

The Parish of Saint Guillaume Courtet which brings together four village churches (Sérignan, Sauvian, Vendres and Valras) was established in 2003. Their patron saint assigned the parish with a missionary vocation. Parish phone + 33 (0) 467 321 243.
 URL : <https://www.paroisses-beziers-littoral.catholique.fr>
 The fruits of the testimony of Saint Guillaume and his companions did not expect all this to happen. In the second half of the nineteenth century, when Japan re-opened its doors after 250 years of isolation and intense persecution, new missionaries found that Christianity still existed, having been handed down throughout the generations and who still spoke about the gospel.



PRAYER

O Most Holy Trinity, we bless you for the admirable work through your grace Saint Guillaume Courtet and his companions rendered possible during their lives and heroic deaths.

Resolutely following Christ "right to the end" they wished to proclaim the true gospel by carrying the message of salvation to Japan.

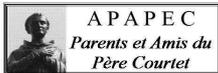
Neither persecution, prison nor torture did daunt them. They never retreated even with the promise of death in order to save the souls for which they had come

Courageously carrying the burden of the cross as Jesus had done, they spilled their blood for the love of God and the souls they wished to save. Guided by this generous example, we implore you O Most Holy Trinity, to help us stay faithful to the teachings of your church according to the gospel.

Our Lady of Grace and the Most Holy Rosary of whom Saint Guillaume Courtet and his companions loved and served so much, grant us the glory of God and give us the grace to be more like him and bravely follow in his path to Heaven. Amen.

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 Louis Boffet, Bishop of Montpellier

Translated from French by Michèle Bonhomme.

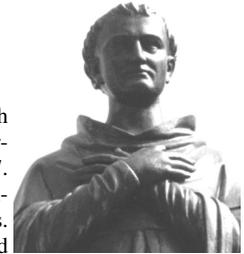


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**SAINT
 GUILLAUME COURTET**



A Missionary Vocation

When Guillaume Courtet was still a pupil with the Jesuits in Béziers, the first Christian martyrdom had just taken place in Nagasaki in 1597. Twenty six men, women and children were crucified after a long and arduous way of the Cross. And yet, Japan had welcomed the Word of God brought by Francis Xavier and others in the middle of the sixteenth century. About fifty years later, there were nearly 200,000 Christians and a Japanese clergy when the persecution started: among the 1597 martyrs, three were Jesuits and one was Japanese. Thirty years after the first martyrdom, Guillaume Courtet asked his superiors to allow him to follow the same route. Persecution was well established and omnipresent in Japan (the great burning at the stake of 1622). Shortly after there were no more priests and the surviving Christians transmitted their faith in secret.

Itinerary of a Preacher

After leaving Sérignan, (where he was born in 1589) and Béziers, Guillaume then continued his education in Toulouse. There he met Dominicans and their Prior: Sébastien Michaëlis, and he expressed his desire to enter their order. A year's noviciate in Albi ensued where his wish was confirmed on the 15th August 1608 at the age of eighteen. He was ordained a priest in his twenty-fourth year. His devoutness and intellectual capacities were quickly recognised and he was soon charged with responsibilities such as Master of Novices and teacher of Theology.

For many years, he lectured in Philosophy and Theology at Saint Maximin's and Toulouse. In 1624, he was elected prior of the large Priory in Avignon. Two years later the Order sent him on a delicate mission of reform to Northern Europe. At the end of this mission in 1628, he asked the superior of the Dominican Order to let him carry out his childhood vocation and *go where I have always wanted'risking sufferings to which I wish to be laid open to"* as he wrote in a letter to Paris on the 30th August 1628.

J. Guillaume Courtet F. A. T. S. P. J.

Around the World

His request was finally accepted, but he would have to change his nationality and congregation because only Portugal or Spain were authorised to send missionaries abroad. He arrived in Madrid in December 1628 at the Priory of Saint Thomas and took on the name of *Thomas de Santo Domingo*. He remained in Spain for five years before being authorised to travel to Manila (via Mexico).

At the University of Manila, as he had done in Madrid, he taught Theology. He was greatly recognised as a teacher and confessor. His ascetic life was contrasted with his caring attitude towards others, but the distress calls from the Japanese Christians deprived of their priests reached them in Manila via passing sailors. This hastened the departure of Guillaume Courtet and his five companions (one of whom was a layman fleeing Spanish justice) aboard a Chinese junk.

After an extremely dangerous month at sea, we later learned from the crew who returned the boat in Manila, that they landed on the Okinawa Islands on the 10th July 1636 in the middle of the night and donned Japanese clothing. That was the last news we were to receive for one year. So, just how long were they able to preach Christianity for until they were arrested by the police? A few hours? One or two months? What Christian testimony ensued during their year's imprisonment?

Supreme Testimony

Fourteen months after landing, Guillaume and his five companions were transferred from Okinawa to Nagasaki as ordered by the central constabulary. It was there that they were submitted to fourteen days of public torture. The idea was to make them reject their faith in front of the crowd which were thought to be largely Christians, particularly numerous in Nagasaki at that time. Over a hundred testimonials were written, mainly by sailors who described the torturing and cruelties in minute detail. Some even reported what they had heard the martyrs saying. One jailor who took pity on his unusual prisoners that spoke only of peace was amazed and asked: « *Why did you come to Japan knowing full well that you would be killed after such atrocious suffering?* » 'Guillaume however, on hearing this replied: « *Tell your judges that we did not come seeking neither death nor torture, our goal was to preach divine love for Christ. [.....] even if*

it costs us our lives.” Guillaume was among the last two surviving prisoners on the evening of the 29th September. Realising that they would not obtain their denial for Christ, the judges ordered their decapitation, then incineration and their ashes to be scattered on the sea to prevent the collection of relics.



An Example

The process of their Canonisation began a year after the martyrdom but faced administrative obstacles. However, the Sérignan community and members of his family honoured his memory as soon as his martyrdom was announced and have remained faithful over the centuries. Father Lacordaire wished to revive his cause and at the end of the nineteenth century it was to be Father Tarniquet, the parish priest of Sérignan at the time, who took over. Then another parish priest, Joseph Estournet, who was contacted by a young relative of Guillaume Courtet, founded the *Association of Friends and Relatives of Father Courtet*, in 1962. (APAPEC in French) and searched the planet for contacts of friends or family of Guillaume's fellow-martyrs and was to become the vice-postulator of the canonical cause. Guillaume Courtet and fifteen other missionaries martyred in Japan, five of whom were his initial travelling companions, were beatified in Manila in 1981 and canonised saints in Rome in 1987. Their liturgical feast is on the 28th September.

The St-Guillaume Courtet Centre established by the Diocese of Montpellier is situated next to the Sérignan Collegiate Church thanks to a legacy bequeathed by the late Father Joseph Estournet (1993). This small sanctuary boasts a showroom with documents and photos permanently on display and a room for archives and research. You can visit the website: www.saintguillaumecourtet.org. Email: apapec@wanadoo.fr or by phoning + 33 (0) 467 328 384 (please leave a message).