

The Jubilee of the 200th Anniversary
of the Birth of
St. Andrew Kim Taegon



1821-1846

The First Priest of Korea



ST. ANDREW KIM TAE GON

The Joseon Dynasty and the Catholic Church

"We are the only nation who embraced the doctrines of the Holy Church through our independent study of the Sacred texts, instead of the missionary efforts of the priests."

--An excerpt from the letter by the faithful of Joseon addressed to the Holy Father in 1811.

During the Joseon Dynasty, a Korean kingdom that lasted between 1392-1897, Catholicism was first introduced by Seunghun Yi. He was a layman who, after receiving his baptism in Beijing in 1784, returned home to Joseon and after sharing the Gospel, privately baptized several believers. By the 1800s, the growing discontent with Confucianism under the Joseon dynasty and an exploding interest in Western civilization caused the Catholic faith to spread rapidly among the people, with believers numbering more than ten thousand. Catholicism, however, clashed with Confucianism: Catholic doctrine gives higher priority to God over kings and parents, causing some to interpret the Faith as fostering disloyalty and dismissing filial duty. The Catholic emphasis on the equality of all God's people was seen as a threat to the social order centred upon Yangban (aristocracy), and the aristocrats, who felt that their political influence was threatened by this new movement, retaliated by pushing for persecution against the Catholic faithful.

Beginning in 1801, several persecutions were carried out, lasting over 100 years. Books on Western civilization were burned and Catholicism was banned throughout the kingdom. As a result, 300 Catholics, including Fr. Jacob Wenmo Zhou who managed to secretly enter Joseon in 1794, were martyred for their faith. The persecution intensified, and the life of the church crumbled as the majority of survivors renounced their Catholic faith. At the same time, however, those who managed to escape the persecution formed a small community in a secluded place and deepened their faith in God among themselves. In 1811, these small groups of Catholics appealed to Beijing for clergy to serve the Korean faithful, expressing their desire for sacraments. Paul Hasang Chong, a lay delegate, personally carried this 1200 km to Beijing on foot; not once, but sixteen times. In 1827, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (currently the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples) in the Vatican finally contacted the Paris Foreign Missions Society for assistance. Father Barthélemy Bruguiere, already serving in Bangkok as a missionary, was deeply moved by the Korean faithfuls' pleading, and asked his order that he be sent to Joseon. Cardinal Cappellari, Prefect of the Congregation, agreed to this arrangement, and after being elected as Pope Gregory XVI, he proclaimed the papal bull establishing Korea as an apostolic vicariate in 1831.

House church in early days of the Catholic (Chultae KIM, Jeoldusan Martyrs Shrine)



Birth and Upbringing of Young Kim Taegon

Solmoe means 'a mountain covered with pine trees' and is located in Woogang-myeon Dangjin-si.



St. Andrew Taegon KIM's birthplace

Kim Taegon was born in 1821 in Songsan-ri (Solmoe) Dangjin-si Chungnam. He was named Kim Jaebok at birth, but was given Taegon Andrew at his baptism. He received catechesis in the Christian way of life sincerely, knowing that he came from a family in which several of his family members, over four generations, were martyred for their faith. At the age of seven, his family had to take refuge in Golbaemasil, a small secluded village in Yongin, due to the increase of Catholic persecution by authorities. The family was warmly received by fellow believers who formed a Catholic community and gained a living selling pottery.

Young Kim Taegon grew up with the priestly vocation in his heart. In 1836, Father Pierre Maubant, who made his visits to these rural Catholic communities, invited Thomas Yangeop Choe and Bangle Francis Xavier Choe, along with a young Taegon, to learn Latin and receive the basic seminary formation. These three would soon leave their home to pursue the priestly studies in Macao. Father Maubant had initially wanted to form a seminary nearby in Manchuria, just outside of Joseon, but the persecution under the Qing Dynasty in Manchuria and fears of intensifying suppression in Joseon caused him to send the three men further away to Macao.

Young Kim Taegon in the seminary formation

"The three young men sent by Father Maubant from Joseon are exemplary in every way, especially in their faith, humility, pursuit of knowledge, and respect to teachers."

-An excerpt from Rector Father Callery's letter to Father Tesson

In 1837, these three young men began their seminary formation at "Joseon Seminary", founded in Macao, however, under the Far East Division of the Paris Foreign Missions Society. Unfortunately, Taegon faced numerous health issues related to pre-existing health complications, while also witnessing the death of his fellow seminarian Bangje Choe's due to typhoid. These personal difficulties added to the burden of cultural differences he was already struggling at seminary as a young fifteen year old boy.

Outside the seminary, the world was consumed by the conflict between imperialist colonial expansion and nationalist resistance. In April 1839 in Macao, this conflict became an uprising, and Taegon, along with the other seminarians, was forced to continue seminary studies in the Philippines. A letter by Father Maistre to the rector of the seminary in Paris Father Albrand reflects how the formation of the "Joseon Seminary" was unsystematic and generally incapable of fulfilling the purpose of a priestly formation. Nevertheless, Taegon remained committed to serving God through the priestly calling, and devoted himself wholeheartedly to the remainder of his seminary studies.

Taegon's love and zeal for the Gospel

His attempts to enter Joseon and the Diaconate Ordination

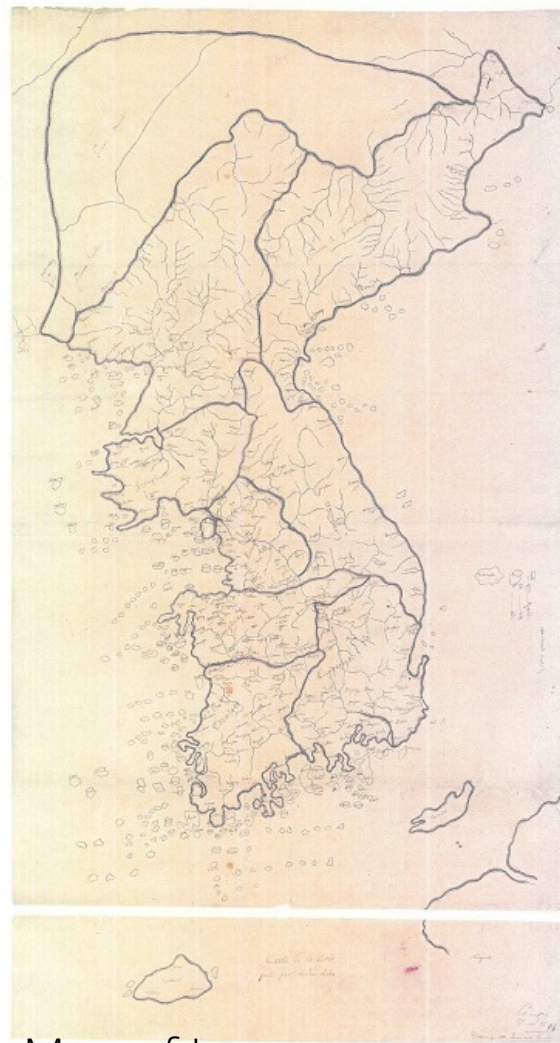
There are few records indicating the exact academic and spiritual formation young Taegon received while in seminary in Macao. The letters he sent to priests, however, expressed the challenges he faced in his ongoing attempts to return to Joseon, as well as his profession of faith in God upon finally re-entering his homeland.

Taegon's first attempt to return was in disguise as an interpreter with Father Maistre on the French battleship *Érigone*. He had been able to learn the French language while studying under French missionaries and now traveled on the battleship along the coast of Shanghai, waiting for an opportunity to return. When the *Érigone* suddenly decided to sail back to France, he transferred to another ship heading to Liaodong, and from there walked over 800km to Ulju, where he hoped to meet a secret envoy from Joseon. Taegon suffered from cold and hunger on that journey, yet grew in his dependence on God's mercy and the assistance of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

After moving to Xiaobajazi in 1843, Kim Taegon and Choe Yangeop attempted to enter Joseon once more, this time under the guidance of the new bishop Ferreol. When the Catholic faithful of Joseon communicated to the young men the particular difficulties and danger at that time, they returned to Xiaobajazi. In December of 1844, Taegon finally received his diaconate ordination. In the following year, he made yet another attempt to enter Joseon, this time successfully managing to arrive in Seoul.

Ministry in the Homeland

For the first time in 10 years, Deacon Kim Taegon returned to Seoul, Joseon. He once again began suffering with a terrible illness, this time one that began with his clerical ministry. Despite his poor physical condition, he managed to accomplish several critical tasks, including ensuring the safe passage for Bishop Ferreol and other missionaries into Joseon. After being asked to foster priestly vocations among the faithful, Deacon Kim selected two fourteen year-old boys in whom he plant the seed of vocation in their hearts. He also created the “Map of Joseon” to facilitate the entrance of missionaries into the country, and to introduce Joseon to those who considered it simply unknown territory. Being aware of the financial need for his growing ministry, he also traded goods with the neighbouring Qing Dynasty as well.



Map of Joseon
Currently preserved
at the National Library
of France in Paris

After some time in Joseon, Deacon Kim once again left for Shanghai on a boat, accompanied by fellow missionaries which included a carpenter, four fishermen, and six farmers-neither of whom had been on open water before. According to the letter written by Father Gotteland, their boat was incapable of sailing to its destination yet they boarded without hesitation. Unfortunately, they soon sailed through a harsh storm on open water, and Deacon Kim, noticing the fear among his crew, showed the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary to calm them, saying, “Our Heavenly Mother is here protecting us in this journey. Don't be afraid. I'm certain that we will arrive in Shanghai and have the opportunity to meet the bishop.”

This young man of Joseon, realizing and embracing his vocation to evangelize, never refused nor resented the long and arduous journey, despite his poor physical condition. His zeal and dedication remind us of the road of evangelization taken by the Apostle St. Paul after encountering Jesus in Damascus.

His Ordination to the Priesthood

Immediately after arriving in China, Deacon Kim Taegon notified his superior Bishop Ferreol of his arrival. The bishop and a Father Daveluy, both in Macao at that time, immediately traveled to Shanghai to meet this small group of believers from Joseon. Bishop Ferreol wrote to Father Libois saying, “Their faith was truly admirable. They finally got to meet their bishop and were joyous to the point of forgetting their hardships.” This same meeting also led to the decision to ordain Deacon Kim to the priesthood.

Thus on Aug 17, 1845 in the church of Jinjxiang, Taegon was ordained priest at the hands of Bishop Ferreol, thereby becoming the very first native priest of Joseon. A week later on Aug 24th, Father Kim celebrated his first Mass with his 11 Joseon brethren in the chapel of Wantang Seminary.

His return to Joseon and the arrest by the authority

On April 8th of 1846, Father Kim was arrested by the authority after celebrating Mass at 'Euni mission'.

On August 31st, 1845, Father Kim Taegon, along with the 11 Christians from Joseon, as well as Bishop Ferreol and Father Daveluy, boarded a ship named "Raphael", which was sailing back to Joseon. That journey was also gruelling: the rudder snapped under heavy winds, the mainsail was ripped, and one side of the deck was so torn their ship now sailed without direction. Nearly sinking on several occasions, the ship finally managed to arrive ashore Jeju Island, over 400 km away from the original destination. The Joseon authority was startled by the unexpected arrival of a British ship. Bishop Ferreol wrote in a letter saying that it was God's great providence, and not misfortune, to land on Jeju Island. Given that the port authority in Seoul had been doing thorough searches and investigations of all foreign ships, it is likely they would have been arrested upon arrival had their ship sailed immediately to Seoul.

The men all took rest after their miraculous landing, stocking up food for their journey north to a Catholic community called 'Nabawi'. From there, Bishop Ferreol and Father Daveluy took on disguises better suited for Joseon and went to Seoul. Father Kim meanwhile went first to Yongin to visit the faithful and to celebrate the sacraments before also heading into Seoul, where he planned to find a way for missionaries to enter Joseon by sea.

Father Kim, struggling to safely bring missionaries into Seoul, decided to use disguised Chinese fishing boats. Unfortunately, an unanticipated incident led to his capture by authorities, and soon faced endless harsh interrogations, including more than 40 false allegations. Although he confessed that the book he carried was an important one for Catholics, containing images of the Child Jesus and the Bl. Virgin Mary, his lips were sealed from ever betraying his companions during the interrogation. Once again, despite his sufferings, he never gave in and remained true to his calling as a good and faithful shepherd.

Three letters during His imprisonment

Father Kim managed to write three letters during his time in prison. The first was addressed to his fellow missionary priests explaining the circumstances of his arrest by the port authority and also bidding them his farewell. The conclusion of this letter expresses his firm faith in returning to the Heavenly Father's arms, requesting that his fellow priest, Father Choe Yangeop, take care of his mother. The second letter was addressed to his superior Bishop Ferreol, and detailed the entire process of his interrogation by the local authorities, and how he was now awaiting their final verdict. The last letter was written exclusively in Korean, addressed to all the Catholics of Joseon, imploring them not to renounce their faith in time of trial, even at the moment of martyrdom.

His Martyrdom and Canonization

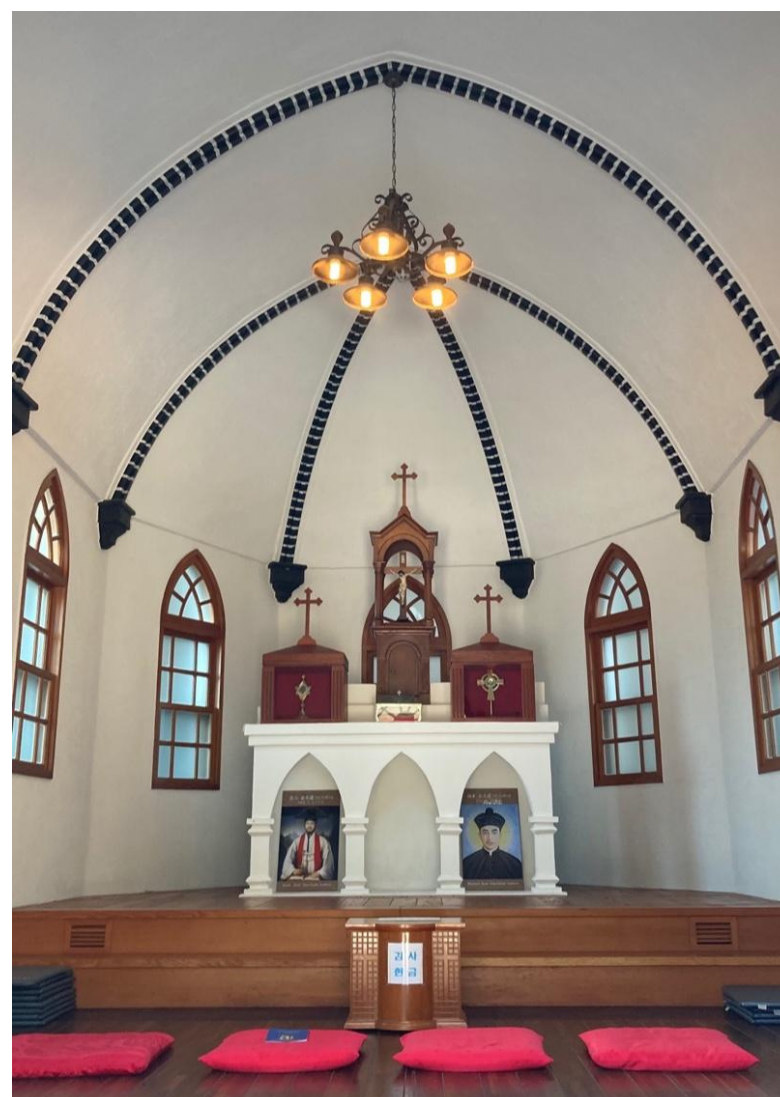
On September 15th, 1846, the senior authorities of the Royal Court petitioned the King to order Father Kim's death by decapitation, and that his head be hung on the front gate. When the King accepted this request, Father Kim, along with 9 fellow Catholics, were martyred for their faith the following day, September 16th, at the Saenamteo by the Hangang. According to the historical record of the event, the local authorities stripped Father Kim of his clothes, pierced his ears with arrows, sprayed him with water, then plastered his face with lime calcium paste. Two soldiers then placed a long club under his armpits, tying his long hair and hands together with a rope so he would face turned by upwards. Twelve executioners encircled Father Kim, each striking him in turn. On the eighth strike, he was decapitated. He was only 25 years old.

His body was temporarily buried in the sand of Saenamteo by the authorities, but a young seventeen year-old Catholic named Minsik Yi took and buried his body properly at Mirinai (His remains are now currently enshrined at the Catholic University of Korea in Hye-hwa-dong). After Father Kim's martyrdom, the persecution against the Catholics lessened, and Catholic communities began to flourish. When twelve year-old Gojong came to the throne, sovereignty passed to Heungseondaewon-gun (translator's note: the King Gojong's father) who initiated a new round of persecution against Catholics in 1866. Bishop Berneux, Bongju Hong, and others, were arrested during that persecution, and over 8000 Catholics were soon martyred for their faith.

While still a deacon, Taegon had written "The Historical Report on the Martyrdom and Martyrs of Joseon" which explained how in 1839, 190 Catholics were arrested and 137 were martyred, including Bishop Imbert, Father Maubant, Father Chastan, and Chong Hasang. If one also considers omitted or missing data, one can safely assume the number of martyrs to have been greater. There has since been a steady push for the beatification and canonization of the Joseon martyrs, and in 1925 Pope Pius XI beatified Father Andrew Kim and 79 martyrs. In 1984 during his visit to South Korea, Pope St. John Paul II canonized Fr. Kim and 102 other Christians. St. Andrew Kim Taegon, who returned to the Heavenly Kingdom after a brief life of 25 years, had an unshakable faith in God. His bright example shed new light on the idea of God, moral ethics, and the true way of life to the people of Joseon, who were greatly oppressed by the violence of the ruling authority. This spiritual giant who first opened the eyes of his beloved people in Joseon and firmly established God's new way of life in his homeland, now invites us all to reflect upon a singular question as we commemorate the 200 years of his sacrificial love, "Can you call yourself a devoted Catholic?"

The chapel
where the relic of
St. Andrew Kim Taegon's
foot is enshrined

Mirinai Shrine



St. Andrew Kim Taegon's
Inferior maxillary bone





***"Listen to me attentively,
as my time is limited here below.***

***The very reason
I reached out to the people
of other civilizations
was for the sole purpose
of my faith and my God alone.
I am willing to lay down
my life for the Lord.***

***The eternal life is about to begin for me
and if you desire to be
eternally satisfied
and joyful after your time here,
believe in this teaching from God.
He will not forget those
who reject Him,
and unending punishment is unavoidable
for them."***

Words of Father Kim during the interrogation before
his martyrdom.

St. Andrew Kim Parish

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