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Sympathy for the Martyr. Daniello Bartoli and the Japanese Children as Moral Examples (17th century)

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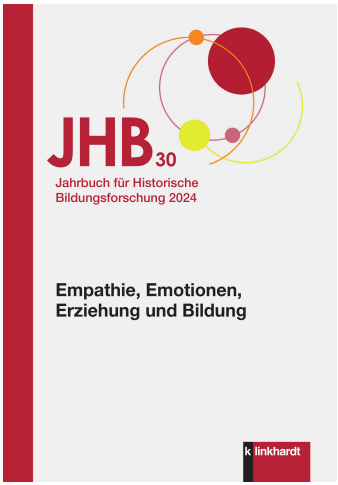


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# Sympathy for the Martyr. Daniello Bartoli and the Japanese Children as Moral Examples (17th century)

**Zusammenfassung**
Dieser Artikel untersucht die Beziehung zwischen Empathie und Bildung in der Gesellschaft Jesu während der Frühen Neuzeit. Die Jesuiten zeigten ein tiefes Bewusstsein und eine ausgeprägte Neigung zum Märtyrertum. Diese Studie beleuchtet ihre Darstellung junger japanischer Märtyrer im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert. Anhand von Jesuitenbriefen und Daniello Bartolis *Giappone* (*Japan*, 1660) wird aufgezeigt, wie lebendige Darstellungen des Märtyrertums das Einfühlungsvermögen förderten und die Gläubigen dazu ermutigten, sich in das Leid der japanischen Christen hineinzuversetzen, es zu verstehen und darauf zu reagieren.

**Empathie, Jesuiten, Märtyrertum, Japanische Christen, Daniello Bartoli**

**Abstract**
This paper explores the relationship between empathy and education in the Society of Jesus during the early modern period. The Jesuits demonstrated a profound awareness of and inclination towards martyrdom, and this study examines their portrayal of young Japanese martyrs in the 16th and 17th centuries. Employing Jesuit letters and Daniello Bartoli's *Giappone* (*Japan*, 1660), it shows how vivid depictions of martyrdom fostered empathy, encouraging the believers to assimilate, comprehend, and respond to the suffering endured by Japanese Christians.

**Empathy, Jesuits, Martyrdom, Japanese Christianity, Daniello Bartoli**

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## Introduction

At the turn of the 17th century, the Japanese five-year-old Pietro was condemned to decapitation because he refused to recant Christ. He received the death sentence without being "dismayed or upset."[1] A few moments before, the same destiny had been delivered to his father, and the guards were afraid that the boy would have lost his temper seeing his father's head cut and thrown to the ground. But Pietro remained tranquil. His father's martyrdom even encouraged him. Reports from the event relate that the crowd gathered for the spectacle were moved to greater piety and tears.

The curious onlookers and Japanese Christians alike often betrayed themselves by demonstrating their sympathy, which was considered a crime because Christianity was illegal. The spectacle quickly became gruesome when the boy's piety struck the heart of the executioner, who refused to fulfill his duty. A volunteer offered to finish the pitiable task. Unfortunately, his lack of skill resulted in a truly grisly scene as he was unable to strike the boy's head from his shoulders in one fell swoop. Instead, the multiple blows shred his head from the neck. The onlookers were attracted to this performance: they were so impressed by his faith that as soon as the execution was complete, they threw themselves upon his remains. Thousands of miles away from Catholic Europe, the similarity of the affective response to a martyr's remains demonstrates shared cultural aspirations and perhaps even Catholicism's cross-cultural appeal.

This is one of many stories with which the members of the Society of Jesus electrified European audiences.[2] Today, as readers, we are mesmerized by these pages, thirsty for the next bloodshed, "hopelessly entangled in the passions – in pleasure, discomfort, and pain," because what we read (or see, in the case of a painting) "shapes us" and in the end "promises metamorphosis,"[3] as the art historian Mia Mochizuki suggested. The present article focuses precisely on the array of emotions – in particular, empathy – that scenes of martyrdoms of children in Japan could evoke in early modern Europeans within the Jesuit orbit. Such sources have an attractive and at the same time repulsive content, that resonated with early modern readers as much as it does today. As historians, however, we must also consider that what appears "grisly" to us could have had a different effect in the early modern period, when famine, wars, and cruelty were part of the daily life –

1 "il più piccolo, ma per la coraggiosa morte che fece, appresso tutti, il primo, e il maggiore de gli altri", Bartoli 1660, p. 619.

The author wishes to thank Andrew Barrette (Boston College), Seth Meehan (Boston College) and Thomas Santa Maria (Harvard Divinity School) for their precious help during the revision of this article; the comments of the two blind reviewers were fundamental as well to better reformulate its argument and structure.

2 For Jesuit history and information networks, see Friedrich 2022.

3 Mochizuki 2014, p. 378, who does not refer to Bartoli but to paintings of the Japanese martyrs and whose example therefore perfectly fits anyway.

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in Europe as much as in the territories where Europeans had tried to import Christianity. Moreover, not only those who read about these violent executions and tortures were empathic with their victims – or actors – but some of them wanted to emulate such a fate at all costs, and become their followers. This was the case of lay boys, students of Jesuit schools, or Jesuits aspiring to become missionaries in the overseas territories of the Iberian crown. How were Jesuits so effective not only in describing events they participated in, but also in disseminating them vividly to evoke their public's empathy, participation, and involvement?

Jesuits engaged with the societies and cultures of those places, studying their languages and civilizations, tirelessly trying to convert them, and in so doing they depended on financial, material, emotional, and human support from Europe. They needed money, books, personnel (missionary recruits), devotional objects, and to elicit empathy. Jesuits provided vivid accounts that evoked emotions, which relied on their training. The *Ratio Studiorum*, for example, shows how Jesuit pedagogy was focused on rhetoric, and the cultivation of theatre in Jesuit structures was a major tool to inculcate rhetoric and faith. Actually, theatre was in every way "pastoral," because it aimed at "affecting the large-scale of the spiritual reformation of the republic through spectacles of pious action."[4] The *Ratio Studiorum*'s plan of studies prepared the Jesuits to manipulate emotions and made them as effective in the sphere of culture as in religion.

It is precisely through emotions that in the last century, mainly thanks to the cultural-historiographical approach of the French school of the *Annales* (1930s), historians returned to dismissed or superficially-interpreted sources. More recently, following the so-called 'affective turn' in the humanities, many scholars categorize themselves as 'historians of emotion' and a rich bibliography has flourished.[5] This article focuses on what some have called "Jesuit emotions".[6] Even if such a thing does not exist, there is no doubt that this religious order appealed to emotions in unique and striking ways.[7]

Members of the same religious order belonged to the same "emotional community", a term with which the medievalist Barbara Rosenwein defines all groups of people sharing the same systems of feeling, that is how they judged, interpreted, evaluated their own and other people's emotions – and the vocabulary with which they expressed it.[8] Early modernists grapple with the fact that emotions and per-

4 Brockey 2005.

5 Rosenwein 2002; Reddy 2009; Barclay 2020.

6 "there is no such thing as Jesuit emotions," Haskell and Garrod in Haskell/Garrod, p. 2.

7 "did employ affects and emotions with unusual effectiveness […] with all verbal and theatrical means," Bloemendal in Haskell/Garrod, XIII.

8 Moreover: "what these communities (and the individuals within them) define and assess as valuable or harmful to them, the evaluations that they make about others' emotions; the nature of the affective bonds between people that they recognize and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate, and deplore," Rosenwein 2002, p. 842.

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ceptions change over time, so to understand these texts requires comprehending how they might have been received in their own time. They must look for answers to questions that an early modern audience and readership – and not a scholar of the 20th or 21st century – would have asked.

Empathy is defined as "the ability to imagine oneself in another's place and understand the other's feelings, desires, ideas, and actions."[9] The origin of the term dates only to the early 20th century, based on the German word *Einfühlung*. This essay's case studies are mainly related to texts which employ, apply, and appeal to both the senses and imagination through detailed descriptions and images, consistent with how the Society of Jesus used to address its followers. In this order's activity, in fact, some scholars spotted a sort of "intercultural empathy,"[10] which allowed its members to connect to the populations they aimed at converting, in some way entering their worldview and drawing from it the elements necessary to be more effective when proposing them the new religious principle. This is one of the reasons why the readers of Jesuit sources still find extraordinary affinity, comprehension – and in the end, empathy – for peoples apparently so culturally and geographically (and in the case of modern readers, also chronologically) distant.

## 1 Emotions and martyrdom in the Society of Jesus

This paper is based on sources produced within the Society of Jesus because, in the Catholic scenario, this religious order most of all used to appeal to the emotions of its flock. In the case of written works, as much as in pictures, architecture, festive apparats, and through all the *media* available at the time, the Jesuits endeavored – and usually succeeded – to immerse the believer fully into the scene, with the aid of all senses.[11] More than any other order, the Jesuits "intentionally aroused emotions through oratory and rhetoric, the performative and visual arts as well as through letters" and their artistic production in general.[12]

Among many emotions, the didactic and transformative role of empathy was fundamental for the Society of Jesus. Nowadays, reading the works (poems, letters, treatises, plays), or viewing gruesome paintings indulging in the most horrid details of violent events (deaths, tortures) can be shocking. Unlike today, such depictions were not only deemed suitable but even recommended for young people. Indeed, boys who studied in Jesuit schools read or heard these works in public readings in the refectory starting at a very tender age. In many cases, these works actually inspired them to become Jesuits and missionaries, but more generically

9 https://www.britannica.com/science/empathy (Encyclopedia Britannica). On empathy from a historical perspective and for further bibliography, see Lanzoni 2018; Dean 2004; Nilsson 2023.

10 Haskell/Garrod, p. 12.

11 See for instance the *compositio loci* practice (Standaert 2007).

12 Joliffe 2023, p. 212.

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the iconographic material was appreciated by believers of all ages, in churches and public spaces, during solemn festive occasions or for daily meditations. Theatrical representations involved empathy as well: the actors were school-boys, interpreting mainly Jesuits. As the historian Yasmin Haskell underlined, "within an educational setting […] all this whipping-up of emotions […] had its primary effect on them [the boys]," and it is hard to think that "the experience of rehearsing and performing in such a play […] could not have been personally transformative for the participants."[13] Through theater, Jesuit schoolboys were supposed to learn how to fully embody what they were taught and then to project it outward. They should have been able to persuade wider audiences, not necessarily as future missionaries, but as lay people – even if members of the Roman Catholic Church.

Martyrdom holds a special place within Christian spirituality, and from its inception. Though at first Romans approached Christian monotheism with their customary syncretism, trying to meld it into their political and civil ceremonies, later they opposed Christians, because they rejected those civic ceremonies.[14] Thus Christians became "martyrs", from Greek "witnesses (of faith)", and the results of centuries of violence was something unexpected. A cult was born on the earthly remains of the martyrs, whose admirers and believers collected bones, clothes, hair, and all sort of other material goods that came into contact with the holy men and women.[15] These practices flourished when Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire, and ultimately spread throughout much of Europe. Though martyrdom itself was apparently a distant memory, Christians clung to martyrdom narratives and their material legacies.

During the early modern period there was a revival of interest for martyrs, relics, and old forms of testifying one's faith: i. e., dying violently "for it", which was born from renewed interest in ancient Christianity, conflict with Protestants, and failed missionary endeavors.[16] As for the first, the inner-Catholic debate had become increasingly meaningful in an age of confessional strife, and on a European level it was most of all relevant for England. As for the missions, many young men enthusiastically joined the Society of Jesus because they knew that Jesuits were at their forefront throughout the globe. The Society of Jesus thus never had shortage of aspiring missionaries, and its most cruel and horrid accounts (coming especially from Asia and the Americas) galvanized and attracted more and more recruits.

13 Haskell 2013, pp. 84–85. The importance of theater in Jesuit pedagogy and praxis cannot be underestimated: on this topic see, for instance, McCabe 1983, Valentin 1984, and in the specific case of Japanese-themed pieces Döpfert 2022 and the whole volume Oba/Watanabe/Schaffenrath 2022.

14 Ironically, this is what became a problem for converts in Confucian countries in East Asia, during the early modern period, most of all with the Chinese rites' controversy. It was precisely apostatizing "from the perspective of traditional spiritual and cultural ancestral veneration" and "breaking with ancestor worship" that became "an act of defiance as well as a test to ferret out Christians" (McCleary 2022, p. 485).

15 Brown 2000.

16 Gregory 2001.

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Even today, Catholic theology considers martyrdom an exceptional grace – a baptism of blood, the highest form of *imitatio Christi*. About the latter, the Society of Jesus boldly adopted the name not of a saint or a founder (such as Saint Francis of Assisi or Saint Augustine), but of Jesus himself. Jesuits aimed to imitate not only his life, but his suffering and death as well,[17] hence there was immense attraction to becoming a missionary in the "Indies".[18] In particular Japan was seen as the best place to pursue martyrdom during the early modern period, because "martyrdom was especially in evidence, as manifest in the narratives that recall and elaborate upon the ancient martyrs of the first centuries."[19]

## 2 Empathy with the Japanese converts, direct heirs of the first Christians

Jesuits were among the first Europeans of the early modern period to reach and live both in the Japanese and Chinese empires.[20] As soon as the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier (1506–1552), who was in Goa at the time, learned of a Portuguese shipwreck in Japan in 1543, he daydreamed about converting the local population of this mysterious and extremely civilized unknown archipelago.

The political situation in Japan seemed at first promising for establishing Jesuit missions since Japanese lords, to prevail over one another in the constant civil wars, longed for the support of European technologies, i. e., firearms, which the Jesuits were able to procure thanks to their Portuguese supporters. However, after the stabilization of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868), the arrival of other religious orders (primarily Franciscans, supported by the Spanish crown, starting from 1592) and other nationalities (including Dutch and English merchants, extremely hostile to Catholicism and the priests), Japanese rulers lost interest in the Jesuits. The presence of all these foreigners, often quarreling with each other, the change of balance between the many commercial opportunities, and the civil problems created by converts and missionaries, led to progressive persecutions again Christianity, starting with Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) in 1597. They culminated in the expulsion of all foreigners from the empire, thus initiating the so-called *sakoku* ("closed country," 1639–1866), a long period of national isolation.

The fact that Japan was totally inaccessible did not discourage European Jesuits from requesting to be missioned there. They wanted to experience an uncomfort-

17 On the desire for martyrdom of Jesuits see Colombo 2019.

18 "Indies" a generic term that, in the early modern period, included East and West Indies, but in general every overseas territory – and even European missions.

19 Cymbalista 2010, p. 1. On the 'rediscovery' of martyrs see also Nebgen 2009, pp. 129–145.

20 As for martyrs in China, see Catto 2022; to make a comparison with the Portuguese territories in the Americas, see Cymbalista 2010; on the story of Jesuits in Japan see Üçerler 2022.

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able life in the name of evangelical poverty, to cry and bleed, and preferably to die as martyrs. The overseas missions – and most of all Japan – were the ideal place to obtain a glorious baptism of blood, and the many sources on the Japanese missions were read, explored, and enjoyed avidly. Thanks to the information shared within the Society's communications network, Jesuits always had privileged access to the best first-hand information. In 1694, when Japan had been an impossible destination for decades, the Italian Jesuit Giovanni Berlendis (1664–1745) applied to become a missionary with these words:

> "the Lord calls me to the Indies, and not, if I have to tell the truth, as I must, in any part of them, but only in those, which look more closely at my dear Japan […] Japan which, just naming it, it is not credible, with how much joy I am filled. Japan, my love, my noble vow, my sigh […] I love in it the pits, the gallows, the waters, the tortures, the martyrs … oh God!"[21]

To be more persuasive, he told the superior general of the Society of Jesus about one of his favorite games as a child. His friends would gather to role-play as captured Jesuits being interrogated by Japanese tyrants. Berlendis relates that he took this game so seriously that he could not stop crying and sighing, especially when the tyrant pronounced the death sentence. At that point he got down on his knees, raised his head, and heroically accepted the simulated decapitation as if it was real. Berlendis felt such a happiness and liberation, that he had to ran away from his friend, because he did not want him to see how many tears of joy he was shedding while putting himself in the shoes of a soon-to-be-martyred Jesuit. Berlendis always wanted to become a missionary, but he waited before sending his first application because of:

> "the fact that I am so immature in every way, both in spirit and in education […] I suspected […] whether such a desire in me was […] freely given by God or arising otherwise […] my dear Japan […] When will I die in my Japan, when will it be, my God, when! […] when will you console me! […] Whenever I took a break to enjoy the stars in the clear sky, whenever I heard someone playing instruments […] or whenever I saw the images of the many martyrs of the Society of Jesus […] I felt kidnapped, with every thought and feeling, to my Japan […] to the people suffering there for God, in unknown and barbaric countries! […] I had to run away, not to be forced to […] cry in front of others."[22]

21 "il Signore mi chiama all'Indie, e non già, se ho a dir, come devo, il vero, in qualunque parte di esse, ma solo in quelle, che guarda più da vicino il caro mio Giappone […] Giappone, quale, a nominarlo solo, non è credibile, di quanta gioia mi colma. Giappone, il mio amore, il mio nobil voto, il mio sospiro […] Amo in esso le fosse, le forche, le acque, i stratii, i martirii … o Dio!" ARSI, *FG* 749, fols. 595–596 (Naples, February 27, 1694).

22 "per l'essere per ogni parte immaturo, o sia nello spirito o nelle lettere […] il sospettar […] se fossemi un tal desiderio […] donato liberalmente da Dio o sorto comunque altrimenti […] il caro mio Giappone […] Quando sarà che squarciato io muoio nel mio Giappone, quando sarà Dio mio, quando! […] quando me consolaveris! […] Se mai io mi fermava a goder delle stelle in Ciel Sereno, se mai mi avveniva udir istrumenti da suono […] imagine de tanti martiri ch'ha la Compagnia […] rapito col

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Since Berlendis's childhood, everything in his daily life had been an opportunity for him to think and immerse himself into (what he imagined was) Japan, and his description is very vivid and intense, involving multiple senses: sight (looking at the sky and the paintings), hearing (musical instruments playing), and touch (the simulated decapitation). Berlendis dreamt day and night about:

> "the multiple kinds of torments, almost as if they all could be applied to me […] vividly imagining that I was already forced to die on a scaffold, but singing those prayers […] already in bed, I woke up in the middle of the night […] to delight myself in such phantasies […] the doors of Japan […] to force those doors, closed with so much jealousy. No, God does not want it; nor is it wanted by reason, or prudence […] will the devil be more astute in looking at it, than God is wise in disappointing the devil's tricks? Japan will open, it will open once, and it will open to a man, not to an Angel."[23]

Berlendis figured himself as the humble instrument of God, being able to cooperate in the reopening of the Japanese empire to foreigners and Christianity. It is impossible to ascertain where Berlendis' juvenile inspiration came from, since Japanese martyrdom (including that of children) was a big topic also beyond Bartoli's publications, and some of it was circulated and discussed via plays.[24] In any case, despite his fervor and determination, Berlendis – like so many other Jesuits – was never selected for missions.

## 3 Case Study: Children in Daniello Bartoli's *Japan* (1660)

One of these desirous missionaries was Daniello Bartoli, who came to be considered as the official historian of the Society of Jesus: his words will be analyzed here to show the intertwining of education and emotions within this religious order. Bartoli always showed a particular predilection for Asian subjects in general, and Japanese in particular. He was just an 'armchair traveler': he never left his native

pensiero e con l'affetto al mio Giappone […] pativan per Dio in paesi ignoti e barbari! […] per non esser costretto a […] piangere a vista d'altri," ARSI, *FG* 749, fols. 595–596 (Naples, 27 February 1694).

23 "varii generi di tormenti, quasi che tutti mi si applicassero […] l'immaginarmi vivamente di esser io constretto già a morire su d'un patibolo, però cantar quelle preci […] già in letto, o svegliatomi tra notte […] a delitiarsi in tali immaginazioni […] il rimanente del ristoro […] le porte del Giappone […] far forza a quelle porte, chiuse con tanta gelosia. No 'l vuole Iddio; non la raggione, non la prudenza […] sarà il dimonio più astuto in guardarlo, che Iddio savio in deludere le sue astutie? Si aprirà, si aprirà una volta, e si aprirà ad un huomo, non già ad un Angelo," ARSI, *FG* 749, fols. 595–596 (Naples, 27 February 1694).

24 In this regard, the English Jesuit Joseph Simons or Simeon (1594–1671) authored several martyr dramas: one of them is *Vitus sive Christiana Fortitudo* (performed in 1623 in a Jesuit College), which evolves around the emperor Diocletian's (244–313) passion for the Christian Vitus, who is then by him sentenced to death. This play exhorted the English Catholics – also, but not only, the youth – to persevere in their belief against every unfavourable political circumstance. The full text of the play is available online at https://philological.cal.bham.ac.uk/vitus/; about its genesis and Simons' work see Parente 1983.

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Italian peninsula, and to write about all different kinds of civilizations he had at his disposal missionary letters and reports. He employed 'oral sources' as well, because he could take advantage of the periodic visits of his confreres returning from the missions, who always stopped in Rome – where he spent most of his life. Bartoli was clearly not the only Jesuit who gave testimonies about contemporary youth, but this paper focuses mainly on his account of the Japanese children and/or children martyrs because of their effectiveness and *longue durée* fruition. Other early modern Jesuits had dealt with this topic before: two of the most important ones are Luís Froís (1532–1597), a Portuguese missionary to Japan, and Nicolas Trigault (1577–1628), a Flemish Jesuit missionary to China. Froís described the interactions between the Jesuits and the local children.[25] On the one hand, some accepted and welcomed Christianity, and tried to understand it with rationality, maturity, and civility – the most educated and noble ones, according to the Jesuit. On the other hand, some rejected it, ridiculed it, and even verbally and physically assaulted priests. Unsurprisingly, the Jesuits described these as low and ignorant people.

Trigault reported his experience on the field through many letters and books, among them a martyrology containing the most gruesome episodes regarding violent death by faith. Curiously, these accounts were from Japan, an empire that he never visited. Children appear in many pages of *De Christianis apud Iaponios triumphis* (*Christian Triumphs among the Japanese*, 1623),[26] and their deaths are recounted both in words and in multiple engravings. Such "visual and narrative representations stirred affections"[27] and reinforced the connections between European and Japanese martyrs: in other words, they created empathy. Both Froís and Trigault (and many other Jesuit authors) understood the "emotional value of children's voices" as a "means to reach the reader's hearts and move them towards more support – both vocational and financial," as the historian Pia Joliffe argued.[28] Bartoli followed this model in his book on Japan: showing children ready and willing to die was both an effective pedagogical tool, but also a risky and problematic strategy. Such ambiguous figures elevated as Christian models could raise questions regarding the duty of young sons and daughters to obey their parents, but also whether children were less corrupt than adults.[29]

Daniello Bartoli was born in Ferrara and died in Rome aged over seventy.[30] He attended Jesuit schools and then joined the order in 1623. A dozen years later he was ordained a priest and began preaching in various Italian cities. After some

25 Joliffe 2023.
26 Trigault 1623. In this regard, see also Verberckmoes 2020.
27 Verberckmoes 2020, p. 3.
28 Joliffe 2023, p. 212.
29 On the Jesuit theatrical employment of children figures for pastoral purposes, see Brockey 2005.
30 Ditchfield 2019, pp. 218–239. See also Arico 1997; Brutto Barone Ades 1980; Frei 2022.

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successful publications, he was called to Rome to write the 'official history' of the first century of the Society of Jesus. Bartoli's 'frustrated' vocation for the mission was poured into the *Istorie della Compagnia di Gesú* (*Histories of the Society of Jesus*, 1650–1673), an ambitious, demanding, and extremely verbose work which became a classic of the Italian baroque. The challenge of describing the first hundred years of the Society's activity was "both global in geographical scope and universal in aspiration."[31]

Despite never moving from the Italian peninsula, Bartoli deeply studied the most distant geographical realities – including the Japanese one. His section of the *Istorie* dedicated to *Giappone* was published in 1660, consists of five books, and consumes the reader with over 1,300 pages; it has never been edited or translated.[32] Bartoli analyzes everything Japan-related – at the time this mysterious country was already closed to Europeans. No doubt this appealed to Catholic, and especially Jesuit audiences, whose imaginations remained captivated by Japan. Bartoli studies its geography, history, philosophies, and religions; he focuses on the animals, the food, the writing system and much more. Chronologically, he starts with the ruling of Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582) and goes on with his successors, arriving as close as possible to his own time.

Martyrdom and Japan were inextricably intertwined in the European imagination, and for very concrete reasons. Japan has been the theatre of one the biggest group martyrdoms in Church history: twenty-six European and Japanese Christians were killed in Nagasaki in 1597 (and were beatified as soon as 1627).[33] Bartoli dedicates dozens of pages to this and other martyrdoms – and not his best ones. In fact, he was criticized[34] because he almost seemed to be on autopilot when describing the scenes of martyrdom: all the cases look the same, are long and prolix but not very creative and imaginative, and too hagiographic in a derogative sense. Bartoli is interested in children and their appearance (clothing and hairstyles), educational practices (how they learn to write, in linguistic systems so different from European ones), and games.[35] In general, Bartoli underlines on the one hand how even such a culturally distant youth were pious and inclined to convert to Christianity, but on the other how difficult it was for missionaries to operate in a society where 'sects' and 'idolaters' (as Christians defined non-Christian religions and traditions) had been influential for millennia. In Bartoli's *Giappone* (and also in *Cina*), therefore, descriptions abound of Buddhist monks who buy children

31 Ditchfield 2019, p. 218. The *Histories* were printed over the course of twenty years: *Asia* (1650–53), *Giappone* (*Japan*, 1660), *Cina* (*China*, 1663), *Inghilterra* (*England*, 1667), and *Italia* (*Italy*, 1673).

32 Bartoli 1660.

33 Which is quite an exception, because most of the martyrs were beatified and canonized in the 19th and 20th centuries (Colombo 2019, p. 56).

34 Like by Guido Sommavilla and Nino Majellaro in their introductory essays of Bartoli 1985.

35 Frei 2021.

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at a low price, with the aim of corrupting (sodomizing) them on the one hand, and not losing recruits and money for their community on the other. This kind of perverted education inevitably led to the 'backsliding' of these children, who were taught from an early age how to lie, disguise their real intentions, and behave basely. However, under the 'right' influence – the Jesuit one, obviously – Japanese youths were capable of extraordinary acts of piety, virtue, and goodness.

Moreover: the converted children could lead their brothers, sisters, and parents on the right path. The Jesuits hoped and planned that, as adults, these former children would take on leadership roles. This would have allowed the missionaries greater room to maneuver in a terrain as fraught with obstacles in such distant empires. Moreover, these territories were not ruled by Spanish or Portuguese kings, like in the case of the Americas and, partially, the Indian subcontinent, where a full colonial scale domination and conversion was most 'successful' from a European perspective.

One of Bartoli's most attentive scholars, Josef Wicki, has pointed to the interplay between the wonderful and marvelous in his works, the literary and religious culture which imbued them, and the letters Bartoli drew on for his histories.[36] In his world exceptionality is the rule, and miracles are performed by God not only through the Jesuits, but often also through children after their conversion, who are extraordinarily effective *media* for this kind of exhibition of power of the new religion.

For example, Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606), the procurator of the East Indies, showcased the Jesuit attitude toward children when he selected a group of Japanese youths as 'ambassadors' to Europe for a famous tour that he organized during the 1580s.[37] The explanation Bartoli gives is prosaic: "the experience of many years had taught that to middle aged Japanese any climate change is fatal: therefore, of those who sailed on the Portuguese ships only few returned, and many died there as soon as they arrived." A further reason was that "they had to be young so that, having a long life ahead of them, they could also bear a long and lasting testimony of the greatness of the Church and of the Christian religion, i. e., what they saw in Europe."[38]

Besides these very pragmatic motivations, however, in *Giappone* Bartoli underlines many times how the Japanese children, thanks to an education which filled them with courage, dignity, and self-control, knew how to live exemplary moments of

36 Wicki 1983, p. 221.

37 Massarella 2005.

38 "la sperienza di molti anni havea insegnato, che a' Giapponesi giá provetti in etá, ogni mutation di clima lontano, riusciva mortale: onde anche perció che de' passati tal volta su le navi de' Portoghesi all'India, pochi n'eran tornati, morti colá appena giuntivi […] oltre a questo, giovani esser doveano, perche lungamente vivendo, lunga anche, e durevole testimonianza facessero delle grandezze della Chiesa, e della Religione christiana, vedute in Europe," Bartoli 1660, p. 170.

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the strongest fervor during the periodic anti-Christian persecutions.[39] Christian tradition, for a long time, viewed "childhood and sanctity […] as profoundly incompatible, if not mutually exclusive states,"[40] and the number of child saints and martyrs is not relevant compared to their adult counterparts – but most of them succumbed to violent deaths.[41] The children described by Bartoli certainly died in a saintly and violent way.

Just browsing the index of *Giappone*,[42] one sees that all the youths mentioned in the book are fulgid *exempla* of the best form of faith, pure and untouched. There are many virtuous children, like those involved in "memorable conversions of their own fathers," or who showed "constancy in faith" and "wanted to die for it, and generously did so." Children were seen – and recounted – as having a "wonderful constancy […] in suffering torments rather than renouncing their faith," showing a remarkable "readiness for martyrdom." While "condemned to die for their faith," they would rather "console their mother" than apostatize, and even "refused to eat or drink if their father and mother did not convert." There was a pious boy who "at night wrapped a tight string around his waist, to wake up several times and pray."[43] Some of them were able to "do wonderful things,"[44] while some others were unstoppable, once converted, in destroying everything pertaining to 'superstition'[45] like a group of children did with "all the idols they found in a cave."[46]

When children are mentioned in Bartoli's *Giappone*, this happens mostly in relation to martyrdom. Childhood seems to be an in-between-situation, and a pious youth does not necessarily bring about a pious adulthood. The message is that God takes for himself his most flourishing buds, and converted children often passed away testifying to their new-found faith. If they did not die in a spectacular and morbid way setting an example for others (for Japanese adults, as well as European readers), their importance lessens, as if the death of children was so

39 Bartoli 1660, pp. 145–146.

40 Wasyliw 2008, p. 1.

41 On young martyrs see McCleary 2022, who calculates that among the 5,213 martyrs beatified by the Catholic Church between 1588 and 2022, only 183 are less than eighteen years old (pp. 1–2).

42 Bartoli 1660, index of topics, on the final and not numbered pages.

43 "memorabili conversioni fatte da essi (fanciulli) de' lor medesimi Padri […] costanza nella Fede […] desiderasse morir per la Fede, e come generosamente morisse […] costanza maravigliosa […] in patire tormenti prima che rinnegar la Fede […] prontezza al martirio […] condannati a morir per la Fede consolano la lor madre […] non vuol magnar, né bere se suo Padre, e Madre non si convertono […] si cinge la notte una cordicella stretta a' fianchi per isvegliarsi alcuna volta, e fare oratione," ibid., index of topics.

44 "cose singolari," ibid.

45 Which was a very common trope and happened also with other missionaries, first of all Francis Xavier, as remembered in Joliffe 2023, p. 219, who also remarks the fact that it was also thanks to such episodes that the politic authorities looked at conversions with suspicion: they often became acts of civil disobedience and disorder.

46 "rovine che fanno di molti Idoli trovati in una grotta," Bartoli 1660, index of topics.

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shocking and horrifying a crime that it became an immensely effective and affective trope with Japanese and European audiences. Children seem keen to become martyrs, often more than their parents, and refuse every possible chance to save themselves, and if they have a choice, they try to be hurt and to suffer as much as possible. In Bartoli's *Giappone* pious children follow one another in "grabbing a red-hot iron[47] in one's hand, to show that they will die with strength of spirit for the faith," or "running to where they can be beheaded, offering themself and taking off their clothes to better lend their neck to the scimitar," "or clinging to their mother to burn alive with her." Some "teach the executioner [how to kill them], and comfort him while they behead him," while others are "thirteen years old, but pretend to be fifteen to be killed for the faith." All of them show an "admirable strength" in harsh situations, for instance "when their fingers are cut off," when they are "submerged in the sea several times," or when they are "burned alive."[48]
The conclusions of this essay will comment on these children, while the following paragraphs present two juvenile martyrdoms described in *Giappone*. Bartoli's lingers on descriptions: this is in line with Italian Baroque taste (of which he is considered a master) but not gratuitous, because their ultimate sacrifice serves as an example not only to these children' fellow countrymen, but most of all because they constitute a fulgid model to look forward to by the European readers of *Giappone*. Moreover, Bartoli's Japanese children are extremely effective characters to raise the empathy of his readers – in the past, and still today – but also to discuss the importance of emotions in the Society of Jesus and its ability to appeal to them in all kind of cultural production.
The protagonist of the first case is Tomaso, a twelve-year-old. Ever since he was a baby, every time he started crying or throwing a tantrum, his mother would say to him: "You cry, but if you are so tender and so charming, how can you presume to be a martyr? What will you do when you see an executioner next to you, and a scimitar on your head?"[49] and that was enough to get him back in line. He was sentenced to death and a Japanese soldier delivered him the news and arrested him. Not only did Tomaso not protest, but he accepted the order "with such a joy, that it was clearly

47 Or a lit coal, in another variant.

48 "vuol prendere in mano un ferro rovente in segno che morrà fortemente per la Fede […] corre dove poteva esser decollato, e si offerisce, e si lieva le vesti dal collo nel porgerlo alla scimitarra […] si afferra alla Madre per andar seco a morire arsa viva […] tiene un carbon acceso su una mano in segno che morrà per la Fede […] insegna al carnefice, e il conforta a decapitarlo […] un di tredici anni finge haverne quindici per essere ucciso per la Fede […] sua mirabil fortezza al troncargli le dita delle mani […] e in essere più volte sommerso in mare […] cose ammirabili della sua fortezza fino al morire arso vivo," ibid., index of topics.

49 "Tu piagni, e se sì tenero, e sì vezzoso, e presumi esser martire? Hor che farai al vederti a lato un carnefice, e sul capo una scimitarra?" Bartoli 1660, p. 617.

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not something of that age," showing "a more than virile fortitude of soul."[50] We see here a representation of the *puer senex*, the "little old man" figure developing in the context of Stoic philosophy and in general Roman culture.[51] This boy tolerated his death sentence like an ancient stoic: not complaining, not showing any negative emotion or fear or rejection, but simply going on to the gallows while comforting those around him. As a matter of fact, Tomaso got dressed as elegantly as he could, greeted his mother and grandfather, and did a last act of generosity giving alms to his little friends. He let the soldier carry him on his shoulder, and "continuously encouraged him to move on, to hurry up, because now he was going to martyrdom,"[52] bearing everything without any signs of fear and with the utmost tranquility, as "something coming from heaven." When he was "at the point of receiving the blow, he stood up and fixed his eyes to the sky, and so they remained open after death, in that same gaze." After he was decapitated, his head was "placed in public to terrify the onlookers," but they "rather revered it, and on the contrary were moved to the faith by it," because they interpreted Tomaso and other executed people as "men who were still alive, either looking at the sky for themselves or pointing it out to others, showing where they were with their souls."[53] Their empathy brought them from feeling horror and pain for these people, to appreciate and enjoy their corpses as testimonies of real faith (and encouragement against the Japanese government's decision, in the end).

The second memorable case of child martyrdom is the one recalled at the beginning of this essay, the five-year-old Pietro – "the youngest, but for the courageous death he died, among all, he was the first and the greatest."[54] The boy was bold and courageous because his father (who was persecuted as a Christian and sentenced to death as well) supported him from heaven, and also because, as Bartoli claims, young Japanese used to act in an extraordinarily mature way because "by the age of five they have perfectly mastered the use of reason."[55] Pietro's beheading reminds us of the dream of the aspiring missionary Giovanni Berlendis, because it represents a sort of realization of it. Bartoli describes in detail how "the executioner […] took out his scimitar," while Pietro "joined both hands, raised them up and stretched them out,

50 "con tale allegrezza, che si vedeva non esser cosa di quell'età […] una fortezza d'animo più che virile," ibid., pp. 617–618.

51 Wasyliw 2008, p. 17.

52 "continuo lo stimolava sollecitasse, affrettassesi, che hora si andava al martirio," Bartoli 1660, p. 618.

53 "nel punto di ricevere il colpo, levati, e fissi gli occhi al cielo, così loro rimasero dopo morte aperti, e in quella medesima guardatura; onde le teste messe di poi in publico terrore del popolo, anzi il moveano ad amor della Fede, e riverenza di loro, parendo d'huomini, che tuttavia viventi, o per sé mirassero il cielo, o ad altrui l'accennassero, mostrando dov'essi eran con l'anime," ibid., p. 619.

54 "il più piccolo, ma per la coraggiosa morte che fece, appresso tutti, il primo, e il maggiore de gli altri", ibid.

55 "affermano essere commune de' Giapponesi, che di cinque anni havea perfettamente in essere l'uso della ragione," ibid.

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and offered him his neck […] with such a simple grace and generosity, with something inexplicable, which was seen as something more than human."[56] His reaction was so admirable that this time we see empathy not only in the bystanders, but also in the executioners themselves, who were used to this kind of job and were not even Christians. The first hangman did not feel like it and refused to kill such an innocent and brave child, so two further soldiers were assigned to this task. They refused to proceed as well, empathic as their predecessor and unconcerned of the consequences that such an insubordination could lead to.

The situation was becoming explosive, until a person from the public took the initiative and decided to finally decapitate him. Why so? Once again, the key is empathy: "just out of compassion […] seeing him suffering for so long."[57] This man, "a native Korean," not being a professional was not able to do a good job, and the killing was not immediately successful: the first hit produced just a deep cut in Pietro's neck. With another blow by the Korean, Pietro ended up on the ground; after two more sword blows, the child finally lost his head and stopped agonizing. The believers in the public oscillated between horror and empathy, but as soon as they saw such an abundant spilling of blood they rejoiced, and rushed "to collect that soil, bathed in the blood of those lucky ones, so that not a single grain of it remained." Then they went to grab "the clothes […] finally the shreds of flesh, and the viscera, and the nails."[58] So even the cruelest and more morbid event could constitute a chance for Christianity to access the hearts of so many "gentiles", previously disinterested in the Lord's word.

## 4 Conclusion

The first Jesuit venerated as a martyr (but who was never officially recognized as such)[59] was Antonio Criminali (1520–1549), killed in India by a local army just nine years after the foundation of the Society of Jesus. From then on, over 300 Jesuits were martyred throughout the world. By their deaths, according to Jesuit sources, they became "instruments for the conversion of the souls and the establishing of the Church in new lands."[60] Martyrs were fundamental not only for the results they concretely achieved (in terms of conversion or foundation of

56 "il carnefice […] sguainò la scimitarra […] il ragazzino giunse ambo le mani, levolle in alto, e distese, e gli porse il collo […] con un garbo cosí semplice, e generoso e con un non so che inesplicabile, che si vedeva esser cosa più che humana," ibid., p. 620.

57 "un famiglio nativo di nation Corea, dicono per compassione che glie ne prese, veggendolo così lungamente penare," ibid.

58 "a ricogliere quella terra bagnata del sangue di que' fortunati, sì che non ve ne rimase granello. Indi a gli habiti […] per fin de' brandelli di carne, e delle viscere, e l'ugne," ibid., p. 620. About the importance of the relics in the Japanese mission, see Omata Rappo 2017.

59 Frei/Rai (forthcoming).

60 Cymbalista 2010, p. 290.

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residences, schools, etc.), but also symbolically. The more spectacular their deaths, the better example they provided: and what could be more effective than boys and girls who, practically, only lived to die?

Using youth as a literary and educational subject was tricky. In line with the classic tradition, Jesuit authors (Bartoli included) saw childhood as "a time of physical and moral *infirmitas*,"[61] inferiority, and immatureness. Youth could also "embody human simplicity, humility, and openness to salvation," thanks to the fact that – only once converted, obviously – they were also considered more "open to receive the divine gift of grace."[62] Faith could thus add to their minds in formation the flavor not only of adulthood, but of wisdom, integrity, and in the end even sanctity. In general, childhood was seen as characterized by "both the vulnerability […] to disease and accident, and the undeveloped capacity for reason," marking them as "unformed individuals, both physically and morally, who must be educated in order to develop into responsible citizens"[63] – in the case of Bartoli, the latter term can be substituted with 'believers'.

Both in Japanese and European society, children did not enjoy a fully developed freedom to speak or authority: however, in many Jesuit accounts they are the ones responsible for the conversion of the whole household. The majority of the youth are male, but girls were also present in these narratives and used as *exempla*.[64] It looks like their newly-acquired status of convert gives them more power, and brings the people around them to recognize it and, in a way, to bow down to their 'wisdom'. Some were converted but their families were not: this way they showed decision-making skills and a certain degree of autonomy, because they were in touch with missionaries without their parents approving or even knowing it.

It is true, however, that the vast majority of these child-martyrs died as part of a Christian community, usually together with their family members.[65] Moreover, martyrs in Japan were for sure among the most numerous groups of the early modern period, and this is one of the reasons of their importance in the Catholic imaginary of the time. Hence, one might ask how much 'personality' and agency was ascribed to these children.[66] As for the first, most of the accounts on child martyrs are mostly one and the same, superimposable and repetitive.[67] As for the

61 Wasyliw 2008, p. 17, which does not refer to Bartoli but in general to children in Christian culture, especially focusing on the medieval period.

62 Joliffe 2023, p. 212.

63 Wasyliw 2008, p. 15.

64 McCleary 2022 calculates that, among the 183 martyr children canonized by the Roman Catholic Church between 1588 and 2022, 77% are male (in case of adults, the percentage raises to 85%).

65 As pointed out in McCleary 2022, p. 472.

66 About agency, see Lelièvre 1984.

67 In many medieval and early-modern Passion narratives as well, the most morbid details and cruel scenes of tortures of Christ actually were either "never mentioned in the Gospels" or "more or less invented" (Roodenburg 2014, p. 53).

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latter, it is questionable to what extent the young people were in a mental state and endowed with the cultural readiness to understand the consequences of their actions. Especially in the case of youth martyrs dying not as a part of a group, they would actually "require autonomous agency involving cognitive, psychological, and physical maturity that belies their chronological development."[68]

One must consider to which extent these children could be able to know and understand the principles of such a different faith, coming from another continent and explained very often in an approximative Japanese, which was seen by the Japanese government as a crime against internal peace. After receiving the first sacraments (baptism, confirmation, and eucharist), children could "exercise full membership in the church and its evangelizing mission" and act in "institutional roles" like altar boy or catechists.[69] But children were not aware of how conversion to Christianity could be and often was "a disruptive force within multigenerational family households," which "implicated all family members, even those who did not convert."[70] Because of their young age, also the consciousness of their choice not to apostatize could be put under discussion, because the main causes for their willingness and eagerness to run for the "scimitars" could have been the Jesuits or their parents. This element is never mentioned in the Jesuit narrative, and also strikes today as dangerously close to fanatism, even if at the time it was considered by Catholics a sign of true faith and a fulgid example for every Christian.

The "spiritual aspects and propagandist potential of martyrdom"[71] was and still is remarkable, especially for a religious order in which (self)sacrifice is such "a central element for its identity."[72] The empathy that children raised, in the Japanese community and even more in the European public, even increased it, and they were a trope that Jesuits abundantly employed, and for multiple reasons. This established a strong emotional bond between the writer and the readers, and between the latter and the characters represented in books, paintings, theatrical pieces and so on.

In line with the Christian tradition, the faith of these young boys and girls was considered in a way even "superior:" it was so solid and fearless because it came directly from God, and it was thanks to their proximity to the Almighty that they were able to endure such distress and suffering, even to refuse to save themselves, and to show more courage and consistency than grown-ups. From the Middle Ages and throughout the early modern period, believers looking at pictures or reading sources of all kind had the opportunity to focus on the most "gruesome details as vividly as possible," which were produced in order to "rouse and deepen

68 McCleary 2022, p. 497.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., p. 485.
71 Cymbalista 2010, p. 291.
72 "elemento centrale dell'identità gesuitica," Colombo 2019, p. 54.

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the believer's empathy, to have them experience in their imagination all the savagery done" to Christ first of all, but in general to all those who died for their faith. All of this inspired empathy, consequently moving to compassion, conversion, and spiritual self-refinement.[73]

The empathic significance of martyrs in Japan, as interpreted by the Jesuits for European audiences, cannot be overstated. They served as a crucial link in the *continuum* of the Christian tradition, bridging the era of the Roman persecutions with the early modern period. By drawing parallels between the Japanese martyrs (regardless of their age) and those of the early Christian centuries in the Roman Empire, the Jesuits aimed to evoke a heated empathy among their flock. They encouraged readers, listeners, or viewers to intimately connect with the martyrs, sharing their pain and suffering, but also experiencing moments of joy, hope, and solidarity. Through these narratives, the Jesuits hoped to garner support for their daring missionary endeavors and the bold evangelization efforts in unfamiliar territories. Moreover, in such a frail missionary horizon like Japan, the "Japanese boys' voices […] expressed the religious fervor and suffering of the whole Japanese community,"[74] as Pia Joliffe remarked.

In the end, are we talking about real children or more about rhetoric constructs?

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73 And also, in line with the "philopassionism" which developed in medieval and then modern Christianity. From the 12th century on, the Passion narratives put more and more attention to Christ's physical suffering (Roodenburg 2014, p. 49).

74 Joliffe 2023, p. 223.

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