



BIBLIOTECA UNIVERSITARIA DI GENOVA – PERCORSI TEMATICI

## UNIVERSALITAS & PERVASIVITAS

*IL COSTITUIRSI E DIFFONDERSI DELLA S.J. E SUOI ECHI (1540 - 1773)*

di A. Pisani

*Schede autori Attività missionaria*

## Gaspar Coelho

Gaspar Coelho was a Portuguese Jesuit missionary. He replaced Francisco Cabral as the Superior and Vice-Provincial of the Jesuit mission in Japan during the late 16th century.

Coelho became infamous among Jesuits and Japanese Christians alike for catalyzing the disfavor of **Toyotomi Hideyoshi** against the Jesuit mission in Japan.

### Conflicts with Hideyoshi

As Superior of the mission, Coelho was the most visible leader of the Christian contingent in Japan and he was frequently consulted by Hideyoshi on matters of political significance.

Just as local daimyos encouraged the Jesuits to participate in the silver trade, so too did Japanese leaders encourage or expect their participation in politics. Just as European feudalism and religious zealotry had given birth to a number of military orders such as the Knights Templar or the Knights of Malta, so too did a number of Buddhist monastic orders focus on martial arts and participate in warfare. Hideyoshi, who was familiar with fighting these orders, not only saw the Jesuits as a path to economic wealth but potentially a source of military power as well.

Hideyoshi asked Coelho to secure him two Portuguese ships; if he could use these in an invasion of the mainland, he promised, he would "build churches the length and breadth of China and Korea." Coelho not only agreed to the deal, but also suggested that the Society could acquire more troops from Portuguese India. It was a dangerous bluff meant to curry greater political support, but it was devoid of any real truth.

### Consequences

Hideyoshi's response was quick and severe. After consulting with some of his Buddhist advisors, he had Coelho roused in the middle of the night and asked a series of questions concerning the intentions of the mission. Coelho responded as best he could, but the next morning Hideyoshi was livid. The great daimyo informed his court that the Jesuits were spreading propaganda against the state and that their mission jeopardized the future of Japan. He may have seen the Jesuits as a potential military threat.

Hideyoshi ordered that an edict be drawn up:

“Japan is a country of the Kami and for the padres to come hither and preach a devilish law, is a most reprehensible thing. For the padres to come to Japan and convert people to their creed, destroying Buddhist and Shinto temples to this end, is a hitherto unseen and unheard of thing . . . I am resolved that the padres should not stay on Japanese soil. I therefore order that having settled their affairs within twenty days, they must return to their own country . . . If the Great Ship comes to trade, this is something quite different, the Portuguese can carry on their commerce unmolested.”



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Coelho protested that the Great Ship was not due to leave Macau for another six months, and thus it was impossible to obey the edict. Hideyoshi accepted this, but issued a further set of commands banning Japanese Jesuits from the country as well. In the meantime, Coelho had realized the severity of the situation and tried to extricate himself. He tried to persuade several friendly daimyo to rise up against Hideyoshi with offers of weapons and financial help. When they flatly refused him, he began to write letters to the other missions. Coelho petitioned the Philippine mission and the Superior in Macau to send two or three hundred troops in support. None of these took him seriously and one even wrote back reprimanding him.

This caused a stir within the ranks of the Jesuit fathers, and it is only through sheer luck that Hideyoshi himself did not find out about Coelho's scheming. The vice-provincial died of natural causes shortly thereafter, just before a furious **Valignano** returned to Japan to try and repair the damage, as it was clear that Coelho's poor judgment had given the opposition the occasion they were looking for to stir up animosity against the Jesuit presence in the country.

This series of events was seen as leading to the Christian persecutions in Japan.

### References

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