Part 3: Kyoto, the "Rome of Buddhism"
— The Resumption of Mission in the Meiji Era and Father Villion's Legacy —

Bringing the Gospel to the Ancient Capital

In Part 2, we saw how the hopes of the Church in Japan and the Maryknoll Mission Society came together, opening the way for missionary work in Kyoto and Shiga.

Kyoto flourished as Japan's capital for more than a thousand years, becoming a center of the nation's religious culture. In the early Meiji era, the head temples and other temples of numerous Buddhist schools—including Higashi Honganji, Nishi Honganji, and Chion-in—were concentrated in the city. Buddhist culture was deeply woven into daily life through scholarship, education, the arts, and annual observances. Just as Rome is the center of the Catholic Church, Kyoto was the historical and spiritual center of Japanese Buddhism. This is why Maryknoll called Kyoto the "Rome of Buddhism." Missionary work there was an undertaking that demanded great resolve.

Xavier's Hope for the Imperial Capital

In January 1551, St. Francis Xavier (1506–1552) visited Kyoto in the hope of obtaining permission from the emperor and the shogun to preach the Gospel. However, he was unable to secure the desired audiences in the war-torn capital and left Kyoto after about eleven days. Even so, his aspiration was carried forward by later missionaries.

In 1576, the Miyako Nanban-ji(temple), a church dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption, was built near Ubayanagi-chō, in what is now Nakagyō Ward. At that time, Christian churches were known as *Nanban-ji* or *Daiusu-dera*. The word *Daiusu* comes from the Portuguese word *Deus*, meaning "God." Even after Christianity was outlawed, the area continued to be known as *Daiusu-chō* or *Daiusu-no-tsuji*. These names were preserved in old maps and local histories.



Textile: "Nanban Temple Fan Design"
Based on an original artwork by Kanō Munetaka
Bōyōan Chapel
Photo from *The Road from Kyoto* (1997)

In 1587, when Toyotomi Hideyoshi issued the edict expelling Christian missionaries, the Miyako Nanban-ji was destroyed. In 1614, the Tokugawa shogunate's prohibition of Christianity was extended throughout Japan, bringing public missionary activity in Kyoto to an end.

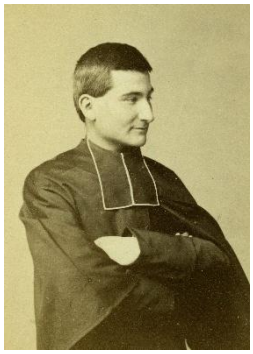
"*Notre-Dame de Miyako*," Who Waited Beneath the Earth

Prayers for the renewal of missionary work in Kyoto never ceased. In 1847, in the village of Digna in the Diocese of Saint-Claude, France, Father Léon Robin (1802–1882) founded a prayer association for the resumption of the mission in Japan. In 1864, he commissioned six bronze statues of the Virgin Mary to be cast in Rome. The following year, after being blessed by Pope Pius IX, the statues were given the title "*Notre-Dame de Miyako*".



One of these statues was sent to Yokohama in 1866, accompanied by a letter asking that it be buried on a hill overlooking Kyoto. In 1873, Father François-Paulin Vigroux, M.E.P. (1842–1909), of the Paris Foreign Missions Society, brought the statue to Kyoto and buried it at Shōgunzuka in the Higashiyama hills, overlooking the city. Beneath the earth, "Notre-Dame de Miyako" waited for the day when the way would once again be opened for missionary work.

Missionary Work in Kyoto amid Difficulties



Father Aimé Villion before leaving his native France

Even after the official noticeboards prohibiting Christianity were removed in 1873, missionary work in Kyoto remained difficult. Father Aimé Villion, M.E.P. (1843–1932), of the Paris Foreign Missions Society, came to Japan in 1868 and served in Nagasaki and Kobe before coming to Kyoto in September 1879 as a teacher of French. The activities of foreigners were still restricted, and suspicion of Christianity lingered. Father Villion established a language school and a temporary chapel in a rented house at Takakura-Nijō, where he placed the statue of *"Notre-Dame de Miyako"*, which had been unearthed at Shōgunzuka. Although he remained under police surveillance, he studied Buddhism at Chion-in and formed friendships with Buddhist monks. He sought to understand the culture of Kyoto and to proclaim the Gospel in a spirit of respect.

In 1888, the land on which the present-day Kawaramachi Church stands was purchased, and construction of a church began. Father Villion was transferred to Yamaguchi before the church was completed. On May 1, 1890, however, the Church of St. Francis Xavier was dedicated, and the statue of *"Notre-Dame de Miyako"* was placed on one of its side altars. After more than three centuries, Xavier's hope had borne fruit.

Foundations Laid across Four Prefectures

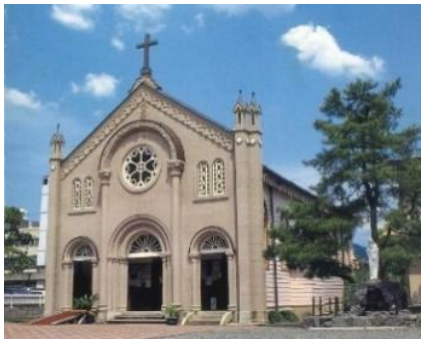
While in Nagasaki, Father Villion witnessed the suffering of Catholics who were exiled throughout Japan during the Fourth Urakami Persecution. Later, while serving in Kobe, he encouraged believers who secretly came from their places of exile to visit him and strengthened them in their faith.

Even after his assignment to Kyoto, he visited believers who had not returned to their native Urakami but had remained in Miyazu, Yamatokōriyama, Tsu, Ise, and other places. He devoted himself to sustaining their life of faith.



Father Jean-Louis Relave
Photo : IRFA / Missions Étrangères de Paris

Missionaries of the Paris Foreign Missions Society continued to establish mission centers throughout Kyoto, Shiga, Nara, and Mie. In Miyazu, Father Jean-Louis Relave (1857–1941) built the Miyazu Church of St. John the Baptist in 1896. The network of mission centers established across these four prefectures became the foundation of the future Diocese of Kyoto.



Miyazu Baptists St. John Catholic Church

Three young Maryknoll missionaries would next make their way to Kyoto—the "Rome of Buddhism"—carrying forward Xavier's hope, the prayer entrusted to "*Notre-Dame de Miyako*" and the legacy of the missionaries of the Meiji era.

In the next installment, we will follow these three missionaries as they studied the Japanese language and culture and prepared for their new mission.



The dedication ceremony of St. Francis Xavier Church (the original Kawaramachi Church).
The church became the cathedral of the Diocese of Kyoto in 1951,
was relocated to the Meiji Mura Museum in Inuyama, Aichi Prefecture, in 1973,
and was registered as a Tangible Cultural Property in 2004.