

## Preface to the Anthologies of Texts

Catholic Christianity first entered Korea in the 17th and 18th centuries in the form of books in Classical Chinese published by European Jesuits serving in China. It came as one element in what was known as the Western Learning, for the Jesuits brought to China and strove to communicate their knowledge of astronomy, geography, engineering, as well as European philosophy and religion. These books appealed to certain aristocratic Korean scholars, whose studies in the Confucian Classics enabled them to read them easily. The rigid, conservative form of Confucianism known as Neo-Confucianism was the official ideology of the Korean Joseon Dynasty and many of its scholars reacted with intense hostility to the Western ideas, which they considered to be heretical, pernicious and wrong.

Then the new religion changed from being the subject of books to being a communal practice in daily life with the baptism of the first Korean. The Korean kings were obliged to send frequent embassies to the Chinese Emperor in Peking and the son of one member of an embassy, Yi Seung-hun, was invited to accompany his father on an embassy in 1784. Scholars interested in the Western Learning urged him to make contact with the European priests in Peking, and bring back additional books. The French priest whom Yi Seung-hun met in Beijing, Fr. de Grammont, taught him the basics of the Faith, seeing an opportunity to bring the faith to Korea, which no foreigner could enter. They had to communicate by writing Sinitic characters, since the difference in pronunciation between the two countries made spoken communication impossible. Before he left Peking, the priest baptized him with the name Peter. On his return to Seoul, he gave the books he had received to a leading young scholar known as Yi Byeok who, after studying them, declared that this religion was the truth they had been seeking. As a baptized believer, Yi Seung-hun was qualified to baptize others and so the first baptized community was formed.

Remarkably, from the very beginning, baptism was given not only to the *yangban* (aristocrats) of the original study-group, but also to people serving in their households. Equally remarkably, from the beginning, women were included, although Korean culture normally made it impossible for men from outside the near family to catch even a glimpse of the wives and daughters of their friends. One of the fundamental ideas that the leaders had grasped was that God was the Father of all without distinction of class or gender, and that the Christian community had to be egalitarian.

Yi Seung-hun had seen how the priests in Peking celebrated Mass and the new believers also saw from the books that the sacraments were celebrated by priests and bishops. At the time of Yi Seung-hun's visit, there was no bishop in Peking, the new bishop was still on his way. Therefore, the leaders of the Seoul-based community chose leaders from among themselves to serve as priests, who began to celebrate some kind of Mass and to hear confessions. This arrangement is now termed the "improvised hierarchy" in Korea.

Very soon, as the newly-baptized *yangban* began to talk about the new religious vision they had discovered, they encountered violent opposition from within their families and from conservative colleagues. Yi Seung-hun and some other leading members of the community were so overwhelmed by this opposition that they soon withdrew.

Troubled by some passages in their books, the community sent other envoys to Peking with letters containing questions about Church discipline. The priests in Beijing replied in 1790, instructing them to disband their hierarchy and not to celebrate any sacrament other than Baptism. They soon obeyed. More significant, by a letter sent a little later in response to requests that a priest be sent to guide them, the Bishop of Beijing stressed that Catholics in China (and therefore also in Korea) were not permitted to engage in the

“superstitious” rites of traditional “ancestor worship,” making and offering food before “soul tablets” for deceased ancestors. Similar offerings made to Confucius and the sages were likewise forbidden.

These rites, which particularly concerned the high-class *yangban* families, were at the very center of the Confucian system for what was considered a civilized society; they held the key to social harmony and order. A considerable number of high-class Christians were appalled by the order forbidding the rites, and withdrew rather than obey. The consequences became clear already late in 1791, when the first case occurred of Catholics being tried and executed for not conducting the traditional rites after the mother of one died. This first case involved Paul Yun of Jinsan in Jeolla province, whose mother had died, and his maternal cousin James Gwon. Fired by the already-existing hostility to the new religion, the authorities were determined to make an example of them. They were duly tried and executed.

Their execution was considered to be a sign that being a Christian was in itself a crime and a number of arrests and executions came in the following years, in the first official persecution, the so-called Shinhae Persecution, even where no direct rejection of the rites had occurred. Many of those arrested saved their lives by apostatizing and the community was badly shaken. From 1795 until 1801, there was a Chinese priest in Seoul, Fr. Zhou Wen-mo, but he was obliged to remain so hidden that only a limited number of Christians knew that he was there and had access to the sacraments he could administer. He surrendered to the authorities during the great persecution of 1801 and was executed.

The king at this time was Jeongjo, who was clearly not willing to authorize a massive persecution of Christians, some of whom were close to him. However, late in 1800, he fell ill and died. The new king was still a child and the widow of the king reigning before Jeongjo became Regent. Her family was strongly hostile to the Western Learning and the Regent authorized a general persecution, the Shin-yu Persecution, in which many *yangban* believers were executed. It was only after the child king, later known as Sunjo, came of age and took control as king that the most active persecution came to an end. After the 1801 persecution, there remained relatively few high-class believers and many Christians lived in poverty away from Seoul, with catechists serving the local communities as lay leaders.

Our knowledge of this initial period comes in a large part from letters written in Beijing by the priests and the Bishop, who had met Korean Christians or received their letters. Additional information comes from a number of texts written by Korean Christians, including a very long account composed during the 1801 persecution by Alexius Hwang Sa-yeong, the “Silk Letter,” written on a sheet of fine silk for easy concealment. The survival of Korean texts is remarkable, given the violence of the various persecutions. Letters written by missionaries were mostly preserved in archives, either in Rome or in Paris.

The Church in Korea was initially founded, spread and led entirely by the Korean believers, without any presence of European missionaries. The Korean Christians called the faith they believed and practiced “Cheonju-hak” or “Cheonju-(seong)-gyo” (the Teaching of Cheonju), as the Chinese name they had learned to use for “God” was 天主 Cheonju, Lord of Heaven. Later, when the first Korean priest, Kim Dae-geon, wrote letters in Latin to French missionaries in Macao he always called the Korean believers “Christiani.” “Catholicism” was represented by “Cheonju-gyo” (God-teaching). These are the terms used in translating the first Korean-language text about the Faith, Jeong Yak-jong’s lengthy *Jugyo Yoji* written before 1800.

The second period in the history of the Korean Church begins in 1831, when the Pope entrusted the Korean mission to the (French) Foreign Missions Society. Bishop Bruguière, a missionary in Siam (Thailand) was appointed to be Korea’s first Apostolic Vicar (Bishop) and the “Notice” which he sent to the review *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* to

be published in France in 1832, as he was setting out for Korea, is the first general outline of Korean Church history to be published after the lengthy Letter by Bishop De Govea, that was written in Latin and published in French in London in 1800. From this point, we have multiple texts written by European missionaries in French and Latin which have been preserved in the Archives of the Foreign Missions Society in Paris, now known as the Institut de Recherches France-Asie IRFA, as well as in the archives of the Propaganda in Rome.

Bishop Bruguière, exhausted by his long journey across China, died in Manchuria late in 1835, just as he was preparing to enter Korea. Finally, early in 1836, after many efforts, Fr. Maubant was able to enter Korea in his place. He was followed by Fr. Chastan and Bishop Imbert. Their letters, some published in the popular review *Annales de la Propagation de la foi*, provide a first European, clerical view of the Korean Church. Because of the constant threats, many Christians had had no choice but to leave their homes and take refuge in Christian villages (교우촌 Gyo-u-chon) hidden in the mountains and remote areas, where they lived in extreme poverty. The first three European missionaries travelled, disguised as mourners to hide their faces, to visit as many of the villages as possible and their activities brought about a considerable increase in the number of believers across the southern regions of the country.

It is not easy to explain the Gihae Persecution which erupted in 1839, beyond the accumulated hostility of the conservative factions and the realization among the “satellites” (police agents) of the profits they could make by stealing the property of those they arrested. This hostility was certainly fuelled by rumors of the presence of foreign priests and the growing numbers of Catholics.

Meanwhile, three young Koreans had left to study for the priesthood outside of Korea. One having fallen ill and died, Andrew Kim Dae-geon and Thomas Choe Yang-eop remained in China to study with the priests from France in the Far-Eastern headquarters of the Foreign Missions Society in Macao. Each wrote a total of some 20 letters in Latin to the priests who had taught them in Macao, after setting out to try to enter Korea, and once they had entered. The letters of Choe Yang-eop are especially precious for the record they provide of the life of Korea’s scattered Christian communities in the 1850s. News of the execution of the three French missionaries in September 1839 only reached the outside world several years later, as Kim Dae-geon was preparing to cross into Korea. His father and both parents of Thomas Choe were among those martyred.

In the autumn of 1845, Kim Dae-geon was able to bring Bishop Ferréol and Fr. Daveluy by ship from Shanghai into Korea. The following year, he was caught and executed, sparking the limited Byeong-o Persecution of 1846. It was only late in 1850 that Fr. Choe succeeded in entering Korea, followed a few months later by Fr. Maistre, and other French missionaries followed, with some falling ill and dying, until in 1866 they were twelve. Fr. Choe was able to serve, traveling constantly, for ten years before he fell ill and died in 1861.

The final, massive persecution, that of 1866, the Byeong-in Persecution, saw the martyrdom of nine French missionaries, while three were able to escape to China. The 1866-1868 persecution was the most murderous of all and there is no telling how many died since records were not kept; many executions were performed arbitrarily on simple delation without formal trial. It was only after the diplomatic opening of Korea in the 1880s that Catholic missionaries from France could exercise their ministry openly and slowly help the Korean Christians recover from the trauma of the past.

The documents collected and translated in these anthologies are some of the most significant expressions of the life of the Korean Church during those years of growth and persecution. They have mostly never been published or translated until now, except in

Korean. The main western source for an understanding of Korea's early Catholic history is Charles Dallet's 2-volume *Histoire de l'Eglise de Corée* (Paris: 1874-5). Dallet's work of compilation drew on the multiple documents available to him in the archives of the Foreign Missions Society in Paris, especially those sent from Korea before and after 1860 by Bishop Antoine Daveluy. Dallet frequently quoted extensively from his sources and his work, never reprinted after its first publication, remains despite its limitations the main guide to and source for the history of the Church in Korea prior to 1866. His work was in large part already an anthology of transcribed texts.

We have only included in our Anthologies texts which Dallet's text reproduces in full when they seem to be of extreme significance. Another compilation which we have made and translated brings together many of the most interesting letters written by the French missionaries and sent either to the Headquarters of the Society in Macao or to the Seminary in Paris. In addition, we have edited and translated the five volumes of texts and letters written by Father / Bishop Daveluy during his more than twenty years in Korea. His more than seventy letters to his family, especially, give many vivid insights into the harsh life of the missionaries in Korea, and of their flock. It has seemed better to separate the texts written by Koreans from those written by the European missionaries. The Korean texts offer a particularly precious insight into the ways in which the Koreans lived and expressed their faith.