

Miyazu Catholic Church

Miyazu Catholic Church is a distinctive example of ecclesiastical architecture from 1896. Romanesque-style features are visible throughout the building, which incorporates many distinctly Japanese features as well. A stained-glass wheel window and arched portals adorn the facade, but instead of doors that swing outward, these church doors slide open. In place of pews churchgoers sit on a tatami floor under a vaulted ceiling. The arcade columns inside the nave are made of zelkova. Arched windows decorate the church inside and out in colorful geometric patterns made entirely from imported French stained glass. The church stands almost as it was built, although it has undergone some renovations, including repairs to the face of the building following an earthquake in 1927.

Considered the oldest existing church in Japan that holds weekly Mass, Miyazu Catholic Church is predated only by the Oura Church in Nagasaki (built 1864). Although there have been Christians in Japan since the mid-sixteenth century, they generally practiced in secrecy until the Meiji government lifted the ban on Christianity in 1873.

Father Jean Louis Relave, a French missionary who arrived in Japan in 1885, oversaw construction of the church in Miyazu. Land was donated by a prominent local figure who had recovered from illness after being baptized by the Paris Foreign Missions Society. Father Relave, who had already established a church in this area, designed the new building. Local carpenters built it using predominantly locally sourced materials and with a limited knowledge of Western construction techniques.