A PILGRIM'S COMPANION TO THE LIVING FAITH OF JAPAN

JAPAN CATHOLIC PILGRIMAGE

Faith. Perseverance. Martyrdom. Hope.
A Story That Continues.



HISTORY • FAITH • PILGRIMAGE

SACRED PLACES • SAINTS • PRAYERS • REFLECTIONS

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Japan Catholic Pilgrimage

A Pilgrim's Companion to the Living Faith of Japan

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Japan Catholic Pilgrimage: A Pilgrim's Companion to the Living Faith of Japan

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Part I - The Gospel Comes to Japan

Chapter One

The Gospel Reaches Japan

The Beginning of an Extraordinary Story

Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature. - Mark 16:15

A Land at the Edge of the Known World When Europeans first looked toward Japan in the sixteenth century, they saw a mysterious archipelago at the far eastern edge of the known world. Sailors' tales spoke of a wealthy kingdom whose people prized honor, discipline, and learning. Merchants sought opportunities for trade, while missionaries dreamed of introducing the Christian faith to a civilization unlike any they had previously encountered.

Japan itself was in the midst of profound change. The country was not yet the unified nation we know today. It was divided among dozens of regional lords, or daimyo, each commanding his own lands and armies. This was the Sengoku Period, the Age of Warring States, a century of nearly constant conflict during which ambitious leaders competed for power.

Yet beneath this political instability lay a sophisticated society. Literacy was valued among the elite, cities were growing rapidly, and Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines formed the spiritual and cultural heart of everyday life. Tea ceremony, poetry, architecture, and military discipline flourished together. It was into this world that Christianity first arrived.

A Chance Meeting That Changed History The story of Catholicism in Japan did not begin with an emperor or a great military leader. It began with a refugee named Anjiro. Born in Kagoshima, Anjiro fled Japan after becoming involved in a violent incident and eventually arrived in Malacca, where he encountered a Jesuit missionary whose life would forever change Japanese history: Francis Xavier.

Anjiro was fascinated by Christianity. He studied the faith, received baptism, and convinced Xavier that the Japanese people would welcome the Gospel if it were presented with wisdom and respect. Through many conversations, he introduced the missionary to Japanese customs, beliefs, and language. Without Anjiro, Xavier might never have traveled to Japan. Without Xavier, the history of Japanese Christianity would have unfolded very differently.

St. Francis Xavier Francis Xavier was born in 1506 in the Kingdom of Navarre. While studying at the University of Paris, he met

Ignatius of Loyola, whose vision would lead to the founding of the Society of Jesus. Xavier's missionary journeys carried him across India, Sri Lanka, the Malay Peninsula, and the Spice Islands. Everywhere he went, he preached, baptized, established schools, and encouraged local Christian communities.

When Anjiro spoke of Japan, Xavier sensed a unique opportunity. Japan was a civilization with a highly developed intellectual tradition. If Christianity could take root there, it might transform the future of East Asia. With characteristic courage, Xavier decided to go.

Arrival at Kagoshima On August 15, 1549, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Xavier landed at Kagoshima together with Fathers Cosme de Torres and Juan Fernandez, accompanied by Anjiro. For Catholics, the date has long held symbolic significance: the missionary journey to Japan began under the patronage of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Xavier immediately recognized that Japan required a different approach. He studied the language, observed local customs, met Buddhist monks, and sought audiences with political leaders. He wrote that the Japanese were among the finest peoples he had encountered, a striking compliment from a man who had traveled farther than almost any European of his age.

Learning Before Teaching One of Xavier's greatest strengths was his willingness to learn. Rather than assuming European customs were superior, he sought to understand Japanese society on its own terms. He carefully adapted his preaching so that educated Japanese audiences could understand Christian teaching within their own philosophical traditions. This humility helped open doors that might otherwise have remained closed.

The First Converts The Gospel spread gradually. Some listened politely and declined. Others were intrigued by Christian teaching about one God, forgiveness, eternal life, and the dignity of every human person. Within months, small Christian communities began to appear. Many of the earliest converts were merchants, fishermen, craftsmen, and members of local samurai families.

Nagasaki: A Christian City As Christianity spread across Kyushu, Nagasaki gradually emerged as its principal center. Originally a modest fishing village, Nagasaki grew rapidly after becoming a center of Portuguese trade. Christian daimyo welcomed both

merchants and missionaries. Churches multiplied, hospitals were established, seminaries educated future priests, and printing presses produced catechisms and devotional works in Japanese.

Pilgrim Reflection As we begin our journey through Japan, we remember that the Gospel first arrived not through political power or military force, but through friendship, humility, and patient dialogue. Francis Xavier came not to conquer a nation but to serve its people. Pilgrimage begins with an open heart.

Pilgrim Prayer Lord Jesus Christ, You called St. Francis Xavier to leave his homeland and carry the Gospel to the people of Japan. Grant us the same missionary spirit - one marked not by pride, but by humility; not by fear, but by trust; not by ambition, but by love. Amen.

The Golden Age of Christianity

When Japan Almost Became a Christian Nation

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. - Luke 10:2

A Seed Begins to Grow When Francis Xavier departed Japan in 1551, he left a small and fragile mission. Yet he sensed that the Gospel had found fertile soil. The Japanese people asked difficult questions, valued reason, and expected missionaries to demonstrate integrity before accepting their teaching.

The Jesuits Continue the Mission After Xavier's departure, Jesuits such as Cosme de Torres, Juan Fernandez, Luis Frois, and Alessandro Valignano continued the work. Valignano became especially influential because he insisted that missionaries respect Japanese culture. Christianity did not require people to become European; it required them to become disciples of Christ.

A Church Takes Root The growth of Christianity surprised everyone. Village after village embraced the faith. Merchants carried Christian teaching from port to port. Local catechists instructed families. Japanese converts became missionaries to their own people. By the 1580s, hundreds of churches and chapels served communities across western Japan.

The Christian Daimyo Several powerful daimyo accepted baptism. Their motives varied, but historical records reveal genuine religious conviction alongside political and commercial concerns. Omura Sumitada's conversion transformed the future of Nagasaki. Arima Harunobu's territory also became a center of Catholic life. These Christian rulers did not merely tolerate the Church; they encouraged its growth.

Nagasaki Becomes the Christian Capital No city symbolizes the Golden Age more than Nagasaki. Portuguese merchant ships

arrived carrying silk, spices, books, scientific instruments, and missionaries. Church towers rose above the harbor. Schools and seminaries educated Japanese youth. Hospitals cared for the sick. Processions filled the streets. To many observers, Nagasaki seemed destined to become the Christian capital of East Asia.

Schools, Seminaries, and Learning The Jesuits understood that the future of the Church depended upon education. Schools were established for children from Christian families. Seminaries prepared young Japanese men for the priesthood. Students learned Latin, philosophy, music, theology, astronomy, mathematics, and classical literature. Printing technology introduced by the Jesuits produced some of the earliest books printed in Japan using movable type.

The Tensho Embassy In 1582, four young Japanese Christians traveled to Europe as representatives of Japan's Christian communities. They visited Portugal, Spain, and Italy, and were received by Pope Gregory XIII. Europeans marveled that young men from distant Japan spoke elegant Latin and represented a sophisticated Christian culture. One member, Juliao Nakaura, later returned to Japan, endured persecution, and died as a martyr.

Clouds on the Horizon Even during years of extraordinary growth, danger quietly gathered. Japan's political landscape was changing. Powerful warlords sought to reunify the nation after generations of civil war. Some rulers welcomed trade; others feared foreign influence. Rumors spread that missionaries could prepare the way for European conquest. The Golden Age was nearing its end.

Pilgrim Reflection Religious freedom is a precious gift. The Christians of sixteenth-century Japan could scarcely imagine that persecution would soon sweep across their communities. Their story invites us to receive every season of peace with gratitude and humility.

Pilgrim Prayer Heavenly Father, we thank You for the missionaries, catechists, families, and faithful believers who planted the seeds of Christianity throughout Japan. May their zeal inspire us to proclaim

the Gospel with wisdom, humility, and charity. Amen.

Chapter Three

The Sword and the Cross

Why Christianity Was Outlawed in Japan

If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you. - John 15:18

A Church at Its Zenith By the late sixteenth century, Christianity in Japan had reached a remarkable height. Churches stood throughout Kyushu, Christian daimyo governed prosperous domains, Jesuit colleges educated future priests, and Nagasaki had become one of the most vibrant Christian cities in Asia. Yet within a generation, everything would change.

A Nation in Search of Unity For more than a century, Japan had been torn apart by civil war. Toyotomi Hideyoshi rose from humble origins to become the most powerful man in the country, determined to restore stability. Anything that threatened national unity attracted his attention. Christianity increasingly became one of those concerns.

The Portuguese Connection Christianity had never arrived alone. It came alongside Portuguese merchants, whose ships brought silk, firearms, medicines, clocks, books, and luxury goods. To many Japanese rulers, European merchants, missionaries, and political influence appeared inseparable. Hideyoshi began to ask whether foreign missionaries could become a threat to domestic authority.

Lessons from the Philippines Japan's leaders knew that Spain had conquered the Philippines. Missionaries had arrived, trade had expanded, and Spanish political control soon followed. Whether such a pattern truly threatened Japan remains debated, but political leaders govern according to perceived risks. For Hideyoshi, even the possibility was unacceptable.

Christianity and Loyalty Christianity proclaimed ultimate loyalty to God. For Christian theology, this did not abolish obedience to

legitimate government. Yet for rulers attempting to unify a fractured country, allegiance to a foreign spiritual authority appeared dangerous. Buddhist institutions also viewed Christianity as a threat. Religious rivalry became entangled with political concern.

The Edict of 1587 In 1587, Hideyoshi issued the first nationwide order restricting Christianity. Missionaries were instructed to leave Japan. The decree was not immediately enforced with total severity, because Portuguese trade remained valuable, but the age of full openness had ended.

The San Felipe Incident In 1596, the Spanish ship San Felipe ran aground on the Japanese coast. Statements attributed to its crew appeared to confirm Japanese fears that missionaries could prepare countries for conquest. Whether accurately translated or misunderstood, these remarks helped convince Hideyoshi to act. Within months, twenty-six Christians were arrested.

A Turning Point in History The prohibition of Christianity emerged from a complex combination of national reunification, fear of foreign domination, international politics, economic interests, religious rivalry, and misunderstanding. Ordinary Christians rarely understood these forces. They simply desired to follow Christ, and it would soon become extraordinarily costly to do so.

Pilgrim Reflection Every generation encounters moments when faith demands courage. The question is often whether we will remain faithful in ordinary but difficult ways: speaking the truth, forgiving an enemy, living with integrity, and choosing compassion over convenience.

Pilgrim Prayer Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen us when following You becomes difficult. Give us wisdom when we face misunderstanding and courage when faith demands sacrifice. Amen.

The Twenty-Six Martyrs of Nagasaki

The Road to Nishizaka Hill

Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. - Revelation 2:10

The First Martyrs of Japan On February 5, 1597, twenty-six Christians were led to Nishizaka Hill overlooking Nagasaki Harbor. Foreign missionaries and Japanese believers, priests and laymen, adults and children forgave their executioners, proclaimed their faith, and surrendered their lives. Their deaths marked the beginning of more than two centuries of persecution and planted seeds that would never disappear.

The Order Following the San Felipe Incident, Toyotomi Hideyoshi decided to make an example of Christianity. Six Franciscan missionaries, three Japanese Jesuits, and seventeen Japanese lay Catholics were arrested. Their only crime was professing the Christian faith.

A Diverse Company The group included Spanish Franciscans, Mexican missionaries, Japanese priests, catechists, artisans, carpenters, physicians, former samurai, and children. Some had spent years preaching; others had only recently embraced Christianity. All shared one conviction: Jesus Christ was worth more than life itself.

The Youngest Witnesses Three of the martyrs were boys. St. Louis Ibaraki was only twelve years old. St. Anthony Dainan was thirteen. Their presence among the condemned was meant to frighten Christian families; instead, they became beloved witnesses to courage and joy.

The Long Road The prisoners were forced to walk nearly one thousand kilometers through the winter countryside. The journey was intended to humiliate them publicly. Each prisoner's left ear, or

part of it, was cut as a mark of disgrace. Yet the martyrs prayed, sang hymns, and encouraged one another. Far from silencing Christianity, the procession became a traveling sermon.

Paul Miki Among the prisoners was Paul Miki, the first Japanese Jesuit widely known as a preacher. Born into a samurai family, he possessed extraordinary gifts as an orator. From his cross he forgave those responsible for his death and proclaimed the Gospel to the crowd.

Nishizaka Hill On Nishizaka Hill, twenty-six crosses had already been erected. The condemned were tied to them and executed by lances. Their deaths astonished observers. There was no bitterness, hatred, or plea for revenge, only forgiveness and faith.

Legacy and Canonization The authorities believed the executions would destroy Christianity. Instead, the story spread throughout Japan and Europe. The Twenty-Six Martyrs were canonized by Pope Pius IX in 1862. Today the museum and monument on Nishizaka Hill preserve their memory for pilgrims from every continent.

Pilgrim Reflection Most Christians are not called to die for their faith. All Christians are called to live for it. The courage of the martyrs asks us how we will respond when Christ asks something difficult of us.

Prayer Heavenly Father, You strengthened the Twenty-Six Martyrs of Japan to remain faithful even in the face of death. Grant us a share in their courage. Amen.

Part II - The Hidden Church

The Great Persecution

When an Entire Church Went Underground

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; persecuted, but not forsaken. - 2 Corinthians 4:8-9

After Nishizaka The execution of the Twenty-Six Martyrs did not immediately destroy Christianity. Missionaries remained active in several regions, and Christian daimyo continued to protect their people where possible. Some hoped the executions had been only a warning. They were mistaken.

Tokugawa Ieyasu Tokugawa Ieyasu established a government that would rule Japan for more than 260 years. His greatest achievement was ending civil war and creating stability. But peace required unity, and anything that appeared to divide the nation became suspect. Christianity, with its foreign connections and spiritual obedience to Rome, increasingly seemed to do that.

Christianity Is Forbidden The Edict of 1614 ordered the expulsion of missionaries, destruction of churches, closure of Christian schools, and suppression of worship. Sacred images were destroyed, books confiscated, seminaries closed, and the visible Church disappeared almost overnight.

The Choice Every Christian now faced a personal decision: remain faithful and risk imprisonment, exile, torture, or death, or publicly renounce the faith to protect family and livelihood. Officials identified Christian households, neighbors reported suspicious activity, and entire villages came under investigation.

The Fumi-e Each year, officials placed on the ground an image of Christ or the Blessed Virgin and required suspected Christians to step upon it. Some refused and suffered. Others, terrified for their families, stepped while weeping. The story of Japan's Christians is

therefore not only a story of heroic martyrdom; it is also a story of mercy.

Torture and Apostasy Authorities often sought not execution but public apostasy. Among the most infamous methods was ana-tsurushi, the pit, in which prisoners were suspended upside down to prolong suffering. Some endured to death; others renounced under unbearable torment. The Church mourned them but also prayed for them.

Families Become the Church By the 1630s, almost every foreign missionary had been expelled, imprisoned, or executed. No priests remained. No churches remained. Yet the government could not erase memory. Fathers and mothers taught prayers. Grandparents preserved feast days. Baptism continued. The home became the parish.

A Church Without Priests There could be no Mass, Eucharist, Confession, Confirmation, or ordinations. The Hidden Christians understood these losses deeply, yet believed Christ had not abandoned them. They waited for the return of priests for generations.

Pilgrim Reflection If every church building disappeared tomorrow, would the faith still live in our homes? The Christians of Japan remind us that the Church is built not only of stone but of faithful hearts.

Prayer Lord Jesus, You remained with Your people even when they could no longer gather openly. Bless every home where Your name is spoken in prayer. Amen.

The Hidden Christians

Faith Kept Alive in Silence (1614-1865)

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. - Matthew 6:21

The Church That Refused to Die When the last missionaries disappeared from Japan, officials believed Christianity had been extinguished. Yet beneath the surface of everyday life - in fishing villages, remote islands, and mountain hamlets - the faith continued to live. For 250 years Japanese Catholics preserved their faith without priests, churches, or contact with Rome.

A Church Without Clergy For Catholics, the priest is central to sacramental life. The Hidden Christians had no Mass, Eucharist, Confession, Confirmation, or new priests. It would have been reasonable to expect the faith to disappear in one generation. Instead, families became guardians of tradition.

The Family Becomes the Church Evenings were moments of quiet instruction. Doors were closed, windows covered, and children learned prayers whispered by grandparents. Stories of Jesus, Mary, and the saints were passed down. The home became the parish, and the family altar became the sanctuary.

The Gift of Baptism One sacrament remained possible: Baptism. Special members of each community, often called Mizukata, memorized the baptismal formula and ensured that every newborn child entered the Christian family. Through Baptism, the Church continued to grow.

Prayers Remembered by Heart Without books, faith depended upon memory. Latin prayers changed as they were passed orally through generations, yet the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Apostles' Creed survived as sacred treasures.

The Calendar of Hope The Hidden Christians remembered the rhythm of the Christian year: Christmas, Holy Week, Easter, the Assumption, All Saints. Certain families kept the calendar and announced periods of fasting and prayer. Time itself became an expression of faith.

Maria Kannon To officials, a Maria Kannon statue appeared to be a Buddhist image of Kannon. To Christian families, it represented the Blessed Virgin Mary. Hidden within familiar imagery, believers continued honoring Mary without attracting suspicion. Faith learned to speak quietly.

Secret Communities Important communities survived in Sotome, the Goto Islands, Ikitsuki, Hirado, and Kuroshima. Each developed local customs, yet all shared the hope that one day priests would return.

Waiting for Rome Perhaps the most astonishing feature of the Hidden Christians was patience. Parents told children, 'Someday, the priests will come back.' For more than ten generations, hope became an inheritance.

Pilgrim Reflection If my faith depended only on what I carried in my heart, how strong would it be?

Prayer Heavenly Father, thank You for those who preserved the Gospel through centuries of silence. Strengthen our families to become places where faith is lived and handed on. Amen.

Chapter Seven

The Miracle of Oura Church

Our Hearts Are the Same as Yours

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. - John 1:5

A New Beginning For more than two and a half centuries, Japan's Hidden Christians waited. Then, in 1865, Japan began reopening to the outside world. French missionaries returned to Nagasaki, including Father Bernard-Thadee Petitjean of the Paris Foreign Missions Society. He had no expectation of finding Christians. Everyone believed they had disappeared.

Building Oura Church In 1864, French missionaries completed a small Gothic church overlooking Nagasaki Harbor. Dedicated to the Twenty-Six Martyrs, it was built primarily for the foreign community. No one expected local Japanese to visit.

An Unexpected Visitor On March 17, 1865, Father Petitjean noticed a small group of villagers approaching the church. They entered quietly and looked around the sanctuary. One woman stepped closer and whispered, 'Our hearts are the same as yours.' The sentence lasted only seconds, but its significance would echo through Christian history.

Three Questions The visitors had preserved three signs by which the true Church could be recognized. They asked where the statue of Holy Mary was, whether the priest was married, and whether he obeyed the Pope in Rome. When Petitjean answered, they knew the priests had returned.

We Are the Same The villagers revealed that they belonged to Christian families whose ancestors had preserved the faith through generations of persecution. Father Petitjean was overwhelmed. He had come to Japan believing he would build a new Church. Instead, he discovered that the Church had never died.

News Reaches Rome The story quickly spread. Pope Pius IX reportedly described it as the Miracle of the Orient. Few moments in Church history compare with it: a community had survived for more than 250 years without priests, churches, sacraments, or contact with Rome.

Thousands Come Forward Within weeks more villagers appeared. Entire communities revealed themselves. Some brought family genealogies, others hidden devotional objects. Missionaries realized Christianity had survived across much of western Japan.

The Last Persecution The rediscovery did not immediately end suffering. Beginning in 1868, many Hidden Christians, especially from Urakami, were arrested and exiled. Only in 1873 was the prohibition against Christianity finally lifted.

Oura Church Today Modern pilgrims entering Oura Church discover a modest building with immense spiritual significance. Here, an elderly Japanese woman spoke words that changed history. Here, the Church discovered that it had never truly disappeared from Japan.

Pilgrim Reflection God's silence is not God's absence. The Hidden Christians waited for more than ten generations; their hope was not disappointed.

Prayer Faithful God, strengthen our patience and deepen our hope. Help us trust that Your promises are fulfilled in Your time. Amen.

Part III - Rebuilding the Church

Freedom Restored

Rebuilding the Church After 250 Years (1873-1945)

See, I am making all things new. - Revelation 21:5

The Dawn of a New Era On February 24, 1873, Japan removed the public notices prohibiting Christianity. For the Hidden Christians, everything changed. At last, they could worship openly. The long night had ended, yet freedom brought new challenges: what did it mean to become a public Church again after centuries in hiding?

Emerging Into the Light Families who had preserved their faith through generations gathered openly for prayer. Missionaries baptized, blessed marriages, taught children, and rang bells publicly for worship. Villages that had hidden their identity began building churches. These buildings were declarations that faith had survived.

Not Everyone Returned Not every Hidden Christian community reunited with the Catholic Church. Some traditions had developed differently in isolation. The Hanare Kirishitan, or separated Christians, continued customs inherited from the persecution era. Their existence reminds us that history is rarely simple.

Building Again Most parishioners were fishermen or farmers, yet each family contributed what it could. Some donated timber, others carried stone. Women prepared meals and children helped at construction sites. Building a church became the work of the entire community and an act of thanksgiving.

Yosuke Tetsukawa No name is more closely associated with this period than Yosuke Tetsukawa, born in the Goto Islands in 1879. A carpenter by training and a master craftsman by genius, he designed or supervised many of Nagasaki's most beautiful churches and is widely regarded as the greatest church builder in Japanese

history.

Architecture of Faith Tetsukawa did not simply copy European churches. His churches combined Romanesque and Gothic forms with Japanese craftsmanship. They feel both Catholic and unmistakably Japanese, reflecting a Gospel rooted in Japanese soil.

Tabira, Kuroshima, and Kashiragashima Tabira Church, completed in 1918, stands high above the Hirado Strait and represents a visible triumph of faith once forced into silence. Kuroshima Church rises above an island community descended from Hidden Christians. Kashiragashima Church, built of local sandstone, harmonizes with its coastal landscape and bears witness to communities that moved from hidden prayer to public worship.

Before the Storm By the 1930s, Catholic communities were firmly established. Seminaries educated Japanese priests; sisters opened schools and hospitals; parishes flourished. It seemed that a new chapter had begun. Then came war.

Pilgrim Reflection The descendants of the Hidden Christians did not build churches merely to celebrate architecture. They built them to express gratitude. What monuments of gratitude are we building in our own lives?

Prayer Faithful God, after centuries of darkness You brought Your people into light. Teach us to become builders of faith, hope, and peace. Amen.

St. Maximilian Kolbe

The Missionary Who Chose Nagasaki

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. - John 15:13

A New Chapter Begins By the twentieth century, Japan was modernizing rapidly. The Church faced new challenges, and a new generation of missionaries had to present the Gospel to a changing nation. Among them was a young Polish Franciscan whose life would forever link Japan and Poland: Maximilian Maria Kolbe.

A Boy with Two Crowns Raymond Kolbe was born in 1894 in Poland. As a child, he had a profound spiritual experience of Mary offering him two crowns: white for purity and red for martyrdom. He accepted both. This moment shaped his entire life.

Becoming Maximilian Entering the Franciscan Order, he received the name Maximilian. He studied in Rome and founded the Militia Immaculatae, a movement dedicated to bringing people to Christ through the intercession of Mary. He dreamed of using modern communication - magazines, printing, radio - for evangelization.

Arrival in Nagasaki Kolbe reached Nagasaki on April 24, 1930. He spoke no Japanese, had little money, and few contacts. Within weeks he and several companions began studying, praying, visiting families, and publishing Catholic literature in Japanese. Kolbe believed books could travel where missionaries could not.

Mugenzai no Sono Kolbe chose a hillside location many considered impractical for his monastery, the Garden of the Immaculate. His decision would later appear providential. From this quiet hillside, friars published books, taught the faith, and served Nagasaki.

Printing the Gospel Kolbe's missionary strategy was modern and bold. The monastery published magazines, devotional books,

catechisms, and educational materials. Printing presses worked tirelessly. The written word entered homes before missionaries could.

Auschwitz After returning to Poland in 1936, Kolbe faced the Second World War. Arrested by the Nazis, he was imprisoned at Auschwitz. In 1941, when ten men were sentenced to death by starvation, Kolbe volunteered to take the place of a husband and father. He prayed with the condemned until he was killed by lethal injection on August 14.

The Miracle of Nagasaki On August 9, 1945, the atomic bomb devastated Nagasaki. Urakami Cathedral lay in ruins, yet Kolbe's hillside monastery survived, shielded by the mountain. Many believers later regarded his choice of location as an act of providence.

Visiting Hongochi Pilgrims visiting Hongochi Church and the Franciscan grounds walk where Kolbe prayed, celebrated Mass, and planned the evangelization of Japan. The site includes the memorial chapel, Lourdes Grotto, museum, and mission grounds.

Pilgrim Reflection Kolbe's greatest sermon was not printed in a magazine. It was spoken through one act: 'I wish to take his place.' True holiness is revealed in extraordinary love.

Prayer Lord Jesus, You filled St. Maximilian Kolbe with heroic charity. Teach us to proclaim the Gospel not only with words but with our lives. Amen.

Urakami Cathedral

From Hidden Faith to Resurrection

I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live. - John 11:25

The Soul of Catholic Japan If one church can be called the spiritual heart of Catholic Japan, it is Urakami Cathedral. It tells the entire story: hidden faith, persecution, exile, forgiveness, destruction, and resurrection.

The Valley of the Hidden Christians Long before the cathedral existed, Urakami Valley was one of Japan's strongest Christian communities. For more than 250 years, the people of Urakami baptized children, whispered prayers, and waited for the return of priests.

Freedom, Then Exile When Hidden Christians were rediscovered in 1865, many came from Urakami. Their joy was short-lived. Beginning in 1868, more than 3,000 Catholics from Urakami were arrested and deported throughout Japan. This Fourth Urakami Persecution was the final great persecution of Japanese Christians.

Building a Cathedral After the ban was lifted, survivors returned home and dreamed of building a cathedral worthy of their faith. The parish was poor, but families contributed coins, timber, bricks, and labor for more than thirty years. The project became a labor of love shared by the entire community.

The Largest Cathedral in East Asia Completed in 1925, Urakami Cathedral's twin brick towers rose above Nagasaki. It was the largest Catholic cathedral in East Asia. For descendants of the Hidden Christians, every brick proclaimed, 'We are still here.'

August 9, 1945 At 11:02 a.m., the atomic bomb exploded over Nagasaki, about 500 meters from the cathedral. The building was

almost completely destroyed, and many worshippers, priests, and religious sisters lost their lives. The Catholic heart of Japan had been struck.

The Bombed Virgin Among the ruins, rescuers discovered a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, her face scarred by heat and shattered glass. The Bombed Virgin has become one of the most recognizable religious images associated with the atomic bombing. Though wounded, she remained standing.

Rebuilding Again The people of Urakami had rebuilt once after persecution. Now they rebuilt after war. In 1959, a new cathedral rose on the same sacred ground, proclaiming that death never has the final word.

Forgiveness and Peace St. John Paul II visited Nagasaki in 1981 and called upon the world to reject war. Urakami's response to tragedy has never been revenge but forgiveness, mercy, reconciliation, and hope.

Pilgrim Reflection Every Christian carries wounds. Urakami reminds us that Christ's Resurrection is not merely a historical event; it is God's promise that healing remains possible after unimaginable loss.

Prayer God of Mercy and Peace, grant eternal rest to all who died in war. Heal the wounds of our world and make us instruments of reconciliation. Amen.

Part IV - Pilgrims of Hope

Our Lady of Akita

Mary's Call to Hope in a Troubled World

Do whatever He tells you. - John 2:5

The Mountain of Silence The pilgrimage turns north toward a place unlike any other in Japan: a quiet convent surrounded by forests and gardens. This is Seitai Hoshikai, the Institute of the Handmaids of the Holy Eucharist, known throughout the Catholic world as the home of Our Lady of Akita.

A Small Convent Founded in 1969 by Bishop John Shojiro Ito, the community dedicated itself to Eucharistic adoration, prayer, and service. Nothing suggested that this secluded community would one day become known around the world.

Sister Agnes Sasagawa Sister Agnes Katsuko Sasagawa, born in 1931, had already experienced serious illness and hearing loss before entering the community. She sought no public attention. She simply wished to dedicate her life to Christ.

The Wound and the Messages In 1973, Sister Agnes noticed a cross-shaped wound on her hand, and the Mother Superior observed a similar wound on a wooden statue of Mary. Sister Agnes later reported messages calling for prayer, conversion, fidelity to Christ, Eucharistic devotion, sacrifice, and trust in God's mercy. These themes echo the Gospel itself.

The Weeping Statue Between 1975 and 1981, the statue reportedly wept on 101 occasions. Witnesses included priests, sisters, medical professionals, scientists, journalists, and pilgrims. Scientific analysis described the moisture as human tears, but could not explain the cause.

The Church Investigates The Church approaches private revelation with prudence. Bishop Ito supervised a careful investigation, asking

whether the events were consistent with Catholic teaching and bore spiritual fruit. In 1984, he judged them worthy of belief and permitted public veneration within his diocese.

The Heart of Akita Pilgrims often arrive expecting dramatic stories and leave speaking of silence. The greatest gift of Akita is the atmosphere of prayer. Mary points not to herself but to Christ, especially in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist The Hidden Christians longed for the Eucharist but could not receive it for more than 250 years. At Akita, pilgrims kneel before the Blessed Sacrament and realize how precious that gift is. The pilgrimage comes full circle.

Pilgrim Reflection The greatest miracle is not what we see. It is how our hearts are changed.

Prayer Holy Mary, Mother of God, teach us to love the Eucharist, strengthen us when faith becomes difficult, and lead us always to your Son. Our Lady of Akita, pray for us. Amen.

Pilgrims of Hope

Bringing Japan’s Faith Home

Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road? - Luke 24:32

Every Pilgrimage Has Two Journeys The first journey is measured in miles: passports, luggage, maps, churches, villages, and holy places. The second journey begins after we return home. A true pilgrimage does not end at the airport; it begins again in daily life.

What Japan Teaches Rome teaches the Church's universality. The Holy Land teaches the earthly life of Christ. Lourdes teaches hope. Fatima teaches conversion. Japan teaches perseverance. Few places reveal more clearly what faith looks like when everything else is taken away.

The Faith of Ordinary People Most heroes in this story were not bishops or theologians. They were fishermen, mothers, children, farmers, grandparents, carpenters, and teachers. They changed history not through fame, but through ordinary faithfulness.

The Universal Church The language changes, the architecture changes, and customs change, but the Mass does not. The Eucharist received in Nagasaki is the same Eucharist received in Dallas, Vancouver, Sydney, Warsaw, Manila, Nairobi, Sao Paulo, and Rome.

Learning from the Hidden Christians The Hidden Christians lived without many things Catholics sometimes take for granted. No parish bulletins, Catholic schools, retreats, conferences, internet, religious bookstores, or Sunday Mass. Yet they never forgot Christ. They teach us that the Church begins at home.

Becoming Witnesses We cannot remain on the mountain forever. The disciples returned from the Transfiguration; the apostles left

the Upper Room; the pilgrims of Emmaus returned to Jerusalem. We return home as witnesses, perhaps through greater patience, generous forgiveness, faithful prayer, and renewed parish life.

Living the Pilgrimage Continue the pilgrimage by praying together as a family, reading Scripture, attending Mass, spending time before the Blessed Sacrament, praying the Rosary, forgiving someone, visiting the lonely, and encouraging the young in faith. Simple acts, faithfully repeated, become the continuation of the pilgrimage.

Prayer for the Journey Home Heavenly Father, thank You for the churches we have visited, the saints who inspired us, the martyrs who strengthened us, and the Hidden Christians who humbled us. Help us carry these gifts home. Amen.

Final Blessing May St. Francis Xavier guide your missionary spirit. May the Twenty-Six Martyrs strengthen your courage. May the Hidden Christians teach you perseverance. May St. Maximilian Kolbe inspire your charity. May the faithful of Urakami show you forgiveness. May Our Lady of Akita lead you to her Son. Amen.

Walking the Pilgrimage

A Spiritual Companion for Every Church

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. - Psalm 119:105

A Different Way of Traveling There is a difference between a tourist and a pilgrim. A tourist asks, 'What can I see?' A pilgrim asks, 'What is God showing me?' A tourist collects photographs; a pilgrim collects grace. This book invites you not only to learn the story of Catholic Japan but to become part of it.

Preparing Before Each Visit Whenever possible, arrive at each church a few minutes early. Walk slowly. Silence your phone. Leave conversations outside. Remember that you are entering sacred ground. For many of these churches, generations sacrificed so that Mass could once again be celebrated within their walls.

Holy Water If holy water is available, make the Sign of the Cross slowly and remember your Baptism. The Hidden Christians preserved Baptism for more than 250 years. Pray: Lord, renew within me the grace of my Baptism.

Prayer Before Entering a Church Lord Jesus, You have called me to this holy place. Open my eyes that I may see Your presence. Open my ears that I may hear Your voice. Open my heart that I may receive Your grace. Amen.

Inside the Church Do not rush. Even if time is limited, take one full minute of silence. Tabira speaks of hope. Shimabara speaks of courage. Hongochi speaks of charity. Urakami speaks of forgiveness. Akita speaks of trust. Allow each church to teach you.

If Mass Is Being Celebrated Remember that you are a guest. Japanese Catholics generally pray quietly, bow reverently, and avoid unnecessary movement. If you do not understand Japanese, pray with your heart. The Eucharist speaks every language.

Lighting a Candle When candles are available, light one intentionally and offer a specific intention: your family, parish, someone sick, someone who has died, or someone who no longer believes. Then leave the intention with God.

Journaling After each church, ask: What moved me? What surprised me? What challenged me? Where did I experience God's presence? Write only a few sentences. Years later, they will be your greatest souvenir.

Questions for Reflection Tabira: What am I building for future generations? Shimabara: How do I respond to suffering? Hongochi: Who needs my generosity? Urakami: Who do I need to forgive? Hiroshima: How can I become a peacemaker? Osaka: What attachments prevent me from following Christ completely? Fujiyoshida: How can I practice the Little Way? St. Ignatius: How can I strengthen my parish community? Asakusa: How can I share faith naturally? Akita: Where is God inviting me to trust more deeply?

Final Pilgrim Prayer Lord Jesus Christ, thank You for walking beside me throughout this pilgrimage. May the courage of the martyrs become my courage. May the faith of the Hidden Christians become my faith. May the charity of St. Maximilian Kolbe become my charity. May the peace of Urakami become my peace. May the trust of Our Lady of Akita become my trust. Amen.

Appendices

Timeline of Japanese Catholic History

1549 - St. Francis Xavier arrives in Kagoshima.

1563 - Omura Sumitada is baptized.

1582 - The Tensho Embassy departs for Europe.

1587 - Toyotomi Hideyoshi issues restrictions against Christianity.

1597 - The Twenty-Six Martyrs are executed at Nagasaki.

1614 - Tokugawa edict forbids Christianity.

1637-1638 - Shimabara-Amakusa Rebellion.

1640s-1850s - Hidden Christians preserve the faith in secrecy.

1865 - Hidden Christians reveal themselves at Oura Church.

1873 - The ban on Christianity is lifted.

1918 - Tabira Church is dedicated.

1925 - Urakami Cathedral is completed.

1930 - St. Maximilian Kolbe arrives in Nagasaki.

1945 - Atomic bomb destroys Urakami Cathedral.

1959 - Urakami Cathedral is rebuilt.

1981 - St. John Paul II visits Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

1984 - Bishop Ito permits veneration of Our Lady of Akita.

2026 - Pilgrims continue to walk the path of Japan's Catholic heritage.

Glossary

Daimyo - A regional lord in feudal Japan.

Fumi-e - An image of Christ or Mary that suspected Christians were ordered to step upon.

Hidden Christians - Japanese Christians who preserved the faith secretly during persecution.

Kakure Kirishitan - Japanese term often used for Hidden Christians.

Hanare Kirishitan - Separated Christian communities that did not fully reunite with the Catholic Church after 1873.

Mizukata - A community member responsible for Baptism among Hidden Christians.

Shogunate - Military government of Japan.

Urakami - A district of Nagasaki, central to Hidden Christian history.

Oura Church - Nagasaki church where Hidden Christians revealed themselves in 1865.

About Japan Adventure Club Pilgrimage Library

The Japan Adventure Club Pilgrimage Library is dedicated to preserving, interpreting, and sharing the rich Christian heritage of Japan through carefully researched books, pilgrimage guides, historical studies, and spiritual resources. Each volume is designed to deepen the pilgrim's understanding of the places they visit by combining historical scholarship, Catholic tradition, and practical travel guidance. Whether walking the streets of Nagasaki, praying at Our Lady of Akita, or tracing the footsteps of St. Francis Xavier, readers are invited not merely to visit sacred places, but to encounter the living faith that continues to shape Japan today.