
6 Concluding Remarks

The year is 1593, and Francisco Cabral, Jesuit Provincial of India, feels vindicated. Writing to the General from Kochi, he describes how, just as he had foreseen so many years before, the Japanese mission is doomed and forsaken by God, because of their lack of faith. He points an accusing finger at the Visitor, Alessandro Valignano, whose sin is “to want to take the control of everything into his hands, and leave nothing to God”.¹ Cabral believes that there is now the very concrete possibility that God might agree with this, and abandon the Visitor for good. After all, Valignano is squandering the funds of the Asian missions to help the Japanese enterprise, which has been hit with a ban on Christianity by Toyotomi Hideyoshi. However, even offering extremely expensive gifts, he is not managing to convince the shōgun to reverse it.² The intentions of the Visitor are surely saintly, writes Cabral maintaining the fiction of Jesuit brotherly love, but he has understood little of what it means to be a missionary. Some human means are acceptable, but the real path towards the expansion of the faith lies in the imitation of the apostles and of the first Jesuits: humility, poverty, a great trust in God and distrust in one’s own human means (*DI*, 16: 544). Cabral continues:

¹ Francisco Cabral to General Acquaviva, Kochi, 15 December 1593, in *DI*, 16: 542.

² On Hideyoshi’s prohibition of Christianity, see Boscaro 1973. Additional information is in Elison 1988, 132-41.

I say this because, from what I saw in Japan, I am convinced and I believe it certain, that the more we follow our rules and *Institute*, and the more we conform to the humility and poverty of Christ, then the more he will be propitious to us and will have to help us in this work of conversion. (*DI*, 16: 545)³

Then, just in case the General is not familiar with Cabral's own exploits in Japan, he presents again the narrative he created in 1580 on the mission's virtuous poverty, and on the consequent growth of Christianity in the country. Cabral now adds a fitting conclusion: once the Visitor allowed expensive gifts for Hideyoshi, the Japanese "tyrant" concluded that the Jesuits were rich, powerful, and subtly converting his daimyō to Spain's political cause; for this reason, he decided to ban Christianity from the archipelago (*DI*, 16: 547-8).

As delineated in this study, this new narrative contrasts with that presented by Cabral during most of his years in Japan. Before 1580, he lamented the damage that the lack of funds was inflicting on the mission. After, he affirmed that Jesuit poverty and humility always obtained excellent conversions and that, now that the Visitor had abandoned, he foresaw the doom of the mission "ab aliqua alta specula". The latter expression, together with the other main points of this new narrative, returns in his 1593 letter. If the idea that it was God who moved the hearts of the people to cause conversions, instead of secular prudence (*DI*, 16: 547), was always present in Cabral's vision of mission, his new recollection of the events shows no doubt about his own role in it: it was his own work that moved God to help the missionaries. To support his bid for the removal of Valignano, Cabral gets to recast his story as one of success, where the Jesuit way of proceeding, as interpreted by him, had converted hundreds of thousands of Japanese. Implicit in this interpretation, of course, is the idea that Cabral never feared for his own salvation, nor of being abandoned by God.

His letters from two decades before depict a different reality, as this study illustrated. The mission was first plagued by conflicting opinions on missionary policy: the refusal of the Jesuits in Japan to leave behind what had become the norm of silk clothes and adapt to another custom left deep marks in the mission in the form of distrust between its superior and its workers – to use a Jesuit expression, the union of the hearts was compromised. Obedience represented, in that moment, the only sure path to salvation for Cabral, who forced it harshly on his brethren and especially on the Japanese dōjuku. Initially proposing the construction of a house of probation to return the Jesuits to the correct way of proceeding, Cabral later focused on

3 It is interesting to note that Cabral is using the importance attributed in Europe to the *Constitutions* and the *Institute* to defend his argument here, arguably trying to counter Valignano's accusations of ignorance on the matter.

the expansion and amelioration of his workforce with the suggestion of an institution where Europeans could study the Japanese language, and the Japanese could learn enough of preaching to be admitted in the Society of Jesus. Cabral proposed this latter project to avoid too much dependence on the local collaborators, and to stop the drain of *dōjuku* who left when it became clear that they would never be allowed to take religious vows, nor to be more than helpers.

Still, no letter was forthcoming from Europe, and Cabral, not desiring to act on his own (and answer to God for his decisions) and limited by the lack of funds, made no substantial modification to the workings of the mission. The hierarchical structure was particularly obsolete, concentrating all the power and the responsibilities on the superior. Troubled by the lack of replies from Rome and the lack of signs that God was favouring their mission (if not the other way around), and overworked due to the continuous visitations and the insufficient workforce, after six years in Japan Cabral had lost his courage. The connection that regulated the Society through obedience, after been broken within the Japanese mission, had shattered with his own superiors as well; feeling abandoned and unsure of his own salvation, Cabral lost hope in divine succour and in the structure of the Society. This meant that, when the new Visitor of the Indian Province reached Japan, Cabral was deeply concerned with his own salvation. Understanding that the future policy of the mission did not follow his precept of prioritising spiritual preoccupations and worried that it might be the final straw for the mission's spiritual well-being, Cabral pushed to be allowed to finally leave, predicting doom for the whole enterprise. Valignano lamented Cabral's more negative traits (anger, stubbornness, and haughtiness) and acquiesced, hoping that, once Cabral was removed from the Japanese context, such faults would improve.⁴

Based on the pictures that were subsequently provided by other missionaries, this did not happen. For instance, in 1589 the superior of Chaul, Christóvão de Castro, illustrated Cabral's character and manner of government in this recognizable way:

[Father Francisco Cabral] is esteemed for his virtue and prudence, very pious and fond of all those who are so; therefore, everybody in the house [of Goa] is pious with spiritual recollection. However, it is possible to say correctly of all superiors here that nothing is altogether blessed, because in the manner of governance all of them (except Father Valignano) have their imperfections. Father Cabral behaves harshly, admonishes very irately and sometimes

⁴ See the letter written by Valignano to Acquaviva, Kochi, 12 December 1584, in *DI*, 13: 669-70.

uses disgraceful words with the Fathers and Brothers. [...] I think nobody dares to communicate their troubles to the Father Superior for the little sweetness there is to be found in him. [...] For any defect, he thinks everything is lost [...] Moreover, Father Cabral is very stingy [...] He is rather opinionated and there is no recourse against what he feels is best. Discussing about a certain penance he wanted to give to one of the brothers, he first gave his sentence and, as the consultors mitigated that penance, he answered angrily: "It can't be what you want", although in the end he reduced it. [...] He lacks zeal [for the Christian community and] I believe the cause is having dealt with the Christianity of Japan which is different from that of these parts of India, as are the people.⁵

Castro's insightful description picks up both on the pessimism Cabral held towards his brethren ("For any defect, he thinks everything is lost") and on his perception that pastoral care of the local Christians (probably Indian) was not a priority when compared to his responsibilities towards the spiritual lives of the Jesuit community, and his own. Castro's letter points to the time Cabral spent in Japan as the reason behind his behaviour.

Indeed, Cabral's already mixed opinion of the Japanese was exacerbated after he left the archipelago (Schütte 1980, 1: 242-6). The idealised depictions made by missionaries before him, which had informed his initial opinion, clashed with the difficulties of work in Japan. As he became more disillusioned with the mission, Cabral built a narrative that shifted the blame onto the supposed innate traits of the Japanese and began describing them as "insincere" and "unreliable" (1: 243). This helped him to move the focus away from his own inability to reach the far-fetched goal, set by Francis Xavier, of rapidly converting the "best people ever discovered", even when he was carrying out mass baptisms. Furthermore, after leaving Japan, there was no need for him to compose edifying texts on that mission anymore, nor to acquire the support of Jesuit and lay authorities alike by underscoring the Japanese propensity for Christianity. Having put some distance between the Japanese people's salvation and his own, it might have become easier for him to disregard the country's exemplary converts as exceptions. Finally, the opinions he expressed became more negative during his attempts to boost the primacy of the Indian mission in the eyes of the General, as part of a concerted effort by some influent Jesuits to have Valignano deposed and to curtail his

⁵ Christóvão de Castro to General Acquaviva, Vaipikotta, 26 November 1589, in *DI*, 15: 424-5.

actions that they perceived as damaging to India.⁶

On the topic of Cabral's perception of Japanese people, the perusal of his correspondence from Japan carried out in this study shows that, in later years, Cabral even denied his own policy decisions. For instance, in 1572 he explained at length that he understood the importance of prioritising the dōjuku's satisfaction, if evangelization was to continue and dangerous divisions avoided, even if he did not particularly care for it. He requested permission to fulfil the Japanese helpers' desire to be accepted into the Society of Jesus, and to build a special structure to educate them. Nevertheless, in a 1596 letter from Goa to the Portuguese Assistant, he declared that he was always opposed to the idea. He framed this purported position of his as a conscious policy born from his keen observation of Buddhist practices of secrecy and of the immoral character of the Japanese people.⁷ This change in opinion, which follows his attempts to depict negatively the people of Japan, can be attributed to the aim of this latter missive from India: denouncing Valignano's admission of the Japanese in the Society and further weaken his role as Visitor of China and Japan, after having obtained his discharge from that of Visitor of the Indies (Schütte 1980, 1: 243). The new narrative Cabral created adopts the vitriolic language he was known for, to depict himself as the defender of the correct policy for the Society, while using his purported knowledge of Japan to undermine Valignano's work.

Cabral's different interpretation of the events of his time in Japan helps putting into focus his shortcomings as a superior and administrator, who was characterised by an inability to implement his decisions with confidence. The frequent changes in the policies he proposed to the General through the years of the 1570s already suggested a lack of competence and experience with a leadership role so complex. Even if Cabral seems to mostly ascribe these changes in opinion to the mercurial political situation of the country, some of his contemporaries' letters show that they had anticipated similar problems due to his inexperience. By the end of Cabral's stay in Japan, it becomes evident that he does not have the resolve to see the mission through a needed radical reform; as he wrote to the General, his heart had been "reduced" by the hardships of the enterprise. Indeed, his perceptions of the degeneration of his brethren from the perfection of the first missionaries and his ensuing expectations about divine punishment in the early years of his superiorate paralysed his missionary activity. Considering the sum of his correspondence about

6 An overview of Cabral's clashes with Valignano in relation to the mission of Japan in the 1590s is in Zampol D'Ortia 2020.

7 See Cabral's letter to Portuguese Assistant João Alvares, Goa, 10 December 1596, in *DI*, 18: 603-26. A translation is available in Schütte 1980, 1: 245-6.

Japan, this study shows how Cabral never had the confidence to carry out any major reform and, in his own words, “trust God”.

Studying Francisco Cabral’s work in the Japanese Jesuit mission through the lens of failure, however, tells us much about the mission’s wider contexts as well. It highlights the differences existing in the interpretations of the Jesuit way of proceeding, over against the depiction of the Society of Jesus as an immutable and unmovable tradition. Instead of being an isolated case, to be repudiated, Francisco Cabral appears as the product of the various contexts that he inhabited and as an expression of the Society to which he belonged, regardless of the actuality of his vision of mission. This study also considers the instability of the depictions of non-European peoples in sixteenth-century texts written by Europeans, confirming how they could be based on the political necessities of the day.⁸ By considering the trajectory of the opinions expressed by Cabral on the Japanese people, it provides an example of how they could become rhetorical tools in European and Eurocentric debates about matters that could appear rather removed from the issues at stake, such as Jesuit salvation. This could happen regardless of how positive or negative their overall depiction was, as shown by Cabral’s initial positive impressions. In this way, the evolution of Cabral’s opinions is analysed in a manner that negates the more common, one-dimensional depictions of this missionary, underscoring how Eurocentric attitudes could grow and develop in the missions, rather than being just brought in from Europe, and could change over time. Moreover, the case study presented here illustrates some of the many reasons why Jesuit reports could contradict one another, including obfuscation and outright revisionism by the writer, reiterating how these documents need to be considered in their totality and in relation to one another.

For all these reasons, Francisco Cabral’s failure can be considered a telling failure. At the core of it, there are the complex workings of the sixteenth-century Catholic idea of salvation, especially the relationship between the salvation of the non-Christian people and that of the missionary. In this instance, the concept of mission, which had promised to provide a fertile terrain for the salvation of many souls, suffered a crisis when these two objectives could not be integrated together. These internal tensions caused Cabral’s perception of failure of the Japanese mission and, concurrently, loss of hope in Divine Providence.

⁸ On this matter, see for instance Watson 2015, 15.