

“I pour everything into the creative process”

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. In this milestone year, Jumpei Matsumoto, a native of Nagasaki Prefecture and a third-generation atomic bomb survivor, talks to us about his film “Nagasaki: In the Shadow of the Flash,” which will be screened in the Vatican Film Library on 31 October.

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Mr. Matsumoto was born in 1984 and was baptized as an infant, receiving the Christian name Kolbe. He entered Seido Gakuen Junior High School in Nagasaki, where he first met Opus Dei.

He debuted his first film at the age of 27 and made his commercial film debut at 30. *Nagasaki: In the Shadow of the Flash* is his sixth work. We talked to him about how he became a filmmaker and invited him to share his reflections on this film. The feature is inspired by the testimonies of the Red Cross nurses who cared for the survivors of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki on 9 August 1945.

What inspired you to make this film? Could you also share how

your grandfather, a *hibakusha* (atomic bomb survivor), influenced you?

Well, my grandfather wasn't a Catholic, but he was a *hibakusha*. I grew up attending church in Nagasaki, and even as a child, I heard Jesus' teachings, which were teachings of love, like, "Love one another." I always wanted to live that way.

But once I stepped outside, I was confronted with the reality of the world shaped by the atomic bombing, especially since I grew up in a city that was one of the epicenters. I was always aware of the contradiction: the gap between the message of love and the reality around me. I think that dissonance really fuels my creative drive.

Regardless of whether someone has heard Jesus' teachings or not, I believe every human being has the

pure desire to love and to be loved. Yet we live in a world that often produces the opposite reality. I think that curiosity — wanting to look into that human condition — is a big part of why I create.

Of course, as a third-generation *hibakusha* and as a Catholic, I've long wanted to make a film about the atomic bombing in Nagasaki. I always thought, "Someday, I want to make a film about the atomic bomb." I finally got the chance about two years ago, when I was 38 or 39. I actually thought it would come later in life, but the opportunity came earlier than expected.

I did feel the pressure, but more than that, I was just genuinely happy to be able to make it. In the past, I've dealt with Christian themes in my own way in films, but to handle it so directly — especially in the Japanese film market — is not easy. Still, with

this project, I felt like I *had* to. I was really glad to be able to make a Catholic character one of the main protagonists.

Looking at your background, you studied architecture at the University of Tokyo and then switched paths to become a film director. Did you always dream of becoming a director as a child?

No, not at all. I entered the architecture department at the University of Tokyo, but at first, I actually wanted to be a comedian. I've mentioned this in other interviews too: my first goal was to become a stand-up comedian. While I was at university, I even attended the Yoshimoto comedy school. But that didn't go well.

If that had worked out, I wouldn't be here today. At the University of Tokyo, we have a system called "shinfuri," where you choose your

major before your third year. I wanted to do something creative, so I chose architecture. I enjoyed it, but I still wanted to realize my dream, so around my fourth year, I entered the Yoshimoto school. I gave it up after about a year, though, and went on to a graduate school.

At that time, the Afghanistan War was ongoing, and a friend of mine — who's now a journalist at *Asahi Shimbun* — approached me about directing an independent film with a strong social message. I joined an NPO and took responsibility for the creative side, and that was my first time directing a film.

It was shown at the coming-of-age ceremony in Suginami Ward. That's when I realized that I might be more suited to directing films than comedy. It was the beginning of my journey into filmmaking.

You've mentioned that your films are always connected to your faith. Would you say that even if Catholicism isn't explicitly presented, your films are deeply tied to your personal beliefs?

I'm not sure how strongly my faith comes across in the films, but since I live a life of faith, I naturally bring my struggles, doubts, inner misery, and also my joy into my work. When I make a film, I can't help but reflect my own life and values.

Unless I tie my characters and themes to something personal, I don't feel like I can make a meaningful film. I feel like I can't do authentic work otherwise.

For me, my relationship with God is the biggest theme of my life as an individual. So if a film doesn't include that element, I lose motivation. Most of my characters aren't people of faith, but whether

they are or not, I try to capture moments where they touch something transcendent. In that sense, I think my spiritual life is quite vividly reflected in my films.

How do you handle funding for your films? Even if you want to make a great film, financial hurdles can be significant.

Yes, I always try to be involved in fundraising when I make a film, but it's tough. Finding ways to raise money is always a challenge.

That said, I have no intention of making films on themes that don't resonate with me, just to secure funding. I don't want to throw away or ignore what I truly want to express just for the sake of success or commercial hits.

In recent years, there's been a noticeable shift away from reading, with people increasingly

turning to visual content. I've even heard that many now watch videos at double or even triple speed rather than taking the time to savor them. Surely, this shift in society must impact filmmaking as well?

Yes, it does seem like that's becoming the norm. I think a lot of people are satisfied with short content; things that can be consumed in 10 or 15 minutes on a train ride, for example. Young people these days tend to favor information overload, and naturally, this creates some real challenges for filmmaking.

Still, I believe I have to stay true to my own way of making films, my own style and approach, regardless of the broader trends.

Do you already have a plan for your next film?

Yes, definitely. I have a few projects in the works. The one I feel most strongly about pursuing right now deals with the theme of abortion. Some aspects are already taking shape, but funding has not yet come together.

I see. Well, I hope this current film becomes a big success. We'll all be rooting for you.

Thank you. Yes, if it becomes a hit, it'll make fundraising for the next one a lot easier.

As you know well, Saint Josemaría's teaching on sanctifying work is central to Opus Dei. How has this idea influenced your work as a film director?

For me, it's about taking my experiences — my inner struggles, doubts, realizations, fulfillment — and pouring them into the creative process of filmmaking. Ideally, I try

to infuse my whole being into the work.

In the end, it often feels like it's not so much of me pulling the film forward, but rather the film pulling me. That's the kind of relationship I have with my work, and through that, I hope to offer both the film and my life to God.

Of course, I'm still very much a beginner in all of this, but I try to keep going with that spirit every day.

Filmmaking isn't a solo job. It's a collaborative process involving many different professionals. In that context, how do you approach your role as a witness of faith?

That's very true. And when you're working with Catholic themes, it's often the case that the crew knows almost nothing about the faith.

In this recent film, we had scenes set in churches, and I had to explain things like: “This is the Eucharist; it’s the Body of Christ.” Most of the staff had no idea. Of course, there are challenges, but as long as I respond sincerely in my role as the director, the information gets across as something new and valuable to them.

Right now, I'm doing promotional work for the film, so I often talk to press staff and interviewers about my Catholic faith. Many of them receive it with genuine interest and even ask deeper questions. I hope these moments can serve as small acts of apostolate.

It's the same with the actors. For those playing Catholic characters, I gave each of them a rosary and told them they *had* to attend Mass. I said, “If you've never been to Mass, you can't portray this role authentically.

Please go.” In Tokyo, St. Ignatius Church in Yotsuya is the most accessible, so I made sure they knew how to get there.

Lastly, could you share a few words about the theme song, *Kusunoki*?

Kusunoki is a song inspired by the bombed camphor tree at Sanno Shrine. It’s written from the perspective of that surviving tree. I’ve loved this song for a long time.

When I asked the songwriter, Masaharu Fukuyama, for permission to use it in the film, he actually suggested something unexpected: rather than having him sing it, he proposed that the three main characters sing it themselves. And that’s how it came to be.

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