

'God, I am not a criminal. I cry out every day.'



Hideko Hakamada speaks on behalf of her brother

On Christmas Eve 28 years ago, the Catholic Church welcomed a new member in unusual circumstances. Iwao Hakamada, now 76, was in prison for a capital offense when he was baptized.

Hakamada was arrested by police in 1966 in the city of Shimizu, in Shizuoka Prefecture, about 130 km southwest of Tokyo. In what became known as “the Hakamada Incident,” the bodies of a family of four were pulled from the ruins of a building that had been set aflame.

Soon after, the police took Hakamada, a former pro-boxer who worked at the same company as one of the victims, into custody.

However, Hakamada’s guilt in this case has proven unusually inconclusive. Much of the evidence has been shown to be unreliable, and an April 2004 DNA test has demonstrated that blood found on an article of clothing matched neither the victim’s blood type nor Hakamada’s.

Hakamada's older sister Hideko, 79, had kept her silence after these events took place, but in July of this year she launched a series of public addresses protesting her brother's innocence that have taken place in eight locations throughout Japan so far.

“When the DNA test results were made public, I was relieved,” Hideko said at a December 9 lecture at Tokyo's Nihon University College of Law. “Until now, as his family, we avoided saying anything about it. After the incident, our mother became ill from the anguish, and after she passed on I took up the role of supporting my younger brother.”

Hideko goes to visit her brother in prison at least once a month. However, an event that gave her hope and added courage came in 2007, when a former judge argued that Hakamada had been falsely accused.

This particular judge had been on the three-judge panel that convicted Hakamada in 1968. Although he himself was convinced at the time that the charges were without merit, he was in the minority; the other two judges handed Hakamada the death sentence.

“That judge's words were truly welcome,” Hideko said. Then, she talked about Hakamada's encounter with Catholicism.

In the 1960's, some sisters of the Society of the Sacred Heart began giving Christmas presents to death row inmates. One of these presents arrived in Hakamada's prison cell, and he was so touched he requested to meet with them.

He later became a catechumen under the prison chaplain and was baptized on December 24, 1984.

Now, after 46 long years of prison life, Hakamada is suffering from psychological illness. However there is finally hope for freedom, for today, the Shizuoka District Court will hear from and question the person who performed this year's DNA test.

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