



KOREA: Daughter of Catholicism Celebrates 200 Years

Matteo Ricci, make way! Enter Master Lee Byok and Saint Andrew Kim!

In 1984 the Catholic Church shifts its attention away from world-wide celebrations in honor of the 400th anniversary of Matteo Ricci's entrance into China. The focus is now on South Korea as Pope John Paul II visits the Church there to help celebrate the 200th anniversary of the beginning of Catholicism, introduced from China in 1784. The highlight of these celebrations will be the special ceremony elevating Blessed Andrew Kim and 102 other Korean and foreign martyrs to the dignity of sainthood. At the same time the Korean Church will be petitioning for the beatification of another twenty-two of its 'Church Founders', those who started the Church before the first foreign missionaries from

China and Europe arrived. Nearly all of these new candidates for beatification were also martyrs for the faith.¹

Like China in Ricci's time, the literati were among the first to accept Catholicism, but while evangelization in China was carried out principally by foreign clergy, it was Korea's laity who instructed, baptized and finally exhorted each other to martyrdom for the faith.

Jesus Christ is the one and only founder of the Church, but nearly every area of the world where the Church has been established, looks upon and reveres its own local founder, that person who under the guidance of the Holy Spirit has done most to sink the roots of faith in its own soil. For China, it was Ricci; for Korea, it was the great teacher Lee Byok (1754-1785), who took the baptismal name John Baptist because he prepared the way for so many others.

How did this great lay missionary movement in Korea come about? There are many different accounts. We have selected just a few of the key events by way of summary. Lee Byok was accustomed to reading all the books on Catholicism in Chinese that he could obtain. These included those written by Matteo Ricci, especially his "The True Idea About God", written in 1603. Some of these were obtained by Lee Kyung Sang, his great grandfather, while Lee was tutoring the son of King In Jo in Peking from 1637 to 1645. Fr. Adam Schall had taught Lee Kyung Sang some Catholic doctrine, and he brought back to Korea many catholic books which at that time were still not prohibited. While reading these books, Lee Byok was active in the Kang Hak Hoe group of scholars. Although they had not yet been baptized group members followed suggestions from these books and began a religious community with regular prayer, fasting and works of charity.

As the acknowledged leader of this group, Lee Byok imposed upon another member, Lee Seung Hoon, to obtain more books from China. This was possible because Seung Hoon was to accompany his father, Lee Tong Ook who went to Peking as envoy in 1783. According to some documents of the time, Lee Byok said to Seung Hoon:

"Your journey to Peking is a marvelous God-given opportunity for us to learn the true religious doctrine. This doctrine of the true saints, as well as the true way to serve the All-Highest Creator of all, is developed to the highest degree among the Europeans. Without this doctrine, we can do nothing. Without it, we can neither improve in spirit nor in character. Without it, how can we know the

various laws of the kings and their people? Without it, there can be no basic rule in life. Without it, we can not understand the creation of the world, the laws of the celestial and terrestrial poles, the regular movement of the universe, the distinction between good and evil. We cannot know the origin and the purpose of the world, the union of soul and body, the problem of good and evil, the Incarnation of Christ to atone for sins, nor eternal reward and punishment." 2

Seung Hoon, who was not as well read in catholic doctrine at this time as was Lee Byok, asked to see some of the Chinese books Lee Byok already had. After studying them, he agreed to help. Lee Byok challenged him, saying "Your chance to go to Peking is a divine sign of the salvation of the Korean people. As soon as you arrive in Peking, go immediately to the Catholic Church and ask the priests about the catechism, learn the liturgy of the Mass and bring us the necessary books. This is a matter of life and death. The all-important business of eternity is in your hands. Go, and above all, proceed with prudence." 3

These early lay leaders were known as the "Sons of Light" (Pai-dal Kyerae) because they sought doctrine, first of all, for their own enlightenment. They wanted to learn more about the faith God had given them so that they could then share it with others. They seemingly did not look upon this religion as foreign; nor did they seem concerned about who would share it with them. They understood that God works through human instruments and they learned that such human instruments could be contacted in China. So, interestingly, Adam Schall, a German, influenced Lee Byok through his ancestor whom Schall had told about Catholicism; they read books by Ricci, an Italian, and others; they welcomed a Chinese sent to them by a Portuguese bishop in Peking as their first priest, and later French and other missionaries helped them to establish a local church.

Seung Hoon was instructed and baptized at North Church in Peking by Fr. Louis de Grammont. He was given the name Peter as it was hoped that he would become the cornerstone of the Korean Church.⁴ In view of his future role in the early Church, we can imagine Fr. de Grammont saying to him "I have prayed for you, Peter, that your faith may never fail. You in turn must strengthen your brothers." 5

When Seung Hoon returned to Korea in 1784 with books of the Seven Sacraments, catechisms, commentaries on the Scriptures, lives of the

saints and prayer books, Lee Byok and his group of intellectuals began to study them and to carry out their teaching. So great was the influence of the Chinese books written by Ricci and other foreign missionaries and brought back to Korea that even today, although the Korean language is very different from Chinese, its catholic terms like God (天主, Tian Zhu), Holy Mother Mary (聖母, Sheng Mu), Sacraments (聖事 Sheng Shi), Pope (教宗, Jiao Zong) and others, are exactly the same as the Chinese. After studying these newly acquired books, Lee Byok said, "Catholicism is a very wonderful doctrine and is the true way. The great God pities the Korean people and wants us to participate in the work of saving their souls. This is the Divine Order. We should not be deaf to the divine call. We must tell the people about the Gospel and spread Catholicism throughout this country."⁶

Then Peter Lee Seung Hoon, the only catholic in the group up until this time, baptized Lee Byok and the others in the group, and their movement was underway. It is recorded that Seung Hoon baptized more than 4,000 catholics within the first year after his return from Peking, 4,000 new believers who almost certainly had never seen a priest. Kwon Il Shin, one of the pillars of the group of literati, took the great St. Francis Xavier as his patron because he had already decided to devote his life to Christian missionary work.

How did the Church gain so many new members? Through many debates with Confucian scholars, often witnessed by groups of curious listeners, Lee Byok won many converts. One of his biographers says that at the end of one such public three-day debate with Lee Ka Hwan, the son of a noble family, a completely vanquished Ka Hwan said "Christianity is magnificent and true. But Christianity brings pain and misfortune to its believers. What is to be done?"⁷

How right and prophetic he was! Within a year of Seung Hoon's return from Peking, and all the apostolic activity of the small band of laymen, the first persecution struck in 1785. Great pressure was put on these sons of noble and well-known families to apostatize, but instead, after apologizing to their families for causing them so much trouble from the government and their non-believing relatives and friends, they preached even more vigorously and gladly died for their beliefs. Lee Byok was so opposed by his family and so threatened by his father's insistence that he would commit suicide if his son did not recant, that he finally decided to devote the remainder of his life to prayer and penance in seclusion. He feared that if his nobleman father carried out his threat, people would say that a religion which would bring this about was not worthy of belief. It is perhaps because of the fact

that Lee Byok died estranged from his family and in solitude as a result of his severe fasting and penance that, revered as he is, his name does not appear among those destined for official sainthood. The others were all given a choice between apostasy and death. Lee Byok died in 1784 before such a choice was offered to him. But the Church continued to grow despite the loss of its acknowledged "founder" and the violent persecution. Knowing what we do from the history of the Church, we would say not 'despite' but rather 'because of' these factors.

Because Lee Byok's and his companions' knowledge of the faith was gained only from books, except for Seung Hoon's and periodic delegations' brief contact with missionaries in China, they did not have an understanding of the hierarchy of ordained ministers. These men elected their own priests and bishops, but as soon as they learned more and experienced doubts about the validity of their actions, they asked for clarification from the Church in China. It is said that delegations made the three-month 1,200 kilometer trip on foot more than twenty times before Bishop de Gouvea of Peking finally responded in 1790. He congratulated them on their zeal, permitted them to continue baptizing, but forbade them to celebrate Mass, to administer the sacrament of penance, to confer ordinations to the priesthood and to continue practicing ancestor worship.⁸ It was at this time that he sent Father James Chu, a Chinese priest, to them.⁹ The Korean christians had no more difficulty talking about the 'Bishop of Peking' even though he was a European, and beseeching him to send clergy, than catholics of today have in speaking about and requesting favors from the 'Bishop of Rome', presently also European, although he might someday be Chinese or any other nationality.

It is surely worth noting that many of these early Korean Christians suffered martyrdom at least partially because they believed and followed the directions of a foreign bishop from Peking who forbade them to practice ancestor worship. To the Korean government this became a political question. Confucianism, with its rigid ritualism and strict social hierarchy, was the official doctrine of the country. To disobey familial and special rites meant calling into question the very foundation of the Korean state. When the ruler in Seoul learned that christians were burning their ancestral tablets, he ordered their deaths. We see that similar to many other situations in history, this was not a persecution of religion 'per se', but rather against what people did as a result of their beliefs. They were seen as going against certain customs and Confucian principles of society. It went contrary to the civil foundations of the society and so was interpreted as political. Sometimes we say that religion is persecuted by those who hate God or

or religion. It is rather that those in power disagree with what believers claim their religion asks of them. When this goes against the traditional values of the state, it is interpreted as political no matter whether the persecutors are believers in another religion or in no religion at all. So long as belief is only a private acknowledgement of a God who is satisfied with this and makes no further demands regarding their 'faith-acted-out-in-society,' it is no threat and can be tolerated.

Father Chu was in trouble from the beginning. The government found out about his secret arrival and put out an order for his arrest. The believers loved him and treasured his priestly ministry so much that they protected him at risk of great peril to their own lives. Matthias Choi In-Ghil impersonated the priest and went to prison in his stead. But when his identity became known he was beaten to death without revealing where Father Chu was. By this heroic act he made it possible for Father Chu to minister for a further five years until his own martyrdom in 1795.¹⁰

For the next thirty years Korean catholics lived without clergy and remained secretly faithful to their religion. We know that in 1811 and again in 1827 they petitioned the Pope to send them priests. We have a copy of the extraordinary letter sent to Pope Pius VII on December 9, 1811. He must have understood well their political and religious trials as he was himself a prisoner of Napoleon at Fontainebleau when the letter was received. It said:

"It is with great urgency and with ardent fervor that we beseech your holiness to have compassion on us... We are living in a little kingdom... For ten years we have been undergoing pains and affliction... Many of our people have died from old age and sickness. Those of us who remain do not know when we can receive the holy instructions in the faith. We desire this grace like someone who is thirsty and longs for water. We implore this grace as those in a drought plea for rain... It is true that we know very little about our religion; we know only how to fast and to say prayers, and truly, we are not worthy to be called christians. However, we are more than 10,000 who know God, and we haven't yet received the grace to be governed by a bishop. If we do not see a boat coming from Europe with help, the precept of Jesus Christ to teach and baptize all nations, the parables in the Holy Gospels about

the love for others and zeal for the salvation of their souls, will all become just like an old hat or old clothes, useless... So we beseech Your Holiness to forgive our importunate appeal. The persecution that we are undergoing forces us to write this letter on silk, so that the one who is going to carry it to you can conceal it in his garments."¹¹

It was not until 1831 that Pope Gregory XVI assigned the Paris Foreign Mission Society to Korea and the first diocese was established at Cho-Seon, thus removing it from the jurisdiction of the diocese of Peking. By this time there were already 40,000 Catholics in Korea, brought to the faith almost completely through the efforts of lay leaders.¹²

As soon as the French priests and their bishop arrived, following the ideal norms of the missionary Church, these early missionaries immediately began to establish a local church. In 1836 they sent Andrew Kim Dai-kun, Thomas Choi and Francis Choi to the seminary in Macao. Francis Choi died in 1839 before ordination, but Andrew Kim, the first native Korean priest, was ordained in Shanghai in 1845 by Bishop Jean Ferreol, and was martyred in Korea after only one year of ministry. His name appears in the list for canonization as 'protosacerdos' or new priest. Thomas Choi became the second native priest.¹³



Andre Kim, the first Korean priest

The history of the Korean Church has been one of extraordinary suffering from the very beginning, but the seed of martyrdom has always blossomed forth with new and more vigorous life. From its small beginnings the Church numbered about 23,000 by the time the great persecution of 1866 began. Many had already died in a persecution that began in 1839 as is indicated by the

fact already mentioned that in 1831 there were 40,000 believers. There are records to show that more than one-third of these 23,000 were killed for their faith between 1866 and 1873, when the regent, Prince Heung-Son, retired. The prince lived in retirement until his death in 1898. His wife, Princess Min, was baptized in 1896 by Bishop Mutel. In her last illness she begged the bishop to try to bring her husband to accept the Christian faith as well. The bishop tried to carry out her wishes by writing to request an audience. The prince replied with a gift and letter, but before the audience could take place, he died.¹⁴ Perhaps had the invitation been as striking and compelling as that to Saul the persecutor, Heung-Son, could have become another Paul and his name found among the list of those he helped to become saints.

In 1942, Pope Pius XII appointed Paul Ro as the first Korean bishop of Seoul, thus making the Church more truly Korean. After the heavy losses suffered during World War II and the Korean War of 1950-1953, the Catholic Church once again began to grow. Today there are nearly one million, 700 thousand catholics in the South, with 15 Korean bishops out of 18 altogether, 1059 Korean and 224 foreign priests, 3,514 Korean and 150 foreign Sisters, 160 Korean and 40 foreign Brothers.¹⁵



*Medal to
commemorate
bicentennial of
the Korean
Catholic Church*

There is much discussion today concerning what really constitutes religious freedom, whether believers are harassed because of their religious beliefs or because their actions are interpreted as contrary to

the policies and goals of the civil powers, whether real persecution exists or not. If Korea is a true indication of what happens when a people's faith values are violently challenged, then all such discussion, except for those caught in this predicament, is merely an exercise in rhetoric. The witness of time will bear out the truth. For as one reflects on these two hundred years of christian belief in Korea, it is easy to picture their experience as if it were one of those special modern non-extinguishable candles on a birthday cake. As long as all effort is used to blow it out, the flame seems to disappear; as soon as the blower pauses to take another breath, the flame reappears as brightly as ever. And just as with the passage of the years the number of candles on the birthday cake increases, so as the believing community celebrates more anniversaries of its birth, the number and brightness of the lighted flames will increase to add joy to the celebrating community and light to the world, And as Korea bears out, the shining witness of these glowing candles will attract more people to the banquet than the simple teaching about birth and rebirth by thousands of missionaries. God's way is not always our way.

FOOTNOTES:

(1) These figures are taken from a Korean-English brochure prepared especially for the Bicentennial celebration. The Latin title (no English title given) is 103 Sancti Martyres Coreani, Most Rev. Angelo N. Kim, Chairman, Bishops' Conference of Korea, P.O. Box 42, Kang-Dong-Ku, Seoul 134-00.

(2) The Great Teacher John Baptist LEE BYOK, Founder of the Catholic Church in Korea, prepared by the Committee for Canonization and Beatification, Bishops' Conference of Korea, pp. 12-13.

(3) Ibid., p. 13.

(4) Ibid., p. 14.

(5) Luke, 22:32.

(6) The Great Teacher, op. cit., p. 15.

(7) Ibid., p. 17.

(8) Annales de la Propagation de la Foi, by Leon Triviere, translated

and quoted in Maryknoll, a magazine of the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, February, 1975, p. 60.

(9) Father James Chu's name appears as James Joo Moon-Mo in Korean sources. See A Brief History of the Catholic Church in Korea, prepared by the Bicentennial committee, p. 6.

(10) Ibid., pp. 6-7.

(11) Translated from a Korean letter in the archives of the Paris Foreign Mission Society, Paris, France.

(12) A Brief History, op. cit., p. 9.

(13) 103 Sancti Martyres, op. cit., p. 10.

(14) Brother DePorres Stilp, "The Church That Was Built with Blood," Maryknoll, October, 1966, p. 23.

(15) Joe Veneroso, "Land of Contradictions," Maryknoll, March, 1982, p. 7.