

20. September 2023

## Faithful unto death

Lk 9:23-26

Gospel in memory of Saints Andrew Kim Taegon, Paul Chong Hasang and fellow martyrs

*And Jesus said to all, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.*

In yesterday's meditation, we spoke briefly about St. Gennaro and rightly praised the witness of the martyrs. Today the Church again commemorates a group of martyrs: the martyrs of Korea. It is worthwhile to dwell briefly on the history of the evangelisation of that country and, above all, on the Christians who gave their lives for the sake of the Gospel. One particularity of Korean history is that evangelisation was carried out by lay people and Christian communities had to survive for a long time without priests. Nevertheless, the Christian faith spread widely, and this is an important message! Even if adverse circumstances arise in which there are no or only a few priests left for the faithful, the faith can survive and even expand. We do not know what times lie ahead for the faithful. There could even be a worldwide persecution of Christians under an anti-Christian figure or under the last Antichrist. But the example of the Christians in Korea can help us to hold on to the faith, come what may. The Lord will reward us!

Throughout its history, Korea was under the influence of China, both culturally and politically; later, under the influence of Japan; and after World War II, under the influence of the Soviet Union, especially in the north of the country.

In 1777, a delegation of Koreans who travelled to Beijing every year to pay tribute brought back from China some Catholic writings expounding the basic truths of the Christian faith. These writings reached a circle of intellectuals, who decided to embrace this doctrine.

In 1783, they asked one of the envoys to become more familiar with Christianity in China. This envoy was called Ni Sjen Huni. At his baptism, he took the name "Peter" and returned to his homeland as an apostle of the faith.

In just a few years, the Christian community in Korea grew to about 4,000 members. They contacted the bishop of Peking, who encouraged them and sent them further writings, which made it clear that ancestor worship was incompatible with the Christian faith.

The new Christians in Korea joyfully accepted all these teachings, and two of them, after the death of their mother, burned their family's genealogical charts. This was the reason for the government to condemn them to death, considering them as traitors of traditional customs and ungodly followers of a foreign doctrine. Thus, they became the first, but not the last martyrs of Korea.

Other martyrs followed, including a Chinese priest who was condemned to death in 1801. About 300 Christians died during this persecution as a result of torture or starvation in prison. A bishop with two of his missionaries and 100 other Christians were also condemned to the stake.

The first Korean priest, Andrew Kim, whom the Church commemorates today together with St. Paul Chong and his companions, died a violent death on 16 September 1846. The persecutions seemed to go on and on. Twenty years after the martyrdom of Andrew Kim, two bishops, seven missionaries and 8,000 faithful Catholics gave their lives for the faith.

However, the Church in Korea continued to grow. It had become a Church of martyrs. The blood of the martyrs, persecuted for the sake of Christ, was the seed of new Christians.

When the Korean government began to sign treaties with Western nations, the situation calmed down and the number of Christians grew to 180,000. But when the communists took over in the north of the country, the bloody persecutions began again.

Today, Korea is divided into two parts: South Korea, where Christians can practice their faith openly, and communist-dominated North Korea, where Christians suffer the harshest reprisals from the government and therefore have to live mostly underground. Despite this constant threat, the community of Catholics continues to grow also in North Korea.

It is great and moving that Christians follow the Lord unconditionally and imitate the apostles to such an extent that they give their lives for the faith. This is the fruit of the indomitable fire of the Holy Spirit, who strengthens each of these Christians with the gift of fortitude.

It is difficult for us to imagine a similar situation, because most of us are not exposed to such a degree of persecution. But we should not be overconfident. The situation may change rapidly, because the Christian values on which Western civilisation was built are increasingly under attack. In their place, unjust laws and measures are being put in place. This can be seen clearly. Indifference to faith turns into distance; distance turns into rejection; rejection turns into hostility and hostility turns into persecution.

Therefore, we must be prepared and equipped. We must look to the holy martyrs not only as role models, but as our brothers and allies, helping us to remain as faithful to the faith in our time as they were in theirs.