

## **Two Hundred and Sixty Years of Silence: The Hidden Christians Who Continued to Secretly Practice Their Faith Despite the Ban on Christianity**

### **What is a Hidden Christian?**

Hidden Christians is the name for people in Japan who secretly maintained their faith throughout the roughly two-and-a-half-century period starting in 1614 during which Christianity was banned. By the end of the eighteenth century, the settlement policies of the Ōmura domain resulted in Christians moving from the Sotome region to remote islands, including the Gotō Islands and Kuroshima Island, which led to the creation of Hidden Christian villages. There are estimated to have been around 30,000 Christians, chiefly in the western part of Kyushu, who maintained and passed down their faith to successive generations in secret while the ban was in force.

### **Background to Organizing and Transmitting the Faith**

Before the ban on Christianity, when the number of Catholics was still growing, the missionaries recognized that there were not enough of them for all the work of propagation that needed to be done. They nominated several native Japanese as faith leaders, creating an organizational structure that would make Christianity a self-sustaining religion. The units of this organization were known as *misericordia*, which provided care for the sick and relief for the poor, and *confraria*, local bodies tasked with maintaining and strengthening the faith of the believers. The existence of both these groups was significant, as they helped to support the faith of the Hidden Christians after all the missionaries were banned. The Hidden Christians prayed and practiced their religious rituals under a hierarchy of leaders: *chōkata*, who safeguarded the prayers and the Christian calendar; *mizukata*, who handled baptisms; and *kikiyaku*, who evangelized.