

St. Nikolai of Japan (1836-1912)

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I Canonization: The Making of an Orthodox Saint

How does one become recognized officially as a saint?

Canonization is the process by which the church formally determines that a particular deceased person is a saint, and belongs to the canon or list of saints. The veneration of saints appeared very early in church history, beginning with the cult of the martyrs and extending in the 4th century to the monks, the ascetics, and the great teaching bishops. They are seen as having clearly manifested God's holiness in the world. The categories of saints expanded over time to include: fools-for-Christ, unmercenary physicians, military saints, rulers who were protectors of the faith, and those called equal-to-the-apostles (meaning great missionaries). An expanded definition of a person who is equal-to-the-apostles is "one whose work greatly built up the church, whether through direct missionary work, or through assisting the church's place in society."

In current Orthodox practice, recognition of saintliness is achieved by local veneration of righteous individuals, and observance of supernatural signs that indicate divine favor. Bishops study the life, writings, and influence of a candidate, sometimes examine the mortal remains, and approve a canonization. Afterward, a memorial service is performed on the anniversary of the saint's death day, the saint's relics might be transferred to a new shrine, and a special icon is often designed. The names of the newly glorified saints are added to the calendar of the Orthodox Church by decision of a synod of governing bishops and notification is given to other churches. For an example, we can look to Archbishop Nikolai, who came to Japan from Russia as a hieromonk in 1861, and was named equal-to-the-apostles by Patriarch Alexis of Moscow and All of Russia in 1970. In the complex ancient culture of Japan, Nikolai achieved remarkable success as a devoted spiritual leader, working with inexhaustible energy to overcome many hardships. Among the Orthodox in Japan today, Nikolai continues to be venerated as a man of great sanctity and a special intercessor with the Lord, but such recognition was not quickly or easily achieved.

II Religions in Japan

According to a 1990 census, the average Japanese has more than one religion. The followers of Shinto are 112 million; Buddhism, 93 million; Christianity, 1-1/2 million; and other religions, including the New Religions, 11 million. In a population of only 120 million people, this means many Japanese adhere to two and sometimes even three religions, but religion for most Japanese means participating in rituals—such as visiting Shinto shrines or Buddhist temples at New Year—rather than holding specific beliefs.

Christianity came to Japan from the Western world in three waves: first in 1549; then after 1853, when Japan was forced to open to foreigners by American Commodore Perry; and third, following defeat in World War II. The earliest missionaries were Portuguese Jesuits and Spanish Franciscans, succeeded by the English and the Dutch. They came to spread the Gospel but also to trade. By 1639, the Dutch were the only European nation allowed to hold a trading station, one that operated on a small island in the harbor of Nagasaki. Christianity was proscribed, or forbidden, and all families had to register as Buddhists, because otherwise, Japan's rulers feared Christianity would become a vehicle for European

domination of their country. The second time Christianity appeared in Japan was when a number of Japanese Christian families who had survived the earlier persecution came out of hiding in the tolerant religious climate of the early Meiji Period (1868-1912), when the Empire of Japan was established. Japanese society was moved out of feudal isolation, and Roman Catholics reentered the country, as did Russian Orthodox missions and various Protestant groups. But, around 1890, Japan chose Shinto as the cornerstone of the new nation state and religious freedom again became an empty phrase. Still, many intellectuals converted to Christianity and at the beginning of the twentieth century, Christian ideas about benevolence influenced the spheres of education, social legislation, and labor unions in Japan. After World War II, the Christian Church increased in numbers, but it is still largely regarded as a foreign religion. The Orthodox faithful of today, for example, are not as numerous as they were in the Meiji era, when, thanks largely to the work of St. Nikolai Kasatkin, Orthodoxy had considerable presence in Japan.

Unfortunately, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 revived old suspicions between the two powers. And the Soviet Revolution of 1917 had a particularly devastating impact on the Japanese Church: financial support ceased, educational institutions were forced to close, and the church no longer could support the catechists who had served as the primary agents of the mission. More generally, Christianity has been limited in growth because of its requirement that adherents have no other religion, an imposition contrary to the inclusiveness and diversity of Japanese religiosity. All these difficulties, both political and theological, caused setbacks in more recent times, but let us now consider how St. Nikolai managed to evangelize the Japanese so successfully in an earlier period.

III Saint Nikolai Kasatkin

Biography and mission:

Ivan Dmitrevich Kasatkin was born in Smolensk province, Russia, in August 1836, to a father who was an Orthodox deacon. His mother died when he was five years old. He received the name Nikolai when he was tonsured a monk in June 1860. That same month he was ordained to the diaconate and then to the priesthood. He was raised to the rank of Archimandrite in 1870, consecrated Bishop in 1880, and elevated to the dignity of Archbishop in 1906. In the spring of 1970, he was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of Japan, a canonization subsequently recognized by the Orthodox Church in America and the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. It was a rapid rise from humble origins, indeed. Despite limited material resources, he apparently was helped early on by a priest who recognized his spiritual gifts, and favored him in an open competition held to replace the consular's chaplain in Japan. Gaining this position was the beginning of the hieromonk's new life journey.

Memorable words about St. Nikolai's life and spiritual legacy appear in the papers of various Orthodox clergy. One writes: "Originally a peasant from Smolensk, St. Nicolai completely mastered the Japanese language, and succeeded in immersing himself in the spiritual life of the people. He overcame initial hostility and won tens of thousands of hearts for Christ. Nikolai's translations of the Gospels and other liturgical works into Japanese were even accepted by the missions of the Western Churches." His translations include the whole of the New Testament and Psalms, and most of the Book of Genesis and the Book of Isaiah, with help from a Japanese Christian and scholar, Nakai Tsugumaro. His translations are still used in the liturgy of the Japanese Orthodox Church.

Another church authority states: "Nikolai's work came from an ascetic self-dedication directed toward the goal of transplanting Orthodoxy to Japan and forming a truly indigenous national church. He envisioned a future where Japanese would themselves build a spiritual world from the foundations. He wanted Japanese architects, iconographers, and choirs. There would have to be Japanese priests and catechists to evangelize. Nikolai achieved all this, showing we can still apply the archaic-sounding term, equal-to-the-apostles, to a saint of our own age." Under Nikolai's leadership, by 1870 the Orthodox community in Japan numbered more than 4,000 people and by 1912 (the year of his death), there were about 33,000 people and 266 Orthodox congregations.

However, there also were times of great difficulty for him. During the Russo-Japanese War, for example, he stayed in Japan though some thought he should return to Russia. His love for the land of his birth conflicted with his duty as the bishop of Japan to support his followers and to pray for the Japanese Emperor as well as the Imperial Army and Navy. And, according to the liturgy of the time, priests had to pray for the defeat of the country's enemy. Nikolai therefore did not participate in any public services during the war, but tried to bring some comfort to both sides. He encouraged his Japanese faithful to pray for and contribute to the Army and Navy; he also worked hard to alleviate the conditions of camps in Osaka which held Russian prisoners, sending priests and teachers to care for the captives who had astonishingly high rate of illiteracy.

We know of these and other achievements and challenges through recently recovered documents, the minutes, letters, and diaries written by Nikolai and his contemporaries. Nikolai kept a diary in Russian for years, recording the pastoral life of the early Orthodox Church of Japan as well as his thoughts and observations of Meiji-era Japan. This diary was believed lost in the earthquake of 1923, but was rediscovered by Kennosuke Nakamura, a Russian literary researcher, who had it published in 2004 in five volumes of Russian, and then translated the whole diary into Japanese, including commentary, published in 2007.

Here are a few little-known items of interest about St. Nikolai as found in the diaries:

In 1879, having received word of his prospective election as a bishop, Nikolai traveled to Russia to receive the honor, not via the daunting journey across Siberia, but to St. Petersburg via North America. He shipped across the Pacific, stayed a few days in San Francisco, and traveled east on the Transcontinental Railroad, eventually arriving at the Russian Consulate General and the Cathedral of the Holy Virgin Protection in New York. As he continued traveling to Russia, he made good use of his time everywhere, seeking inspiration, guidance, and financial support. He enjoyed conversations with Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the quintessential Russian novelist; arranged for young Japanese women to study iconography at the women's monastery in St. Petersburg; and gained support from one of Russia's leading architects to produce a set of building plans for a cathedral in Tokyo. Back in Japan, his travel diaries show he enjoyed walks in rural communities wearing sandals made of woven rice straw, slept in traditional Japanese houses, and was familiar with local customs. Another of his many interests was religious publishing, because he believed the printed word and image were essential to the highly literate Japanese people; he introduced lithographic printing in 1871 and founded a mission newsletter,

the Church Herald. Nikolai was an avid reader himself. He introduced Russian literature to Japan, and developed a collection of books for the Mission library; his copies there of Dostoyevsky's major works have his penciled comments in the margins. Despite this evidence of intellectual interests, a recent biographer describes him as anti-secular and anti-rationalistic in his recordings of premonitions and encounters with spiritual beings. Nikolai interpreted the sufferings of Russians in war and domestic unrest as omens of the impending salvation of mankind, but so did many Russians, who believed the modern history of their nation was apocalyptic.

Reasons for his success:

Nikolai's mission is credited by most scholars as having been successful because of his vision to form a truly indigenous national church. He had great respect for the language and traditions of the Japanese, laboring from the beginning to translate Christian literature into Japanese so as to develop native-language Orthodoxy; he also translated Byzantine chants into the Japanese tonal system. The number of Russian missionaries was deliberately kept small so that native converts would assume leadership positions. Lay catechists were supported for full-time church work by the Russian Church and became active missionaries, and two of the first converts became Orthodox priests. Nikolai also developed Orthodox education, establishing a school for catechists, a seminary to train native clergy, primary schools for girls and boys, and church schools to teach catechism. Other reasons for his success include Nikolai's insistence on a great deal of functional autonomy for the Japanese Church, which was administered by a synod that included lay delegates from every congregation, and his successful separation of the mission from Russian political interests.

The two photographs reproduced on the handout may offer a bit of additional insight into his forceful and effective personality. One was taken in 1882 at a group council meeting, the other produced in 1910 by a Japanese photographer to commemorate Nikolai's 50th ordination anniversary. He was tall and imposing, though shown seated in these photographs. The images suggest a man of intellect with ascetic facial expression; his eyes acknowledge neither the viewer nor the splendid diamond pectoral cross and gold medallions he wears; instead he seems to gaze into the future at not-yet-realized spiritual goals.

IV Holy Resurrection Cathedral: Nikolai-do

In tangible terms, the grand total of Nikolai's endeavors in Japan at the time of his repose in 1912 was: two cathedrals, seven churches, 276 chapels, 175 meeting houses, 34 priests, 8 deacons, 115 lay catechists, and 34,110 faithful. Holy Resurrection Cathedral (known affectionately in Tokyo as Nikolai-do, that is, Nikolai's House) was a masterpiece of architectural planning. The original Cathedral consisted of a large sanctuary covered by a Byzantine-style dome rising to a height of 35 meters. The Cathedral suffered severe damage in the earthquake and fire of 1923, but was restored to its previous splendor, except for the bell tower, in the late 1920s despite a global economic depression, thanks to the extraordinary generosity of Japanese and Russian Orthodox believers. Holy Resurrection Cathedral remains the most tangible evidence of St. Nikolai's evangelical endeavors in Japan. However, this prominent structure that once overlooked the Imperial palace, is now largely hidden from view by the surrounding tall buildings erected since the 1960s.