

## **The Discovery of the Hidden Christians: “Where is the Statue of the Virgin Mary?”**

### **The Opening of Japan’s Ports and the Return of the Missionaries**

In 1854, the Tokugawa shogunate signed a Treaty of Peace and Amity with Commodore Perry of the United States of America, leading to the opening of the country’s ports. Starting in 1859, Japan gradually opened up five ports, including Nagasaki, where it placed a foreign settlement.

The Vatican, which was then pursuing a vigorous program of propagation in East Asia, began looking into the resumption of missionary activity in Japan. In 1838, it assigned the task to the Paris Foreign Missions Society, which was already extremely active in Vietnam and China. When the port of Yokohama opened up, the Society’s Father Prudence Girard, who had been standing by in the Ryukyu Islands, came to Japan as interpreter for the consul general of France. In 1863, Father Louis Furet arrived in Nagasaki, soon followed by Father Bernard Petitjean.

### **The Construction of Ōura Cathedral and Discovery of the Hidden Christians**

After Father Girard built a cathedral in Yokohama in 1862, Father Furet and Father Petitjean went on to construct Ōura Cathedral in Nagasaki, consecrating the building in February 1865. Although the church was ostensibly for the foreigners living in the settlement, the missionaries’ primary reason for coming to Japan was to find the Hidden Christians of the Nagasaki Region.

It did not take long. On March 17, 1865, a group of some 14 or 15 Hidden Christians from Urakami went to Ōura Cathedral. This was the day they would make their confession of faith to Father Petitjean, who recorded the event as follows:

*A woman of about 40 or 50 years old approached me and, with her hands pressed to her breast, said, “Our hearts are the same as yours. . . . Where is the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary?” At the sacred name of the Virgin, all my doubts left me. I knew that I was in the presence of the descendants of the ancient Christians of Japan.*

Letter of Father Bernard Petitjean dated 18 March 1865

This dramatic episode, which took place while the two-and-a-half century ban on Christianity in Japan was still in effect, is known as *shinto hakken*, or the “Discovery of the Hidden

Christians.” The Europeans, who believed that the relentless government repression over the years had wiped out Japan’s Christians, were amazed.

This first contact marked a turning point. The Hidden Christians in the region divided into several groups: those who returned to the traditional Catholic faith; Kakure Kirishitan, who stayed with their existing forms of belief; and those who converted to Buddhism and Shinto.

(left) Architectural drawing for Ōura Cathedral believed to be the work of Father Louis Furet  
Ca. 1864

(Paris Foreign Missions Society)

(right) Photograph by Ueno Hikoma

“Ōura Cathedral”

Ca. 1865

(Ezaki Bekkoten)

Note the word *tenshudō* (church) displayed over the front door to make the purpose of the building clear to a Japanese audience.

“The Christians’ Confession of Faith at Ōura Cathedral”

From Aimé Villion, *Histoire des martyrs du Japon*

1926

(Seijin Senketsu Isho)