

Martyrs of the Meiji Era

Robert M. Flynn, S.J.



This story took place a scant 120 years ago. It is a touching and an exciting story, and deserves to be better known. At the time of modern Japan's birth, 153 Nagasaki Christians were exiled to the mountain town of Tsuwano in western Japan. There, at the Pass of the Virgin, they suffered, and 36 of them died. The surviving leaders have left us an eyewitness account.

HIDDEN CHRISTIANS DISCOVERED

When the Tokugawa regime began to totter and Japan was pried open by Perry in 1854, Christianity was still outlawed. The stern edict of 240 years before was still in force, and no Japanese could be known as Christian under penalty of death.

Some of the foreign nations that established diplomatic relations with Japan-France, England, America,-petitioned the government to grant a place of worship for the families of foreign diplomats. This permission was granted, and so the first Catholic church was built by the French in 1865 at Oura (part of Nagasaki). Hundreds of Japanese curiously watched the construction of "the French temple"-but on the day of its solemn dedication none dared be seen near it.

About a month later, on March 17, 1865, took place the unforgettable incident. Fr. Petitjean, Paris Foreign Missioner, was at prayer in the darkened church, when a few Japanese slipped silently in. Their leader cautiously asked, "Do you pray to Santa Maria?" Father pointed to the statue of the Blessed Virgin. The visitors exchanged silent glances of satisfaction, and the leader said, "Father, we have the same heart as you."

They had come from Urakami, a section of Nagasaki on the other side of a spur of mountain. And they announced that there were many other hidden Christians like themselves!

The whole world has ever since wondered and been thrilled: these Christians, living under interdict and in the shadow of death, had kept the faith for 240 years--without a priest, without the sacraments, without a Bible! No page of Christian history can compare with this for fidelity and perseverance.

A PROBLEM

The whole Christian world was jubilant at the news of this discovery. But within Japan there was consternation--and a problem. What was the Japanese government to do with these Christians?



In a quandary, the governor of Nagasaki sent to Edo (later Tokyo) to ask for directions. In the meantime he had 68 Christians put into prison--July 15, 1867.

Under examination and torture in prison, 21 lapsed, 47 remaining firm in their faith. Other Christians were imprisoned, the number rising to 83. Some of them were put to such brutal torture that all weakened and apostatized by word if not by heart. All but one--an old farmer, Senemon Takagi. Senemon, foreseeing the coming persecution, had already sent his two sons to Malaysia, exhorting them to deepen their knowledge of their Faith and to come back to Japan as priests.

Urged by the examiners to follow all the others in their "conversion from Christ," he replied, "Before God and before the soul God gave me, that would be the greatest misfortune. I will follow God, whether I follow Him with 100 companions or must follow Him alone."

The chief examiner respected that devotedness and said, "I urge you no more. You have the spirit of a true samurai: to be loyal to one's lord to the last; if need be, alone. You may go home."

When Senemon returned, the others asked him how he had been able to endure the torments. "I knew I was not strong enough by myself, so I prayed to the Holy Spirit," he replied.

Soon the others who had weakened found strength in humble prayer. They went to the magistrate voluntarily and announced themselves as Christians once more. They were told to wait for the pending decision from Edo.

The tottering Tokugawa regime finally, after 264 years, collapsed. The last shogun retired in November 1867. The restoration of the Emperor to power was achieved. The Meiji Era officially began in December 1867.

The new government was immediately faced with the problem of the hidden Christians. The able young revolutionaries who achieved this restoration had skillfully revived the age-old traditional religion of Shinto (the Way of the Gods) as the basis of reverence for the Emperor, who was taught to be the descendant and representative of the gods. Even Buddhism lost government support, and Christianity remained as sternly proscribed as ever. Add to this a deep feeling of resentment at the intrusion of the foreigners, coupled with a desire to be modernized and accepted by the Western world. And now more and more hidden Christians began to emerge. The government was in a dilemma.

Two solutions were offered. One was: "The ban is still in force. Put all the Christians to the sword!" The other was a solution of tolerance, and was suggested by the Lord of Tsuwano, who was department chief of the Bureau of Religious Affairs. He said, "Let them be. Those few Nagasaki Christians are not worth sacrificing our reputation as a civilized people."

THE GOVERNMENT'S DECISION

The first of the suggested solutions was too drastic, but the government was not ready to admit the solution of tolerance, either. A compromise solution was then proposed; this, too, by a scholar from Tsuwano (a little but quite important town in the mountains of western Japan). He said, "Let us convert them to Shinto. It is the ancient religion of Japan and the foundation of our history. These Christians are poor farmers. If we teach them, I am sure we can persuade them."

So the government decided on this policy, and the "re-education" of those Nagasaki Christians began. They were gathered for a series of lectures aimed at persuading them to give up Christ and adopt Shinto.

The Christians listened respectfully to the talks) but adamantly refused to give up their faith. "We have kept this heart despite great hardships for two hundred and fifty years. Do you think that because of your talks we can betray our very hearts?"

DISPERSION TO TSUWANO

The next step was more drastic. It was decided that these recalcitrant Christians should be uprooted from their homes and dispersed throughout the country.

Eventually 3500 Christians were forced into exile. They were shipped in small groups to about 20 places in Japan: from Kagoshima on the southern tip of Kyushu to Nagoya (between Tokyo and Osaka). Little Tsuwano was assigned a group in spite of her smallness, because her ancient university was famous for its religious scholars.

On July 10, 1868, twenty-eight Christians (including Senemon Takagi and Junsaburo Moriyama) were exiled to Tsuwano, where they were confined in an abandoned temple (Korinji). There they were subjected to brainwashing, then to severe cutbacks in food and clothing. In the resulting weakness, six relapsed; but the others remained steadfast.

Persuasion failing, the authorities, led by a young administrator by the name of Morioka, turned to harsher methods. One of these was exposure in 3-foot cages.

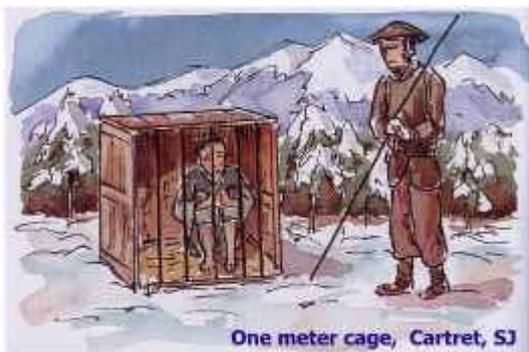
THE FIRST MARTYR

These infamous cages were solid boxes, 3 by 3, with one side barred. The prisoners were put into these and exposed on the mountainside to cold, hunger, and isolation.

One of the first to be confined in a 3-foot cage was 27-year-old Wasaburo. He was exposed for twenty days, until his strength failed and he died on October 9, 1868. He was the first martyr of Tsuwano.

YASUTARO AND OUR BLESSED LADY

In midwinter of that year Yasutaro, 30 years old, was placed in a 3-foot cage and subjected to brainwashing day and night for three full days. It was a fruitless task; he remained firm.



One meter cage, Cartret, SJ

The other Christians were concerned about him. Always quiet but cheerful and very generous, he used to share his meager rations with the others and take upon himself the most disagreeable chores. One freezing night, Senemon and Jinsaburo managed to cut their way out through the floor of the prison and sneaked out to encourage Yasutaro in his 3-foot cage. In spite of the midwinter mountain cold, he seemed to be as cheerful as ever.

"Aren't you lonely and freezing?" they asked.

"Oh no, no," he replied. "Almost every night a beautiful lady comes and speaks wonderful things to me. At times she stays until dawn. She is dressed in blue and looks just like the statue of Santa Maria in our Nagasaki church . . . But please say nothing of this while I am alive."

"Yasutaro, if we can ever contact your mother, what do you want us to tell her?"

"Please tell her that I am happy to die here. I am on the cross with our Lord Jesus."

Senemon and Jinsaburo slipped back into the temple to report to the other Christians, who were filled with joy and new courage at the strange and wonderful news. They thanked God for sending the Blessed Virgin to console them.

A week later, the two leaders sneaked out again--only to find the cage buried beneath deep snow and Yasutaro dead inside. It was January 22, 1869.

"THE PASS OF THE VIRGIN"

The temple-prison where these Christians were confined and near which these martyrs died was a short way up a mountain pass on the outskirts of Tsuwano. In Japanese it is called Otome Toge. In English: "The Pass of the Virgin. "

The story goes that hundreds of years ago the young daughter of a lord of this district was betrothed to a young prince in Kyoto and that he rebuffed her. In her desolation she wandered up this lonely pass and was never to be seen again. In her honor it was called the Pass of the Virgin.

The name, therefore, antedates the martyrdoms by centuries. But in view of the mysterious apparitions to Yasutaro, it seems to have been christened providentially "The Pass of the Virgin"--it is indeed an appropriate and beautiful name.



JINSABURO MORIYAMA

Jinsaburo Moriyama (Moriyama, the family name, would be given first in Japanese) was one of the leaders of the imprisoned Christians. The inquisitors, led by Morioka, constantly urged him to give up his Christian faith and to adore the ancestral sun-god. "We worship the sun that we see," said Morioka, "the sun that lights our way and makes the world bright. Why do you adore a god you cannot see? Give that foolishness up and follow the Way of the Gods."



After listening for hours to this sort of harangue, Jinsaburo said, "Sir, I'll try to explain. Suppose you are sent far out into the country on business. Your business over, you start on your way home, but the day is far spent and so soon it is quite dark. On the poor country road you cannot see three paces ahead. Suppose a farmer sees your plight, lights a lantern, and says, 'Here, use this lantern to light your way.' By the light of the lantern you arrive home safely. Sir, do you put the lantern on a pedestal and

offer it worshipful thanks? . . . Should you not rather thank the kind farmer who gave you the lantern? You tell me, sir, to worship the sun that lights our way. But we Christians offer our worshipful thanks to the God who made the sun and placed it in the sky to light our world. Him we worship and praise."

Morioka, incensed at the unanswerable logic of Jinsaburo's defense of his faith, ended the exchange promptly and threw him into prison again.

Further trials were in store on the morrow.

TRIAL BY ICE AND FIRE

The following day Senemon and Jinsaburo were summoned once more for a session of lecturing.

Now, near the temple-prison there was a pond. It may still be seen today, but 100 years ago it was about three times as large as it is now, the temple having since been torn down and the pond filled in.

That winter, as it had snowed steadily for more than a month, the pond was covered with snow and ice.

After the brainwashing session that day, Morioka had the two faithful leaders thrown into this icy pond. Shivering and gasping for breath, the two began to pray the "Our Father" and "My God, I offer Thee . . ." Their tormentors poured buckets of icy water on their heads. Finally, when the older man was on the point of dying, they pulled the two out by the hair with hooked poles. Then, with a mocking "You must be chilly," they held them over a fire. Later Jinsaburo was to say, "That ordeal by ice and fire was by far the worst of all."

Half-dead, they were put back into prison.

COMPANIONS IN EXILE

In the 3rd year of the Meiji Era (1870), the final dispersion of the Urakami Christians was effected. Men, women and children were forcibly exiled to different parts of the country. 125 were sent to Tsuwano to join those who had been sent two years before. Among them were Jinsaburo's elder sister, Matsu, and his younger brother, Yujiro.

To make room for the new group in the old temple-prison, Senemon and his companions were moved to a different prison. At this order Jinsaburo reasoned, "The authorities will probably tell the new arrivals that we have all apostatized and cause them to lose courage." So with spittle and charcoal he made some ink and wrote a note with a piece of bamboo: "We have not given up our faith in Christ. You, too, please be faithful." Then he hid the note in the latrine.

Sure enough, when the new exiles arrived, the authorities urged them, "The others have given up their faith and are now living comfortably. You will be wise to follow their example." That dismayed the others, until Matsu found Jinsaburo's note and their dismay turned into joy.

Each family was called in turn and examined. Hunger soon took its toll. Kiyojiro, a three year-old boy, was the first victim in the new group. He died on January 23, 1871. By November, 24 more had succumbed.

A STRUGGLE OF WILLS

We have mentioned the names of Morioka several times. The same age as the Christian Jinsaburo, this samurai had been commissioned to make the Christians in Tsuwano give up their faith. It was his first commission and he put into it all his energy. The acid test was to be the "conversion" of Jinsaburo-Jinsaburo, scion of a key family of Urakami Christians, with the responsibility of inherited leadership. These two, determined samurai and resolute Christian, were pitted against each other in a clash of wills that was to last five years.

Having failed to weaken his will in the ordeal by fire and water, Morioka probed for Jinsaburo's weak spot, and when the new group arrived, he thought he had found it: Jinsaburo's little brother, Yujiro, 14 years old. Morioka's direct attack on Jinsaburo having served only to strengthen the Christian's resolve, he decided to strike indirectly, taking advantage of the deep affection Jinsaburo had for his little brother.

Yujiro was afraid of pain. He used to say to his brother, "Please pray for me. If they start to torture me, I'm sure to give up Christ. I don't know how to suffer."

"Don't you worry. We'll all pray. You'll be all right, Yujiro. You will carry through," his brother encouraged him.



YUJIRO'S MARTYRDOM

One day at the beginning of November Morioka had Yujiro stripped and bound to a cross by the roadside. Villagers came, poked at him with bamboo sticks, made fun of him for being a Christian fool. "Now I share His sufferings," Yujiro boasted with a proud smile.

To every taunt and urging to "give up Christ," he bravely answered with only one word: "No!"

"Am I going to be beaten by such a little child?" thought Morioka. And so, after a day on the cross, he had Yujiro taken down for a different attempt.

This time Morioka had the boy kneel Zen-fashion on a rough veranda of bamboo slats. There, stripped and bound to a post, he was mercilessly whipped. Several times cries and groans escaped his lips, but his only answer was always "No!" Icy water from the pond was poured over him. Still "No!"

For two full weeks the lad endured the cold, the hunger, the lashes. Finally his body began to turn purple; the end seemed near. Morioka, however, did not want him to die. Moreover, (as he himself was to write years later), he began to hate himself for what he was doing: "What am I doing? Torturing a child! Am I a samurai? Am I a man?" So he handed the boy over to his big sister, Matsu, who tried to revive him with the warmth of her own body.

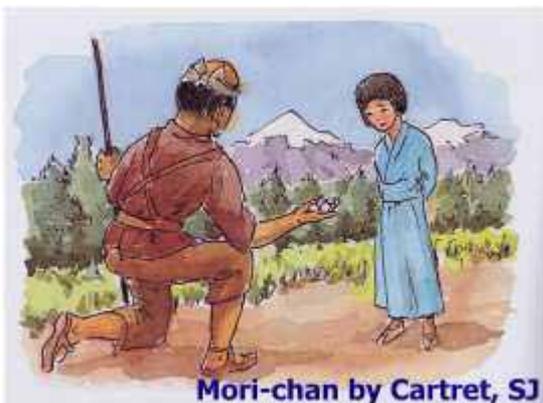
When Yujiro awoke in his sister's arms, he found her crying. He said to her, "Forgive me, sister. I did not mean to groan and cry, but I could not help it at first."

"That's all right. It must have been very terrible," said Matsu.

"At first it was," whispered Yujiro, "but on the eighth day, when I was praying with all my heart, I saw a little sparrow on the temple roof. It was crying, too, and then the mother sparrow came and fed it and it stopped crying. When I saw that, I knew God. I thought, 'If a mother sparrow takes care of her little bird, I know our Father in heaven must be taking care of me, and that Maria-sama will take me to heaven.' "

Then, as he grew weaker, he foretold the safe return of Matsu and Jinsaburo to Nagasaki. "Then you will take care of little children all your life--and you, elder brother, will give your first son to God as a priest." With this prophecy, the boy died--November 26.

LITTLE MORI



That year (1870) twenty-five died in the Pass of the Virgin. Among them was a little girl five years old. Her name was Mori.

Mori's mother was in a small warehouse prison right next to the main prison (on the very spot where the present Memorial Chapel now stands). In this prison the women and the children were confined, although the children were allowed to run around outside.

One morning Mori's mother looked out of the window to see what her little daughter was doing. She saw one of the jailers approach the child with sweet Japanese cookies in his hand. Showing the hungry child the sweets, he said, "Here, eat these. You are very hungry, aren't you? Say that you hate Christ, and you may have the cookies. Here, eat them."

"Oh, no. Then I cannot go to heaven. There are much sweeter cookies in heaven."

SOME WEAK ONES

The story of the weak ones must also be told. It is recorded that fifty-four of those Christians exiled to Tsuwano gave up their faith. It is true that in weakness from hunger or terror of torture they may have cried "I give up," but even then their "conversion" was not fully recognized: they were not allowed to go home. They had to stay in Tsuwano, where, however, they were given food and clothing and allowed to work in the town. They were ashamed both before the townspeople and before the other Christians.

With the money they earned they bought food and, though forbidden to do so, offered it to the other Christians. But these refused their offer, saying, "We can't eat the food of traitors to Christ."

Then the weak ones bowed their heads lower and said, "Please don't think of us. Please take the food. If you don't eat, you will die. Take it, and pray for us."

With this help many managed to survive.

RELEASE AND RETURN

The central government supporting the Emperor, which had adopted the compromise policy of "re-education" of the hidden believers, was not aware of the extreme measures being taken at Tsuwano. Foreign missionaries made representation and finally, in 1871, when the British vice-consul complained of the barbarity, an investigation was made and revealed the shameful facts.

Immediately a decree was issued ordering the release of the Christians. Meanwhile, however, eight more Christians, including four children, had died, bringing to thirty-six the number of the martyrs of the Pass of the Virgin.

When the decree came, food and clothing were given the Christians, and in 1872 the ones who had 'converted' were allowed to go back home. As they were ashamed to go, the faithful Christians wrote a letter to the priest for their relapsed brothers and sisters:

Father, please do not be harsh on these so-called traitors, for they have helped us all. Thanks to the food they gave to us, we were able to survive. Please hear their confessions and absolve them, we pray you.

The 54 went back to Nagasaki in May, bearing this letter of intercession.

The others had to stay on at Tsuwano, but the severe measures undertaken against them were relaxed, and finally, a year later (1873), all were sent home. Before they went, Morioka and the other officials invited Senemon and Jinsaburo to their home and offered them a festive dinners at Which they apologized for their cruelty and expressed their deep admiration for the rare exhibition of samurai-like loyalty to their lord Christ.

SOME FOOTNOTES

It remains to add some footnotes to our story of the Pass of the Virgin.

Yujiro's Prophecy. His elder brother and sister did return to Nagasaki. Matsu lived to be 98 years old and to the end of her life she devoted herself to the Christian education of the children in the Goto Islands, just off the coast. Jinsaburo's eldest son became a priest in the Nagasaki diocese, fulfilling the prophecy of his martyred uncle.



Senemon Takagi's Sons. Before the persecution broke out, Senemon had sent his two sons abroad, to a minor seminary in Malaysia. Later he received a letter in Tsuwano notifying him that his sons had safely arrived, but that one had fallen victim to a fever. In the letter (which still exists) the Father Director of the seminary urges them all to be Christians in their suffering. He asks them to offer up their sufferings in penance for their own sins and the sins of others, and never to hate those who were persecuting them. "You should pray for them. You should offer up your sufferings for those who cause you such pain."

When the descendants of the jailers read that letter recently, they said, "I never knew the Christian religion was so beautiful. I never knew."

Memorial Stones. Many years after the martyrdoms of the Pass of the Virgin, the Takagi family wished to honor their forefather Senemon and his companions. They cut 36 stones from their own mountains to be a frame for the nameplate of the martyrs in their common grave at Sennintsuka (in the valley neighboring the Pass of the Virgin). In 1974, when the mayor and the townspeople of Tsuwano learned of this plan, they came to the parish priest and said, "Father, we are going to take those stones on Our shoulders and carry them up to the grave. We want to do penance for the wrongs of our forefathers."

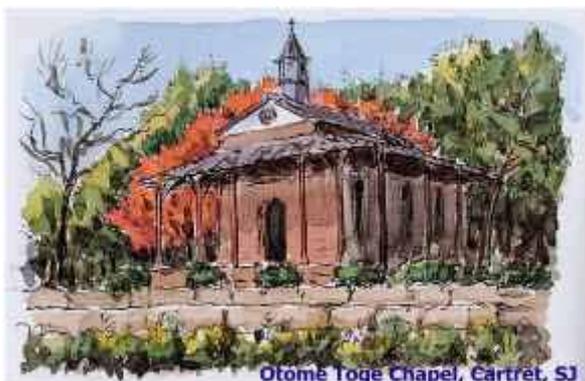
A Strange Meeting. In the summer of 1918 Jinsaburo, then an old man, received a letter from none other than the son of his persecutor, Morioka. He said that he had become a Christian and had entered a religious order, and that he wanted to meet

Jinsaburo at Tsuwano. He enclosed the train fare for the journey. When Jinsaburo came, they walked to the site of the temple-prison, and there Morioka knelt in the grass weeping and asking, "Please forgive my father for his sins."

Tears welled in Jinsaburo's eyes, too, as he embraced Morioka and said, "What a joy it is to see that you have become a Christian!" They knelt down together to thank God for His mysterious gifts of salvation.

Our Lady's Chapel. There has been a beautiful little church in the town since 1931. Actually, it is a replica of the "French temple" in Nagasaki, the Oura Tenshudo, which

has been declared a National Treasure. But it was not until 1951 that a chapel was finally built at the Pass of the Virgin.



Otome Toge Chapel, Carrret, SJ

The building of this chapel was the fulfillment of a dream of Father Nebel, S.J., who was pastor of the church for many years and who later took the Japanese name Yujiro Okazaki. In honor of the martyrs and of Maria-sama's motherly goodness, he erected the

Memorial Chapel of Mary at the site of the old Korinji temple, right in the Pass of the Virgin.

Every year since then, the Festival of the Pass of the Virgin (Otome Toge Matsuri) has been held on May 3. Thousands of pilgrims from all over Japan come to Tsuwano on that day and, together with the city officials, move in solemn but joyful procession through the town and up the valley to the Memorial Chapel, praising God for the glory of the martyrs and the guidance of our Blessed Lady.

THE STORY GOES ON

The present pastor, successor of Fr. Nebel in Tsuwano, has one of the smallest parishes in Japan, yet can claim to be perhaps the busiest priest in the country. Every day hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of visitors come to his church in town and up to the Pass of the Virgin, where he tells the story of the martyrs over and over, never losing his enthusiasm as he sees the light of interest and wonder in the eyes of his listeners.

One day a university professor came and told Father: "Father, I always bring my top students here. I am not a Christian, but I believe there is a message here for my students. As a professor at a famous university, I am a fortunate man; but as an educator, I often feel myself a zero: my students have good heads and good hearts, but when I ask them, 'What do you intend to do after graduation?' they just say, 'I don't know.' They have no vision of life-nothing to live for-nothing they would give their lives for. Here, at the Pass of the Virgin, they can listen and feel that just 100 years ago those country boys

from Nagasaki dedicated themselves in faith and now are honored throughout the world. I hope that here they will learn the meaning of dedication to a goal."

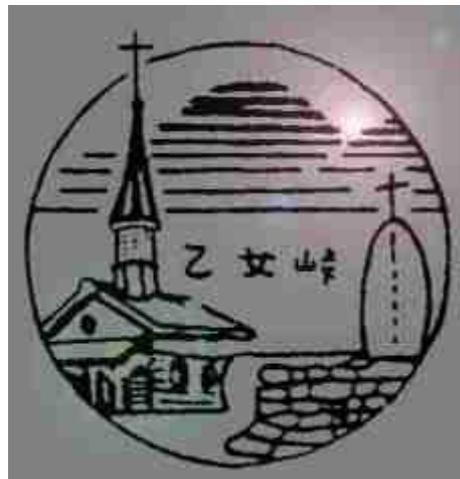
The pastor says, "I know from my own experience that, in most parishes in Japan, evangelization is very difficult, heart-breakingly discouraging. But not in Tsuwano. Here, from morning to evening people come and listen. They come here to listen to the story of the martyrs. Those martyrs were ordinary Japanese, just like anybody else. They were not highly educated; they were not converted after long study and struggle. They were simple souls, pure souls. Those people appeal very much to the present generation. Young mothers who listen to the story of the boy Yujiro remember their own sons and pray to Yujiro that their boy may grow up strong-hearted and true. Others think of five-year-old Mori-chan and pray for her help in raising their own little daughters. Here in Tsuwano the message gets across in a hundred simple and beautiful ways."

One autumn day a mother came. "Father, in the summer vacation I was here with my little son. We listened to your talk at the Pass of the Virgin. At the end of that month my son fell ill with a high fever. He was lying there and I was sitting at his side. Then he looked at me and said, "Mama, I don't have to worry."

"Of course, you don't have to worry. I'm here with you."

"Yes, Mama, I know I am safe. Because you are like the mother sparrow the Father in Tsuwano was talking about when we went there. So I don't have to worry."

She was so touched that as soon as her son recovered she came back to tell Father how the story of Yujiro and the sparrow had helped her son's recovery.



The magnificence of the mountain setting the fame of the ancient town with its literary heritage, its lanternd streets, its channels running with golden carp, the aura of the martyrs, the prayerful pageantry of the May festival: these have made Tsuwano and the Pass of the Virgin the subjects of many television programs and magazine articles in recent years. And this in turn has enticed increasing numbers of visitors to the town and the shrine.

The roof tiles have their own little secret. The roof leaking, all the tiles had to be replaced. So 1200 tiles were piled at the foot of the steep path, all ready to be carried up. Beside them were writing materials and a placard which said:

These tiles are for the roof of the chapel. If you would be so kind as to carry just one tile up to the chapel, you may use the writing materials to write your name on the back of the tile and become part of Maria-sama's chapel.

Within three days all the tiles were up at the chapel, with people busily writing their names and addresses on the back.

One young man was carrying two tiles. "You are very kind," Father said, "to carry two of them." The young man turned and pointed behind him: his girl friend was coming along. "One is for her," he said.

Later another was seen carrying three. "Has he two girl friends?" thought Father, and he said, "They must be heavy." "No, Father, not heavy at all. They are for the three of us," he answered and pointed to his pregnant young wife.

Letters upon letters come back from visitors. Many write that they are now studying to become Christians. Christians who had fallen away write that they have begun to go to church again. Many young couples come back to be married in Tsuwano, where their romance had found a new depth.

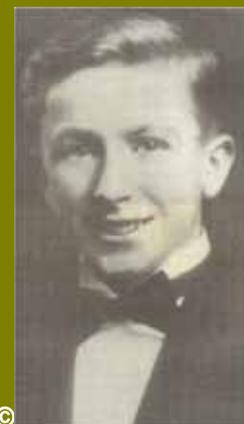
The story of the martyrs goes on.

Of course, the meaning of martyrdom escapes many. "Why did Christ not help these people?" is a question often asked.

That is a grace we need through the example and intercession of the martyrs: the grace to understand that He who said, "Greater love than this no man hath--that a man lay down his life for his friend," can give us no greater grace than the strength to give our lives in witness to our love for Him. That is the grace He gave to the martyrs of the Pass of the Virgin.

Blessed be His holy Name!

Fr. Robert M. Flynn, S.J., a Jesuit from USA, has spent many years in Japan as a missionary. He's widely known in Japan as the author of a series of English Language Textbooks, still used in more than 100 schools, having been reprinted more than 40 times! After his successful career as a language teacher in Jesuit high schools, he has taken up the challenging job of being a pastor at Tsuwano, where *Otome Toge* is. *Martyrs of the Meiji Era* (originally entitled *No Greater Love: The Story of the Martyrs at The Pass of the Virgin*) is one of the several booklets Fr. Flynn has written on the martyrs of the Meiji Era.



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