

The Mission (1549–)

The Arrival of Christianity in Japan

Statue of Saint Francis Xavier (Kobe Municipal Museum)

Portrait of Omura Sumitada (Nagasaki Museum of History and Culture)

In 1548 in Malacca (present-day Philippines), the Jesuit priest Francis Xavier (1506–1552), who had been sent by the Pope as a missionary, set off to Japan with two other Spanish Jesuits.

In 1549, Xavier arrived in Kagoshima in Kyushu, Japan, but succeeded in converting only a small number of people there. However, he was slightly more successful in 1550 in Hirado, Nagasaki, where the religion was received more favorably as a result of the influence of Portuguese traders who had also settled there.

Two years after Xavier's departure, additional Jesuit missionaries arrived in Kyushu and converted around 4,000 Japanese people. An acceleration in the rise of Japanese Christians, however, came when three local rulers were baptized. One of these rulers was Omura Sumitada (1533–1587). He is known as the first Christian ruler in Japan. These rulers not only showed an interest in the practices and teachings of Roman Catholicism, but also understood the importance of religious ties with the Jesuits for Portuguese-Japanese trade relations, which provided them with European firearms and Chinese silk.