

Urakami Cathedral

Urakami Cathedral has a tragic history. The Urakami area had a sizeable population of Christians who were persecuted in a series of crackdowns from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries. In 1865, a woman from Urakami revealed the existence of Japan's Hidden Christians to Father Bernard Petitjean at Oura Church in Nagasaki. Ironically, the resulting propagation efforts of Father Petitjean and his colleagues at the Paris Foreign Missions Society served only to trigger the Fourth (and last) Urakami Crackdown, in which more than 3,000 members of the local Christian community were sent into exile around Japan.

After the ban on Christianity was lifted in 1873, the Urakami Christians who had returned safely home wanted a church where they could worship. They made do with a temporary structure at first, but in 1895, construction of a proper Romanesque red-brick church with stone trim began under the direction of Father Pierre-Théodore Fraineau. Hampered by a lack of funds, the parishioners spent 20 years building the cathedral; it was finally consecrated in 1914, three years after the death of Father Fraineau, and even then, it took another 11 years to complete the two bell towers. At the time of its completion, it was one of the largest churches in Asia. Formally known as the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Urakami is the cathedral of the archdiocese of Nagasaki.

The cathedral was deliberately built on the site of the house of the village headman, whose family had spent 250 years forcing members of the local Christian community to trample on images of Christ and the Virgin Mary in *fumi-e* ceremonies. Tragically, it was also only a few hundred meters from the epicenter of the second atomic bomb, which was dropped on Nagasaki on August 9, 1945. The belfry of the northern tower was blown off in the explosion, and can be seen perched just above a small stream to the left of the church. One of the two original bells survived the blast and is still in use.

The ruined cathedral was replaced with a wooden structure in 1946; the current ferroconcrete building was completed in 1959. It was faced with brick tiles in 1980 in the runup to the visit of Pope John-Paul II, who celebrated mass here in 1981. The cathedral can hold one thousand worshippers.

The remains of the belfry are not the only reminder of the atomic bomb. There is also the burned head of a wooden effigy of the Virgin Mary. Visitors can see a replica at the back of the church, since the original is kept in a side chapel at the front of the church and is not open to tourists. To the left of the path leading up to the church is a group of statues from the original church that were burned and broken in the blast. On the other side of the path is the church hall, where religious items damaged by the blast are on display.

In the garden facing the church is the so-called Torture Stone from Hagi, in Yamaguchi Prefecture. Hagi was one of the places where the Urakami Christians were exiled in the Fourth Urakami Crackdown (1867–1873). They were forced to squat on this stone, exposed to the elements, until they either died or recanted their faith.