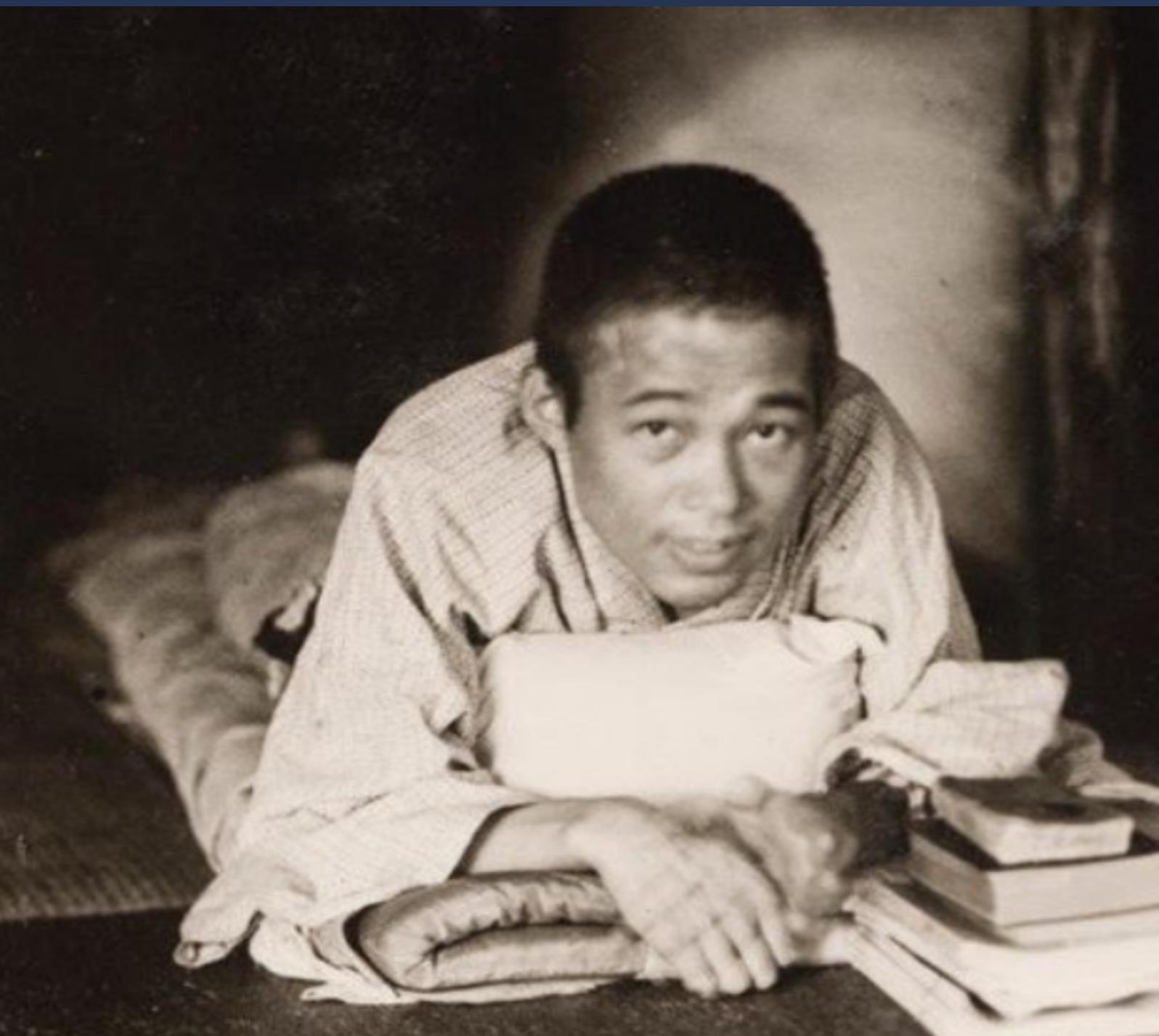


# Takashi Paul Nagai

(1908-1951)



First of 5 children, Takashi Nagai was born on February 3, 1908, in Matsue, in the prefecture of Shimane, a region that is one of the true cradles of Shintoism that has shaped the culture, heart and sensitivity of the Japanese; in this tradition the family educates the children in the values of filial piety, loyalty and courage. The family is dedicated to the practice of medicine: the grandfather already practiced traditional medicine and now the father, assisted by his mother, practices Western medicine. Takashi was born in a very particular period in the history of Japan which, after more than 200 years of closure to the rest of the world, since 1854 has reopened to contacts with the West, starting a race towards modernization to align itself with the major modern powers: they call the leading experts in all scientific disciplines from the United States and European nations and send their scholars to learn about the advances of new technologies. Japan rapidly takes a leap forward that gives a shake to the millenary traditions, opening the doors to the myth of progress and to a materialistic positivism, especially in schools, universities and in the circles of intellectuals. Takashi is a very sensitive young man, a lover of poetry, painting and sports, but he himself will later recognize that he remained a slave to an atheistic positivism in his high school years and in the early years of his medical studies in Nagasaki. Until that day in March 1930, when, called urgently to the bedside of his dying mother, he grasps in his last glance the evidence of something of the man who does not die and lets himself be completely overturned, proving that he has a reason. truly open to seeking the truth. He is no longer at peace with himself and knows he has to go to the bottom of that intuition, looking for the meaning of life and death. In this journey of self-discovery, Blaise Pascal's Thoughts are his companions, but he soon realizes that a book is not enough.



Takashi with his parents

He decides to check who the Christians really are by going to meet them in Urakami, the northern district of the city of Nagasaki that has been completely Christian for centuries, where the bells of the great church had always bothered him by ringing three times a day to call everyone to the Angelus prayer. He takes up residence as a student with the Moriyama family who only later will discover descend from the leaders of the community of Hidden Christians of Urakami, the people of occult faithful who for three centuries had kept and handed down the Catholic faith in hiding during the period of bloody persecutions. In living together with the Moriyama spouses, his prejudices are transformed into knowledge and esteem and he learns to appreciate their way of life and the history of their ancestors. Everyone in the ward noticed that after the death of his mother his relationship with the sick changed. In March 1932 he graduated in Medicine; he is the best and is invited to stay at the university. For post-otitis meningitis he has a left ear deafness that forces him to give up his dream of becoming an internal doctor (no longer being able to use the stethoscope) and change specialization: he will become a radiologist, dedicating himself to that new specialty just imported from Europe by prof. Suetsugu, of whom he becomes an assistant, and to whom he quickly becomes passionate for the possibilities it offers both in the clinical and research fields. He dedicates himself with all of himself, so much so that he stays in the laboratory until late at night and among his patients he will also have the opportunity to visit Father Maximilian Kolbe! On Christmas vigil 1932 he was invited to stay for dinner with the Moriyama spouses who from the first day prayed so that he could know Christ through his sick. They talk about what Christmas is and that evening their daughter Midori is also present, who lives far from home for her work as a teacher. They invite him to attend Mass. Reluctant at first, he ends up accepting, mindful of Pascal's words. He is shocked by a palpable Presence previously unknown to him: "I felt someone close to me that I didn't know yet" . The next evening when he returns from work he is called by Midori's father because the young woman is ill: acute appendicitis which is going into peritonitis. It's snowing. He loads her on his shoulders and takes her to the hospital where they operate her urgently, saving her life. On January 21, 1933, Takashi was ordered to leave for Japan's ongoing terrible war against China. He knows that many soldiers do not return and suffers from the idea of leaving his research unfinished. In this sad state of mind, the evening before departure he hears a

knock on his door. It is Midori in kimono, deeply bowed, who hands him a sweater made by her during her convalescence: " Excuse me, I came to thank you for saving my life ". He, sitting opposite in an equally formal position, with a bow and speechless takes the sweater and kisses her. The next day Takashi leaves for Hiroshima, the place of military training, and then for China, where he is invested by militarist ideology according to the ethics of the samurai. Midori prays and writes every day. Immersed in the violence of war, at the camp he received gloves made by Midori, a letter and the catechism by post. He is amazed by reading the book: but how is it possible that in those simple lines there are clear answers to the questions of his whole life? And those ten commandments, which make him feel that he is dirty and vulgar? His life begins to change even if the war is terrible: in his book, Dr. Nagai describes the many amputations and those corpses of old men and children torn apart by artillery. Propaganda screams that the job of the Japanese is to stop inhuman Bolshevism and Western colonialism, but the brutality of the Japanese army disturbs him deeply. The myth of science and progress also vanishes. Pascal remains as a friend, who tells him that in order to know God, one must get on one's knees. On returning to Nagasaki, in front of the soldier tried and disappointed by the war, two possible options open up: on the one hand, the front of the harbor, with entertainment and the intoxication of alcohol; on the other the great church of Urakami, the hill of the martyrs and the convent founded by Father Kolbe. Go and get stunned, as so many veterans did, or look for Midori, to apologize for the man he is and go to church to look for light? The decision is made: turn towards Urakami. He goes up to the church where he finds that priest who had celebrated Christmas Mass and asks him how he can believe with that certainty that makes his eyes shine and that has allowed



him to become a priest. The answer is the story of his life: the grandparents who died in prison because they were Christians, the father locked up in a detention camp and tortured even with the sight of the martyrdom of his 14-year-old brother, so much loved, from whom he receives as his last words the prophecy that he would return I live in Urakami and would have a priest son, while his sister would take care of the orphans. So it had actually happened. The priest, son of that prophecy, welcomes this soldier who has returned from the front who feels too sinful and invites him to pray: "the Gospel is experienced by praying, it cannot be understood with intelligence" like radiology. Tada suware : get on your knees and you will understand, you are on the chest of Jesus to know Him! Doctor Nagai resumes his work in Radiology and in the meantime begins the catechesis for Baptism. Asking for baptism is not an easy decision: his father is against it and there are many obstacles. In fact, hostility to Christianity is on the part of the militarists and even in universities it is an obstacle to their career. It could at least be postponed, but Nagai decides to ask immediately. He chooses Paulo as his name: from Paulo Miki. The godfather is a cousin of Midori, who then, on the advice of the priest, quickly mediates a formal meeting between the two. Takashi, however, wants to clarify the risks associated with his work as a radiologist before the wedding. After his baptism Takashi has become a radically new creature: he lives, judges, treats, knows everything differently, including enemies, war, work, politics. This is clear from his writings and constitutes a strong provocation for us baptized in a world strongly tempted by relativism. He is a happy father and husband but in this period very distracted by his research and his patients, so much so that, in that very difficult time of economic crisis, he left to his wife the management and the economy of the house and the education of the children (four children, of which two died infants). However, it combines science and charity. He knows San Vincenzo, takes care of the poor and for him " Assistance to the poor is only valid if it contributes to restoring dignity to the person". Many episodes demonstrate his radical change. In particular, its position in the second Sino-Japanese war is surprising: the 1937 war in Manchuria is similar to the previous one, but it is Takashi who is different. Baptism made him a new man. He is distinguished by his courage, volunteering for impossible feats by crossing enemy lines to retrieve drugs for his wounded. He is tireless in helping the sick: he learns to set up rapid and effective medical aid camps, to manage personnel, to intervene promptly in

the midst of a war attack. He also learns to build underground bunkers to keep the wounded safe from bombs and, most surprisingly, Takashi not only rescues the Japanese, but also the Chinese enemies and his superiors let him do it! In particular, he contacts the Chinese San Vincenzo to bring relief with food and clothes. Takashi is a fervent nationalist, but he hates war and militarism; however this time he discovers a new serenity, nourished by prayer. He relies in particular on the rosary and invents Christian nembutsu , short ejaculations taken from Gospel passages, psalms, or short prayers. One episode puts him to the test particularly. It is Christmas Eve 1939, the Chinese have surprised them by killing three hundred soldiers and are ready to annihilate the rest. The captain orders him to gather the sick around the flag and sprinkle everything with petrol: if they succumb to the enemy, he will have to set them on fire so that they do not fall into the hands of the enemy. Takashi asks not to be disturbed and withdraws in prayer, entrusting everything. Finally a messenger arrives: the enemy has withdrawn! In those days a letter from Japan announces the death of Midori's father and daughter Ikuko by epidemic. Takashi's homecoming is dramatic. Midori is in pieces: he feels guilty of the death of little Ikuko and all of Japan is economically and morally on its knees, while the army lies about the disastrous outcome of the war. Takashi returns to Pascal in search of answers, and finds there: "Only in Christ can the paradox of the greatness and misery of man be resolved", and the solution to the paradox is "to live for the glory of Christ". Thus he recognizes that his return home is "willed by the Son of God, to serve the Father with his work ". Its change also manifests itself in the way students are taught to care for the sick and the wounded and in the way they look with pain at Japan's entry into the war. In the spring of 1945 he self-diagnosed a chronic myeloid leukemia, a consequence of his work as a radiologist in which he did not spare himself for the good of patients and for the progress of radiological

1937-1940.

Takashi, second from right in the front row, together with fellow soldiers during the Second Sino-Japanese War



science; he knows that after a few years he will have to die and leave his children orphans: before returning home to tell Midori he goes to pray on Paul Miki's hill. Once again it is Midori who comforts him by answering with total faith in the awareness that everything is already taken into account from the first day of their yes. Completely abandoned to the will of God, it is the rock for his steps. Without Midori there would have been no Takashi Paul, because everyone in the journey of the Church is accompanied in their vocation by a carnal presence, a sign of another Presence. Meanwhile, the war rages on and on 9 August 1945 the second atomic bomb is dropped on Nagasaki. The epicenter is Urakami itself. At that moment Takashi is on guard in the radiology bunker; this allows him to survive even if he has a severe injury to the right temporal artery. As soon as he leaves, he sees the horror: the Christian neighborhood of Urakami, with the great church of Nagasaki, no longer exists. About 70,000 people died immediately, charred or skinned alive. Until the arrival of help from the other cities in those first two days, he tirelessly takes care of the survivors, in desperate conditions; only after 3 days does she allow herself to go to her house, knowing full well that if Midori has not come it is because Midori is no longer there. He finds a few remains of the charred bones next to a loose rosary where their home was. The next day he brings the news to his two refugee children with their grandmother out of town; he remains there, 6 km from Nagasaki, where he continues to treat the survivors and where he is reached on August 15 by the voice of the emperor who on the radio gives the shocking news of Japan's unconditional surrender for the end of World War II. In the following time of mourning he prays and observes reality with the eyes of

faith, seeing signs that, as he will say in November 1945, during the mass of suffrage for the dead of the bomb celebrated in the ruins of the church, they lead him to read that tragedy and the death of the many Christians of Urakami as the offering of the sacrificial Lamb of a people of martyrs for the end of the war and

Takashi in the ruins of a Urakami annihilated by the explosion of the Atomic bomb



peace in the world. In September Takashi was dying due to leukemia and unstoppable bleeding due to the lesion of the temporal artery which has reopened due to the consequences of nuclear radiation on the tissues. Doctors testify that he is dying. The mother-in-law makes him drink the holy water from the source of the sanctuary founded by Father Kolbe and Takashi hears a woman's voice telling him to pray to Father Kolbe. So he does and suddenly the bleeding stops. Since October 15, 1945, having seen a blade of grass grow back and some ants reappear in the atomic desert, he realizes that life is still possible and returns to live in Urakami, where the ruins of his old house are, under a sheet canopy of metal, to welcome war veterans who find neither their home nor their loved ones and to begin rebuilding life where there is nothing left. Takashi invites everyone not to flee but to stay with him "to walk the path of the beatitudes". And this last stretch of his life is the most striking: he, a university professor, heroically begins a path of sought-after poverty of spirit, as well as absolute material poverty as a way for him and for those who meet him of such a friendship and company with God that everything becomes possible and alive again. He goes so far as to say: " I walked with God in the ghostly desolation of Urakami and finally understood the depth of his friendship " like the people of Israel in the desert. For himself and for his children he keeps the bare minimum, while he cares for the common good. With friends he manages to find the bell under the rubble of the church, hoist it and make it ring for the first time on the night of the eve of the sad Christmas 1945. It is the beginning of the recovery: not even the atomic bomb can silence the bells of God! He invites everyone not to think about themselves and their pain but to work to rebuild life by doing what everyone can: he can write books, thanks to which he earns his first money, which he donates completely to the reconstruction of the hospital, of a school , a church, a library and with whom he even decides to plant 1000 cherry trees, to restore beauty to that desolate land. The progression of his illness made him enticed from the beginning of 1946 and in 1948 he decided to go and live in a very small hut of 2x2 meters, leaving the largest house to his brother's family, grandmother and children. He renames this hut Nyokodo, the sanctuary of self-love , to indicate that this is the place where he can make his journey of asceticism in friendship with the Lord. As he himself says, it is his desire to imitate the poverty of St. Francis. He is no longer able to do anything but write his books and letters at night but his own person becomes such a source of light

and hope that thousands of people visit him every day for comfort and peace. He has been called the "mystic of peace"; but of that peace which is the fruit of a profound ascetic work against one's own selfishness to welcome every neighbor, very different from the pacifism that shouts slogans in the streets against others without committing to oneself and to reality. And he proves this position himself when he is slandered and does not defend himself. This conversion of the gaze to everything that transpires in the joy of his face (even in the photograph!) Makes his person a credible announcement and becomes an engine of peace and the capacity for reconstruction for all the people of Nagasaki and for the many people who come to look for him. from all over Japan and other countries. Even for the lepers to whom he writes at night. Indeed, not what is said is truly an announcement, but what one is, visible and encounterable; in fact it is his person who is sought: from the emperor himself to the Pontiff who sends him a messenger twice, passing through many famous personalities of the world (such as Evita Peron and Helen Keller), but also by the common people. His life is offered to everyone every day until May 1, 1951, the day on which, realizing that he has reached the end, he is taken on a stretcher first to the church, to pray once again for peace, and then to his hospital. , where he recommends everyone to pray. He dies, and, as per his instructions, donates his body for the autopsy so that the students can learn from this as well. At his funeral the whole city stops and the sound of the bell of the church of Urakami is joined in unison by the bells of all the churches, Buddhist temples and the sirens of the factories and the port. It is the farewell of all Nagasaki to its great citizen. The epitaph for the tomb, which he himself composed says: «We are useless servants. We have done what we had to do "(Lk 17:10). A film was made about his life while he was still alive and the actors met him. A song is played at the station near his home. Many missionaries from that film were touched to the heart of their vocation. In 1942 he was one of the three founders of the Japanese Catholic Doctors and as early as 1951 the Italian Catholic Doctors knew him



Takashi Nagai in Nyokodo

and were so grateful for his testimony that they sent him a statue of the Virgin in Carrara marble! Even today in Japan it is said: there were two atomic bombs, but in Hiroshima people shout, while in Nagasaki they pray. Everyone knows that the difference was made by dr. Takashi Paul Nagai. His 2x2 meter hut is a pilgrimage destination and is located in a street called 'the street of the Saint', because Takashi is known in his city as the Saint of Urakami.

Takashi Nagai in Nyokodo with the children





AMICI di  
TAKASHI  
e MIDORI  
**NAGAI**