

The “Discovery of the Hidden Christians” Takes Place While the Ban on Christianity Is Still in Force

In December 1864, the missionaries in Nagasaki completed the construction of a cathedral in Ōura, in the foreign settlement overlooking Nagasaki Bay. It was officially named the Basilica of the Twenty-Six Holy Martyrs of Japan and it overlooked the location of their martyrdom. Since preaching to the Japanese was not yet permitted, the missionaries only served the Westerners from the foreign settlement. Nonetheless, the overarching reason for their return to Japan was to find the Hidden Christians of Nagasaki.

On March 17, 1865, a group of some 15 Japanese men and women from Urakami entered Ōura Cathedral and revealed their faith to Father Petitjean. According to a letter written by Father Petitjean the next day, one of the women in the group approached him saying, “Your heart and our hearts are the same,” and asking where she could find the statue of the Virgin Mary. At the time, Christianity was still banned, as it had been for two and a half centuries. But the so-called “Discovery of the Hidden Christians” (*Shinto Hakken* in Japanese) galvanized the Europeans who thought that relentless repression had wiped out Japan’s Christian population.

Soon after this incident, the leaders of the various Hidden Christian communities all around Nagasaki began visiting Ōura Cathedral to get guidance from the missionaries, which they then passed on to their own flocks. The organized revival of Catholicism in Japan was underway.