A government panel in Japan has included historic Christian sites and biologically diverse islands in its nominations for the World Heritage honor on Thursday.

Amami Oshima and Tokunoshima were among the sites in Kagoshima Prefecture nominated by the panel for the World Heritage status. The Yanbaru region and Iriomote island were also selected, as well as Christian sites in Nagasaki and Kumamoto prefectures, the Nikkei Asian Review reports.

The Oura Church in Nagasaki, which is a national treasure in the country, is one of the dozen Christian sites Japan nominated for the World Heritage status. Another site is the Sakitsu village in Kumamoto Prefecture, which used to serve as home for underground Catholics.

Last year, Pope Francis granted the Oura Church the title of a "minor basilica," an honor reserved only for important places of worship. In 1865, Japan's underground Christians came to the church to reveal their faith to Father Bernard Petitjean, The Asahi Shimbun details.
"The church was the scene of an event that marked a transition from an age when our faith was banned to an age when it became free to follow it," Mitsuaki Takami, the archbishop of Nagasaki, said of the Oura Church. "The church will have to play a more central role than ever."

The Archdiocese of Nagasaki filed an application for the status of a minor basilica for the Oura Church upon the advice of the Vatican. The application was filed in February and was approved in April.

According to the Japanese government, Christians continued to practice their faith underground when Christianity was banned for centuries during the Tokugawa era. They reportedly developed their own cultural tradition while co-existing with the other religious groups in the country.

There are 20 Japanese assets that UNESCO has named as World Heritage sites. The new list is supported by the cabinet and it will be submitted to UNESCO on or before Feb. 1. The organization will determine by 2018 whether the nominated locations will be approved as World Heritage sites.