

When Faith Was Banned

Christmas In Secret In Japan

This story tells how Christians in Japan kept the feast of Christmas during the three centuries the faith was banned in that island empire. Divine Word Father H. J. Wloesen, pastor of St. Philomena's Church in Atom bombed Nagasaki sent the story this week to the Courier Journal.

FOR US WHO ENJOY the privilege of faith and the blessings of freedom, Christmas will ever be Christ and the Mass and bells and lights, and the songs of Bethlehem.

Yet I live in a Valley where for many, many years Christmas was stripped of Christ in the Mass; where the lights could not shine and the bells could not ring; where Christians could not raise their voices in song, nor their hands in prayer.

Here in this Valley called Urakami—now a part of Nagasaki City, for nearly two and a half centuries every Christmas had to be a catacomb Christmas.

Let me tell you the story.

In 1549, on the Feast of Our Lady's Assumption, the first missionary ever to reach Japan, landed at the small trading port of Kagoshima. He was Francis Xavier. And during a restless two years and three months in the country, he planted the seed that was to grow into a tree big enough to become a cross.

The first to be baptized were the samurai, and the people called the Fathers from the West arrived. They were brave men, self-sacrificing, zealous, and they taught the faith to the harbor-city of Nagasaki, and to the hidden Valley of Urakami that stretches beyond the harbor.

In 1614, the rugged farmers who filled the terraced rice fields on the slopes of Mt. Kompira and Mt. Inasa, the shopkeepers farther below, the fishermen on the banks of the river—nearly all were Catholics.

Christmas in both days was Christmas with the essentials and the trimmings. On the Holy Eve, as the silent stars shined in the Valley, the Christians went off in their gayest kimonos to the Santa Clara Church. There in a House of God that was bright with candles and flowers, they watched their children play the story of Christmas.

And they listened to the tall Eastern speak in strange accents about the night God was born in a simple stable of a spotless Mother. There they sang and prayed. And they participated in the Mass that brought Christmas to Urakami, a Christmas that made of their altar, a manger of their hearts, a crib.

But then the lights went out. The songs stopped. The bells no longer rang. And the Mass was taken out of Christmas.

In 1614, Shogun Tokugawa, military dictator of Japan, issued an edict against "the Christian, the enemies of the gods, and of Buddha." Every missionary was to be deported. Every Church in the land was to be torn down. The Christians were to return to the religion of their fathers immediately or die.

The Great Persecution began. The Valley of Urakami, fortress of faith, and the rest of the country too, was bathed in blood.

But though the sword went on cutting, and the fires continued to burn, though the dark dungeons went on rotting the Christians, the flame of faith was not entirely extinguished. Neither did all the Christmas lights go out.

In spite of sniffling spies and vigilant police, the Christians continued to celebrate Christmas in their own way. For nearly two hundred and fifty years they managed to fit the Birthday of Christ into the center of their catacomb life as best they could.

Some time after the country was sealed tight to the outside and no missionaries were allowed out or in, the Christian Community of Urakami was divided into groups. At the head of each group was the "chokata"—the headman, who took the place of the "Bateren" until the time these would return. One of the important duties of this "chokata" was to fix the date of Christmas. The vernal equinox was selected as the starting point. Christmas day would be just nine months hence, during the Month of the Frost, on the nearest "Thursday."

The Christmas preparations proper began weeks before the feast. The Christians, climbed the mountain slopes of their Valley, thick with trees and bushes, to gather bundles of straw. They stacked these against the mud walls of their homes.

The majority of the "Kishitan" in the Valley were farmers. And as the great day drew near, the menfolk cleaned the stables, bedding them with fresh straw. For was not "Yezusu" born in just such a poor place?

On the morning of the great Eve, after the house had been cleaned from "tatami" (floor mats) to ceiling, the banquet preparations began. But first, the offering, for are not a thing a gift from the Divine Child? The family gathered before the shrine on which were stacked the plates of food.

All folded their hands, closed their eyes, and bowed low before the statue in the center of the altar. This offering rite was such that a casual visitor would have nothing at all to report to the police, for here was a household fervently honoring "Kannon," the Buddhist goddess of mercy. But for these people, these Christians forced to hide their faith, that central figure was not "Kannon"; she was "Santa Maria" with the Child in her arms.

After the Christmas food had been duly offered, the stone stoves were stuffed with wood, and lighted. Aged upon them the caldrons of rice were set to boil, the vegetables, to cook. Ribbons of smoke, some full and black—some light and scraggy, curled into the afternoon skies.

To the Christians of means these ribbons of smoke from the kitchen stoves were a summons to Christmas charity. In 1683, after a lapse of two centuries, the "Bateren" returned to the Valley and secretly established four temporary chapels in the homes of leading Urakami Christians. One of these was in the home of the wealthy ropemaker, Tokueemon. From him the missionaries learned of another custom that must have been here a long time.

As Christmas Eve approached, Tokueemon would climb up to the top of the thatched roof. From this vantage point, he could look down the Valley, easily pick out the smoking chimneys, and tell what kind of Christmas his fellow Christians would be having.

If the smoke poured out in heavy curls, then all was well. If, however, the smoke was thin, something had to be done. Tokueemon would carefully note the owners of these chimneys. Then calling together his servants, he would order them to carry food to these people.

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Then the conversation purposely grew "thin." And the father of the family rose from his place. After checking the doors to make sure that no stranger was approaching, he brought out the precious relics of the past.

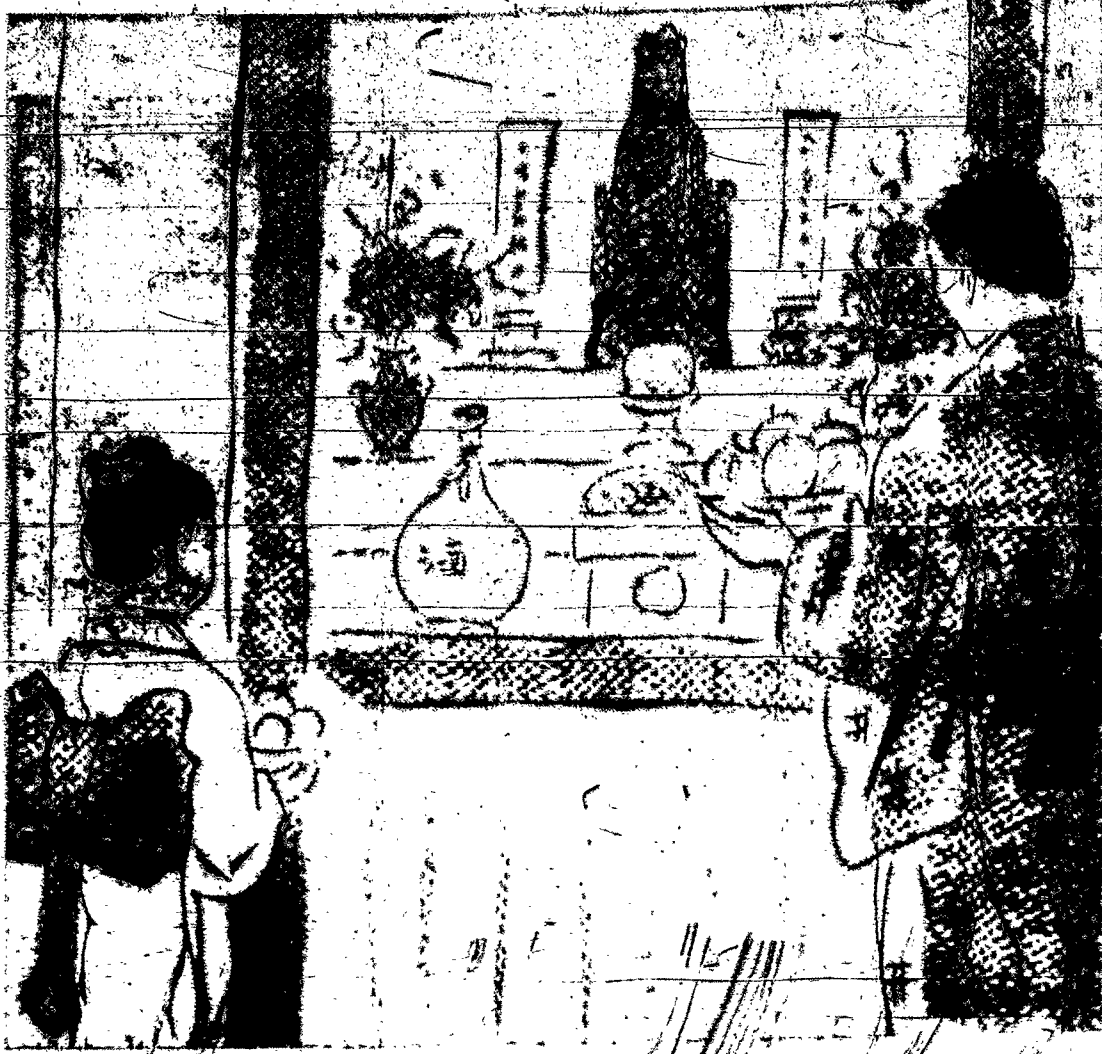
From the hollow of a bamboo pole came a crucifix. From a box hid a candle under the "tatami," a medal or rosary. From a crevice in the huge beam overhead, a holy picture.

All these relics were one held in the hands of the martyred relatives and friends. They had been speaking about.

All present bowed low, then gently fingered each medal and rosary and crucifix and picture as if they would reach back into the glorious past.

Thus ended the day. And thus the lights kept on dimly shining. This Christmas never died.

We know with certainty that it did not from a day that will live long in Christian history. In 1853, ten years after Admiral Perry of the United States Navy, managed to pry open the gates of Japan, the missionaries returned to Nagasaki.



Japanese Catholics during the centuries the Blessed Virgin Mary with her divine Child faith was banned, used statues of Kannon, the Buddhist goddess of mercy, to represent the infant before the statue.

who were not able to celebrate the Birth of "Yezusu" as it should be celebrated.

Dark settled over Urakami. One by one the stars appeared in the silent sky. And Christmas Eve came to the Valley.

The boys gathered a low table, and placed in the middle of the living room, were lighted. Red and white shadows of a note about the "tatami" (matted floor) up and around the rough, black beams of the ceiling, and back upon the squatting figures. The iron kettle over the fire began to sing.

The hour of prayer was at hand. "Onarujisama wa Orumi to toro ni . . . Gotaino Yezusu-sama wa totori nite masimasu . . . The Lord is with thee . . . Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus . . ." Over and over again the members of the family chanted the Hail Mary which they called the "Garasa."

The Aves to be recited by each Christian was determined. At one period the number was thirty-three. At still another, fifty. But usually it was one hundred and fifty.

And custom prescribed that this bouquet of Hail Marys reach heaven for each member of the family. Hence, if a son or a daughter or a dependent was prevented from performing this Christmas office, the father or the mother took on the additional burden.

This is why Christmas Eve for some "Kishitan" had to begin in the morning. We are told, for instance, of Miguru Danjell—Miguru contentedly counted his blessings, but he likewise had quite a count of Hail Marys. And since many of his children and dependents were themselves unable to do

them the conversation purposely grew "thin." And the father of the family rose from his place. After checking the doors to make sure that no stranger was approaching, he brought out the precious relics of the past.

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Above the blue harbor, on the slopes of Oura, they built a church which they dedicated to the Twenty-Six Martyrs who died on a hill not far away, and which they ostentatiously established for the foreign community of the city.

Because the Kishitan, he began, was still mistakenly prohibited for a month after the day of death, hardly a single Japanese ventured to open the gate of the church compound. No one that is until the seventeenth day of March.

The Angelus bell had just rung. The noontide sun bathed the new church in light making it glitter like a jewel in a setting of green.

From the second story room of his rectory Father Pettitron looked down upon the ladder of steps that led up to the church. Suddenly the scene below was alive. A group of some fifteen people were slowly and cautiously ascending. The missionary watched. And a voice within him whispered, "Go forth to meet these people. They are yours."

Father Pettitron left his room, walked to the front of the church, and without saying a word led the group inside as far as the Communion rail. There he knelt down and prayed to the Eucharist Christ Who had so recently returned to Japan.

Scarcely had he finished his prayer when a middle-aged woman knelt at his side, crossed her hands over her breast, and whispered, "We here are of the same heart as you."

"Indeed," said the astonished priest, "And where are you from?"

"We are all from Urakami. In Urakami nearly every one believes as we do."

Then another of the group whispered a question, "Where is Santa Maria?"

Instead of answering, the priest rose and led the group to the altar of the Blessed Virgin. He pointed to a small statue.

"Yes," said one; "yes, there she is. There is Santa Maria. Look, the Divine Infant in her arms."

And then still another of the first of thousands to return home, asked a question that summarized the devotion of the years. "We celebrate the Feast of Our Lord's Birth during the Month of the Frost. Do you do likewise?"

Although the lights were forcibly put out; although the churches were torn down, the altar candles, the bells broken; although the Mass was taken out of Christmas, Christmas never left the catacomb Valley of Urakami.

And that is why this year, once again Christmas will have a special sort of joy and peace. For these heirs of the Hidden Urakami, for the Catholics of Urakami, if you watch them this Christmas, at Midnight Mass, you will see the stars of Bethlehem in their eyes.

You will hear them sing, and the singing angels will hover near. You will see them approach the Communion rail, and a manger with a Virgin Mother, and shepherds will appear.

All this you will see this Christmas in the Valley of Urakami, because here live people who know well the difference Christ makes to Christmas.

JOSEPH BREIG Boy On A Sled

Christmas means more to me with every year that passes, but the statement is one that requires explanation. To begin with, I am not precisely sure now what the holiday meant to me when I was three or four or five years of age.

I suppose those days must have been at least one occasion in my childhood when Christmas of Truck me with a wonder rather—like the wonder to which we look forward in heaven. But if so, I confess that my memory of it is vague.

There are two Christmas days that I remember vividly, doubtless because they did go to all my senses. One I sat on a sofa at the tree because I did not find an electric train, and my electric train was in my room with my heart.

FOR TWENTY years I have been in the box business and the box business is a lot and they say through a fall of snow and a winter of ice and snow, and it came out with a box containing a train which he played on my lap.

I have never forgotten how I marvelled at the thought that I possessed a key to that holy of holies, a toy shop. Exactly what the word "father" meant to me at that time, I do not recall, but at least I knew that somehow I had some kind of ownership in this extraordinary being who could unlock a toy store.

The other Christmas that I remember well was rather a Christmas Eve than a Christmas Day. I had been put to bed but did not go to sleep, and I would hear the subdued sounds of some kind of super-important business going on in the parlor which was just down the hall from my little bedroom.

I waited with what now strikes me as astonishing eagerness for company, in one or very young, until I fell certain that every one was absorbed in what was going on. Then I rose up on my floor with a little flashlight and a long pole and I went through the door and under a couch to watch while the Christmas tree was trimmed.

Thus did I discover what I had suspected that Santa Claus was a pleasant fiction. Only on such late in life did I realize that what I called the spirit of Christmas as it was lived centuries ago by the Archbishop St. Nicholas, Santa Claus, is true with the very heart of truth.

But now Christmas to me is not a feast of a day at all, but a being. Christmas is a Person, Christmas is Christ, Christmas is my Father, God, I can say so much about me and my fellow-men as to send His Son, God Himself, to become one of us in our own human nature to redeem us so that we and He can live together forever.

ON THAT EARLY Christmas Day when I wanted a toy train, I was a child and my father was a man, and I did not understand him because the mind of a small boy is not the mind of a grown adult. But I trusted him, and I saw that he had power to give happiness to me. For he had the key to the Kingdom of Heaven. It was a key that I have.

Now I am a man with children of my own, but of course I do not understand our Father God, I do not understand God in Christ, because He is divine and I am human, and the little knowledge of a man is not the infinite wisdom of God. But I trust Him, and I know that He has power to give me happiness because He has the key to the Kingdom of Heaven. And I know He is good; He is born for me in Bethlehem, and died for me in Calvary. It is enough. I am content.

SUCH IS the meaning of Christmas as I see it. Now Christmas is Christ in His Church, Christ present with us in the Mass, Christ in whose Mystical Body I am. The Church—we are members. And because we are members of Him, we are members also of one another. And so Christmas is Christ and you and I together at Mass, offering ourselves to God with our hearts and our minds, our tongues and our feet, our senses and our faith.

Prayers For Persecuted

My dear People:

The Bishops of the United States have set aside Sunday, December 28, as a "Day of Prayer For the Victims of Religious Persecution."

In our Diocese I would like this Day of Prayer observed in every Church by special prayers and by public Exposition of the Most Blessed Sacrament from the Last Mass until late afternoon or early evening.

We in the United States of America have very much for which to be grateful. We do well to remember this and to thank God for it. Especially, as we approach another year of freedom, of plenty, and of hope, we must not forget our persecuted brothers who stand on the brink of another desolate year of persecution and terror.

Please pray that God may grant peace and freedom to those who have so patiently borne their heavy burdens.

With a blessing, I am

Your devoted Shepherd in Christ,

John E. Kearney

Bishop of Rochester

Safety Sunday Every Day

Bishop Kearney this week joined clergymen and lay leaders throughout the country to stress highway safety measures at this time of year when the accident toll soars to year-end records.

The holiday season is well known for tragedies which result from haste, negligence, alcohol and icy pavements—grim ingredients which spell screaming sirens and sometimes funeral dirges.

We have heard for years hundreds of slogans—"If you drink don't drive"—"the life you save may be your own"—but the statistics continue to mount.

In Germany, one mayor decided slogans were not enough. He embalmed the body of a young driver who died in a flaming crash. He had been intoxicated. He was mutilated and scared in the accident. His charred and torn body was then put on display at the city hall—a revolting spectacle but a stern lesson to those who risk not only their own but others' lives by their own irresponsibility.

American newspapers do not publish pictures of the broken and bleeding bodies of accident victims. Even the news stories speak about "the car failed to negotiate a curve" or "two cars collided" or "a car skidded into a pedestrian"—always "a car" and never the driver who is responsible for the car.

Traffic experts report that most accidents are the result of a very small minority of immature drivers—people who are given the right to control a car before they can control their own emotions.

Since slogans and safety campaigns don't seem to reach these people, maybe the German mayor had the right idea—virtually terrify them into safe driving.

Meantime those who cherish life for themselves and their neighbors will be wary as pedestrians and cautious as drivers. In observing the basic rules of traffic, we actually put into practice age-old Christian traditions of charity and courtesy—and fulfill the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill."

SERMONETTE

Charity Beareth All Things. I Cor. 13

BY THE REVEREND PAUL COURTNEY

Is St. Paul saying that charity requires us to believe everything we hear? Flying saucer stories? TV commercials? Pious legends of dubious parentage? Is it somehow more religious to anesthetize our critical faculties and nod in bland agreement with every opinion, theory and tale we are told? Is St. Paul here agreeing with those who hold that intelligence and common sense are the enemies of religious faith, that the more items you believe the better your faith is?

Hardly. St. Paul would be the first to tell us that the important thing about faith is why and what you believe—not how much. The true motive of religious faith is the authority of God revealing "who can neither deceive nor be deceived." On that unquestionable basis we believe all that God has not revealed does not increase or deepen our faith one bit. In fact, it sometimes confuses and distorts things rather badly.

What St. Paul is talking about here is quite a different thing—the attitude of the truly charitable man towards people who are giving him trouble. He believes the best about them and their motives until evil is evident, then, St. Paul will add, the man of charity hopes for their reform, and if that does not eventuate, he endures with patience the trouble they cause.

This sort of behavior, one might object, amounts to a pretty large order.

It does, indeed. Believing the best about others is the acid test—not of faith—but of the difficult virtue, charity.

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