

A Tale from Nagasaki

Dermot Brangan, S.J. (2004)

About 15 miles northeast of Nagasaki is the town of Sotome. On Nov 3rd last—a national holiday in Japan—Fr. Renzo De Luca, the Jesuit superior in Nagasaki, and I went there on the invitation of the local priest. The occasion was the Baptism of a woman of 84 years. The day also coincided with the annual Karematsu Shrine Festival at which Catholics and "hidden Christians" gathered for prayer and singing. The woman about to be baptized had been a "hidden Christian" since childhood. Approaching Sotome we turned off the main highway and followed a narrow road climbing through wooded country. After a mile or so, we parked the car and walked along a narrow track into the forest until we came to a large clearing with the Karematsu Shrine in the middle. Some 200 people had gathered

At the beginning of Mass, the Parish Priest told how the catechumen had come to him saying that she wanted to spend the rest of her life in the Catholic Church. Having completed a course of instruction she was now ready for Baptism. Thus the lady was baptized, confirmed and received the Eucharist. For all her years, she was a sprightly, straight-backed woman and received the sacraments with joy and dignity.



Among the people present were Catholics, "hidden Christians" and 5 bonzes from different Buddhist sects in the area. Representing the "hidden Christians", a group of men and women presented their gifts of fruit, vegetables and *sake* ['rice wine'] which were laid before the Shrine. After the Mass an old man was helped up the steps to the area around the altar. This man

represented the "hidden Christians" and had come to pray in their name.

He began by saying that their religion had been handed down from generation to generation by his ancestors since the year 1670. I was close to him and could hear and understand what he said. Then he seated himself and began to read prayers that were handwritten on what looked like well-thumbed parchment sheets. It took me a few moments to understand that he was using a language I had never heard and, I am told, is quite unintelligible even for Japanese people. Allow me at this juncture to say something about the "hidden Christians" and their story.

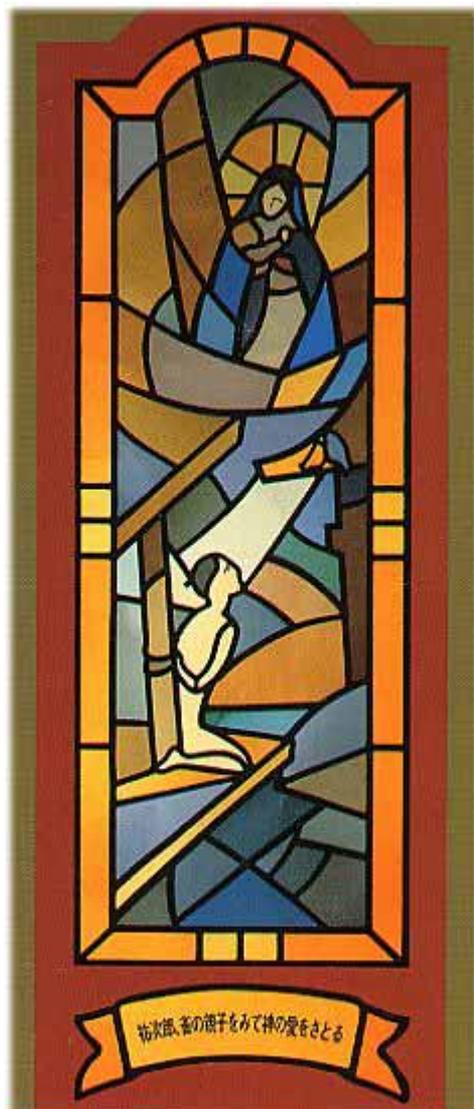
The mission in Japan began with the arrival of St. Francis Xavier and his companions on Aug.15th, 1549, in the port of Kagoshima on the southern coast of the island of Kyushu, which is the third largest of the four main islands of Japan. In spite of difficulties, the mission spread to many parts of Kyushu and the main island, Honshu. Then suddenly, in 1587, an edict banning Christianity was issued by the warlord Hideyoshi. But it was not really enforced until 1597, when 26 people were martyred in Nagasaki. In 1614 another edict was issued which ordered the immediate expulsion of all foreign missionaries from Japan, the destruction of Christian churches, and ordering all Japanese Christians to recant their Christianity and revert to Buddhism and Shintoism. The beginning of the "hidden Christians" dates from about this time. On Nov 6-7, 1614 three ships sailed from Nagasaki with the expelled missionaries on board. Two were bound for Macau and one for Manila. Some missionaries had evaded detection and remained behind.

Among them was the distinguished Jesuit, Padre Ferreira. He was finally captured and tortured. After enduring six hours of agony, he gave the signal for recantation (Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan*, P.353). Ferreira is a central figure in the novel *Silence*, by the late Endo Shusaku. Persecutions continued with growing ferocity. By the year 1639, what Christians there had been in Japan had either been martyred, had recanted, or had gone completely underground. Secrecy became part of being a Christian and Japan became a closed country. Somehow the Christians carried on. They baptized, held prayer meetings and offered prayers for their dead before the arrival of the Bonze from the local temple to conduct a Buddhist funeral service.

More than two centuries elapsed. In 1859 French missionaries began to return. A pact between France and Japan won for the French the right to have chaplains for their people in Japan and the right to build Churches so that they could practice their religion freely. In 1865 a church was blessed in Nagasaki and it was in that year in that church that one of the priests Pere Petitjean, was approached by a group of people who astonished him with their questions about the Pope and the whereabouts of the statue of "Santa Maria". The date, believe it or not, was March 17th. The remnants of the "hidden Christians" had surfaced. The news spread around the world. There was hope of



a mass return to the Church. A large number of the "hidden Christians" did receive Baptism. However, about half of them did not.



Glass window at the Tsuwano martyr's shrine.

The returned missionaries from Europe came from a church that was both defensive and authoritarian. They were also mindful of the Rites Controversy in China in the previous century and the papal statements which forbade missionaries to allow Chinese converts to practice their own rites. So it is not surprising that we find them forbidding the "hidden Christians" to keep their *butsudan* (Buddhist household altar) and *kamidana* (Shinto household altar) in their homes. The "hidden Christians", on their part felt, they were being faithful to what their ancestors had been taught by the first missionaries. They saw themselves neither as Buddhists nor Shintoists but rather as Christians.

After more than two centuries the divide between them and the new missionaries was vast. Perhaps a slower, more understanding approach by the French missionaries might have led to a different chain of events. Some see the "hidden Christians" as somewhere between orthodoxy and heterodoxy which brings to mind the words of the British prelate, William Wartburton, to Lord Sandwich: "Orthodoxy, my Lord... is my doxy. Heterodoxy is another man's doxy."

What is happening with the "hidden Christians" in our own day? They are declining in number. When a leader dies, if there is no one to replace him, their traditions are not handed on to the next generation and gradually they fade away. The young people move to the cities where the kind of life they led in their village is no longer possible. Conversions to Catholicism remain rare. The elderly lady about to be baptized is an exception. The way things are now, the estimated 15,000 "hidden Christians" will probably have dwindled to a few small pockets on the islands off Nagasaki or in some isolated areas in Kyushu within the next 50 years or so. Yet, theirs must remain among the most extraordinary stories in the history of the Church in recent centuries.

One of the bonzes had been asked to address the gathering. He was a burly man, comfortable with himself and at peace with the world. His talk seemed to be somewhat disconnected. But gradually I began to get his drift. Little by little he let us know that the

"hidden Christians" had long been known to the monks in his temple. The monks knew all the local people and sought to help them. Obviously there were "hidden Christians" among these people. The import of his talk was that the monks had helped the "hidden Christians" when times were bad. The language was veiled but I believe he was saying just that.

We had reached to final stage of the proceedings. A choir sang some hymns after which a brass ensemble played selections from Handel, Bach, Mozart and some Japanese pieces. Under a canopy of blue sky and surrounded by sylvan serenity we sat listening to the beautiful music until the time came to go home. It had been a memorable day.

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