

Japanese Catholics celebrate anniversary of hidden communities

Nagasaki, Imamura communities discovered each other 150 years ago, having kept their faith a secret for 200 years Japanese Catholics celebrate anniversary of hidden communities



The Imamura Christians celebrated 150 years since another secret Catholic community made contact with them on Feb. 26 at the Imamura church in Fukuoka Prefecture. (ucanews.com photo)

Catholics in southern Japan are remembering when two of their hidden communities discovered each other 150 years ago during a time of persecution.

In March 1865, while Christianity was still banned in Japan, a French missionary discovered hidden Catholics in Nagasaki. For more than 200 years they had kept their faith in secret and lived without any priests. Two years later, another hidden Catholic community was discovered in Imamura village about 100 kilometers east of Nagasaki when a Christian from Urakami village, Nagasaki, went to a town near Imamura and heard rumors of their presence.

The Christian returned to Nagasaki and told the French missionary who sent four Japanese Christians to Imamura to confirm.*

Three days later, on Feb. 26, 1867, the four arrived in the village. A local woman invited them to her house because they had nowhere to stay. When the women began to prepare a meal for them using

either chicken or eggs, the messengers declined, saying that they would eat neither chicken nor eggs at that time.



The surprised women replied, "You too?" and realized that her guests also kept the Lenten fast. After the discovery, the Imamura Catholics sent two villagers back to Nagasaki to confirm that missionaries were there. Since then, the two communities have maintained close relations with each other.

In the same year as the Imamura discovery, a massive crackdown started in Urakami. Some 3,400 Urakami Catholics were exiled and about 670 villagers died, most of them by torture, until the ban on Christianity was removed in 1873.

The red-brick Imamura church was built in 1913 and was selected as a National Important Cultural Property in 2015. While the church is famous for its architecture, the history of the Imamura Catholics is not as famous as the story of the Nagasaki congregation.

To mark the anniversary, a DVD telling the story of the Imamura community was produced and nine Catholics walked the 100 kilometers from Nagasaki to Imamura on Feb. 16-18.

"The [Nagasaki] Catholics' encounter with the missionary fired their passion for the faith. So I did the

pilgrimage because I wanted to experience a bit of their feeling as they walked to Imamura," said Keiji Hisatsugu, one of the pilgrims.

On Feb. 26, Archbishop Joseph Chennoth, the apostolic nuncio in Japan, celebrated Mass at the Imamura church in Fukuoka Prefecture to mark the 150th anniversary of the discovery of hidden Christians there.

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