Hakodate’s Open Ports

A Case Study of Global Catholicism

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For over two hundred years Catholics in Japan practiced their faith in hiding (Spae 6). From 1639 to 1859, they did not receive any sacraments besides baptism (Jennes 194), did not have contact with priests, and learned how to independently preserve their faith (Spae 8). Until 1792, these Japanese Catholics lived especially in fear of torture or death due to the systematic persecution conducted by the Inquisition Office in Japan (6). This persecution, one of the longest persecutions of Catholics (Jennes 132) stemmed from the arrival of a Portuguese missionary priest St. Francis Xavier on the southern shore of Kyushu in 1549 (Spae 3). During this missionary period in Japan, almost three thousand missionaries or Japanese converts were martyred under the persecution of war general Hideyoshi (Jennes 57, Spae 5). For almost one hundred years, missionaries resided in Japan until Shogun Iemitsu expelled the Portuguese in 1639, and all foreigners and foreign trade (excluding Holland and China) were outlawed (Spae 3, Jennes 203). For two hundred years, a strictly-enforced, but never formally codified policy against all foreigners was maintained by the Japanese (Spae 204), until American Commodore Matthew C. Perry arrived with four war ships on the shores of Japan in 1853. A year later, by threat of force, he convinced the Japanese to open their ports to American ships (206). This concession by the Japanese began a new chapter for Japan and the foreign world. Despite Japan's bleak history of isolation and hostility towards Catholicism, the nation's transition into the Meiji era marked a new relationship with religion that mirrored current global Catholic trends. These trends, such as mission work, ultramontanism, and responding to nationalism were especially prominent in Hakodate, one of the first towns open to foreigners in nineteenth century Japan.

The story of Catholicism in Hakodate, Japan began on November 25th, 1859 when Fr. Mermet, sent by the Society of the Foreign Missions of Paris (Obara), arrived in the port town (Jennes 211). Just one year prior, Japan and France signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce,

(Obara) ending Japan's era of isolation (Jennes 209-210). Priests were still barred from evangelizing; however, Mermet founded a dispensary and French Language School (211). He also built a small church dedicated to the Immaculate Conception in 1860 (Obara). Mermet left Hakodate due to illness, but after an eight-year hiatus, Fr. Mounicou returned, followed shortly after by Fr. Henry Armbruster (Obara), and together they reestablished the mission (Van Hecken 19). In 1873, Japan removed the edicts preventing native Japanese from participating in Christianity (Jennes 228). Five years later, Fr. Jean-Marie, pictured in figure 1, began the missionary work that encapsulates the Catholic missionary work occurring worldwide in the late nineteenth century.

Because of the great diaspora of Catholics in the nineteenth century, the church globalized. Approximately sixty million people emigrated from Europe, many of them Catholic. In addition to the spread of people worldwide, there was also a great spread of Catholic ideas because of advancing technology like the telegraph and steamship. Part of this Catholic diaspora was an increase in missionary activity and institution building. In the United States, for example, women religious orders taught and administered in schools. Missionaries travelled everywhere—to America, India, and beyond. The Catholic Church in France sent the most missionaries to foreign countries, including Hakodate in Japan.

The expansion that occurred when Fr. Jean-Marie was head priest in Hakodate was indicative of the missionary institution-building elsewhere in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. In 1878 he built a large church (the third church built) that attracted new followers of Catholicism (Van Hecken 19). At this same time, three religious sisters arrived in Hakodate who largely contributed to the missionary efforts (Obara, Van Hecken 20). The sisters were members of the order of St. Paul de Chartres (Van Hecken 180). They founded an

orphanage, school for religious education, and a dispensary for the poor (Laures 233). In figure 2 they can be seen in Hakodate serving a meal to young girls (Obara). They established multiple orphanages in Northern Japan (Van Hecken 180). Moreover, by 1901 there were four dispensaries for the poor in the diocese of Hakodate (171). Two decades later on April 25th, 1898, French Trappistine nuns would also establish Our Lady of the Angels monastery nearby (244). Both Fr. Jean-Marie and the sisters of St Paul de Chartres served during what was known as “the golden age” of evangelization in Japan (30); in the Hakodate parish alone there were an estimated 3,821 believers (Obara).

An integral part of Catholic missions worldwide was the balance between ultramontane uniformity and acculturation. The French missionaries displayed both of these aspects of Catholicism in ministering to the Japanese in Hakodate. The French missionaries brought a rich European tradition with them, but they did not neglect incorporation of Japanese culture into the mission. The mass occurring in figure 3 illustrates the balance between acculturation and ultramontane influence in Hakodate. The image shows a French priest in distinctly European vestments, and church’s interior design is also in the gothic style (Obara). While these aspects of the photograph paint an image of a church promoting uniformity, the congregation tells a different story. As they still do today in Hakodate, many of the women wear the European veil; however, many of the women are also wearing the traditional Japanese kimono. Moreover, there are no pews or kneelers in the church. Rather, the congregation kneel on tatami mats, traditional Japanese rugs, and wear no shoes. Despite the mission’s partial integration of Japanese culture into parish life, the church building, among other physical features of the parish, overwhelmingly embrace many aspects of ultramontanism.

Ultramontanism was a style of Catholicism notable for its emphasis on papal power, its sentimentality for the medieval age, its veneration of Mary and the saints, and extreme piety. Missionaries, especially, were more likely to be ultramontane. Many features of the church in Hakodate, visible in figure 4, preserve these dominating features of the ultramontane aesthetic. The interior architecture of the church is especially ultramontane. Figure 4 shows the fifth and most recent Catholic church in Hakodate built in 1923 (others were destroyed, many times by fire) (Obara). Tall, arched ceilings mirror the gothic style. Stained glass lines the walls, and small statues fill the sacred space. Invisible in the photograph are the side altar pieces to the left and right of the main altar. These pieces, one depicting the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the other depicting the Virgin Mary, showcase the devotion and emotional appeal associated with them (Obara). The church as a whole shares similarity to other churches built around the same time worldwide.

Although today it may seem unusual that Italian wood carvings would be found in a Japanese fishing town in the twentieth century, it illustrated the global dominance of ultramontanism. When the fifth church was built in 1923, Pope Benedict XV donated the wooden altar pieces and the stations of the cross lining the walls of the church. These pieces were hand-carved in the Tyrol region of Italy by Ferdinand Stutfresser (Obara). The main altar piece displays a carved statue of the patron saint of Japan, St. Francis Xavier, and St. Michael whom St. Xavier designated as protector of Japan. The reasons for which Benedict XV donated the wooden pieces are unclear; however, the act of generosity expresses his acknowledgement of the Catholic population in Japan. More significantly, Benedict XV's donation symbolizes the Pope's central role within the church in the early twentieth century, and how ultramontanism

valued uniformity within the Church. His role was monarchical; he had influence and power over the worldwide Church, and with that power he fostered a Euro-centric, ultramontane church.

Beyond the features inside of the church in Hakodate, the French missionaries established what is arguably the most prominent symbol of ultramontane Catholicism just outside of the church building. Bernadette's visions of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary—which took place in the small village of Lourdes, France—is the epitome of ultramontane piety. Catholics globally latched on to her narrative, and Bernadette became the "poster child" of ultramontane Catholicism. Sometime within the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Hakodate parish built a shrine to Our Lady of Lourdes. In figure 5 a girl prays at the grotto speckled with bonsai trees, a Japanese depiction of the famous scene of Bernadette (Obara). Missionaries from the Paris Society of Foreign Missions were especially committed to the spread of these ultramontane symbols of Our Lady of Lourdes and the Immaculate Conception. The Hakodate missionaries even dedicated the church to the Immaculate Conception (Van Hecken 256, Obara).

While missionaries actively shared ultramontane Catholicism worldwide, the Church also had to react to the global spread of nationalism. In the 1920s and 30s, nationalist dictators like Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany rose to power. These leaders were a threat to Catholicism: Mussolini was anti-Catholic, and Hitler began to restrict the activities of the Church. Soviet Russia almost entirely extinguished religion itself. In Japan, the country made a significant step towards internationalism at the beginning of the Meiji period, yet simultaneously entered into an era of increasing nationalism (Jennes 9). From the very beginning of foreign missions in Japan, conflict existed between the Japanese government and missionaries. Even after the restrictions against evangelization to the native Japanese were lifted, the missions

experienced hostility and challenges in spreading their faith (229). This hostility culminated during the Second World War as it morphed into nationalism. In 1890 Shinto ideals became the foundation of education, and private schools were required to comply (Van Hecken 159). In 1905 the anti-Christian brochure, “Our Nation and the Christian Religion” was published. It argued that Christianity would destroy the “Japanese spirit” (91). Controversy ensued in 1907 when the Japanese government required all Japanese, Christians included, to pay respects to the emperor and Shinto shrines. Surely these laws affected the school founded by the sisters of St. Paul de Chartres in Hakodate. Christians became plagued by the question of whether they could comply with these requirements in good conscience (92). These requirements agitated Catholics and even “threatened the very existence of Catholic life” until 1932, when the government designated shrine visits as nonreligious and the Vatican allowed Catholics to participate (Spae 11). Nationalism, however, increasingly plagued Catholics in Japan (Laures 243).

In 1940 during the Second World War, the Japanese government asserted new control on religious organizations. The Decree on Religious Registration, as well as a law created by the Ministry of Education, gave the State control over the Religious Associations (Van Hecken 92-94). Many educators, often missionaries, were replaced by secular Japanese teachers (92), foreign church leaders or “ordinaries” were forced to resign (Laures 244), and church activity was monitored by the government (Van Hecken 94). The situation worsened. Between 1941 and 1945 Japan interned or forced repatriation of foreign priests (95). Spies in Hakodate detained and deported Fr. Shimada Minoru (see figure 6), a Japanese priest serving the church in Hakodate (Obara). Many seminarians and cloistered monks were also required to enter the military (Van Hecken 95). While this was yet another challenging period for Catholics in Japan, the situation contrasts sharply with the Catholic experience in post-war Japan.

The end of the Second World War marked the beginning of flourishing Catholicism in Japan. In figure 7, parishioners pose for a picture with American occupying soldiers who frequented mass in Hakodate. Although the photograph signifies the defeat of the Japanese in the war, for Japanese Catholics it signified the end of repression. Churches and institutions seized by the government were returned, and freedom of worship was granted by the Japanese government (Laures 246). So many people converted to Catholicism after the war that missionaries returned to care for the influx in Catholics (246-247). The Church also experienced an increase in vocations and Catholic institutions in Japan (247). This period of growth and peace for the Japanese Church would continue until an increasingly global and modern Catholic Church developed out of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, a new era for not only the Church in Japan, but the Church as a whole.

Materializing at the end of isolationism and the dawn of the Meiji period, the Catholic Church arrived at a new age in Japan. Japan's renewed interaction with other countries allowed the Church in Japan to encounter and ally with the trends of the global church in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. The church responded to Japan's globalization by sending missionaries to build churches and institutions and by spreading ultramontanism that saturated Catholic culture. As Japan engaged in warfare during the Second World War, the Church also became a reactionist to religious persecution. The change in relationship that occurred during the post-isolationist era in Japan between the Church and the government was similar to the change that occurred more recently at the Second Vatican Council. This was a turning point; it was the Church that initiated change and became more global. The modern Catholic Church in Japan is not the same as it was in the Meiji period, just as the global Church is not the same as it was in the previous centuries. It continues to follow global Catholic trends—now the church

experiences declining mass attendance and participation of young people. The Japanese Catholic Church continues to change, but despite the new challenges it faces, Japanese Catholics have hope, a hope shared with their persecuted Japanese brothers and sisters who lived for two hundred years in seclusion.

Appendix

Figure 1 (“Fr. John Marie 1875-1878.”)

Figure 2 (“Religious Sisters and Young Girls.”)

Figure 3 (“Mass at Hakodate Church.”)

Figure 4 (“Hakodate Church in Color.”)

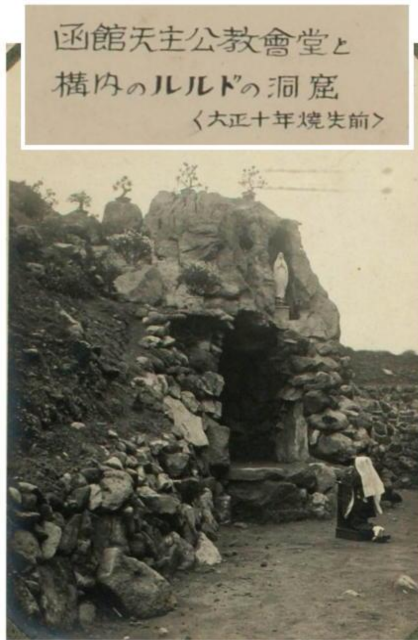

Figure 6

Figure 5 (“Lourdes Grotto in Hakodate.”) (“Fr. Shimada Minoru 1935-1943, 1945-1950.”)

Figure 7 (“American Soldiers and Hakodate Parishioners”)

References

Fig. 7. “American Soldiers and Hakodate Parishioners.” *Hakodate Catholic Church*, http://motomachich.holy.jp/.

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Fig. 6. “Fr. Shimada Minoru 1935-1943, 1945-1950.” *Hakodate Catholic Church*, http://motomachich.holy.jp/.

Fig. 4. “Hakodate Church in Color.” *Hakodate Catholic Church*, http://motomachi-ch.holy.jp/.

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Fig. 5. “Lourdes Grotto in Hakodate.” *Hakodate Catholic Church*, http://motomachi-ch.holy.jp/.

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Fig. 2. "Religious Sisters and Young Girls." *Hakodate Catholic Church*, http://motomachi-ch.holy.jp/.

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