

## **“The Korean Catholic Experience: Lessons for the Church in Contemporary Society”**

Homily for the Parish Visit and 50th Anniversary Mass of St. Michael's Korean Parish  
Votive Mass, “For the Church” - Readings: Lev 25:1.8-19; 2 Cor 6:1-3; Luke 4:16-21  
August 13, 2016, St. Michael Korean Parish

### **Introduction**

It is certainly a very happy occasion that brings us together today, to celebrate this Fiftieth Anniversary of the establishment of the first Korean Catholic community in the United States. What a blessing and a boast it is for us here in San Francisco that this historical moment took place here in our city, in this Archdiocese. In particular I am grateful to His Excellency, the Most Reverend Linus Seong Hyo Lee, Auxiliary Bishop of the Diocese of Suwon, for his presence with us today. It is a sign of the tighter bond of communion that our two local churches share through the service that your priests provide to our Archdiocese in shepherding the Korean Catholics who live here.

### **A Unique History**

The Catholic faith, of course, did not come to Korea in the usual way, in which a nation of ancient Christian faith discovers a new land; then sends missionaries to become familiar with the people and their culture, their customs and their language; and then they teach them practical skills and educate them in the arts and sciences; and then eventually, after this preparation for evangelization, the missionaries teach the faith to the people, baptizing them and nurturing them in faithfully living out their new Christian religion, eventually leading to the building of a new Christian civilization with its own unique cultural identity. That is the usual way it happens. It is well known, though, that in Korea it did not happen this way; in Korea, Catholicism began as a lay movement.

The Catholic faith first came to Korea by way of Christian literature brought into the country from Jesuits in China, beginning in 1777. This opened up an intellectual quest for the truth of God's word among your scholarly ancestors, and kindled within them a deeper desire for the Christian faith. And so it was that one of those scholarly ancestors, Yi Seun-hun, went to Beijing in 1784 and was baptized there, and then returned to Korea to spread his new faith and baptize others. This marks the beginning of the Catholic faith in Korea, a completely lay-led initiative, and so it would continue for quite some time. Five years later the first priest was able to secretly enter the country from China, and already found some 4,000 Catholics, none of whom had ever seen a priest. Seven years later there were 10,000 Catholics. Over all, though, the presence and ministry of priests was quite limited during the first half-century of the Catholic faith in Korea, with only two priests able to assist, and only for a time, during that period. And yet, the Catholics there continued to deepen their unity in Christ and their life of prayer. It was not until 1836 that the first French missionary priests were sent to Korea, after years of pleading from the fervent Catholics there.

There is something else, too, to which the Korean experience points of a truly remarkable nature: being a strictly lay-led Church for its first several years means that Catholics in Korea went all those years without the Eucharist, and continued without it for most of the time during those first fifty years. How could the Church have survived, let alone flourished, without the sacrament of the Bread of Life for all those years, especially those formative years? It is, again, simply because of their faith. The reception of the sacraments is not some sort of mechanical ritual; the sacraments are signs of God's initiative and the response to faith already present. Without the faith which the sacraments presuppose, they are simply empty rituals, conferring no benefit to those who receive them. This is especially so with regard to the Eucharist: it presumes a life of faith, of spiritual communion with the Church as the only proper disposition to receive the sacrament of Communion worthily. What burning desire must have welled up in the hearts of those first Korean Catholics, as they longed for the day when they would be able to receive their Lord and Savior in the Most Blessed Sacrament, and his forgiveness in the sacrament of Penance.

Of course, we also know, tragically, that the arrival of the Catholic faith in Korea was accompanied by waves of the fiercest persecution, both before and after the arrival of the French

missionaries. Tragic, but in God's Providence, the seed bed of the Church. As always, the blood of martyrs watered the seeds of the faith which had been planted and began to grow.

This unprecedented phenomenon of Korean Catholicism moved Pope St. John Paul II to state, in his homily at the Mass of Canonization of the Korean Martyrs in 1984 during his Apostolic Visit there:

The Korean Church is unique because it was founded entirely by lay people. This fledgling Church, so young and yet so strong in faith, withstood wave after wave of fierce persecution. Thus, in less than a century, it could boast of 10,000 martyrs. The death of these martyrs became the leaven of the Church and led to today's splendid flowering of the Church in Korea.

Notice the interesting turn of phrase Pope John Paul uses: he speaks of "boasting" of 10,000 martyrs. This is the great boast, the great legacy, that you Korean Catholics have inherited from your ancestors, and that you must live up to and pass on to future generations.

### **The Jubilee Celebration**

This Mass of Canonization followed shortly after the conclusion of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year that St. John Paul proclaimed to mark the 1,950<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our redemption, extending from the Solemnity of the Annunciation in the year 1983 to Easter of the following year. We, likewise, are in the midst of an Extraordinary Jubilee Year, the Year of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis in order to open more widely to the faithful the graces of the Lord's merciful redemption which he won for us by his death on the Cross.

Our first reading for our Mass today speaks of the jubilee year. According to ancient Jewish law, every seventh year was a sabbatical year, a year of rest; and every seventh year of seven years, that is, every fifty years, a jubilee year was to be celebrated that would mark a restitution to the previous state of affairs: slaves were set free, people returned to their families, those who had lost property had their property restored to them. This celebration of restoration prefigures the true restoration that God would win for us through His Son Jesus Christ: a restoration to the original dignity and destiny with which He created us – to share His life and His love forever.

And so Pope Francis wishes for all the faithful an opening of their hearts to this redemptive mercy of God. As he says in his Bull of Indiction, "The Face of Mercy," with which he proclaims this Jubilee Year:

Though we feel the transforming power of grace, we also feel the effects of sin typical of our fallen state.... But the mercy of God is stronger even than this. It becomes *indulgence* on the part of the Father who, through the Bride of Christ, his Church, reaches the pardoned sinner and frees him from every residue left by the consequences of sin, enabling him to act with charity, to grow in love rather than to fall back into sin.

### **The Current Reality**

As we heard in the Gospel that was just proclaimed to us, Christ was anointed to bring this Good News, to liberate us and to restore to God's original design. But, as Pope Francis reminds us, this mercy isn't automatic; rather, we need to open our hearts to it, because of the "residue left" in us "by the consequences of sin." And here, Korea is an invaluable gift to the Church. Given your extraordinary history of saints and scholars, of heroic suffering for the faith, Korea has much to teach the universal Church. Korea is, in a certain sense, anointed as well, anointed to shed light for the Church on how to live the Good News in these time in which we are facing unprecedented challenges to living our Christian faith with integrity.

To begin with, there is the breakdown of marriage and the family, that which is the very foundation of society. At a time when marriage and family life are strained and torn apart from the pressures of contemporary ideas and lifestyles, I am grateful for the presence of so many Korean Catholics and other Asians in our Archdiocese. You still understand the importance of family cohesion and unity, a witness we desperately need today. In addition to this, given the secularizing influences in the West that have eroded the sense of the sacred and stigmatized the practice of religion, there is so much more that the two-hundred years of Korean Catholic experience has to teach the Church throughout the world: the role and vocation of the laity in spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ; a living faith of spiritual union with Christ as the only proper disposition for receiving the sacraments worthily; suffering persecution for the faith, and not compromising the integrity of the faith under any circumstances, no matter how harsh the suffering. It is precisely such trials as these which move us to cling tenaciously to the faith, that make us strong and bolster our conviction.

You indeed have a precious legacy, and I speak especially to the young when I say: do not squander this heroic witness! You, likewise, are called to bear courageous witness to your faith in the face of hostility. Although it is doubtful that you will be called upon to bear witness to Christ by the shedding of your blood – as was St. Andrew Kim Taegon, St. Paul Chong Hasang, and their 101 companions, along with those thousands and thousands of other martyrs – you, too, are called to be martyrs, but in a different way: you will likely have to bear ridicule and scorn for being openly and visibly true to your faith; you may even suffer being stigmatized and shut out of opportunities extended to others who don't have, or hide, their religious beliefs. Do you, too, have the courage of your ancestors? Do you, too, have the integrity of seventeen-year-old Agatha Yi who said, when she and her younger brother were falsely told that their parents had betrayed the faith: "Whether my parents betrayed or not is their affair. As for us, we cannot betray the Lord of heaven whom we have always served." Because of this witness of hers, six adult Christians freely delivered themselves to the government officials to be martyred. You, too, have this power.

## Conclusion

In that canonization homily, St. John Paul II also said the following: "The Korean Martyrs have borne witness to the crucified and risen Christ. *Through the sacrifice of their own lives they have become like Christ* in a very special way. The words of Saint Paul the Apostle could truly have been spoken by them: We are "always carrying in the body *the death of Jesus*, so that *the life of Jesus* may also be manifested in our bodies."

May the hallowed and inspiring spiritual inheritance which is yours as Korean Catholics keep you strong in the faith, so that you may live up to the legacy of your ancestors who carried about in their bodies the death of Jesus. May you do so in the way that God calls you to today, and may the saints and martyrs in your lineage, and those of the whole Church, inspire us all to be faithful and courageous witnesses of the Good News to all the world.