

Twenty-Six Martyrs Museum and Monument

This complex consists of a plaza, a monument, a museum, and a church. It stands on Nishizaka, the hill overlooking Nagasaki where 26 Catholics were executed on February 5, 1597 on the orders of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the leader of the country, in the first wave of persecution of the Christians. The 26 martyrs were canonized in 1862, and this complex, managed by the Society of Jesus, opened in 1962 to mark the hundredth anniversary of that event.

Sculpture of the Martyrs

The enormous high-relief bronze sculpture in the plaza was created by artist Funakoshi Yasutake (1912–2002), who converted to Catholicism in his late thirties. It features life-sized figures of the 26 martyrs. (The three smaller members of the group are children who were between the ages of 12 and 14 at the time of their execution.) The Latin inscription on the top reads *Laudate Dominum Omnes Gentes* (“All people praise God”), which the martyrs are said to have chanted as they died, while the cluster of crucifixes beneath is a reference to their mode of execution. The monument is positioned to face Oura Church. Important visitors to the monument have included Pope John-Paul II in 1981, Mother Teresa in 1982, and Pope Francis in 2019. The site has particular significance for the Catholic Church because the martyrs came from several countries, with four Spaniards, one Mexican, and one Portuguese, in addition to the Japanese believers.

An Unusual Work of Architecture

Both the museum and the church are the work of architect Imai Kenji (1895–1987), another Catholic convert. Traveling to Spain as a young man, Imai was profoundly impressed by the works of the Modernist Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí. Gaudí’s influence can be seen in the Sagrada Família-influenced spires of St. Philip’s Church, with their organic shapes and colorful ceramic tile mosaics, as well as on the west wall of the museum, which is decorated with a white phoenix set against a colorful mosaic background made in part from broken tableware.

The museum façade has multiple layers of meaning. The lowest level, a wall of stones set in white mortar, is designed to suggest the walls of Nagasaki’s Teramachi temple district, which used mortar imported from Macao (Macao was an important base for Jesuit missionaries).

The second level features a *takeyarai*, a bamboo lattice used to surround places of execution. The two top layers feature pillars evocative of a prison. The color tiles in the middle of the thicker pillars become red at the top, a reference to the bloody spears thrust into the Nagasaki martyrs' sides during their crucifixion.

A Museum Full of Old Treasures

The museum, which is operated by the Jesuits, has objects of extraordinary historical interest stretching back more than four centuries. Highlights include an original letter written by St. Francis Xavier to King John III of Portugal in 1546; an original 1621 letter to a senior Jesuit from Nakaura Julian, who had traveled to Rome in 1582 as a member of the Tensho Embassy before returning to Japan and becoming a priest, describing the persecution of the Japanese Christians; and *Our Lady of the Snows*, a painting of the Virgin Mary thought to have been made in Nagasaki between 1600 and 1614. There are also numerous old maps, old books with lurid engravings of Japanese Christians being executed, and newspapers that report the return of the Catholic missionaries in the late nineteenth century.

Pope Pius XII designated Nishizaka an official Catholic pilgrimage site in 1950. The museum includes holy relics that will be of interest to the faithful, such as a piece of silk stained with the blood of one of the martyrs, and bones belonging to St. Paul Miki, St. Jacob Kisai, and St. John of Goto, Japanese priests who were among their number.

The small statue just outside the museum entrance is of Saint Lorenzo Ruiz, the first Filipino Christian martyr and Filipino saint, who was executed here in 1637.