



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of October 28, 2011,  
Saints Simon and Jude

**Dear Friends,**

**T**HE day after the terrible earthquake and tsunami that ravaged Japan on March 11, 2011, many people made heroic efforts to aid the victims of the tragedy, and to curb the risk of nuclear contamination posed by the Fukushima nuclear power plant. Father Yasutaka Muramatsu, a Japanese Salesian, gave this account: "Young people, Christian and non-Christian, have mobilized. They have wanted to go immediately into the affected areas to put their energy and enthusiasm at the victims' disposal, to help them, offer a smile, give them a little hope again. It is truly moving to see how they burn with love toward their neighbor. It is a lesson for all us educators." In the same country, a remarkable devotion was similarly demonstrated in 1945 after the atomic bomb fell on Nagasaki, particularly on the part of Doctor Takashi Nagai.

Takashi Nagai was born into a Shintoist family in 1908, in Izumo, close to Hiroshima. In 1928, he entered the faculty of medicine in Nagasaki. "From my high school years," he would later write, "I was a prisoner of materialism. Shortly after I entered the faculty of medicine, they had me dissect cadavers... The marvelous structure of the entire body, the detailed organization of its smallest parts, all this aroused my admiration. But what I was handling was nothing but mere matter to me. The soul? A fantasy invented by impostors to deceive simple people."

## ***A mother's last look***

**O**ne day in 1930, a telegram arrived from his father: "Come home!" He left as quickly as possible. When he arrived, he was stunned to learn that his mother had suffered a stroke and was no longer able to speak. Sitting beside her bed, he read in her eyes a last goodbye. This experience of death changed his life: "With this last penetrating look, my mother demolished the ideological framework that I had constructed. This woman who had brought me into the world and raised me, this woman who had never given herself a moment of rest out of her love for me, spoke to me very clearly in the last moments of her life. Her look told me that the human spirit continues to live after death. All this came as an intuition, an intuition that tasted of truth."

Takashi then began reading the *Pensées* of Pascal, the great seventeenth-century French scientist and thinker. "The soul, eternity... God. So our great predecessor in medicine, Pascal, had accepted these things!" he thought. "This incomparable sage truly believed in



Doctor Takashi Nagai

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them! What must this Catholic faith be, if the scientist Pascal was able to accept it without contradicting his knowledge?" Pascal explains that we encounter God in faith and in prayer. Even if you are not yet able to believe, he said, do not neglect prayer or attendance at Mass. "I am always ready to prove a hypothesis in the laboratory," thought Nagai, "why not try this prayer that Pascal emphasized so much?" He decided to look for a Catholic family who would agree to take him in as a boarder during his studies. This would provide him with the opportunity to learn about Catholicism and Christian prayer. He was received by the Moriyama family. Mr. Moriyama, a livestock dealer, descended from one of the old Christian families that, throughout two and a half centuries of persecution, were able to preserve the faith brought to Japan by Saint Francis Xavier. The purity of this Christian faith amazed young Nagai—humble farmers taught him by their example what the great scientist Pascal had believed!

In March 1932, a severe earache left Takashi deaf in his right ear, and so his plans for the future were turned upside down. No longer able to use a stethoscope, he had to give up ordinary medicine. So he redirected his studies toward radiological medicine, which was just being introduced in Japan. This science gave doctors tremendous new opportunities to detect diseases.

Mr. and Mrs. Moriyama had a daughter, Midori, a teacher in another town. All three prayed for Takashi's

conversion, thinking that perhaps God had sent him to them for this purpose. On December 25, 1932, Midori was at her parents' home for Christmas. "Doctor," Mr. Moriyama asked Takashi, "why don't you come with us to Midnight Mass?"—"But, I'm not Christian!"—"It doesn't matter; the shepherds and Wise Men who came to the stable weren't Christian, either. Yet, when they saw the Child, they believed. You will never be able to believe if you do not come to pray at church." After a moment, Nagai surprised himself by answering, "Yes, I would like to go with you this evening." Five thousand Christians filled the cathedral, all chanting the same Credo in Latin. This made a strong impression on Nagai, and encouraged him in thinking about the Catholic religion, although he did not allow himself to be persuaded.

One night, Mr. Moriyama came to wake Takashi: Midori was writhing in pain on her bed. The young doctor very quickly diagnosed acute appendicitis. He heard Mr. Moriyama murmur, "This is the will of God. Who knows the good that will come of it..." In spite of the heavy snow, Takashi ran to the school next door to phone the hospital. "Hello, it's Nagai. Who is in the emergency room this evening? Good. Could you please get him?" A friend answered, and Nagai asked him if he could perform an appendectomy immediately. On his affirmative response, Takashi returned to get Midori. "It would take too long to get a taxi, with all this snow. We cannot risk waiting." Then, speaking to Mr. Moriyama: "If you carry the lantern in front of us, I can easily carry Midori." On the way, Takashi realized that Midori's heart was racing and that she was burning with fever. Her life was in danger. He picked up the pace. Finally, the hospital! The operating room was ready. Seven minutes later, it was all over. Midori was saved. Out of gratitude, Midori would do everything she could to obtain her rescuer's conversion.

### **Midori's little catechism**

The following year, Takashi was called up by the Japanese army, and left to fight in Manchuria. In a package that Midori sent him, he found a little catechism that he read with interest. At the end of a year, he returned home, almost in despair as he became aware of the disorders of his life and the memory of the horrible scenes from the war. He went to the cathedral in Nagasaki, where he met a Japanese priest who listened to him at length. Encouraged, Takashi took up his radiology work again and began to study the Bible, liturgy, and prayer of the Catholic Church. But the moral demands of the Gospel and the necessity of breaking with his family's Shintoist ties remained an obstacle to his conversion. One day, in the midst of his doubts, he took up the *Pensées* again and came across a sentence that caught his eye: "There is sufficient light for those who want to see, and sufficient darkness for those who don't." Suddenly, everything became clear for him. He made his decision and asked for baptism, which he received in June 1934.

He took the name Paul, after Saint Paul Miki, the Japanese martyr crucified in Nagasaki in 1597.

Two months later, he married Midori. Before the wedding, he wanted to make known to her the significant risks to which his profession exposed him, for radiologists of the day did not have the means to adequately protect themselves against X-rays. Midori understood the danger to Takashi's life, but she shared his views and his ideal of being a "pioneer" in saving human lives. Nagai would be more than a doctor—he would become an apostle of charity towards his neighbor. He wrote, "The doctor's task is to suffer and rejoice with his patients, to strive to diminish their sufferings as though they were his own. He must sympathize with their pains. However, in the end, it is not the doctor who cures the patient, but God's good will. Once that is understood, medical diagnosis gives rise to prayer."

Mobilized again from June 1937 to March 1940, he participated as a doctor in the Sino-Japanese war. His devotion to everyone, Japanese soldiers or Chinese, women, children and the elderly who were pitilessly drawn into the horrible slaughter, grew heroically. On his return to Japan, the demand for X-rays increased. Soon, Takashi noticed on his hands disturbing marks, and he often felt exhausted. Sometimes, in moments of exhaustion, he would close his door and sit before the statue of MARY in his office. Saying the rosary would gradually bring him interior peace.

### **Three years to live**

One of Takashi's colleagues persuaded him to undergo an X-ray himself. One morning in June 1945, he brought himself to do it. "Prepare the equipment," he said to his assistant. "But Doctor, there aren't any patients here yet." "I'm the patient," replied Nagai, pointing to his chest. "And the doctor?" "He's here, too!" and he pointed to his eyes. One look at the X-ray took Nagai's breath away—on the left there was a large black patch—hypertrophy of the spleen! He diagnosed leukemia and murmured, "Lord, I am nothing more than a worthless servant. Protect Midori and our two children. May it be done to me according to Your will!" Doctor Kageura, head of the department of internal medicine, confirmed his analysis: "Chronic leukemia. Life expectancy: three years." He had used up his life saving innumerable patients whom no one else could have X-rayed.

When he returned home, Takashi told Midori everything. His wife knelt before the crucifix that her family had kept during the two and a half centuries of persecutions, and prayed at length, shaking with sobs, until peace returned to her soul. Nagai prayed as well—he was overcome with remorse at the thought that he had always thrown himself headfirst into his work, without thinking enough about his wife. But Midori showed herself equal to the situation. The next day, a new man left

for his work—Midori's full acceptance of the tragedy and her refusal to hear talk of "neglect" had filled him with strength.

August 9, 1945, 11:02 a.m. A blinding flash. An atomic bomb had just exploded in Urakami, Nagasaki's northern district. In their war against Japan, the leaders of the United States had taken recourse to a terrifying new weapon—the A-bomb. A first bomb had been released on Hiroshima, and a second devastated Nagasaki. Temperatures of 9,000 degrees Celsius, 72,000 dead, 100,000 wounded. At the university of medicine, 700 meters from the center of the explosion, Nagai, who was filing X-rays, was thrown onto the floor, pierced with shards of glass. Blood flowed copiously from his right temple... Soon, there was an uninterrupted flood of wounded: bloody silhouettes, clothing torn away, hair burned, rushed to the hospital door—a vision of hell.

### *Her rosary!*

The fire approached the hospital. The patients were evacuated to the top of a nearby hill. Nagai spent himself serving them to the limits of his strength. At 4 p.m., the fire reached the radiology department. Thirteen years of research, the equipment, the precious documentation—all went up in smoke. August 10<sup>th</sup> was spent caring for the wounded. On the 11<sup>th</sup>, the work became a little less pressing, and Takashi left to look for Midori, who had remained at the house while the children and their grandmother had been in a safe place in the mountains since August 7<sup>th</sup>. He had difficulty finding the location of his home, amidst the piles of tiles and ashes. Suddenly, he found the carbonized remains of his wife. Kneeling, he prayed and cried, then gathered the bones into a container. Something shone weakly in the powder of bones from her right hand—her rosary!

He bent his head. "My God, I thank You for having allowed her to die praying. MARY, Mother of sorrows, thank you for having accompanied her at the hour of her death... JESUS, You carried the heavy cross on the way to Your crucifixion. Now, You spread a light of peace on the mystery of the suffering and death, both Midori's and mine... Strange destiny—I had believed that Midori would lead me to the grave... Now her poor remains rest in my arms... Her voice seems to murmur: forgive, forgive." Nagai's forgiveness would be absolute. He would encourage Christians discouraged by the loss of their families to abandon themselves to God's Providence, which always brings good out of evil.

On August 15, 1945, a radio message from the emperor announced Japan's surrender. At the beginning of September, Nagai was dying. The radiation from the A-bomb had made his illness worse. He received the last sacraments and said, "I will die happy," then fell into a semi-coma. Someone brought him water from the Lourdes grotto that had been built not far from there by Father Maximilian Kolbe. He would later write, "I heard

a voice telling me to ask Father Maximilian Kolbe to pray for me. I did this. Then, I addressed myself to Christ, saying, 'Lord, I deliver myself into Your divine hands.' The next morning, Takashi was out of danger, and he would attribute to Father Kolbe (now canonized) the six years of remission from his disease.

### *"I want to be the first to live there!"*

While the residents feared to return to Urakami, Nagai declared, "I want to be the first to live there!" He built himself a shelter close to his former home—some sheet metal resting on a remnant of a wall. In front, two rocks formed a makeshift hearth above which hung a cauldron. To the side, an old bottle without a neck collected water. His clothing was one of the navy uniforms distributed by the army to the disaster victims. He began to remove the debris from his home, where he discovered the crucifix from the family altar. "Everything has been taken from me," he said, "except this crucifix I found."

On November 23, 1945, Nagai was invited to speak during a Requiem Mass celebrated beside the ruins of the Urakami Cathedral. Christ's holocaust on Calvary shed light on and gave meaning to Nagasaki's "holocaust": "On the morning of August 9<sup>th</sup>," said Takashi, "an atomic bomb exploded above our district. In an instant, 8,000 Christians were called to God... At midnight that night, our cathedral suddenly caught fire and was consumed. At that very moment, at the imperial palace, His Majesty the emperor made known his decision... On August 15<sup>th</sup>, the imperial edict that put an end to the fighting was officially issued, and the whole world saw the light of peace. August 15<sup>th</sup> is also the great feast of the Assumption of MARY. It is not for nothing that the Urakami Cathedral was consecrated to Her... Is there not a deep connection between the annihilation of this Christian city and the end of the war? Was not Nagasaki the chosen victim, the spotless lamb, the holocaust offered on the altar of sacrifice, immolated for the sins of all the nations during the Second World War? ... Let us be grateful that Nagasaki was chosen for this holocaust! Let us be grateful, for through this sacrifice, peace has been given to the world, and religious freedom has been given to Japan."

In spring 1947, Takashi's illness forced him to take to his bed in his hut and give up his professorship, with the result that he found himself without resources. "My head is still working," he thought. "My eyes, my ears, my hands and fingers are still good." So he began to write. For his still young children, Makoto and Kayano, he put together a collection of advice. "My dear children, love your neighbor as yourself. This is the word I leave you. It is by this word that I begin this document, and it is perhaps by it that I will end it, and again by it that I will sum it up." This message, and his example alone, would have been enough to imprint it in their hearts. Had their father's entire life been anything else than heroic service

to his neighbor, service that now was leading him to his death? It was to this service that Nagai wanted to dedicate himself until his final hours.

Lying on his back, he wrote holding a small tablet like schoolchildren use. He noted, "When I woke up at 1 o'clock this morning, my fever had fallen. After drinking some coffee from the thermos, I was able to write until seven o'clock in the morning—the work has progressed well!" Soon he could write only at night, because visitors announced themselves from the morning on, but he never showed any impatience toward them. "It is a bother," he wrote, "but since they are kind enough to come here, shouldn't I try to pour a little joy into their hearts and speak to them of our Catholic hope? I cannot turn them away."

### Only one guarantee

It was in these difficult conditions that Nagai wrote and published fifteen volumes in four years. What aim did he propose in his writings? First, to give a faithful account of the atomic explosion, through his extraordinary experience and his personal skill; secondly, to work toward the establishment of peace. Convinced above all that a lasting peace could only be based on the spirit of love that shines in Catholic doctrine, he considered it his vocation to spread the Christian message. At the end of his book *The Bells of Nagasaki*, he wrote, "Will humanity be happy in the atomic age, or miserable? What shall we do with this double-edged sword hidden in the universe by God and now discovered by man? Using it well would make great strides of progress for civilization; evil use of it would destroy the world. The decision rests in the free will of man. He holds his destiny in his hands. In thinking about it, one is struck with terror and, for my

part, I believe that a true religious spirit is the sole guarantee in this area... On our knees, in the ashes of the atomic desert, we pray that Urakami will be the last victim of the bomb. The bell rings... O MARY conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to Thee."

In March 1951, the doctor's health gave cause for alarm, but did not affect his customary good humor. In April, he wrote his last book. He had scarcely finished it when he suffered a stroke. He was taken to the hospital, where he lost consciousness. When he came to, he said in a loud voice: "JESUS, MARY, JOSEPH," then more weakly, "I place my soul in Your hands." Deeply moved, the nurse gave the large family crucifix to Makoto, his son, to take to his father, who took it and exclaimed in a surprisingly loud voice: "Pray, please, pray..." He died immediately thereafter, on this first of May, the beginning of the month of Mary.

During the funeral at the Urakami Cathedral, the mayor of Nagasaki solemnly read some three hundred messages of condolence, beginning with that of the Prime Minister. At the end of the ceremony, the crowd set out for the cemetery, a kilometer and a half away—the head of the procession arrived there while majority of the participants had not yet left the cathedral. Takashi Nagai was buried beside Midori. For her grave, he had chosen the epitaph *Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to Your word* (Lk. 1:38). For his own grave: *We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty* (Lk. 17:10). His influence spread thanks to his books—from 1948, they have been read throughout Japan—which have made a remarkable contribution to the social education of his fellow citizens and to the evangelization of his country.

Let us ask the Blessed Virgin and Saint JOSEPH, for ourselves and all those dear to us, for a true conversion, a love of neighbor that drives us to the supreme sacrifice, and a holy death that might usher us into the eternal happiness of Heaven. And let us entrust the noble and courageous people of Japan to Our Lady of Nagasaki, the wooden statue of which was miraculously preserved from the nuclear peril in 1945.

Dom Antoine Marie  
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