

By Blood or by Sweat: Two Kinds of Martyrdom

Brother Anthony of Taizé

Andrew Kim Dae-geon and Thomas Choe Yang-eop were born in the same year, 1821, walked across China together to Macao in 1837, aged 16, studied together in Macao to become priests, then spent time together in Manchuria waiting for a chance to re-enter Korea. Andrew entered first, early in 1845, not yet a priest, then sailed back to Shanghai through a storm, was ordained as a priest, set off again in the same ship with a French bishop and priest, landed in Korea in October 1845, was arrested in June the following year and was beheaded as a traitor on September 16, 1846, less than a year after his arrival. Thomas was only able to enter Korea, already a priest, at the end of 1849, spent over ten years walking around the southern regions ministering to the scattered Christians, and died of exhaustion on June 15, 1861. Today, Andrew is celebrated as a “Martyr of Blood” while Thomas is said to be a “Martyr of Sweat.”

If martyrdom is a competition, the championship might seem to have been won in advance by Andrew, who was a canonized Catholic saint in 1984, while Thomas, despite everyone’s efforts, is still only entitled to the title of “Venerable,” finally granted in 2016, a title awarded to Andrew already in 1857. Attempts to have Thomas beatified are underway. Andrew has the additional plus of being the main character in a recently released commercial movie.

Both men were born in 1821, Thomas being born a little earlier, on March 1, while Andrew was born on August 21. Thomas was born in present-day Cheongyang-gun, South Chungcheong Province, a rural area lying between Buyeo and Gongju, while Andrew was born in the same province in Solmoe, which lies between Dangjin and Asan. Neither stayed long in his birthplace. In 1827 Thomas’s family moved first to Gongdeok-ri, then outside of Seoul, then to Gangwon Province, and finally to Bupyeong near Incheon. At about the same time, Andrew’s family left Solmoe and after a time near Seoul they settled in Yongin, a little to the south of Seoul, in Gyeonggi Province.

Similarly, both were the children of pioneering Catholic families. Thomas’s father, (Saint) Francis Choe Gyeong-hwan, was born in 1805 in South Chungcheong Province and his grandfather, Choe Han-il, had

Two Kinds of Martyrdom

learned about the faith from Yi Jon-chang (Ludovico Gonzaga), the great evangelizer of the region, and been baptized together with his family already in 1787. That was only a couple of years after the Church had been established in Korea on the return from Beijing of Peter Yi Seung-hun, who had been baptized there in 1784. Thomas's mother, (the Blessed) Mary Yi Seong-rye, was born in 1801, a member of that same Yi Jon-chang's family, and she married Thomas's father when she was 17.

Andrew's family had an even older Catholic pedigree. His older great-uncle Kim Jong-hyeon had become a believer at the very start, in 1784-5, then he converted Andrew's younger great-uncle, Kim Han-hyeon, who was later martyred in prison in Daegu in 1816. Not much seems to be known about the family of Andrew's mother, who was known only as Go Ursula. In later years, both of Thomas's parents and Andrew's father, (Saint) Ignatius Kim Jae-jun, were martyred in the 1839 persecution.

Since the first baptisms in 1785, the Korean Catholics had been asking the bishop in Beijing to send them priests so that they could have access to the full range of sacraments, beyond baptism, but in vain; the Church in China was also undergoing violent persecution at the time. Finally, a Chinese priest, James Zhou Wen-mo, was able to enter Korea at the end of 1794. Since foreigners were not allowed into the country, he had to stay hidden and even most Catholics never knew there was a priest in Seoul. When a violent persecution broke out in 1801, he surrendered to the authorities, who had learned of his presence, in hope that the persecution would end. He was martyred, but the persecution did not stop. From 1801, the Koreans kept asking Beijing and Rome for priests, in vain.

Finally, in 1831, the Pope asked the Paris Foreign Missions Society to take responsibility for the Korean mission. The French Church was still struggling to recover from the French Revolution, and there were few volunteers for missionary work, but finally some would-be missionaries were found. The problem was how they could enter such a closed country.

For several years, French missionaries hoping to enter Korea lived in Manchuria, where the Catholic Church was already established. The first apostolic vicar (bishop), Mgr Bruguière died there before he could enter. Finally, in mid-January 1836, the first French missionary to enter Korea, Fr. Pierre Maubant, reached Seoul. He immediately began to look for young Koreans who might be prepared for the priesthood. On February 6 of that year, Thomas Choe Yang-eop arrived at Fr. Maubant's house, and one month later on March 14 he was joined by Francis-Xavier Choe Bang-je. Andrew had not yet been baptized. In April, Fr. Maubant baptized Kim Dae-geon as Andrew near his home in Yongin and on July 11 he became the third candidate to enter Fr. Maubant's house, where all three set about

Two Kinds of Martyrdom

studying the Latin they would need if they were to follow the courses in philosophy and theology required to become priests.

It was clear that such studies could not be undertaken in Korea. Thinking that perhaps something would be possible in Manchuria, Fr. Maubant decided to send them there. On December 2, 1836, the three young men took a vow of purity and obedience and on the following day they set off for China, arriving on December 28 in the house in Manchuria where the French priest Fr. Chastan was waiting to enter Korea, which he finally did in 1837.

It was decided that they would best be able to study in the relative security of the Portuguese territory of Macao, where the Paris Foreign Missions Society had its Far East headquarters. They crossed the whole length of China on foot. It is hard to imagine how they survived, three teenagers with almost no money, no maps, no contacts, and no Chinese language. Alas, there is no record of their adventures. They arrived in Macao on June 7, 1837.

In Macao they entered a community composed of three or four French priests. There had been French missionaries in Indochina since the 17th century and there were a few in different parts of China. This was the central headquarters. But Macao was Portuguese territory and the pope had, centuries before, given the Portuguese kings sole authority over the Church in the Far East. The Portuguese bishops and priests demanded exclusive rights and there was much friction with the French. The three young Koreans could not be sent to the Portuguese-run seminary in Macao, so the French priests created a temporary “Seminary for Korea” based in their house. The procurator of the headquarters was Fr. Pierre Louis Legrégeois, and they were mainly taught by him and Fr. Joseph-Marie Callery and Fr. Napoléon Libois. The letters that they later wrote were almost all addressed to Fr. Libois and Fr. Legrégeois, whom they clearly loved and respected deeply.

Like in every Catholic seminary at the time, classes were taught in Latin and there was little time or encouragement for the boys to learn French. A shock came when on November 27, 1837, soon after their arrival, Choe Bang-je suddenly died of a fever. If the two remaining young men were to become priests, they would have to complete courses, first in philosophy, and then in theology.

In 1839 tensions were rising between China and Britain over the British imports of opium from India. It seemed likely that Macao might be the scene of armed conflict and on April 6, 1839, the Korean students left Macao with two French priests for safety in the Philippines. They arrived in Manila on April 19 and from May 3 they resumed studies at the

Two Kinds of Martyrdom

Lollomboy Farm, outside of Manila, at the invitation of the head of the Dominican Monastery in Manila, to whom it belonged. There is now a shrine to St. Andrew Kim Dae-geon there. Once it was clear that Macao would not be affected by the ongoing war, the priests and students returned there in November the same year.

They could not, of course, have had any idea that during that time, on September 21 1839, in Seoul, Bishop Imbert had been martyred together with Fr. Maubant and Fr. Chastan. Bishop Ferréol in Manchuria would succeed Bishop Imbert as the third head of the Korean Apostolic Vicariate but the news only became known several years later. The father of Andrew and the parents of Thomas were also victims of the 1839 *Gihae* Persecution but they did not know it until much later.

On January 8, 1840, a young French missionary, Fr. Ambroise Maistre, arrived in Macao and helped teach the seminarians. It was soon decided that he too should become a missionary in Korea. On February 15, 1842, Andrew and Fr. Maistre left Macao on board *l'Érigone*, a French frigate captained by Jean-Baptiste Cécille. Cécille seemed interested in establishing contact with the Korean government and needed an interpreter (or two, since Andrew's French was limited). They hoped to benefit from his planned visit to enter Korea, hence the rush.

This is the point at which both Thomas and Andrew began to write letters in Latin, first to Fr. Legrégeois, who had left Macao for France, and then also to Fr. Libois in Macao. All the letters that we have were finally sent to the Paris Foreign Missions Society headquarters in Paris and archived there. A couple of Andrew's letters survive only in French translations. For Andrew, the list of 21 letters includes two that do not in fact exist but are mentioned in other letters. By coincidence, there are also 21 letters written by Thomas.

Arriving in Manila with Cécille, Andrew wrote his first letter to Fr. Legrégeois.

The journey soon became complex, as Cécille kept changing his plans. After a detour via Taiwan, they reached the mouth of the Yangtze River. Meanwhile, in July 1842 Thomas and a missionary from Manchuria had left Macao in turn, aboard another French warship, *La Favorite*. The Koreans were supposed to act as interpreters if the ships reached Korea.

With Cécille, Andrew visited Nanjing on the day of the Treaty Signing Ceremony marking the end of the First Opium War, but he soon realized that there was no longer any hope of reaching Korea with Cécille, who now had other plans. In September he left the French ship and was reunited with Fr. Maistre and Thomas in Shanghai.

They arrived together in Liaodong (northeastern China) on October 22.

Two Kinds of Martyrdom

They reached Bajiazi in November. Bishop Verrolles of Manchuria had built a church in this Catholic village early on and made it a base for missions to the north. The third apostolic vicar of Korea, Jean Ferréol, was already serving there, waiting to be able to enter Korea. Andrew was able to enter Korea first as a deacon, stayed there for several weeks, then set out in a small ship for China. They were caught in a violent storm and only reached Shanghai by a miracle.

On August 17, 1845, after his arrival in Shanghai, Andrew was ordained as a priest by Bishop Ferréol. On August 31, 1845, Andrew boarded the *Raphael* (the Korean ship on which he had come to Shanghai) and left for Korea together with Bishop Ferréol and Fr. Daveluy. After losing their way during another rough crossing, on September 28 they reached Jeju Island, far to the south of their planned destination. Finally they arrived at Nabawi in Hwangsanpo, near Ganggyeong, South Chungcheong Province, on October 12, 1845. Andrew could begin his brief career as a missionary priest in Korea

The most important difference between the two sets of letters is that Andrew's brief letter 18 is the first letter to be written from inside Korea, and letter 19 is already sent from prison after his arrest in June 1846. On August 26 he writes a last letter to Bishop Ferréol from prison (the 20th letter), and near the end of August he writes a final letter, an exhortation addressed to the Catholics of Korea (the 21st letter). On September 15 he is sentenced to death for treason and on September 16, 1846, he is martyred at Saenamteo. Finally, on October 26 his remains are buried in Mirinae, in Yongin.

In contrast, Thomas's seventh letter is already written from within Korea and it is a lengthy account of the situation of the Church he finds there. In this respect, Thomas wins the championship hands down! Andrew's letters are full of Chinese adventures, including his lengthy winter voyage across the wild area lying to the north of Korea, his foolish, unprepared incursion into North Korea at Uiju, and the extremely dangerous sea crossings from Korea to China and back. They end with descriptions of his rather strange imprisonment, during which he is not tortured but treated well. His letters teach us nothing at all about the daily life of the Korean Christians.

It took Thomas a long time to find a way into Korea. In March 1843, after briefly entering Korea at Uiju, Andrew had arrived back at Bajiazi with news of the *Gihae* Persecution, including the execution of both their fathers and Thomas's mother, heard from an envoy. At the end of January 1846, Thomas departed eastward with Fr. Maistre in a second (fruitless) search for a route into Korea. At the end of December 1846, he set off

Two Kinds of Martyrdom

again with Fr. Maistre to explore the entry route via Uiju for the third time. Nothing was possible.

In early 1847, he arrived back at the Far Eastern Headquarters of the Paris Foreign Missions Society, which had moved from Macao to Hong Kong, and there he translated into Latin “The Acts of the Martyrs of the *Gihae* (1839) and *Byungo* (1846) Persecutions” that had been prepared in Korea.

On July 30, 1847, Thomas set off for Korea with Fr. Maistre on a couple of French warships, *La Victoire* and *La Gloire*, in a fourth search for an entry route. On August 10, both French ships ran aground near Gogunsan Islands just off Gunsan, and everyone took refuge on a nearby island. On September 12, all left for Shanghai aboard a British ship that had come to their rescue. The two missionaries were not allowed to stay behind although Thomas had spoken briefly with a Korean Christian who seemed to promise to help bring them in.

Finally, on April 15, 1849, Thomas was ordained a priest at a Shanghai church. In May, he went to Baengnyeong Island just off the coast of Korea with Fr. Maistre, in a fifth unsuccessful search for an entry route into Korea, then returned to Shanghai. At the end of December 1849, under orders from Bishop Ferréol, he departed with Fr. Maistre in a sixth search for an entry route and finally succeeded in entering Korea through Uiju with the envoys sent to guide him, leaving Fr. Maistre behind in China, thus returning home after 13 years away.

Arriving in Seoul early in 1850, Thomas began his ministry by giving the sacrament of the sick to Fr. Daveluy, a French priest who was very ill, and then went to the the Chungcheong Province region to meet with Bishop Ferréol, his boss, before beginning visitations of Christian villages scattered in five provinces across the country. His years of ministry were mainly spent walking from one Christian village to another, ministering to small groups of isolated, impoverished believers. Only the torrid summer when travel was hardly possible gave a moment’s respite. Finally, on June 15, 1861, on his way to Seoul to report on his pastoral work, he fell ill from overwork and died at Jincheon, North Chungcheong Province. In early November 1861, his remains were moved to Baeron in what is now Jecheon. On March 7, 2002, he was approved as a candidate for beatification. On January 31, 2004, the decree ‘No obstacle’ was approved by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. On April 26, 2016 His Holiness Pope Francis proclaimed Fr. Choe Yang-eop “Venerable.”

The letters

Turning now to the letters, the first letter written by each dates from the spring of 1842, Andrew's from the end of February, Thomas's from late April. When he writes, Andrew has already set off with Fr. Maistre aboard *l'Érigone* under Cécille, and has reached Manila. Andrew says that he expects to leave for Korea immediately, but Thomas, still in Macao, says in his letter that he is still there, two months later. Thomas writes nothing more until May 1844, by which time Andrew is writing his eighth letter, and Thomas's second letter, quite short, simply reports that they are together in Manchuria. He has written nothing about the various adventures he had on the way there, whereas Andrew's multiple letters give a detailed account of the adventures and disappointments he experienced with Cécille and after parting from him.

In his third letter of September 1842, Andrew tells how he arrived with Cécille in Nanjing in time for the signing of the treaty between England and China ending the First Opium War and gives a quite detailed account of the contents of the treaty. However, he says nothing about the ceremony itself, so maybe they arrived too late to attend it?

Andrew's fourth letter (to Fr. Legrégeois), although only written in Manchuria in December, describes in some detail their visit to Nanjing (they could not enter the actual city) and the Baoensi temple on its outskirts, with its celebrated Porcelain Pagoda. This account contains many details, including Chinese names, even Chinese characters, so it seems that they must have had a guide who wrote down explanations, and he took that with him. Soon after this, Cécille having told them that he would probably not visit Korea, he leaves the ship, and records how Thomas, after a time on *La Favorite*, reaches a similar decision.

Then comes an episode that shows Andrew's great self-confidence. They have reached the coast of Liaoning on another ship and on landing need to avoid being stopped at a customs post. They try walking along the shore but are noticed by agents at the post, who chase them down. Andrew writes how he scolded them sharply for troubling innocent people. According to one of his French companions, he spoke at considerable length and with great force, so that the Chinese were abashed, apologized, and let them go free. The letter ends with the first (vague) news received by hearsay through a Korean contact agent of the deaths in the 1839 persecution of the French missionaries. At this point, Andrew says that he expects that he and Fr. Maistre will enter Korea in December 1842. The shorter fifth letter (to Fr. Libois), written a few weeks after the fourth, repeats this initial report of the persecution. Both Andrew and Thomas are

Two Kinds of Martyrdom

now staying in Christian villages in Manchuria.

Andrew's sixth letter to Fr. Legrégeois, written in mid-January 1843, gives a fuller account of the 1839 persecution, learned after meeting Francis Kim, a key member of the Seoul Catholic community, who was on his way to Beijing with an embassy. He now knows that the three French missionaries are dead, and that in addition his own father and Thomas's two parents were martyred, while his mother is homeless, reduced to total poverty. After this meeting, he relates that he suddenly decided to enter Korea, without any kind of preparation. He does not tell us why he did this. He slipped across the border close to Uiju, was nearly caught, but was able to return safely to China. This careless taking of unnecessary risks prepares us for the way in which, in 1846, he was caught. In his seventh letter (to Fr. Libois) he repeats the same story.

There are no more letters from Andrew until the eighth letter in May 1844. This brief letter simply mentions that he is staying with Bishop Ferréol after a two-month journey to Hunchun. In contrast, the ninth letter, addressed to Bishop Ferréol dated mid-December 1844, is a lengthy account of his long winter journey. Curiously, the letter is only preserved in a French version with a note claiming that it was originally written in "Chinese." This seems unlikely but there is now no way of knowing for sure. Shortly before he signed this letter, he and Thomas had been ordained deacons. The Hunchun travel journal is a remarkable account of a winter journey across the frozen wasteland of the area to the north of the Korean border. It shows Andrew's sharp eye for the natural landscape and his critical view of the mainly poor "pagan" people he encountered, including his experience of the "superstitious" Chinese ways of celebrating the Lunar New Year. He was even able to meet Korean Christians very briefly at the Gyeongwon fair, but was unable to talk at any length because of the crowd around them. Ultimately his journey was fruitless and the western entry through Uiju remained the only overland method of entering Korea.

Thomas wrote briefly twice to Fr. Legrégeois, once in 1844 and once at the end of 1846, simply to say that he was still in Manchuria, waiting for a chance to enter Korea.

Andrew, meanwhile, had been able to enter Korea in January 1845 with guides and reach Seoul, from where he wrote his tenth letter, telling about the adventure of his arrival in Uiju, where he nearly lost contact with the guides sent from Seoul. On arriving in Seoul, he fell ill, and then set about preparing a boat in which to return to China, for he was not yet a priest. On April 6, 1845, he wrote to Fr. Libois his 11th letter, telling him some more details of the death of the three French missionaries in 1839 and explaining the political background to the persecution. The 12th letter,

Two Kinds of Martyrdom

dated the following day, continues to explain the factional infighting in the Korean court.

Andrew's 13th and 14th letters are brief notes from Shanghai to Fr. Libois and Bishop Ferréol dated June 4, 1845, the day he arrived in Shanghai after his dramatic journey from Korea by ship through a great storm. In the long 16th letter, dated July 23, 1845, also from Shanghai, he tells Fr. Libois about the crossing in dramatic detail. It was truly a miracle that they did not all drown!

Andrew sends with that letter a lengthy Latin account he had brought with him of the Korean martyrs, the translation of materials collected by Christians in Seoul. He had presumably translated it from Korean while in Seoul and it had survived the sea crossing. This was the first extended account of the Korean martyrs to reach the outside world.

His short 17th letter was written the same day to Bishop Ferréol who had been waiting for news of his arrival before coming to join him. The equally short 18th letter of November 20, from Seoul, tells Fr. Libois how the ship on which he was returning to Korea with Bishop Ferréol and Fr. Daveluy had lost its way in another storm, arriving first off Jeju Island before making its way slowly to the coast of the mainland. He had been ordained a priest before leaving Shanghai.

Andrew's next letter, the fairly short 19th, of July 1846, was already written from prison. It is essentially a letter of farewell, addressed to his four main French correspondents, Fr. Berneux in Manchuria, who would later take over as apostolic vicar of Korea after the death of Bishop Ferréol in 1853, Fr. Maistre who was still waiting to enter Korea, and the usual Fr. Libois and Fr. Legrégeois. He clearly expected to be condemned and after a short description of his arrest bids each of them farewell, including Thomas as well. Then on August 26, 1846, he writes to Bishop Ferréol in much fuller detail about his arrest and interrogations, also mentioning the others arrested with him (and martyred because of him). Toward the end he makes it plain that, far from being tortured, he is being given good treatment and even has to translate an English map to be given to the king. However, he has been told that a French ship has come to the coast and ends by warning the bishop that such ineffectual, brief visits followed by rapid departures give a very poor image of France and can only harm the Korean Church by convincing the authorities that the Catholics are agents of the foreigners. The irony of the situation is that the commander of the ship in question was none other than Captain Cécille, with whom he had first embarked in an attempt to enter Korea. Cécille could not, of course, have known that Andrew had entered Korea and was now about to be executed.

Two Kinds of Martyrdom

Andrew's execution was finally decided by the emotion at court provoked by the arrival of Captain Cécille. Andrew was executed on September 16, 1846, the day following delivery of the sentence. He was not executed as a Christian but as a traitor, mainly because of his unauthorized stay in China and his contact with "foreigners." He was therefore given the formal military ritual at Saenamteo instead of a simple beheading outside the Small West Gate of Seoul. Finally on October 26, his remains were recovered by Catholic believers and buried in Mirinae, Yongin, a Christian village.

Andrew's final 21st "letter" is not in fact a letter but an exhortation (*hoeyu*) written in Korean and addressed to the faithful of the Korean Church. He ends:

Everything here below is ordained by God, everything is from him reward or punishment; persecution itself comes only by his permission, endure it patiently and solely for God; conjure him with tears to restore peace to his Church. My death will undoubtedly be upsetting to you and your souls will find themselves in distress; but soon God will give you better pastors than I am. So do not be too sad, and strive with great charity to serve God as he deserves to be served. Let us remain united in charity, and after death we will be united for eternity, and we will enjoy God forever. I hope so a thousand times, ten thousand times.

It is striking that all of Andrew's letters, including the account of his arrest in the 20th letter, show the same ability to relate clearly and calmly all the adventures that have happened to him, but tell us nothing in detail about the people he meets. Whether he is visiting Nanjing, crossing the snowbound wastes of Manchuria, venturing unaccompanied into Korea, or carelessly allowing himself to be spotted and arrested on a remote island, he is always equally calm and self-assured. One source of the trouble leading to his arrest seems to have been his determined claim that he was a high-class *yangban* deserving respect. That confidence of the *yangban* was also visible when he was shouting at the agents from the customs post as they landed in northern China. What might be felt to be completely lacking in his letters is any religious, spiritual dimension, or a real interest in ordinary people's lives. True, during the storm at sea, he baptizes one of the sailors, fearing they might all drown, and invokes the Virgin Mary. But he has nothing to say, for example, of life in the Christian villages in China where he spent quite some time, and nothing of the Christian

community in Seoul that welcomed him and prepared the report on the martyrs that he translated into Latin.

Without wishing to be disrespectful, Andrew's accounts of his adventures sometimes read like a blog written by an adventurous young man fresh out of school and travelling the world before settling down. The tone often seems to be, "Look where I've been, see what I've done." Equally striking is the way he always has someone to blame if things go wrong. It was Captain Cécille who decided to visit Nanjing; at the customs post he was accompanied by Fr. Maistre and Fr. Brunière. Telling Fr. Libois about his journey across Manchuria he specifies that he was "sent by the Most Illustrious Bishop" and when writing to his correspondents after his arrest, he begins by specifying that he had gone to the off-shore island "as his excellency Bishop Ferréol ordered me to." The only exception is the foolhardy excursion to Uiju related in the seventh letter, that he seems to have undertaken on his own, at the spur of the moment, after meeting the Korean envoy Francis Kim and hearing of the death of his father. Before Bishop Ferréol died from exhaustion on February 3, 1853, he asked to be buried beside Andrew, saying, "You will never know how sad I was to lose this young native priest. I loved him as a father loves his son; it is a consolation for me to think of his eternal happiness."

Thomas's story

Late in December 1849, Thomas finally slipped past the guards at Uiju and was brought to Seoul by the waiting Christians, who refused to let Fr. Maistre accompany him, saying it would be too dangerous. He was thus able to write his seventh letter, to Fr. Légrégeois, from Seoul, on October 1, 1850. At last! We can feel him full of joy at being finally able to write the letter he had been wanting to write for so many years. This long letter is already full of his experiences as he ministers to the Catholics scattered across the country. It and those that follow are very unlike Andrew's stories of adventure, risk, and travel. Thomas alone can minister to Koreans as a Korean, with no need to hide his long beard and long nose like the French, without any barrier due to language and culture. He can walk along freely, without hiding his face in mourning dress. Yet still he has to be very careful.

The seventh letter begins with an account of his entry at Uiju, slipping past the guard-post late on a bitterly cold night. Arriving in Seoul, he immediately discovered the health problems the French missionaries were having. Fr. Daveluy was so sick that Thomas feels obliged to give him the last rites, in case he died. The bishop, too, was sick. Then he left for Jeolla

Two Kinds of Martyrdom

Province, where there were many Christians living in scattered villages. He starts by describing two places where local “pagan” village heads took him for a European for some reason and wanted to arrest him. In both cases, he was able to slip away by night, without having time to celebrate Mass for the waiting faithful, to his and their great distress.

He then describes the poverty in which the Catholics were living, driven from their homes and families as Christians, living in rough, remote villages, and the difficulties would-be believers faced, evoking the cases of two women. The first, having left her high-class home in search of some other Christians after hearing about the faith, was kidnapped by a “pagan” on the road and forced to live with him for 12 years. Then a Christian heard about her situation and was able to give her some books so that she could learn more about the faith and have prayers to recite, but nothing more could be done for her. The second woman, who had been baptized, was confined in a high-class pagan home for 19 years, longing for the sacraments in vain. She would hold a piece of imported European cloth and pray that European priests might come to Korea one day. Hearing about her from a Christian, Fr. Choe (as he now should be called) went all the way to visit her. Instead of making a spoken Confession, to save time she wrote out her examination of conscience and sent it to him. Then he found a moment when there were no other adults in the house, slipped in, quickly gave her Absolution and Communion, and slipped out again. He goes on to note that it was harder for “nobles” to become believers because of all that they lose. He quotes one recent convert who had been given an unexpected official position, explaining that he, like any official, would be obliged to “participate in official rituals” forbidden to Catholics, so that he despaired of seeing him continue in the faith, as the material and social rewards available to the *yangban* were so great.

He then returns to the plight of high-class women who can never leave home, since they do not work in the fields. He explains that all the Christians are eager for Confession and Communion and travel great distances for them, and become very upset once the priest is leaving again. He moves on to another topic, the wish of many young Christian women to live as virgins. Among the early Korean Catholics, virginity was highly prized and the priests often felt obliged to urge the women to marry, since society had no place for unmarried women. This leads into the long story of Barbara, a clever girl who decided not to marry when she was just seven years old. As the years passed, she practiced extreme forms of fasting and hid in the hills to pray. The French priests and the bishop did not take her seriously, thinking she was deluded, telling her she must marry, and even refusing her the sacraments. Finally Fr. Choe visited her, again urging her

Two Kinds of Martyrdom

to be reasonable. She suddenly fell ill and was clearly dying, so he gave her the sacraments and extreme unction, and she died, aged 18! He was overwhelmed with sorrow.

Finally he talks about himself. Since arriving in Korea, some 10 months before, he has walked some 5,000 *li* (well over 2,000 kilometers). He has visited 3,800 Christians, 1,760 of whom could receive Communion from him in small groups. He ends by describing the overall situation, and asks Fr. Legrégeois to send him sacred pictures, crosses etc. to help the faithful pray. What strikes most in this letter is his acute awareness of the hardships believers are prepared to face for their faith, the compassion he feels for their sufferings, and his admiration for their intense piety, that can very rarely be confirmed by a visit from a priest and reception of the sacraments. The Christian life was mostly lived at home, alone or with a few family members and if possible among a tight community of believers. There is a hint of tension between him and the French missionaries, for example concerning the evaluation of Barbara's intense piety. He was fully aware that the bishop had refused to give her Absolution and Communion four times, implying that he considered her misguided and disobedient to his command. Fr. Choe seems only too glad to have the excuse of her sudden illness to give her the sacraments, and his response to her death expresses real affection: "I will never forget her beauty and devotion."

The eighth letter, written one year later in October 1857, gives many more details of the difficulties and trials faced by Christians but one especially interesting passage is his translation of the response from the Korean government to the letter Captain Cécille had sent to the ministers after the shipwreck described in the fourth letter, giving the government's reasons for the execution of the three missionaries in 1839. Still more interesting is his detailed account of the life and the martyrdom of his own parents, which he felt had not been properly covered in the previous accounts. This very lengthy account has to be read in full; it cannot be summarized. His father finally died in prison in 1839 as a result of torture; his mother was executed in 1840.

The short tenth letter is dated from two years later, November 4, 1854. A new French priest had arrived, only to fall sick and die at once, leaving them as under-manned as ever. Then another year passes before the 11th letter of October 8, 1855. Written to Fr. Legrégeois, it too is quite short, and reports that things are going well. He has baptized 240 adults. He then notes that the converts from the upper "*yangban*" class tend to lapse easily, because as Christians they lose too much, becoming poor after being rich, losing the pleasures wealth made possible, and find themselves finally

Two Kinds of Martyrdom

forced to return to their previous lives because of hunger and poverty. He ends after adding a few details about the deaths of his parents.

Another year passes, then in September 1856 he writes again to Fr. Legrégeois, reporting the arrest of five Christians in a village in Jeolla Province, before giving a long account of the martyrdom of a man named John Choe in 1839. He ends by stressing that for many other martyrs there are not enough eyewitness accounts to provide detailed reports. The 13th letter, from September 1857, tells of the multiple difficulties Christians suffer, and mentions an incident in which he found himself in a house surrounded by police agents (“satellites”) but escaped through a gap in the wall at the back. At the same time, he writes the 14th letter to Fr. Libois.

The key element in this letter is the complaint he voices against the previous bishop for the way he surrounded himself with assistants who were of *yangban* origin, arrogant and “hated by all, only loved by Bishop Ferréol, and they alone were his confidential assistants.” He then explains, in a tone of extreme indignation:

There are some who judge the social customs of the Korean people to be good, according to which all the rights which the nobles claim should be granted to them; and as for the common people, that the commoners must be compelled to directly hand over all that the nobles demand, and thus the proud should always be favored for being proud, and the wretched must always be compelled to be even humbler. Moreover, the spirit of Christ is then degraded, who always sides with the poor and the abject in words and deeds, but shows himself more severe to the proud and the powerful. Human nature, indeed, is always most prone to flatter the rich and powerful, and shrinks from the poor and humble.

Strong words indeed! Fr. Choe’s tone is tentative, as he does not want to be seen as anti-French; his position as the only Korean priest must have been very delicate. But he knows what he knows.

Thomas’s 16th letter, to Fr. Legrégeois, dated October 1858, begins with the sickness and death of Fr. Maistre at the end of 1857. After so many journeys together, they must have been especially close and he was surely very sad to see him die, aged only 49. At the same time he writes a brief 17th letter, to Fr. Libois, mainly about a man from Jeju Island who, shipwrecked in China, had learned about the faith there and was now intending to spread the religion at home. A year later, in October 1859, he writes again to Fr. Legrégeois, with stories of how various “pagans” have

Two Kinds of Martyrdom

become believers, as well as the description of a night in which he and a group of companions staying at an inn were attacked by “satellites” and he was left alone there while the others were taken off to the magistrate. The magistrate, who was not hostile to Christians, let them all go free, but demanded that they leave the town at once, despite the snow and icy cold.

The short 19th letter, of the same moment, to Fr. Libois, only mentions the bishop’s poor health, and his own weakening body. He longs for the European powers to come and oblige Korea to open to the mission as China would be forced to do after the end of the Second Opium War in 1860. The brief 20th letter to Bishop Verrolles, also of October 1859, evokes the overall situation and asks for prayers. The final 21st letter is addressed to both Fr. Libois and Fr. Legrégeois. Fr. Choe is in hiding because a persecution has broken out, no longer involving multiple executions but with arrests and constant harassment, forcing believers up into the hills, and with even the hidden villages being attacked and burned. The government had been able to sow distrust of Catholics among the general population, which had previously been rather sympathetic. He returns to the great dangers facing isolated female believers. He quotes an example of a family of 14 that lost everything. The letter ends with a prayer for God’s help. He is acutely aware of the suffering involved in being a Christian and the risks of a greater persecution.

The following year, as he was on his way to Seoul to report to the bishop, overcome with fatigue and suffering from typhus, he lay dying in a village not so far from the seminary at Baeron where the French missionary Fr. Pourthié was living. Fr. Pourthié heard the news, came rushing and was able to give him the last rites as he lay dying, able only to pronounce the names of Jesus and Mary. Fr. Choe died on June 14, 1861, aged just 40. In the November following, his remains were taken to Baeron and reburied; his grave is still visible there. It was only in 2002 that the Catholic Church decided he might deserve to be beatified and that was approved in Rome in 2004. In April 2016, the pope recognized his qualities and authorized that he be titled “the Venerable” which is the last step before beatification. So far, the Korean Church has pushed in vain for that to happen and the recent publication of his letters in English is intended to give an extra push to the process.

Only a few years after the death of Fr. Choe, the 1866 *Byeong-in* Persecution brought an end to the seminary in Baeron and although a few young Koreans had previously been sent to study in the seminary at Penang, no other Korean was ready to be ordained as a priest until 1896, when Mark Gang Do-yeong, Lawrence Gang Seong-sam, and Augustine Jeong Gyu-ha were ordained. They had left Korea in 1883 for Japan, from

Two Kinds of Martyrdom

there they went to the seminary in Penang. Overcome by the climate, in mid-1892 they returned to Korea, and were able to complete their studies in the newly founded Seminary of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Yongsan, once it was formally opened in 1892. Those three were ordained in Nakhyeon-dong church, the first to be built in Seoul, on April 26, 1896. Gang Do-yeong (1863-1929) was sent to establish the parish at Mirinae, the burial-place of Kim Dae-geon and Bishop Ferréol. Jeong Gyu-ha (1863-1943) went to a rural area of Gangwon Province and established the parish of Pungsuwon, where he built Korea's earliest Gothic-style church outside of Seoul. Gang Seong-sam (1866-1903) went down to Busan and Miryang, where he continued the earlier style of ministry, visiting a number of smaller mass-stations regularly, and died young.

Three of the French priests had avoided martyrdom in 1866 and in 1869 one of them, Fr. Ridel, was appointed apostolic vicar to replace the two martyred bishops, but there could be no question of any missionary entering Korea at that time. He was consecrated in Rome at the start of the First Vatican Council. In 1876 he was preparing to attempt an entry with Fr. Blanc and Fr. Deguette but at the last moment they asked him to stay in China to deal with the broader issues that might arise. The two entered alone and began a hidden ministry as before. In 1877, Fr. Coste, Fr. Doucet, and Fr. Robert joined him and together they entered Korea. Early in 1878, Bishop Ridel was arrested. After a time of imprisonment and questioning, he was expelled into Manchuria in June. The others remained hidden in Korea. A little later, Bishop Ridel fell seriously ill in Japan and finally returned to Europe where he died in early 1889. Fr. Blanc had succeeded him as apostolic vicar, only to die in 1890. Fr. Mutel then became apostolic vicar and remained at the head of the Korean church until his death in 1933.

Two hundred years after Thomas's birth, today, seeing in his letters such intense compassion for the sufferings of the impoverished believers he met, his deep admiration for the way in which they practiced the faith, his veneration for otherwise completely forgotten humble Christian lives, his burning desire to give them access to the sacraments, walking hundreds of miles, year after year, I cannot help feeling that he is by far the greater saint of the two.

Brother Anthony is President Emeritus of RAS Korea after serving as President for 10 years. He arrived in Korea in 1980 and has published many translations of Korean poetry and fiction. He is now engaged in rendering the history of the early Korean Catholic Church into English.