

Father Petitjean

The Missionary Who Discovered the Hidden Christians in Nagasaki

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After studying at Autun Seminary and briefly working as a professor there, the French Roman Catholic, Bernard Thaddée Petitjean, (1829–1884) joined the mission and, in 1858, set out for Japan on the orders of his superiors. He initially lived on the Ryukyu islands (present-day Okinawa), where he studied Japanese. In this period, foreigners were gradually being allowed to openly practice their faith in Japan for the first time since the seventeenth century, although the religion was still forbidden for Japanese people. Petitjean moved to Yokohama in 1862 and left for Nagasaki the following year to work on the construction of Oura church. There he was pleasantly surprised when, only a few weeks after the completion of the church in 1865, villagers from Urakami told him they were descendants of the Christians-in-hiding he had heard so much about.

Petitjean became one of the most important members of the Nagasaki mission. He established various education centers and churches in the region, many aimed at re-educating the secret Christians who had been practicing the religion by themselves for centuries. Understanding the importance of print in re-educating and further spreading Christianity, Petitjean sought a missionary well-versed in printing. This led him to Father de Rotz (1840–1914), whom he called to Japan in 1868. Bernard Petitjean died and was buried at Oura Church in 1884.