

August 10, 2005

Chapter 7: Atom-bombed Nagasaki

*Between the idea and the reality
Between the motion and the act
Falls the shadow.... This is the
way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper. -- The Hollow Men T.S. Eliot*

by Fr. Stephen Lynch, OFM,

Life out of ashes

Out of the ashes of atom bombed Nagasaki came a story of faith in God that makes one proud to be Christian. A Japanese doctor told me this story at, of all places, a Rotary Meeting in Tokyo in 1972. For 6 years, I was a member of the second oldest Rotary Club in Tokyo during the early seventies. One of my Rotarian duties took me to other Rotary Clubs to speak about international friendship. During lunch, at one such Rotary Meeting, I was quite preoccupied with getting my talk in Japanese together as best I could.

Sitting next to me at the table was Club President, Dr. Takenaka, a short, distinguished-looking Japanese surgeon whom I had met for the first time that day. This silver-haired man, with gentle eyes set in a round, kindly face, turned to me with a little smile and asked, "Are you a Catholic priest, sir?" I nodded that I was. He replied, "I'm a Catholic, too." In a country where less than one half of one percent are Catholic, I was genuinely amazed that a Japanese Rotary president would be Christian.

He went on to tell me, "I probably would not be Catholic today if the atom bomb had not exploded over Nagasaki on August 9, 1945." At this remark my surprise turned to shock. Up until that moment, I had never heard anyone speak of anything good coming out of the atomic bombings.

Here is Dr. Takenaka's story.

It all began only hours after the atom bomb mushroomed over Nagasaki in the summer of 1945. Dr. Takenaka was working as a surgeon in a military hospital just outside the city of Nagasaki. Almost half of the medical personnel in the city died in the first seconds of the blast.

Nagasaki is shaped something like a salad bowl with mountains on three sides. The open side makes Nagasaki one of Japan's great seaports. When the atomic bomb exploded over Nagasaki, fire and radiation splashed up the sides of this salad bowl-like city. It is estimated that about 60,000 people died in the blast.

The American bomber, nicknamed Bock's Car, had the city of Kokura, not Nagasaki, as its primary target. However, the clouds were so thick over the primary target, that the bombardier could not pick up his aiming point. As fuel was running low, the pilot had to go to Nagasaki, which was his secondary target. Although there were clouds over Nagasaki, too, the oval

stadium, near two Mitsubishi war-goods plants, was visible. The bomb, called the Fat Man, was released by parachute to explode at an altitude of 1600 feet. This was a plutonium bomb, even more devastating than Hiroshima's uranium bomb. Because the bomb was dropped off target and the wind took it even more off course, Madame Butterfly's house was saved, but "ground zero", the epicenter of the blast, was right over the Catholic Cathedral of the Assumption in the Urakami district of Nagasaki. The only things found in the ashes of the 2000-seat Cathedral were the charred buttons from the cassocks of the Japanese priests hearing confessions during the high mass going on at the time. Not deliberately, of course, but Christian America had just destroyed the largest Christian church in the Orient, and snuffed out about 75 percent of the Christians who lived in and around Nagasaki.

Dr. Takenaka went on to describe the scene shortly after the A-bomb exploded. He said, "Being only a few miles away, we knew something dreadful had happened to the city. But when we arrived on the scene itself, I couldn't believe my eyes. Blazing rubble, littered with bodies burned beyond recognition; incredible heat, and the stench of scorched flesh made us nauseous. Horribly burned people, screaming hysterically, twisted and squirmed uncontrollably in pain, terror and panic -- pleading pitifully for help. Many of the irradiated victims were faceless, with only indentations where eyes, nose and ears had once been, their skin hanging in folds from their arms and legs. Among the ashes were both the living and the dead. Even though we were experienced medical personnel, the scale of devastation shocked us, to the point that we were temporarily immobilized. "

This man with bushy eyebrows and graying temples continued, "I thought to myself, if there's a hell, this is what it must be like. Many of the survivors were burned so badly that even under the best circumstances, nothing could be done to save them.

Supplies were short; needs were enormous. Vehicles were stalled in the rubble, so the wounded had to be carried by hand to whatever clearing could be found."

Dr. Takenaka said that glazed-eyed survivors, screaming in agony, pulled frantically at his white coat, begging him to do something for them.

"I did what I could," he said dejectedly.

Because everything had been leveled, there were no shelters where the victims could be taken to protect them from the 100-degree heat of the scorching August sun. Many simply expired in the ashes of their own homes and places of business.

In a voice filled with sadness, Dr. Takenaka went on, "The heat from the fires, plus the heat from the very hot sun exhausted us quickly, but we knew we must try to keep going for the sake of the victims. Most of us worked without rest for over 48 hours. Food and water were simply non-existent at that point. Radiation and epidemic loomed as our greatest fears. So many dead, unburied bodies made the danger of plague positively frightening."

Dr. Takenaka continued: "We were working in the Urakami Cathedral section of the burned-out city. As I made my way slowly through piles of human bodies, I heard what I thought was the sound of singing. I couldn't believe my ears."

Dr. Takenaka's tone softened and quickened. "Frankly, because I was on the verge of exhaustion, I wondered if I was beginning to hallucinate, the horrors of this hell being too much for a human being to bear. Suddenly, I saw them, 20 or 30 people, some critically burned, sitting in a kind of circle singing and apparently praying. They had beads in their hands which reminded me of the Buddhist juzu beads. On a closer look, as I made my way over to this little group, I discovered the beads had crosses on one end. They seemed like a tiny island of composure and serenity in what I would forever remember as a nightmarish sea of horror, destruction and panic."

"Who are you?, I asked, still not sure that I wasn't going out of my mind.

"The noise of screaming and crying around us was so loud, I could hardly hear their reply.

"Who are you?, I shouted again at the top of my voice."

The reply came back, "We are Christians, and we are praying to our God."

"Of course, I had heard of Jesus Christ, but this was the first time in my life that I had ever spoken to Christians. For people to have such inner composure at a time like this jolted me way down deep inside with a strange mixture of fear and awe. I said to them, 'Some of you are badly burned. Let me do what I can for you.'"

As the doctor prepared to give these hapless victims medical attention, he was stunned to hear them say, "Thank you for coming to us, doctor, but God is with us and will take care of us. Please go and help those who need you more. We will be all right."

This soft-spoken, ingenuous man paused reflectively, his eyes misty, and then went on, "Everyone around me was reaching out desperately, begging me to come and give them medical attention. I just could not believe my ears when this group of Christians calmly asked that I go to the others who needed me more. I honestly never dreamed this kind of selfless concern for others really existed. Although I knew nothing about the teaching of Jesus Christ, I immediately saw the difference between a true Christian and the rest of us. In the presence of indescribable suffering, their faith in God never wavered; and they were more concerned about others than themselves.

"I have no way of knowing, but I suspect that most of that little band of Christians died before the fires went out in their incinerated city."

Now, with a little smile, Dr. Takenaka observed, "My first contact with Christianity revealed a remarkable quality of heart, and an heroic dimension of inner strength. I said to myself, if there is a God, I hope that God will give me the faith to believe what these Christians believed."

Fifteen years later, in Tokyo, Dr. Takenaka met the famous Paris Foreign Missionary, Fr. Candau. After a year's instruction, Dr. Takenaka was baptized a Christian.

For this one Japanese naval doctor, the atom bombing of Nagasaki became the vehicle of his conversion from Buddhism to Christianity. Dr. Takenaka's story and mine intersected only one time in this world, at a Tokyo Rotary luncheon. But I'll never forget him or the fact a Rotary Club on the outskirts of Tokyo brought us together in the early 1970's.

As Dr. Takenaka and I parted that day in Tokyo, he left me with these words: "The great Jesus Christ taught that The gift you have received, you should give as a gift. I believe the seeds of my own Christian faith were sown in atom-bombed Nagasaki. My heart tells me that those dying Christians passed on to me the gift of their Christian faith. And now I try my best to share my own faith with others. I believe I am the spiritual child of those Nagasaki Christians. For them, dying was truly gain; and for me staying alive meant becoming Christian -- this was also gain. From those Christians, I learned a very important lesson: I must let God be God in my life."

St. Paul has to be right when he reminds us that the sufferings of these times are not worthy to be compared to the glory that is to come.