

# Urakami Cathedral

Nagasaki, Japan  
The Catholic Church in Japan



The Urakami Cathedral, one of Nagasaki's prominent landmarks, stands on a hill amid the rubble of a residential district east of ground zero.



The statues of the Madonna and John the Apostle stand at the ruins.



Two women pray before a statue of the Virgin Mary in the days after the bombing.

Early in the morning of August 9, 1945, a B-29 Superfortress took off headed for the Japanese city of Kokura, the primary target for the second nuclear bomb. The crew had instructions to only drop the bomb on visual sighting, and after finding Kokura clouded over they headed for their secondary target, Nagasaki.

Nagasaki is famous in the history of Japanese Christianity. Not only was it the site of the largest Christian church in the Orient, St. Mary's Cathedral, but it also had the largest concentration of baptized Christians in all of Japan. It was the city where the legendary Jesuit missionary, Francis Xavier, established a mission church in 1549, a Christian community which thrived and multiplied for several generations until, in the early 1600s, it became the target of brutal Japanese Imperial persecutions.

Within 50 years of the planting of Xaviar's mission church, it was a capital crime to be a Christian. The Japanese Christians who refused to recant their beliefs suffered ostracism, horrific torture and even crucifixions similar to the Roman persecutions in the first three centuries of Christianity. After the reign of terror was over, it appeared to all observers that Christianity had been stamped out.

However, in the 1850s, after the gunboat diplomacy of Commodore Perry forced open an offshore island for American trade, it was discovered that there were still thousands of baptized Christians in Nagasaki, living their faith in a catacomb existence, completely unknown to the government, which immediately started another purge. But because of international pressure, the persecutions were soon stopped, and religious freedom was granted in 1873.

In 1925 the people of Urakami, one of the former enclaves of the hidden Christians, constructed a grand brick and stone Cathedral, said to be the largest in the Orient.

In a twist of fate, the Urakami Cathedral was one of the landmarks that the bombardier had been briefed on, and, looking through his bomb site over Nagasaki that day, he identified the cathedral, ordered the drop, and, at 11:02 am, Nagasaki Christianity was vaporized.

## Urakami Today



The Urakami Cathedral was rebuilt in 1959



Today the Urakami District is called the "Love and Peace Zone."



## Japan Today