

Revival (1865–)

The Discovery of Hidden Christians in Nagasaki

A Relief of the Discovery of Christians (Oura Church)

St. Mary Statue (Oura Church)

Father Petitjean

In 1854, after a period of more than 200 years, the trade and travel restrictions forbidding foreigners to live in Japan came to an end. Trade treaties with the United States, Holland, England, Russia, and France were made in 1858, establishing Nagasaki port as one of the free trade ports in Japan. These treaties also allowed foreigners to reside within the port area. Among the many foreigners who settled in Japan was the French Roman Catholic priest Bernard Thaddée Petitjean (1829–1884), who took up residence in Nagasaki in 1863. There he contributed to the establishment of the Oura Church. Initially, the cathedral was used only by French Catholics, although some Japanese people came to visit the “barbarian temple” out of curiosity. However, soon after its opening in 1865, Petitjean met some villagers from nearby Urakami who revealed they were themselves hidden Christians.

As the villagers grew in confidence in the practice of their faith (for example, refusing to participate in Buddhist funeral practices), persecutions increased. One such large-scale persecution in Urakami led to the exile of 3,394 Japanese Christians. Only in 1873, mainly due to the heavy protests of Western countries, was the ban on Christianity lifted and the persecutions ended. After the abolition of the ban, it is thought that many Christians in hiding began to participate in the Catholic Church again, whereas others kept practicing the traditions of their ancestors.