

The Communities and Sacred Places of Hirado

Christianity in Hirado

The first Portuguese ship to reach Japan docked at Hirado,
Nagasaki Prefecture, in the year 1550.

The Portuguese brought Western culture with them.

Buildings like Hirado's Dutch Trading Post
evoke the romance of overseas trade.

Trade with the West flourished.
It was not only goods that came to Hirado.

Christianity came, too.

The missionary Francis Xavier came to Hirado to preach.

Thinking it would help win trade, Matsura Takanobu,
the 25th lord of Hirado, let the Jesuits preach.

He also allowed his retainer Koteda Yasutsune and
his brother Ichibu Kageyu to convert to Christianity.

As ardent Christians, the two men persuaded
ordinary people in the Hirado domain to convert.

Hirado became the first place in Japan
where Christianity flourished.

It did not flourish for long.

In 1587, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the great unifier of Japan,
published an edict expelling the Catholic fathers.

Matsura Takanobu, the lord of Hirado,
had been tolerant of Christianity.

But after his death in 1599, the repression of
Christianity in Hirado gradually intensified.

Believers were executed not just in Hirado,
but in Nagasaki, and throughout Japan.

People known as Hidden Christians secretly kept their faith,
while outwardly accepting Buddhism and Shinto.

This recreates how the Hidden Christians practiced their faith.
They had a Shinto altar in the tatami room
and a Buddhist altar in the tea room . . .

. . . but they kept Christian objects of devotion in a closet
where no one would see them.

These are hanging scrolls based on Christian pictures,
and a purification tool derived from the scourge.

These water bottles are filled with holy water.

The Hidden Christians worshipped these objects while
chanting the Christian prayers they called *oratio*.

For 250 years, the faith was transmitted from generation to
generation, secretly and unbroken, with no missionary contact.

When Japan opened its borders at the end of the
Tokugawa shogunate, foreign priests resumed their preaching.

The ban on Christianity was finally lifted in 1873.

Many Hidden Christians rejoined the Catholic Church.
Religious activity resumed, and churches were built.

Some of Japan's Christians did not return to the Catholic Church.
They persisted with the old forms of faith.

They and their faith are known as "Kakure Kirishitan."
They have no churches, and believe in Buddhism and Shinto too.

It is important to tell people about Hirado's history
of Christianity and the Kakure Kirishitan.

They safeguarded and transmitted the faith for 250 years
with no missionaries there to help them.

It is an extraordinary story,
as rare as it is precious.

Because of the low birthrate and social changes,
the number of Kakure Kirishitan is now shrinking.

We can learn from the dramatic history of Christianity in Hirado.

The culture of the Kakure Kirishitan, which retains the old forms of faith,
and the churches built by the Catholics after the revival . . .

. . . all point to the importance of faith and religion.

We, too, must pass on the history and faith
of our ancestors to the next generation.