

The Lifting of the Ban on Christianity: Towards Religious Freedom

Protests from the Western Powers

In 1871, the Meiji government appointed foreign secretary Iwakura Tomomi as the country's plenipotentiary ambassador and dispatched him on a mission overseas to renegotiate various unequal treaties with other countries. Wherever he went, however, his hosts proved severely critical of the harsh treatment of the Christians in Urakami and the ongoing mass arrests in Sotome and the Nagasaki Bay area, and pressed for the introduction of freedom of religion in Japan. On February 24, 1873, the Meiji government issued Grand Council of State Proclamation No. 68, ordering the removal of the official signpost prohibiting Christianity.

The Urakami Christians and Freedom of Religion

On March 14 of the same year, an order was issued to the relevant prefectures to send the exiled Urakami Christians back home. As a result, after five years in exile, some 1,930 people were able to return to Urakami. When the Constitution of the Empire of Japan, also known as the Meiji Constitution, was promulgated in 1889, article 28 stated, "Japanese subjects shall, within limits not prejudicial to peace and order, and not antagonistic to their duties as subjects, enjoy freedom of religious belief." Freedom of religion was now guaranteed by the state.

Resuming Missionary Work and Building Churches

Thanks in part to the enthusiastic efforts of the missionaries from the Paris Foreign Missions Society, the Christians who rejoined the Catholic church began building churches in the communities where they had been hiding as an expression of their long-sustained faith. The first churches were very simple. But many of the missionaries—among them Father Marc De Rotz in Oura and Sotome, and Father Albert Pelloux in the Gotō Islands—possessed expertise in structural design, and construction of grander churches began. The missionaries also passed on their construction know-how to local Japanese, such as the Kawahara family in Sotome and the Gotō Islands' Tetsukawa Yosuke, who went on to design and build more than 30 churches in his career.

Launching Welfare Work

In July 1874, there was an outbreak of dysentery on Iōjima, an island just outside the port of Nagasaki, which went on to spread across the whole Sotome and Urakami district. This was

followed in August by an outbreak of smallpox on Kagenōjima. Father De Rotz took care of the people affected by these epidemics, with the assistance of many self-sacrificing young women, including Iwanaga Maki (founder of the Jūjikai women's service organization), and young men who had recently returned to Urakami from their long exile.

The women subsequently started taking care of orphans, and, with the guidance of the foreign priests, formed groups such as the "Woman's Room" (which later became the Urakami Cross Association). They extended their activities, which were reminiscent of the old *misericordia*, not just geographically to regions including Sotome, the Gotō Islands, Hirado, and Kuroshima, but through study in new fields like childcare, healthcare, and self-reliance for women.

CAPTIONS

PICTURE 1

In 1873, the Meiji government took down the official signposts it had put up in 1868.

(Nagasaki Museum of History and Culture)

PICTURE 2

Urakami Cathedral was constructed on the site of the house of Takatani, the village headman.

Ca. 1937

Construction got underway in 1895, under the guidance of Father Pierre Fraineau. Fraineau, who is said to have carved some of the stone statues himself, died long before the building was completed in 1925. It was destroyed by the atomic bomb in 1945.

(Nagasaki Museum of History and Culture)

PICTURE 3

A vocational training center for women built in Sotome (currently known as the Former Shitsu Aid Center)

(Congregation of Mary of the Annunciation)