# On Japan's Catholic Outposts, Faith Abides Even as the Churches Dwindle

Ko Sasaki for The New York Times

Parishioners took part in a recent service at a Roman Catholic church, in Shinkamigoto, Japan.

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SHINKAMIGOTO, Japan — Fringed with sheer cliffs and the narrowest strips of flat land, covered in mountains of dense forest, the islands of the Goto Archipelago of Japan are some of the country's most remote and forbidding. And yet atop hills overlooking fishing villages, reached by bridges and serpentine roads paved over just a generation ago, rise the steeples of Roman Catholic churches.

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Ko Sasaki for The New York Times

Ohso Church, in the background, is one of the 29 Roman Catholic churches left in Shinkamigoto. Several churches have closed in recent years.

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Japan's persecuted Christians fled here centuries ago, seeking to practice their faith in one of the country's southwesternmost reaches. They eventually forged Roman Catholic communities found nowhere else in Japan, villages where everyone was Catholic, life revolved around the parish and even the school calendar yielded to the church's.

Today, one quarter of the roughly 25,000 inhabitants of the district, a collection of seven inhabited islands and 60 uninhabited ones, are Roman Catholic, an extraordinary percentage in a country where Christianity failed to take root. It is by far the highest level in Japan, where Catholics account for about one-third of 1 percent of the overall population and where the total number of Christians amounts to less than 1 percent.

But like Japan's Roman Catholicism in general, this

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A stained-glass window in another church in the village includes representations of former residents who were officials in the local fishermen's union.


The New York Times

Several churches have closed in recent years on the Goto Archipelago.

redoubt is also losing its vitality for reasons both familiar to Catholics in other wealthy nations and peculiar to Japan. Young Catholics here are loosening their ties to the church, their spiritual needs fulfilled elsewhere. Those who have left for the cities are marrying non-Catholics and are being absorbed into an overwhelmingly non-Christian culture.

Several churches have closed here in recent years. The membership is graying and dwindling at many of the surviving 29 churches, especially at those on the islands' least accessible corners.

"The situation here is severe — a question of which churches will be abandoned next," said the Rev. Shigeshi Oyama, 61, who, because of a shortage of priests, celebrated Mass at two churches on the Fifth Sunday of Lent recently.

Parishioners arrived at Hiyamizu Church for the 7 a.m. Mass, ascending a steep concrete stairway to reach a small wooden white building with a red roof. They took off their shoes at the entrance, in keeping with the custom at many Japanese churches, and stepped onto the church's cold, though carpeted, floor. Mostly elderly, with the women hewing to tradition by covering their heads with white veils, they listened to the liturgy on the raising of Lazarus.

After Mass, one of the few younger members, Toshiyuki Mori, 40, stood outside in the courtyard, smoking a cigarette and peering down at a small bay that a solitary boat was silently crossing. An irregular churchgoer, Mr. Mori had brought his son, Tomoyuki, 8, an altar boy, to church on this morning.

Much of Mr. Mori's boyhood had centered on the parish, and he had married a woman of the same faith. But unlike their parents, the young couple had lost the habit of praying before meals or attending Mass.

It was not that their lives now were so busy, Mr. Mori said. "I guess my faith gradually faded," he said.

He said he would not compel his son to remain a Catholic, adding, "Once he becomes aware to a certain degree, he can quit if that's what he wants."

For now, though, his son said, school was more fun than church.

"But Father Oyama bought us sweets," the boy added. "And the day before yesterday, he bought us ice cream, for everybody up to sixth grade."

Japan's Catholic population — 452,571 in 2006, or 0.35 percent of the country's total population of 127 million — is believed to have peaked, said the Rev. Ritsuo Hisashi, a spokesman at the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan in Tokyo.

The church is grappling with problems like a shortage of young Japanese priests and nuns. In the diocese of Naha, in Okinawa, priests from Vietnam and the Philippines have come to fill the posts, Father Hisashi said.

Most Japanese follow a combination of Buddhism and Shintoism, though Christmas and weddings in chapels, stripped of their religious meaning, have taken root in Japanese society.

Christianity had a promising start in Japan with the arrival in 1549 of Francis Xavier, the

Jesuit missionary. But the isolationist Tokugawa Shogunate eventually proscribed Christianity and expelled all missionaries; persecuted Christians went into hiding and fled to places like the Goto Archipelago. For more than two centuries, Japan's "hidden Christians" practiced their faith in secret and without priests until after the United States forced Japan to open up in the mid-19th century — an example often held as proof of the resilience of Japanese Christian faith.

"Given that history, it's all the more puzzling why there are so few believers now," Father Hisashi said.

Here in Shinkamigoto, many say growing wealth has sapped the people's faith. Catholics were far poorer than non-Catholics, occupying villages along this district's harsh, western shore, or on its fringes, some more accessible by water than by land.

But starting three decades ago, roads were built linking the most remote villages. Catholics began making economic strides, erasing the gap between them and non-Catholics. Interest in the church began declining.

"The same thing happened in Europe," said the Rev. Yasuhiko Hamasaki, a priest at the Kamigoto Catholic Center here. "When people start gaining material wealth, they end up seeking comfort and healing in material things."

Aggravating matters were a low birthrate and demographic changes afflicting all of rural Japan. Here, with a decline in the fishing industry and public works, the young have gravitated to cities; many never return, inviting their aging parents to join them instead.

With the town's population declining by double digits every month, local government officials are hoping to turn their churches — two of them soon to be added to Unesco's World Heritage List — into tourist attractions.

One of them, Kashiragashima Church, is on an islet that was linked by a bridge to the main island only a couple of decades ago. Today, 16 elderly parishioners are left, served by a priest who visits two Sundays a month.

Nine of the residents took turns cleaning the church and adorning it with flowers from their own gardens. The parish's lay leader, Yoshiki Matsui, 70, a fisherman, had mixed feelings about its designation as a World Heritage site. The parishioners were sure to decrease and the government would cover major repairs with the listing.

"But this was not built with the thought that it would become a cultural heritage site," Mr. Matsui said.

Away from the archipelago's Catholic villages, more and more of the young now live in cities with few churches and believers.

"The bishop of Nagasaki once said that when Catholic kids go out into a city, it's a religion's graveyard," said Kyushiro Urakoshi, 77, a member of Komeyama Church.

Mr. Urakoshi had arrived early for Saturday evening Mass at Komeyama, the northernmost parish on a slender, fingerlike piece of land jutting out into the sea and reachable by a single-lane mountainous road.

Another parishioner, Tsuyako Takeya, 66, said all but her youngest child had migrated to cities. Only two of her five grandchildren had been baptized.

"My other children married non-Catholics," Ms. Takeya explained, adding that she was unsure how many of her children had kept the faith.

Those who remain do what would have been unthinkable a generation ago by skipping Mass or marrying non-Catholics. The growing ties with non-Catholics have already changed some practices at Ohso Church, nearer the center of town.

Parishioners now say prayers for the dead during the Buddhist festival for ancestors in

mid-August, one of Japan's biggest holidays. Catholics also gather and, following Buddhist custom, pay tribute to a relative one year or three years after a death.

"In this age," said Mitsunori Ikuta, 60, Ohso's lay leader, "we have come to accept these things."

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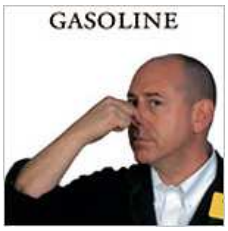


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