

St. Magdalene of Nagasaki

October 20, 2006

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The sparkling blue East China Sea is the sacred resting place for the remains of Saint Magdalene of Nagasaki, Augustinian tertiary and martyr, the first Japanese woman, along with Saint Marina of Omura to be added to the canon of Saints on October 18, 1987. Rising up from the peaceful East China Sea, the year-round green mountains of Nagasaki are the sacred rough terrain where Magdalene lived and walked as a lay missionary and loving witness to Jesus Christ. The beautiful but rugged landscape was a fitting symbol for the glorious but cruel age into which Magdalene was born. The first 40 years of the 17th Century in Japan was a mixture of relentless persecution of Christians and the heroic and enthusiastic witness of countless martyrs who courageously lived and died for Christ, knowing that their dedication to the task of spreading the Gospel was their ticket to excruciating torture and rejection.

While still in her early adolescence, Magdalene's mother and father were martyred about the year 1620. The imaginative and horrendous methods of torture used by the government officials, was designed to make the Christians denounce their Christian faith. To make the Christians to choose apostasy over martyrdom was the real intention of the cruel implementers of Japan's anti-Christian policy. The official policy hoped to bring the Christian faithful to the abyss of despair, and it was thought that there was no more certain and quicker way than to force into public apostasy as many Christian leaders as possible. This plan did not work in the case of Magdalene. The young girl of tender age could not be made to abandon her love for Christ. Rather, the martyrdom of her beloved mother and father served to be a new source of courage for her own life of service to the Gospel and building up the Christian community. Never assuming a posture of fear or discouragement, Magdalene positively sought out ways to lead an active apostolic life of service. After meeting the Augustinian missionaries, Fathers Francis of Jesus and Vincent of St. Anthony, Magdalene served as a co-worker to the Augustinian friars, acting as an interpreter and catechist, finding food for her own spiritual journey by learning from the rich spirituality of her Augustinian confreres. In 1625, she formally asked to be accepted into the Augustinian Order and Father Francis happily admitted her into the Third Order of St. Augustine.

In 1632, Magdalene's co-workers and spiritual guides, Fr. Francis and Fr. Vincent were burned alive. This time, through the example of the martyrdom of her beloved spiritual fathers, her own desire to be a witness for Christ burned ever more deeply in her heart. Soon she was at the side of two more Augustinian Friars sharing in their apostolate and through them, continued to nourish her spirit on the teachings of Augustinian Spirituality. These new spiritual guides, Fr. Melchior of St. Augustine and Fr. Martin of St. Nicholas were also put to death for the Christian faith, leaving Magdalene to search for a new spiritual counselor. A Dominican missionary, Fr. Jordan came to her assistance. Since his own profession was based on the Rule of St. Augustine Fr. Jordan, now became Magdalene's spiritual guide. Desiring to live the life of the Evangelical counsels within a religious community, she sought entrance into a community of Dominican sisters. However, she was never to make her profession as a nun. A new wave of persecution was terrifying the church of Nagasaki. Not waiting for armed soldiers to come to arrest her, she elected to go voluntarily to the jail to declare publicly that she was a Christian Catechist. After 13 days of torture, she died hanging upside down in a pit filled with excrement. In order not to leave

the relics of this young martyr to the local church, her executioners cast her remains into the nearby East China Sea. On a sunny day, when I look at the beauty of the shimmering sea, I remember the face of St. Magdalene, radiant both in life and in death with the love of Christ. She remains a remarkable example of unwavering faith and courage for all the friends and followers of Augustinian spirituality. She teaches us to be positive in our apostolic endeavors even though the environment be harsh or even treacherous. The saint who loved Christ so strongly from her youthful days is now interceding for our young brothers and sisters throughout her beloved Augustinian family today. Thanks be to God!