



SAINTS AND MARTYRS

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SAINTS ANDREW KIM TAE-GON, PAUL CHONG HA-SANG AND COMPANIONS

Feast day: September 20



KOREAN MARTYRS

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Andrew Kim Tae-gon was Korea's first Catholic priest. Born on 21 August 1822 of a noble Korean family, Kim Taegon's parents were converts and his father was subsequently martyred for being a practicing Christian. Andrew began his priestly studies at the seminary in Macau and, six years later, was ordained a priest in Shanghai. He then returned to Korea to preach the Gospel. During the Joseon Dynasty, Christianity was strongly suppressed, resulting in the persecution of many Christians (Catholics and Protestants) and their execution. The Catholic faith had to go underground. Andrew was one of thousands who gave their life for their faith at this time. In 1846, when he was just 25 years of age, he was tortured and beheaded. Among his last words were: "This is my last hour of life, listen to me attentively. If I have held communication with foreigners, it has been for my religion and for my God. It is for Him that I die. My immortal life is on the point of beginning. Become Christians if you wish to be happy after death, because God has eternal chastisements in store for those who have refused to know Him."

Macau's famous Camoes Garden (in Portuguese, Jardim Luis de Camoes) contains a statue dedicated to Andrew Kim Taegon. A plaque below it indicates dates and events of the major milestones in his life.

Paul Chong Hasang was born in 1795. He was the son of Augustine Chong Yakchong, one of Korea's first converts to Christianity who was himself martyred in 1801 during the persecuion of Shin-Yu. When Yakjong was martyred with Hasang's older brother, Yakjong's wife and the other children were spared and took shelter in the countryside. Hasang was then seven years old.

As a layman, Paul reunited the scattered Christians and encouraged them to keep living their faith. For this he wrote the first catechism for the Korean Church entitled Joo Gyo Yo Ji. He also wrote the Sang-Je-Sang-Su which explained to the Korean government why the Church was no threat to the country.

Paul was employed as a servant to the diplomatic corps and this enabled him to travel to China and Beijing on at least nine occasions. While he was there he tried to persuade the bishop in Beijing to send missionary priests to Korea. Through the good offices of the bishop he sent letters to Pope Gregory XVI (1831-46) in Rome requesting the establishment of a diocese in Korea independent of Beijing. On 9 September 1831, Pope Gregory announced the setting up of a Korean diocese.

In 1836 Bishop Laurent-Marie-Joseph Imbert MEP arrived with two priests of his Society as the first Vicar Apostolic for Korea (and Titular Bishop of Capsa). The bishop found Paul to be gifted, zealous and virtuous. He taught him Latin and theology and was about to ordain him priest when the Gi Hye persecution of 1839 broke out. Hasang was captured and made a statement to his judge, defending his Catholic faith. The judge, after reading it, said, "You are right in what you have written but the king forbids this religion and it is your duty to renounce it." To which Paul replied, "I have told you that I am a Christian, and will be one until the day of my death." Paul was then put through a series of tortures during which he remained calm. He was bound to a cross on a cart and courageously met his death. He died on 21 September 1839 and was just 45 years of age. Bishop Imbert was also a martyr at this time.

Among the 103 martyrs being commemorated today there were also Ignatius, the father of Andrew Kim, two other bishops; seven priests of the Missions Etrangeres de Paris (MEP, Paris Foreign Missions Society). There was Columba Kim, an unmarried woman of twenty-six. She was put in prison, pierced with hot awls and seared with burning coals. She and her sister Agnes were disrobed and kept for two days in a cell with condemned criminals but not molested. After Columba complained about the indignity, no more women were subjected to it. The two were beheaded. A boy of thirteen, Peter Ryou, had his flesh so badly torn that he could pull off pieces and throw them at the judges. He was killed by strangulation. Protase Chong, a 41-year-old noble, apostatized under torture and was freed. Later he came back, confessed his faith and was tortured to death.

In 1925 79 Korean martyrs were beatified by Pope Pius XI and 24 more in 1968 by Pope Paul VI. On 6 May 1984, all 103 were canonised together as saints by Pope John Paul II. In a break with tradition, the ceremony did not take place in Rome, but in Seoul.

Today there are approximately four million Catholics in Korea and has the fourth largest number of saints in the Catholic world.

*Excerpted from:
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