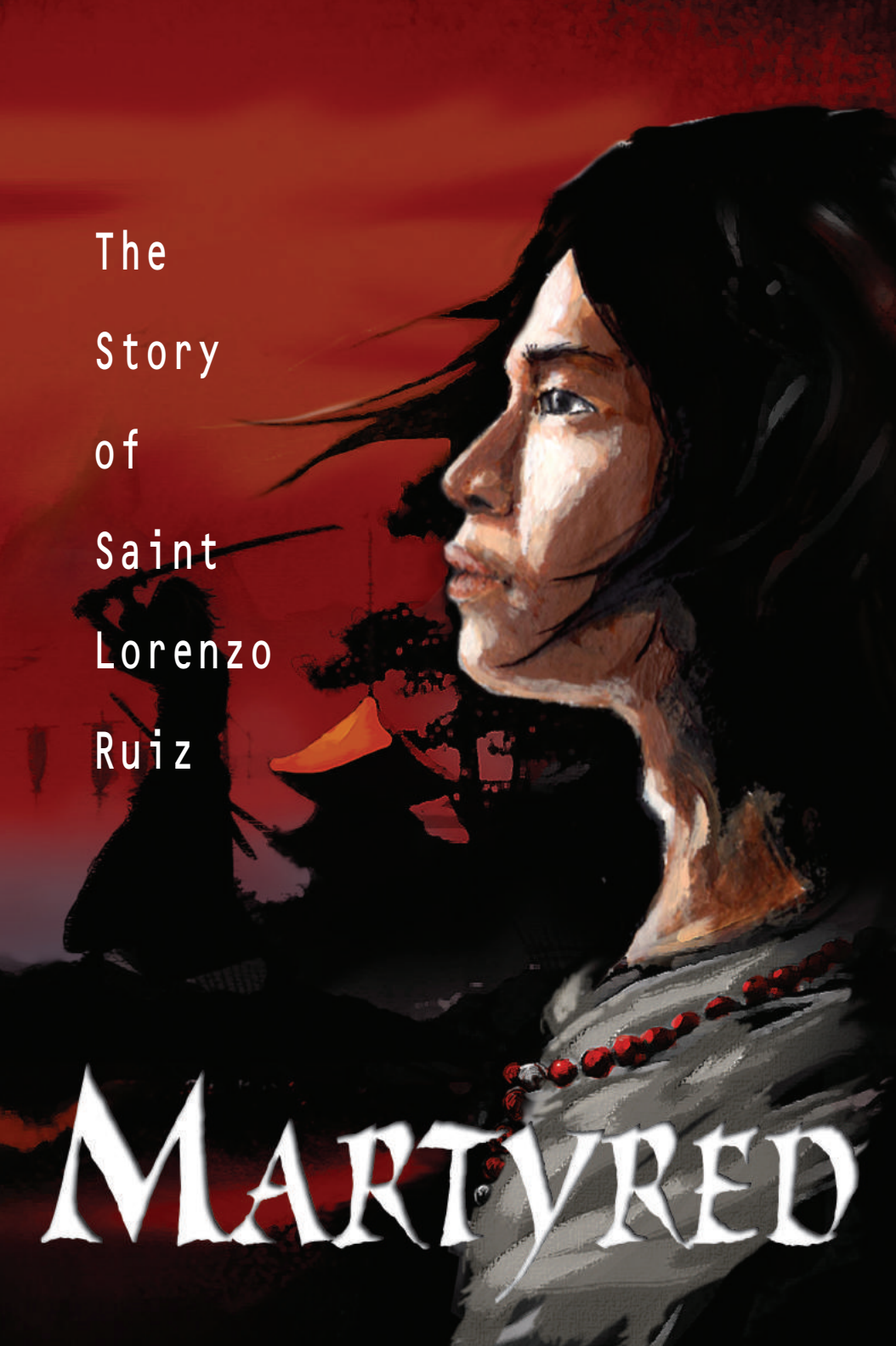
The
Story
of
Saint
Lorenzo
Ruiz
MARTYRED

Martyred

The Story of Saint Lorenzo Ruiz

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Do not invite death by the error of your life, or bring destruction by the works of your hands; because God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living.

—Wisdom 1:12–13

The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

—1 Corinthians 15:26

Prologue

Autumn arrived with an annual visitor to Nagasaki, a remote seaport hemmed in by steep mountains on the island of Kyushu in southwest Japan. Jomei stood, not as physically tall as he once was, but with great presence nonetheless. He very much anticipated his guest's arrival, though he was uncertain how long he could sustain this annual reunion. It was true that Jomei had been a samurai, but he was not as agile as the spirit that came to meet him in his old age. Yet Jomei anticipated this guest with increasing devotion, as one looks forward to a good friend's arrival from afar. Opening the door, his white hair caught the breeze as he bowed. "Lorenzo," he whispered.

Jomei's guest was, in truth, a ghost from long ago—outside of time and ageless. He was not unlike the spirits Jomei's ancestors had called to in their need. But this was no divinity or demigod, nor did he come with vengeance to punish Jomei. The spirit's presence was strangely one of comfort, even solace. Yet, friendship could never have grown between them when the man was alive. The doors to outsiders had long since slammed shut with the shogun's rigid policy of isolating Japan. And a tormentor and his victim are unlikely

companions. *There are things a man must live with and bear as a mark upon his soul.*

At one time Jomei might have put an end to his existence in *seppuku,*[1] death by a self-inflicted mortal wound with his own sword. It was a horrible but quick escape from life and its burdens. But such an end troubled him. *If this life is all there is—how could it be justified?* Still more the persistence of something he could not understand pursued him like an overpowering wave at sea as it plunges down on its poor victims. Jomei had lived honorably, beyond what any standard might have demanded of him. Yet there was a greatness he could not fully comprehend. He had glimpsed a freedom and height he could not successfully scale, a depth he could not wholly explore apart from the powerful force of his will to live. The hope of reaching it had cost Jomei something more than honor.

He carried in remarkable detail the memory of what had initially caused him shame. Yet gauging from the annual visits which came at the anniversary of his guest's execution, death seemed to be rendered harmless because it was without lasting victory. *Is death no more than a momentary sting? Perhaps for some.*

The circumstances of their meeting were too absurd to nurture any bond of brotherhood between them. Instead, Jomei and his visitor were bound by torture and rage. For a time they had shared a spot on the earth and their destinies were forever linked because of it. Throughout the 590 mile journey from Okinawa to Nagasaki, each of them made small decisions. But it was not as if either of them had a real choice in the matter. The outcome was predetermined, but how it played out was the result of a conscious decision to believe or not to believe, to die victorious or in defeat. Between Jomei and his guest, it was a matter of faith.

Lorenzo Ruiz had died in the execution of six men, all of them Catholics. They were led up a hill overlooking Nagasaki Bay and thrown into a well. Hung from their feet, their heads dangled above sharpened stakes, while their rotting flesh was invaded by feasting maggots. They perished through hemorrhage and asphyxiation. Lorenzo Ruiz was not the last to die. Still, it was Ruiz who made the most lasting impression in Jomei's mind because he was neither a cleric nor Japanese. He had died on a Wednesday thirty years before—September 29, 1637—three days after Jomei had ordered his men to slice gashes into their heads.

Jomei fulfilled the duty his position demanded of him. He had planned and ordered their torture and execution. Jomei could still see the iron stain and smell the metallic odor of blood in the execution pits. He could hear their groans rising amid the dampened walls. Their crime was absolutely clear. They were foreigners; and worse, Christians. But peace was something that had eluded him ever since.

And yet on the anniversary of his execution, the unseen guest arrived and lodged with Jomei in his home. The encounters were cordial and informal, like the reunion of two comrades swapping stories of past battles. They were also brief, all but concluding as soon as they commenced. Jomei was always left with the misery of wanting more. This only worsened the heavy burdens he carried in his mind and, more grievously, in his heart.

Jomei kept a list of their names. Believing he had committed an irreversible error, he made a daily ritual of reciting them for the thirty years that had passed. Among those he had killed, Lorenzo Ruiz was the only one who was married and the head of a family. Perhaps this was what troubled Jomei most. The others were European missionaries, Dominicans, traveling with a Japanese Christian convert and a priest.

Lorenzo had been given an opportunity to renounce his faith and return home to the Philippines. He refused. The courage he summoned seemed to make him indestructible. Jomei was as intrigued as he was perplexed. *What kind of Lord did these Christians serve? How does dying in disgrace bear witness to a Master's goodness? Why would anyone sing while he languished? Insanity.*

Jomei had, on several occasions, come to the conclusion that he would have to take his own life. *This is the accepted way of the warrior.* But as he planned to redeem nothing more than personal honor, Jomei could not fight off the idea that *seppuku* presented a kind of honor that was fleeting at best, gone before it had even come into full bloom. In contrast, Ruiz's martyrdom seemed to bear a kind of infinity within it, a mystical sacrifice that extended well beyond death.

Still, death is death is death. There is no beautiful way to die. Truly Ruiz and his companions were made to suffer until the last drops of their blood could be shed. Yet somehow it seemed to Jomei that the blood of a martyr, though red as a warrior's, was tinged by the color of sanctity. *Why?* It was said that the martyrs had offered their lives as a sacrifice for their executioners, for the salvation of their souls. *What kind of man loves his killers?*

It was proper that their remains be thrown out to the sea after they were cremated, Jomei thought. No foreigner must find a resting place in a land that the Japanese held sacred. And yet their lifeblood had soaked the earth beneath his feet, and made it fertile for the growth of something Jomei could not have foreseen.

"Not so soon, *otouto-san*, my young brother," the old man Jomei said. He motioned with his right hand for his guest to sit across from him. "Stay a moment longer."

Jomei had prepared his household for this foreign guest, though he never breathed the visitor's name to anyone, not even to those closest to him. Content with his company, Jomei took in with relish the sight of the nearly harvested field. The work was almost finished. He and his spirit friend stayed like this for a good length of time, comfortable in each other's presence. Any added exchange of conversation would have been proof to the contrary.

"Do you hear the kettle simmering?" he asked. Jomei would not have called attention to something so mundane had his visitor been Japanese. Before tea was served it was customary to wait for the quiet sound of water beginning to boil. "My granddaughter prepares us our tea."

Aiko was growing into a fine child. Slender, with wisps of fine blue-black hair framing her face, she was no more than eleven years old. Aiko usually stayed at home with her grandfather, who taught her calligraphy and reading when she was not occupied by chores. Until a year ago, when her grandmother Chiyo was still alive, lessons in the art of serving tea had taken up most of her afternoons.

The precision and elegance of such learning betrayed the plainness of their everyday existence. Aiko's parents farmed the land they now possessed. Jomei had first leased it from the feudal lord after he was released from his service as a samurai. In a rare gesture of goodwill—and to signal that there was no dishonor in relieving Jomei of his position—the *daimyo*[2] had rewarded Jomei with the property for his exemplary service. He had even extended an invitation to Jomei and his son, Ichiro, to maintain ties of service with his lordship. But Jomei resigned himself to a life of farming and to teaching what he could to his descendants, however long he might be given to live.

The old man ate a sweet rice cake and sipped from

one of the two cups Aiko had brought without his ever noticing her. His thoughts were otherwise engaged, and she kept a respectful distance.

Suddenly a shadow of sadness moved across Jomei's face. "Please do not say that you have found lodgings elsewhere," Jomei protested. Aware that one cannot restrain the movement of the spirit, he reconsidered and took a different tack. "Perhaps you will take me along on your journey, on the waters, across our sea," he said aloud. "Perhaps," Jomei mumbled to himself, then seemed to concede whatever his guest had said. The visit appeared to continue amicably for some time.

Whatever this strange visit really was, it was blatantly disobedient to the shogun's orders. No foreigners were allowed into the country; likewise no native Japanese were permitted to leave it. In Japan foreigners were barred from almost everywhere, beginning from its outer reaches. Nagasaki was the exception; it coddled foreigners—mostly traders—in its fine warm harbor.

The consensus was that the greatest danger foreigners brought to Japan had nothing to do with commerce or trade. It was their ideas and beliefs which, if left unchecked, could bring unwanted change to well-ordered Japanese society and the powerful men who ruled it. Portuguese missionaries had long been expelled. Those who remained in the interior had been summarily executed in the failed Shimabara rebellion, which had been largely blamed on Christians.

Even before that there had been waves of Christian persecution and extermination in Japan. The great *daimyo* Toyotomi Hideyoshi had outlawed the religion altogether in 1587, forty years after the Jesuit priest Francis Xavier first introduced Christianity to a small gathering of listeners in Kagoshima, also on the island of Kyushu. Succeeding

shoguns carried out the ban on Christianity to varying degrees. They did so believing the faith to be a weapon in the hands of foreigners who sought to influence Japan.

Small scattered settlements of Christian converts remained throughout Japan, but nowhere had Christians anchored their roots as deeply as they had in Nagasaki. Even traces of Christian faith were considered dangerous, however, and all its adherents had to be wiped out. This task was assigned to the *daimyos* and their military detachments of samurais. Ridding Japan of Christians did not come easily. Although a few left the country altogether, most never renounced their faith and were executed with gruesome practicality. Nevertheless, there were persistent rumors that a small number of Christians had gone into hiding, particularly in the Nagasaki district of Urakami. The *kakure kirishitan*, or "secret Christians," were referred to in low murmurs among the samurai, who once could have counted a few Christians among themselves.

"Sofu-san!" Aiko whispered to her *ojiisan*,[3] unaware of the unseen guest her grandfather had before him. "I am off to do the wash. Will you be all right here alone?" There was something about her grandfather's behavior that had troubled Aiko all morning. "Mother and Father will be here shortly," she assured him. "Can you manage, Sofu-san?"

On most mornings he was absorbed in his calligraphy, preferring to work without interruption while the rest of the household left him to his thoughts. Aiko was accustomed to being unnoticed whenever her grandfather took a brush in hand. Sometimes, he appeared almost as if he were praying. She excused herself with a low bow and left for the nearby stream. Camellia hedges bordered the house. It would be good to gather a few green branches for the family's ancestral shrine before their white blooms opened in late fall, she thought.

She had just departed when Jomei suddenly called out. "Aiko, Aiko!" The sound of his distress opened a cavern of fear in her heart. As she raced back to the house, the ball of clothes she had clutched under her arms fell forgotten onto the grass. The old man's face was peaceful when she approached him, as if he had just heard some important news he had long been awaiting.

"Aiko," Jomei said. The sound of his speech rose with much difficulty, "Get some water. Hurry, my child."

Lorenzo Ruiz

Chapter 1

Lorenzo dipped his brush pen in ink and marked the date on his calendar: Tuesday, June 10, 1636. It was the date he was to set sail from the Philippines. Lorenzo had already said goodbye to his three children and his beloved wife, Rosario. He had also asked both his Chinese and Filipino relatives to keep an eye on his family while he was gone.

"Do everything you can to keep Rosario from worrying," he pleaded. But Lorenzo suspected that only his safe return home would put her fears to rest.

Despite the rains and his sad departure, the family shared some early morning cheer: a cup of hot Chinese tea between husband and wife, and a rare treat of ground roasted cacao beans whipped with warmed carabao's[1] milk for the children. The thick aroma of the chocolate filled the room. The cacao beans had come as a gift from the Dominican friars, who had hefty bags of them imported from New Spain[2] in America half a world away.

Lorenzo had a good relationship with the Dominican missionaries. He often thanked God for the many opportunities and blessings that came his way through the Spanish friars. It was from them that Lorenzo and the rest of his

family learned about the faith. Moreover, because Lorenzo's penmanship was superb, the Dominicans also helped him develop the skills of a parish recorder—an *escríbano*. Working at the local parish office as a notary scribe, Lorenzo had been able to earn a decent living. And through the Dominicans' special love for the Blessed Virgin Mary, he became deeply devoted to praying the Rosary and was known as a dedicated member of the Confraternity of the Most Holy Rosary.

Looking back, Lorenzo reflected upon the fact that he had lived his whole life under the protection of the Church. Lorenzo was born in humble circumstances around the year 1600 (probably on August 10), of Catholic parents. At his Baptism they named him Lorenzo after Saint Lawrence, a deacon who was martyred in Rome in 258, at the height of early Christian persecution under the Roman emperor Valerian. He was roasted on a red-hot gridiron.

Lorenzo was educated at a Dominican school, but he also benefited from the combined knowledge of his parents, who drew from the richness of their own cultures and experiences. Lorenzo's Filipina mother taught him to speak the native language, Tagalog. His Chinese father taught him to speak Chinese and write in *kanji*, the difficult style of classical Chinese characters.

The summer monsoons had begun late this year. But on the morning of Lorenzo's departure from the Chinese quarter of Manila, it seemed as if the skies were eager to dump a deluge upon them. Not many of the usually numerous vendors moved their boats along the waterways in the torrential rain. But a kind vegetable merchant offered Lorenzo a ride to the wharf at the mouth of the Pásig River. Not once did he ask Lorenzo why he was in such a hurry to get there; nor did he suggest waiting for the rains to subside. The downpour provided an added curtain of safety for Lorenzo,

who was uneasy and on edge after the unexpected turn of events within the past weeks. He knew, however, that the rain would not be enough to shield him forever.

As the rains fell, Lorenzo's thoughts drifted back. Not long ago, his days had seemed completely secure. Lorenzo and his family lived in simple joy and breathed a faith that sustained them. Yet he also knew that life would never be trouble-free for a native Filipino under Spanish rule in his own homeland. Other Filipinos had not fared as well as Lorenzo had with the friars or the civil authorities. But those days of contentment felt an eternity away. Everything had changed the instant he had been falsely accused. *A murder?* It was so unjust he could hardly believe it had happened.

Everyone was talking about it: a brawl had broken out between a Spanish ship's mate and a fellow Spaniard. Both had been drinking heavily and the evening had deteriorated. They argued, then one of them pulled out his knife and plunged it into the gut of the other. The victim died on the scene. The other man had staggered away in a drunken haze and evaded capture from the authorities.

"Who will the Spanish arrest?" That was the question whispered on every street corner and in every home. The Spaniards who settled on the numerous Filipino islands numbered barely more than 1 percent of the population. In order for the Spanish to remain in control, they felt it was necessary to rule with an iron hand. Both settlers and natives knew what to expect when a crime was committed. If the victim was a Spaniard, someone *must* be made to answer for the crime. But if the authorities detained an ordinary Spanish drunkard, the execution by hanging would serve little purpose. To strengthen Spain's grip on the Philippines, the authorities felt it was important to punish a local now and then as a warning to everyone.

"Why not search for the real killer?" Lorenzo had suggested. Native witnesses, and the usual odd assortment of false informers and decoys, were hesitant to come forward when it came to testifying against a Spaniard. "Why make up charges against an innocent man?" he asked.

Perhaps it was the boldness of Lorenzo's suggestion, or the fact that it came from a native, that irritated the Spanish law enforcement officials in the city of Manila. With a sense of injured pride, a Spanish officer had been quick to suggest an alternative. "Why not arrest Lorenzo Ruiz as a suspect in the murder of the Spanish soldier? He associates closely with the Dominicans and is half Chinese." Most Spaniards distrusted the Chinese anyway. This fueled the charges against Lorenzo even more. He was, by their account, a particularly convenient scapegoat.

As he wondered about his decision to flee, Lorenzo realized it was the only choice he really had. *Prejudice*, Lorenzo thought, *creates its own criteria. If they can justify false charges, what will stop them from justifying an execution?*

The news spread rapidly. Immediately, the Dominican superior, Father Antonio Gonzales, suggested that Lorenzo leave with them for a religious mission in Japan. This would save his life. The ship was scheduled to make a stop at Formosa, the Portuguese name for Taiwan, where Lorenzo planned to remain. Though the journey would separate him from his family for a time, Lorenzo gratefully agreed. Being half Chinese, he could blend in, find work or a trade, and plan to move his family there in the near future. The separation was only temporary. It would end up being more of a relocation than an escape. In Manila, he was a dead man. It was only a matter of time.

"You only have one life, Lorenzo. We must make whatever sacrifices are necessary to save it. May God help

you begin a new life for all of us in Formosa," Rosario said, her voice trembling with emotion.

"And may he soon reunite our family," Lorenzo added, still not quite believing his present dilemma.

With God, nothing is impossible, he thought. Still, both of them suspected that this physical separation was only the beginning. There would be more struggle and sacrifice to come before the family would be reunited.

Rosario turned in prayer to the Blessed Mother, and appealed to Our Lady of Sorrows to strengthen, protect, and intercede for them. For now, she would have to raise their three children without her husband.

Falsely accused, troubled, and uncertain, Lorenzo offered a simple and straightforward prayer—one of trust. "Jesus, give me faith. You once said to your disciples that if any of them had faith the size of a tiny mustard seed, it would be enough to move mountains. My departure is a heavy cross for us to bear. Help us."

Help us to escape? Help us to fight back? No. What mattered increasingly to Lorenzo was what God willed, and not what Lorenzo himself wanted because of his fears. In his uneventful daily life he had seen it many times: carrying out God's will always brought about a greater good than achieving one's own desires. The difficulty was finding and discerning God's will. There was the obvious will of God, Lorenzo knew, that was found in the Ten Commandments he had learned as a child. But Lorenzo also knew that there is sometimes a greater calling: to give oneself totally to God, to reach true freedom by embracing God's will fully.

Lorenzo began to perceive that God was taking him to places he would rather not go. He did not *want* to leave his family, but Lorenzo also felt that God was leading him to take this step for the good of all. This brief boat ride, soaked in

monsoon rains, was just the first leg of the journey. Although it may have appeared insignificant to others, Lorenzo understood that his actions were a real sacrifice for both himself and his small family. Placed in the heart of God, every moment of this separation would have meaning and lasting value.

Squinting into the future, Lorenzo realized that he was on a path of sorrow, a *via dolorosa*—his way of the cross. His soul's inner regions of fear and oppression, pain and anxiety, desolation and darkness would culminate on his very own Mount Calvary. But with crucifixion would also come resurrection. The promise of liberation from death and of eternal life would be fulfilled in a decisive victory without end. He would then bring his family to Formosa and all would be well.

"No one can impose God's will on me," Lorenzo whispered to himself. "It is something I want to carry out freely, just as the Blessed Virgin did." *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you . . .* The beads of the rosary slipped through his fingers.

All this occupied Lorenzo's thoughts as the boat made its way to the Boca del Rio Pásig. Dressed in pantaloons and capped with a tattered sombrero, Lorenzo joined some native fishermen. They sailed past the Spanish garrison and across the bay to Cavite unnoticed; then the colossal galleon[3] berthed at the pier came into view.

A few dried-fish merchants helped load an array of foodstuff and provisions into the vessel's hold. It would have to provide enough supplies for the voyage across the passages of southern Luzon and into the treacherous Strait of San Bernardino. Some galleons, failing to make it beyond that to the Pacific, crashed instead against rock formations and splintered into wreckage. But if they reached the open sea, the ship would catch the trade winds and head north to Formosa. *This is my best chance for freedom,* thought Lorenzo.

At best, it would be another two weeks before Lorenzo would set foot on land again. But as he approached the ship, Lorenzo realized that he would have to find a way to board it undetected. Checkpoints had been set up to monitor the movement of natives. To the soldiers who manned them, Lorenzo was a wanted man on the run.