

SAINT LORENZO RUIZ

(First Filipino Saint and his companions)



The road to official sainthood is long and difficult. It takes on several lanes that are equally arduous; exemplary Christian life, a life of holiness, a life of self-sacrifice, and shedding of blood for the faith. It was the last mentioned lane that brought Lorenzo Ruiz to the altar, the lane of martyrdom. He was beatified (proclaimed Blessed) by Pope John Paul III in February 1981 at solemn rites held at Rizal Park. Fifteen other martyr companions were also beatified. On October 18, 1987 Blessed Lorenzo was canonized (proclaimed Saint) in Rome. He is thus the first Filipino to be honored. No doubt, there have been many other Filipinos who deserved sainthood by taking the other lanes.

But, Lorenzo Ruiz took the “short cut” (so to say) to sainthood. And in these times of doubt and unorthodoxy, Lorenzo can be help up as a true example of a steadfast lover and staunch defender of the Christian faith.

Two books, one written by Dominican priest Fr. Fidel Villaroel, OP and the other by noted author Celso Carunungan, provide the ingredients of the life story of the first Filipino saint.

CHILDHOOD: Lorenzo Ruiz was born in Binondo, Manila. The year of his birth must be placed some time between 1600 and 1610 according to his contemporaries who were Dominican priests, Fr. Domingo Gonzales and Fr. Diego Rodriguez. His parents were certainly Christians. His father was a Chinese and his mother, a Filipina. He must have been baptized in the Dominican church of San Gabriel, since it was the only one existing then in Binondo. The name Lorenzo was given to him in honor of the great martyr St. Lawrence. His family name Ruiz must have been taken from the family name of his baptismal sponsor.

The child Lorenzo grew up into a young boy and served in the church and convent of Binondo, doing various jobs as an errand boy or serving as an altar boy or little sacristan in the church. He also served as “scribe” or notary.

According to the data given by a historian priest, Lorenzo learned reading, writing and music from Binondo school. He acquired a good knowledge of three languages, namely Tagalog, Chinese and Spanish.

His Dominican companions of martyrdom before the Nagasaki Tribunal claimed that he had become a good “escribano,” a Spanish term meaning “notary” during those times. The term can also be taken to mean a calligrapher, one who rendered handwriting for private or official use. This was what probably Lorenzo did for his living.

MANHOOD: As an adult, Lorenzo later joined the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary and became a full member thereof. His responsibilities as a Rosarian were first, to have his name inscribed in the register book of the Confraternity; second, to recite the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary once every week. He was strongly advised to receive the Holy Eucharist every first Sunday of the month, participate in the rosary procession along the streets of Binondo, frequently visit the Confraternity altar of the Blessed Sacrament, and pray for the Holy Father.

When Fr. Juan Peguero wrote a history of the Dominicans in the Philippines in 1690, he revealed that Lorenzo’s wife was still living that year, surviving him by 53 years. They bore two sons and one daughter.

In the year 1636, Lorenzo was accused of being involved in a criminal case with unclear circumstances. The crime was committed somewhere in Manila of its activities. He was sought by the authorities on account of a homicide to which he witnessed or was attributed to him. This was affirmed by his contemporaries. Frs. Domingo Gonzales and Diego Rodriguez when he confessed before judges in Nagasaki: “I could not stay in Manila because I had a quarrel with a Spaniard.” It is certain that he was sought by the police for trial. Whether guilty or not, Lorenzo feared very much that he might be given a death sentence as a consequence of a trial or mistrial.

THE SECRET ESCAPE: Lorenzo sought the help of Fr. Domingo Gonzales, the Dominican Provincial Superior who lived in Sto. Domingo Convent in Intramuros. The former explained to the latter his being prosecuted by agents of law for criminal charges against him. Lorenzo confided to Fr. Gonzales the terrible anguish he was suffering and asked if there could be hope of being some solution to the problem.

Convinced of the innocence of Lorenzo, through the belief in the righteousness of rescuing the life of a refugee who was asking for an asylum from the church, Fr. Gonzales was assisted by the Commissary of the Holy Office of Inquisition composed of four priests, the leper Lazaro of Kyoto and himself. They sought of strategies on how Lorenzo could escape secretly.

Since Fr. Gonzales was the one assigned to be personally in charge of the transportation of missionary priest to Japan that time, he advised Lorenzo to leave the country and join these missionary priests. He then started the preparations of the voyage about April or May 1636 by taking the risk of sending the missionaries aboard a champan, a boat built in Japanese style and owned by a Dominican Corporation.

Another French priest, Fr Guillermo Courtet wrote a letter dated June 10, 1636 to the General Superior of the Order in Rome of his departure to Japan together with the Rector of Colegio de Santo Tomas, 2 other priests and two laymen, in another boat most secretly prepared for them. On that date they sailed. Lorenzo was aboard the boat but unwary of the destination. He thought they were going to Macao but the champan, veered instead northward and soon Lorenzo realized they were driving far away from Macao.

ARRIVAL: Only July 10, 1636 the champan reached the coastline of Okinawa and after touching Okinawa sail, they hurried to go inland and in a deserted place of the countryside, they hid their religious habits, liturgical ornaments and Christian objects as well as the two pieces of gold and silver they brought for their maintenance. A few days passed, Lorenzo and his companions were detected as being religious, judging from their chaste behavior and patience, reported an anonymous Dominican author who wrote a contemporary narrative in Manila. They were immediately imprisoned in Okinawa for a whole year and were transferred to Satsuma, north of Kyushu.

At an unspecified date in 1636 or early in 1635 the prisoners left the Ryukyu islands and were transported to mainland Japan. Divided into two groups and in a span of eight days, they arrived in Nagasaki in September 1637 to be tried as criminals under Japan's penal laws. The first three prisoners to be tried were Frs. Miguel de Anzaraza, Vicente Shiwozuka dela Cruz and Guillermo Courtet. For unknown reason the other three prisoners, Fr Antonio Gonzales, Lazaro of Kyoto and Lorenzo Ruiz had been left behind.

THE TRIAL AND DEATH: On September 21, 1637, another funea sailed across Nagasaki Bay with, among other passengers, Fr Gonzales, Lorenzo Ruis and the leper Lazaro of Kyoto on board. They landed in front of Deshima in full view of Portuguese traders from Macao. They were led towards Shoya (a government building) and then into the tribunal. Before a prisoner was brought to trial and sentenced, he had to be taken into a chamber where he was asked to renounce his faith and be freed. The torture in the chamber, meant to persuade one to give up the Christian belief, consisted of painful water torture.

Lorenzo went through this ordeal. But, he was adamant; he remained steadfast to his faith. He said: "I am Christian and this profess until the hour of my death. For god, I shall give my life. Although I did not come to Japan to be a martyr and because I could not stay in Manila, however, as a Christian and for God I shall give my life. So, do with me as you please."

Lorenzo's declaration of faith led him to the torture chamber, then to the "gallows of the pit". When he was brought to the judges, he made a sort of biographical confession: "I am a Filipino, son of a Chinese father and a Filipino mother. I am married and have two sons and one daughter. I could not stay in Manila because I had a quarrel with a Spaniard. I came with these priests without knowing where they were going to..."

The judges would like to know if Lorenzo would change his mind. "If we grant you life, will you renounce your faith?" Lorenzo answered without hesitation: "That I will never do, because I am a Christian, and I shall die for God, and for him I will give many thousands of lives if I had them. And so, do as you please."

Lorenzo was meted the death sentence on Sept. 27. He was led to the place of execution. He was hanged from a gallows, his feet tied to the upper horizontal beam and his head downwards. The mouth of the pit was closed with boards, so that only the remaining part of the body and the legs were visible.

When he died, like the other prisoners, Lorenzo's body was set on fire and the ashes and soil under the bonfire were thrown into the sea. That was Sept. 29, 1637.

EPILOGUE: Of the 16 Nagasaki martyrs who were declared saints, three were laymen: Lorenzo of Manila, Lazaro of Kyoto and catechist Domingo Kakuseke, also a Japanese. The res were either priests or religious brothers and sisters. The Philippines can now look with pride upon a man who gladly preferred death to denial of faith. Christianity has been in the country for more than 400 years and it was only this year that a Filipino had been acclaimed saint. May he inspire other Filipinos to live and die for, not simply profess and proclaim the Christian faith. There are just too many preachers around us. We badly need sincere witnesses like. Lorenzo. Indeed, it is hoped that the blood of Lorenzo will be the seed of total evangelization in our country.

(Source: Novena in honour of Blessed Martyrs - Lorenzo Ruiz, first Filipino Saint and his companions)