of modern martyrs, and as we approach the Beatification of Ukon go on praying for the grace of canonization.