

BLESSED JUSTUS TAKAYAMA UKON (1552-1615)

Among the many saints in the history of the Church in the Land of the Rising Sun (42 saints and 393 blessed, including European missionaries), all martyred *in odium fidei* during several waves of persecution, the story of Justus Takayama Ukon is special. He was a layman, politician and soldier; in fact, he was a feudal lord and a samurai. Unlike the others, he was not put to death, but renounced a social position of very high rank, nobility and wealth, in order to remain faithful to Jesus Christ and the Gospel.

He was born with the name Hikogoro Shigetomo between 1552 and 1553 in Takayama Castle, near Nara, Japan, the son of Takayama Zusho, who later became lord of the castle of Sawa. Takayama was his family name and derived from the territory that was their feudal property. His family was part of the noble class, or *daimyō*, lords of a castle with its properties. They were second only to the shogun (lords of several territories of which the different *daimyō* were faithful allies, providing them with an army and professional fighters, the samurai) who were often at war with each other to broaden their areas of influence.

In 1563, his father was appointed by his shogun to judge a Jesuit missionary, Father Gaspar Videla, who had been proclaiming the Gospel in Kyoto, the future imperial city. The Gospel was brought to Japan by the great missionary, Jesuit Father Francis Xavier in 1549, and spread rapidly. Listening to Father Videla, Justus's father was so impressed that he decided to become a Christian. He was baptized and took the name Darius. Returning home to his castle accompanied by a catechist, he instructed and baptized many of his soldiers, his wife, and his children, including

his oldest son Hikogoro, who at the time was about twelve years old and who received the name Justus. From that moment on his father became a protector of Christians.

For Justus, the son and heir of an important *daimyō*, it would be his natural vocation to become a samurai, a warrior always ready to defend his family, his estate, and his lord, the shogun. Given the frequent conflicts between the *daimyō*, he participated in wars and fights, and distinguished himself by his valor. His forced convalescence, after being wounded in a duel, was providential for him and he became convinced in 1571, at the age of twenty, that even though he would remain a samurai he would have to put his skill in handling weapons at the service of the weakest members of his territory, especially widows and orphans.

In 1573, his family received a new estate, and since by now his father was too old to manage the family's affairs, Justus became the *daimyō*. Two years later he married Giusta, a Christian, and had three sons (two of whom died as infants) and a daughter. He built a church in the imperial city of Kyoto and a seminary in Azuchi, on Lake Biwa, for the formation of Japanese missionaries and catechists. Most seminarians came from the families of his estate.

Justus used a customary Japanese tea ceremony as an opportunity to evangelize. During the ceremony relationships were strengthened and friendships deepened, and Justus would transform the moment by proclaiming the Gospel to all present and by entering into dialogue about the Christian faith with other nobles. In the first period of the shogun, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who rose to power in 1583, increased his influence among the nobles, several of whom chose to become Christians. But Toyotomi, who had become so powerful that he could unify all of Japan under his authority, began to fear Christians and in 1587 issued an edict that prohibited the practice of Christianity in the country and ordered the expulsion of foreign missionaries and exile for native catechists.

All of the great feudal lords accepted the arrangement except for Justus, who preferred to renounce his estate and suffer exile rather than obey.

Toyotomi suddenly died, but his successor proved to be even worse than he was. The persecution of Christians became widespread and intense, with the aim of eradicating what was called “the bad plant” or “the perverse religion.”

On February 14, 1614, Justus Takayama and his family were captured and transferred to Nagasaki, where they awaited execution together with the missionaries who were gathered there. After months of jail, on November 8, 1614, Justus and three hundred of his companions were sentenced to exile and loaded on a Chinese junk to Manila in the Philippines. During his time in prison, he had hoped to share the fate of the martyrs of Nagasaki. He was certain that he would be killed and had waited for the end with great serenity. The expulsion and the slow voyage on the loaded ship into the unknown served to help Justus deepen his faith. Although received with honors by the Spaniards, exhausted by imprisonment and the long voyage, he died in Manila on February 3, 1615, forty days after his arrival in the Philippines.

The example of Justus is important and valuable. He lived an authentic, honest, sincere, and profound Christian life. He was recognized as a martyr, because even though he was not directly killed by his persecutors, he was forced to abandon all his wealth and social status and to endure a voyage and exile that contributed to his death. He was very happy to have received from God the gift of the Christian faith, and he was a contagious witness to all those he met – nobles of his rank, superiors, subjects, and friends.

He was beatified in Osaka on February 7, 2017, during the pontificate of Pope Francis.