

the closing of the Catholic churches, and the confinement in Nagasaki of all the remaining priests, both foreign and local.

In November of that same year, the priests and laymen who led the community were forced into exile. Kibe went first to Macao, and then to Rome.

He was ordained a priest on November 15, 1620, and after completing the novitiate in Lisbon, he made his first vows as a Jesuit on June 6, 1622.

He returned to Japan among the Catholics subjected to cruel persecution, and in 1639 he was captured in Sendai, together with two other priests. He was tortured for ten straight days, but refused to give in. And he was martyred in Edo, which is present-day Tokyo.

One of his 187 companions in martyrdom, most of whom were laymen, was Michael Kusurya, called the "good Samaritan of Nagasaki." He climbed the "hill of the martyrs," a little outside the city, singing psalms. He died, like many, tied to the stake and burned at a slow fire.

Another of the soon-to-be blessed was Nicholas Keian Fukunaga. He died after being thrown into a muddy well, where he prayed in a loud voice until the very end, asking forgiveness "for not having brought Christ to all the Japanese, beginning with the shogun."

Other martyrs were killed by being nailed to crosses or cut to pieces, with unheard-of cruelties that did not spare women or children. Apart from the killings, the Catholic community was decimated by the apostasies of those who renounced their faith out of fear. And yet, it was not wiped

out. Part of it went into hiding and kept the faith until the arrival, two centuries later, of a more liberal regime.

Last September, the diocese of Takamatsu dedicated a symposium to yet another of the 188 martyrs who will be beatified in 2008, the Jesuit Diego Ryosetsu Yuki, the descendent of a family of shoguns.

One of the speakers, professor Shinzo Kawamura from the Jesuits' Sophia University in Tokyo, showed that the undaunted strength with which so many Catholics at that time resisted torture and faced martyrdom came, in part, from the communitarian spirit with which they supported each other in the faith. They had modeled themselves to some extent on the Buddhist communities of Jodo Shinshu, of the Pure Land school. "The kumi, the communities of the kirisitan, were the terrain on which the 188 martyrs blossomed. The Church in Japan at that time was a true Church of the people."

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Nagasaki, the City of the Atomic Bomb – And of the Christian Martyrs

by Sandro Magister

There are 188 of them, from four centuries ago, and they will be beatified in one year. In the same city in which, on a single day in 1945, two thirds of the Catholics in Japan were killed. Was this a deliberate decision?



In the volume of Cardinal Giacomo Biffi's memoirs,* there is one passage, concerning Japan, that ends with an open question.

It is where Biffi recalls the strong impact he felt in 1945 from the news of the atomic bombs dropped by the United States on Hiroshima on August 6, and on Nagasaki on August 9.

He writes:

"I had already heard about Nagasaki. I had come across it repeatedly in the 'History manual of the Catholic missions' by Giuseppe Schmidlin, three volumes published in Milan in 1929. Nagasaki had produced the first substantial Catholic community in Japan, in the sixteenth century. In Nagasaki, on February 5, 1597, thirty-six martyrs (six missionary Franciscans, three Japanese Jesuits, and twenty-seven laymen) gave their lives for Christ. They were canonized by Pius IX in 1862. When the persecution was resumed in 1637, no fewer than thirty-five thousand Christians were killed. After this, the young community lived in the catacombs, so to speak, but it was not extinguished. In 1865, Fr. Petitjean discovered this 'clandestine Church', which revealed itself to him after it had verified that he was celibate, devoted to Mary, and obedient to the pope of Rome; thus the sacramental life could be resumed as normal. In 1889, complete religious freedom was proclaimed in Japan, and everything began flourishing again. On June 15, 1891, the diocese of Nagasaki was established canonically, and in 1927 it welcomed as its pastor Bishop Hayasaka, whom Pius XI himself had consecrated as the first Japanese bishop. It is from Schmidlin that we learn that in 1929, of the 94,096 Japanese Catholics, fully 63,698 were in Nagasaki."

Having established this, cardinal Biffi concludes with a disturbing question:

"We can certainly assume that the atomic bombs were not dropped at random. So the question is inevitable: why is it that for the second slaughter, out of all the

possibilities, that very city of Japan was chosen where Catholicism, apart from having its most glorious history, was also the most widespread and firmly established?"

In effect, among the victims of the atomic bomb in Nagasaki, two thirds of the small but vibrant Japanese Catholic community disappeared in a single day. It was a community that was nearly wiped out twice in three centuries.

In 1945, this was done through an act of war that was mysteriously focused on this city. Three centuries before, it was by a terrible persecution very similar to that of the Roman empire against the first Christians, with Nagasaki and its "hill of martyrs" again the epicenter.

And yet, the Japanese Catholic community was able to recover from both of these tragedies. After the persecution in the seventeenth century, Christians kept their faith alive by passing it on from parents to children for two centuries, in the absence of bishops, priests, and sacraments. It is recounted that on Good Friday of 1865, ten thousand of these "kakure kirisitan," hidden Christians, streamed from the villages and presented themselves in Nagasaki to the stunned missionaries who had just recently regained access to Japan.

And again after the second slaughter in Nagasaki, in 1945, the Catholic Church was reborn in Japan. The most recent official data, from 2004, estimate that there are a little more than half a million Japanese Catholics. They are few in relation to a population of 126 million. But they are respected and influential, thanks in part to

their solid network of schools and universities.

Moreover, if to the native Japanese are added the immigrants from other Asian countries, the number of Catholics doubles. A 2005 report from the commission for migrants of the bishops' conference calculates that the total number of Catholics recently passed one million, for the first time in the history of Japan.

This background sheds new light on a decree authorized by Benedict XVI on June 1, 2007: the beatification of 188 martyrs from Japan, who join the 42 saints and 395 blessed – all martyrs – already raised to the altars by previous popes.

The beatification – the first one ever held in Japan – will be celebrated on November 24, 2008, in Nagasaki, by the prefect of the congregation for the causes of saints, cardinal José Saraiva Martins, as the special envoy of Benedict XVI.

The 188 Japanese martyrs who will be beatified next year are classified in the documents of the canonical proceedings as "Father Kibe and his 187 companions." They were killed on account of their faith between 1603 and 1639.

Peter Kibe Kasui was born in 1587, the year in which the royal deputy in Nagasaki, the shogun Hideyoshi, released an edict ordering the foreign missionaries to leave the country. Ten years later, the persecutions began.

At that time, there were about 300 thousand Catholics in Japan, evangelized first by saint Francis Xavier and the Jesuits, and then by others including the Franciscans. In February of 1614, another edict imposed