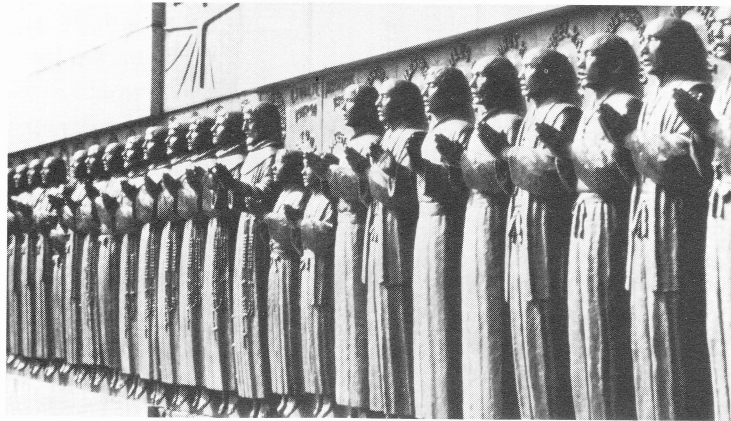


WORLD
encounter
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NAGASAKI



the city of martyrs

ON AUGUST 9, 1945, an American B-29 droned across the sky over the Japanese port city of Nagasaki. It was three days after the world's first atom bomb explosion in a populated area had devastated the city of Hiroshima.

Because of cloud cover, the bomber had to bypass its primary target, the city of Kokura. It also missed its secondary target, the Mitsubishi shipyards in Nagasaki.

Finally it dropped its atom bomb about a half a mile from the historic Urugami church, a red brick structure that stood on a small hill on the outskirts of Nagasaki. In seconds the church was destroyed and all the people inside were dead.

The bombing of Nagasaki inflicted a terrible loss on the church in Japan. At that time, the greatest concentration of the country's Roman Catholics lived in the

Nagasaki area, and at least 8,000 of them died in the atomic holocaust.

For the Christians of Nagasaki, it was one more sad chapter in a long history of misery and death suffered at the hands of their fellow human beings.

On Feb. 5, 1597, twenty Japanese Christians and six Spanish missionaries were crucified on a hill in Nagasaki, marking the outset of a harsh wave of religious persecution that brought death or exile to thousands of Japanese Christians. Christians around the world today (including users of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*) still commemorate the Martyrs of Japan on Feb. 5.

The old city of Nagasaki could be called the cradle of Christianity in Japan. There, in the mid-16th century, the first missionaries, Jesuit priests, mostly Portuguese, began their ministry to the Japanese.

At that time the country was going through a period of great political and social upheaval. With the support of one of the mighty generals of the day, Nobunaga Oda, the Jesuits were allowed to travel and preach. By the time he died in 1582, there were 150,000 Japanese Christians.

Nobunaga's successor, General Hideyoshi Toyotomi, at the outset continued the policy of support for missionaries and Christians.

In the 1580s, however, Spanish Franciscans also began to work in Japan. Hideyoshi viewed the competition between the trading powers with which these two missionary groups were associated with great suspicion. He also feared their strong religious allegiance, viewing it as a rival to his own power.

In 1587, Hideyoshi ordered the missionaries to leave, and they

refused. Hideyoshi feared rebellion by the oppressed farmers and village people for whom Christianity had great appeal. In 1596, persecution began in earnest. Christians—by then numbering at least 300,000—were forced to renounce their faith or die.

In the 40 years that followed the martyrdom of the 26 Christians in Nagasaki, Christians were persecuted with great severity. Many went underground and worshiped in secret.

Since they had no priests, villagers would choose one man to baptize and catechize. Outwardly, though, these Christian believers appeared to practice Buddhism. Many even kept statues of Buddha or the Buddhist goddess Kannon in their homes. The statues frequently wore crosses.

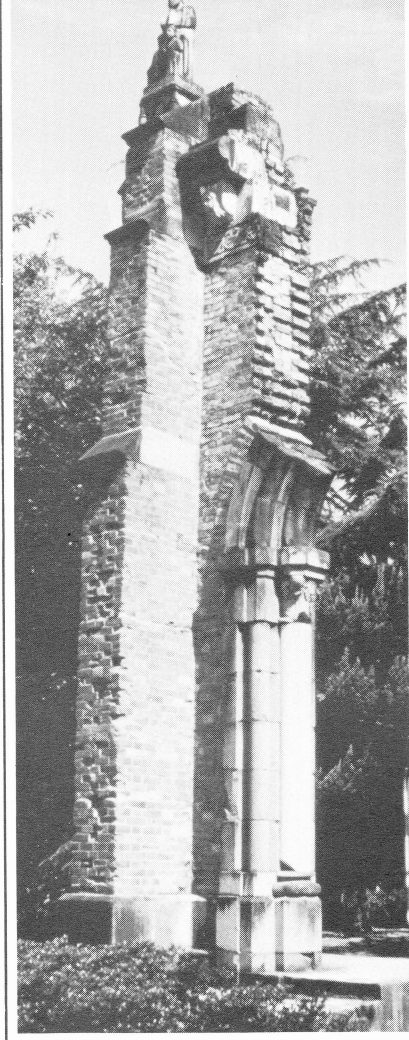
This went on for seven generations.

Hideyoshi had isolated Japan from the rest of the world in the 1590s as a means of tightening his control over the country and uniting it under his rule.

He recognized, however, that Japan, an island nation, needed to import some goods it could not produce, so he allowed the port of Nagasaki to remain open to receive shipments from abroad. At first the trade was mainly with China and other parts of Asia but, as time passed, some of the Western nations, especially the Netherlands, also sent ships.

In 1853 American naval ships led by Commodore Matthew Perry compelled the Japanese to reopen their country to trade with the West.

By 1864, Nagasaki had a large



Portion of the original Uragami Cathedral, destroyed by the atomic bomb, now stands in the peace park around the epicenter of the explosion.

population of Western Christians. Although Christianity was still prohibited among the Japanese, a Catholic priest, Father Petitjean, was allowed to build a cathedral in Nagasaki and minister to the many foreigners who lived there.

The priest knew that before the persecution began, there had been thousands of Japanese Christians. He felt that, although 250 years had passed, perhaps there were still some Christians in the area. He decided to search for them.

Wearing his conspicuous

cassock, Father Petitjean began to take long walks through Nagasaki and ride horseback in the area around the city.

In his effort to be noticed, he usually managed to fall off his horse. Invariably nearby Japanese would come to help him, and he would strike up a conversation. Sooner or later, he would ask, "Are there any Christians around here?" Invariably the answer would come, "No."

After Father Petitjean had been in Japan half a year, Nagasaki's Oura cathedral was completed. A week after its dedication, the priest was praying in the church when a group of Japanese farmers walked in. As he knelt in front of the altar, a woman from the group came up to him and whispered, "We are of the same faith as you. Where is the statue of St. Mary?"

Father Petitjean, happy and surprised, showed the farmers the statue of Mary holding the baby Jesus. This satisfied them that this was indeed the same faith to which they had clung secretly, desperately, for so many years.

The farmers were from the village of Uragami, in the hills north of Nagasaki. Soon Father Petitjean began to go out at night to worship with them in secret. As time passed, other Christian villages began to reveal themselves to the priest.

Since Christianity was still illegal, everything was done secretly, usually at night. By the end of the year, seven different pockets of Christians were known to the priest and he estimated the number of Japanese Christians at 20,000.

Still being careful to preserve

secrecy, Petitjean and another priest who had recently come to Nagasaki provided pastoral care for these underground Christians.

Petitjean prepared a catechism and a book of daily prayer, using the special Japanese terminology that had developed over the centuries of hiding. Soon so many people were involved in this ministry that it was becoming less and less clandestine.

Seeing their faith come alive again, the Christians realized that they could not continue to pretend to be Buddhists as their ancestors had done. The village of Uragami boldly asked the governor of Nagasaki to exempt them from using a Buddhist priest to conduct funeral services. The governor granted their request.

No retribution was made at that time, but the government was aware of renewed Christian activity. Finally, in July 1867, authorities raided Uragami at night and 64 Christians were arrested. Although these people were released after a few months, it marked the renewal of Christian persecution.

In time, 1500 were jailed and saw all their property confiscated. They were starved and tortured in an effort to get them to abandon their faith. Many were exiled to other areas of Japan. Still they held strong in their faith.

The government of Japan, meanwhile, in trying to establish diplomatic ties with the West, met an obstacle in its negotiations with the U.S. The Japanese delegation was informed by President Ulysses S. Grant that he could not sign a treaty with a country that was



Father Petitjean. During his ministry Nagasaki Roman Catholics came out into the open after hundreds of years of hiding.

flagrantly persecuting Christians.

Although the delegation protested that the president was addressing an internal matter, they took his message back to Tokyo. Even with this outside pressure, it was not until 1873 that the Anti-Christian Edict of 1614 was finally repealed and freedom of religion was granted.

In that last wave of persecution, 4,000 died of torture and starvation. But very few gave up their faith. When those who had been exiled returned to their homes, they

found that everything they owned had been destroyed. Houses and fields lay in waste.

But one woman wrote in her diary, "We have nothing earthly here, but we can now worship as Christians out in the open. We have the freedom to attend church in Nagasaki four kilometers away."

After enduring so much for their faith, the people of Uragami wanted to build their own house of worship. With their own labor, it took the villagers 30 years to erect their beautiful red brick church.

It is said to be built on the site of the home of the village headman where, in the days of persecution, people had to gather to declare themselves non-Christians or risk punishment.

This was the church that the atom bomb destroyed on Aug. 9, 1945. A remnant of it now stands in the Uragami peace park. In 1958 a new church was built of reinforced concrete. Last year, in preparation for the visit of Pope John Paul 2, it was covered with red bricks, making it look like the original building.

The faith of these Christians through persecution, torture, starvation, hiding, exile, and even the atomic bombing is incredible. The Holy Spirit has been at work in Japan in ways Westerners will never comprehend. Those hidden Christians who stayed steadfast for generations are like a city set on a hill. Their faith makes them seen by the world. □

The author is an LCA missionary who teaches English at a Japanese high school in Kumamoto.