

## A Ball of Fire, A Sea of Flame

After a quiet meal on August 9, Mother Ezumi said, "I read in yesterday's paper that Hiroshima has been extensively damaged by some sort of new bomb. I hope this horrible weapon will not be dropped on Nagasaki." Mother then took the roll call of Sisters, ordering some of them to Koba, a nearby village. Ten Sisters stayed to look after the school; all the boarding students had just left for their work at the munitions factory along with Sister Christina.

I was cooking in the kitchen when the alarm went off, and still gathering things up when the raid began. I hurried to the shelter near the river where Sister Clara was already praying the rosary. Mother had carried the Blessed Sacrament to the nearest air raid shelter.

Before long the all clear was sounded and I returned to the kitchen. At eleven o'clock I went to take my turn of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. It was very peaceful to pray before our Lord even in an underground shelter. I had just made the sign of the cross when there was a terrible sound and a dazzling light. "Dear Lord," I prayed, "help us." Holding the Ciborium close to me I covered myself with a blanket. I was sure that a bomb had exploded near the shelter. I was reluctant to raise my head or look around. Should our shelter catch fire, all would be lost. But then as I glanced at the entrance of the shelter, a cloud of dust blinded me. I ventured out anyway wondering what had happened. The buildings had all been destroyed; there wasn't a soul in sight. Only the howling of the wind. I still couldn't open my eyes to see clearly through the dust. I stood there absent-mindedly wondering if the end of the world had not come, and I was the only one left alive. Suddenly I felt terribly lonely and headed back toward the now destroyed kitchen. Looking round I noticed that Sisters Martha and Elizabeth and Kunegunda had crawled out of the shelter. I shouted to them, but they did not answer. I shouted again, "Do you know where the Mistress of Novices is?" This time they heard me and answered, "No!" And so I shouted, "Mistress of Novices! Mistress of Novices!" This time I heard an answer. We hurried in the direction of the voice, but still could not see anyone. Once more Sister Martha called out, and this time we found Sister under the fallen roof of the kitchen. We couldn't get her out from under the roof or do anything for her, but fortunately an elderly man who was passing by came to our aid. Using a hatchet he made an opening through which we dragged Sister out. Her clothes were in rags, her hair was dishevelled, and her left arm was bleeding badly. We carried her to the shelter to treat her wounds.

Looking around for Sister Angela I saw Sisters Margarita and Secunda with burns all over their bodies heading for the shelter. I called, "Sister Angela! Sister Angela!" Her weak voice answered, "Here I am!", but still I could not locate her. I shouted once again, "Sister Angela!" Now I was joined in shouting by Sister Martha and the man who was helping us. Once more came her weak answer which seemed to come from under a heap of fallen bricks. We finally managed to drag her out from underneath the rubble and to carry her into the shade of a nearby tree. We also found Sisters Joanna and Anna under the rubble.

Reverend Mother now was the only one who had not been located. I remembered that I had seen her walking toward the school, and I went to look for her there. When I came to the kitchen there was an explosion behind me and a small fire broke out. I ran shouting, "Mother, where are you! Mother, Mother..." But there was no answer. I ran on shouting, "Mother, answer me!" Finally I heard a weak voice: "Here, Here!" I shouted to no one in particular, "I found her, I found her!" However, when I came to the place where the voice was coming from, all I could see was the sparkle of rosary beads. Mother lay motionless under a fire-proof wall, held down also by a chair; a board was wedged against her face. She was praying the rosary. Although I had no visible injuries, I could not think of a way to get her out. "Mother, wait...I'll get some help..." I ran off to find Sister Kunegunda and anybody else who might be able to help. Many passed me by, for they were still trying to save themselves. But I managed to persuade four men to help me try to move the wall from Mother. Then I noticed the auditorium catching fire. "Hurry, hurry," I cried. Using the trunk of a tree as a lever we slowly managed to move the fire-wall inch by inch to make a gap through which we dragged Mother out. Finally when she was clear of the wall I looked around to thank the four men, but they were gone.

Mother was numbed and could not walk and so I carried her to the shelter. There I asked her to wait for me while I ran to the kindergarten for a mattress. On the way I was told that Sisters Anastasia and Valeria had been rescued; they had been saved, but the school buildings were a sea of flames. The chapel was the only building still standing. Running inside I removed the fallen crucifix and began to splash water around the chapel entrance. I was joined by the students who, panting and dripping with perspiration, had run all the way from Koba. I was overjoyed to see them.

Toward evening I went to the shelter near the river bank. I shouted but no one answered. And so I moved on to the other shelters. Discouraged on finding nobody there either, I crossed over to the other side of the river. Turning and looking back on the city which was covered by one huge dense cloud of black smoke, the only sound I heard was the crackling of flames. The once green hillsides were now charred. Here and there sat a lone pumpkin, seemingly untouched by the flames.

Slowly I walked through the deserted fields, feeling forlorn and conscious of the uncertainty of life. All around me everything had been turned to ashes and bones. I thought I could hear a weak voice praying, "Jesus, Mary, Joseph! I trust in you with all my heart and with all my soul. Jesus, Mary, Joseph, assist me in my last agony." Looking about I found, lying among some charred vegetables, a figure that at first I did not recognize. But on drawing near I found Sister Anastasia, blinded and her lips swollen. "Sister Anastasia, do you know who I am?" She replied, "Yes, Sister Odilia!" I felt utterly helpless. Then she began to recite the act of contrition, "Forgive my sins...." I joined her in her prayer. When she finished, she asked me if she could receive the Blessed Sacrament. I told her I would go for the Eucharist. She smiled. I ran to the shelter where the Ciborium was being kept.

On the way I could hear many voices calling for help. I simply did not know what to do. When I reached the shelter, it was already full of Sisters and students. Finding Mother I told her of Sister's request. She told me to take the Blessed Sacrament to Sister immediately. Conscious of my own unworthiness, but also aware of the urgency of the situation, I hurried back bearing the Eucharist to Sister Anastasia. When I arrived Sister immediately began to recite the Confiteor as loudly as she could. "Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault...." she prayed as she beat her breast. Finishing the Confiteor she lay there on the ground clasping with her inflamed and swollen hands. She tried to open her lips wide, but they were too swollen. I slipped the Host through her lips. For a while she was still and silent. I prayed for her in this her last agony.

As I sat looking out at the flames, a voice called to me, "What are you doing?" I saw a soldier approaching. I told him that Sister had been seriously injured; I didn't know what to do. He turned and called some of his companions offering to take her to the hospital.

When the soldiers had carried Sister off, I went back to the shelter. After that

I went to Mrs. Mori's home to prepare supper. I ate some boiled rice and pickled plums which had been put aside for an emergency.

All through the night people were groaning with pain. I had no time to rest and recover from the day's fatigue. Towards dawn I moved out to find a quieter place to rest. No sooner had I lain down than I fell into a sound sleep. Later on awakening, I found myself lying among many students and other people seriously wounded or dead. The recollection of that scene still makes me shudder.

After morning grace and a light breakfast I ran to look for Sister Martina and the students belonging to Junshin High School. When I reached Ohashi-machi, I saw piles and piles of dead bodies. Many of the bodies were very badly burned. Some were disembowelled, others were missing legs and arms. A dead horse laid sprawled across some of the bodies. Among the dead I could see many girls from our own high school.

Along the railroad tracks I saw many people struggling along in pain. I found it difficult to look on this sight for any length of time. The soldiers scolded those who were persistent in their requests for assistance and for water. I searched for our students among these people; I found many who were in great pain. Some seeing me called out cheerfully, "Sensei, Sensei...." At about ten o'clock in the morning—I guessed the time, for I had no watch—the long-expected train came along. The people stormed toward the train only to be held back by the warning shouts of the soldiers.

Looking around I noticed a soldier pulling a mattress away from the train. I was shocked to realize that the patient was Sister Anastasia. The soldiers hadn't managed to get her to the hospital. I apologized to her but she seemed not to know me at first. Slowly and painfully she spoke my name. She was still conscious, but barely, it seemed. I asked her if she wanted something to eat. Eagerly she responded, "Yes," but I doubted whether she would be able to swallow anything, so swollen were her lips. Anyway, I determined to return to the shelter to get some food for her. On the way I passed someone distributing boiled rice to a group of victims at Michino. They were kind enough to give me some for Sister. When I gave it to her, hard as it was for her, she ate it hungrily dropping much as she did so. On finishing the food, she thanked me and dropped off to sleep.

We knew we had a great responsibility for her. But we also had many others to look after—many of our students. All seemed to be suffering a great deal, but Sister Anastasia’s condition was most serious. Suddenly a shrill scream rang out from the direction of Sister Anastasia. Looking around I saw her blindly stumbling over another patient. I ran to her and laid her back down in her own place apologizing to the other patients. I then smoothed her sheets and looked on in dismay. Four or five minutes passed, then she quietly began to pray, “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, assist me in my last agony...forgive my sins!” Not long after, she left this world for heaven.

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