

## Karematsu Shrine

This area became a holy site for the Hidden Christian era in the Meiji era (1868–1912). But for years, there was only a miniature stone shrine known as a *hokora*. The first proper wooden shrine was constructed in 1938, during the Sino-Japanese War. Men being shipped to the front believed that praying at this shrine would save them from harm in battle, while those who returned home safely from the fighting would offer sake drinking bowls in gratitude. The current building, which is identical to the original, dates from 2003.

The route up to the shrine passes a couple of huge flat rocks. A space has been hollowed out beneath the lower rock; legend has it that the local Hidden Christians would use this spot to memorize and practice their prayers (*oratio*), posting a lookout to avoid detection.

The shrine was constructed to mark the gravesite of San Juan, a Spanish Franciscan friar who was buried here by local people after he died of cold and hunger. San Juan is famous as the mentor of Bastian, the Japanese evangelist who compiled the Japanese church calendar and prophesied the end of Christian persecution.

Inside the current shrine are two miniature stone shrines. The larger one in the center dates from 1933, while the smaller one to the left is from the Meiji era (1868–1912).

The place was originally known as Jiwan (Japanese for “Juan”) Karematsu. The word *karematsu* literally means “dry pines,” but any pines that once stood here have been replaced by camphor trees. The flat stretches of ground around the shrine once served as Christian graveyards, and the flat stones now piled up as terracing may originally have been gravestones.

Down the hill is a small graveyard dating from 1990; it includes family gravestones combining elements from three religions. There is a Christian tombstone marked with a gilded cross and Western baptismal names on one side; a Buddhist upright stone with *kaimyo* posthumous names in the center; and a small, bulbous Taoist monument on the far side.

Since 1999, the shrine has hosted an interfaith ceremony known as the Karematsu Festival every November, in which local Catholics, Hidden Christians, and Buddhists all pray together for the repose of their ancestors. (This is not open to the public.)