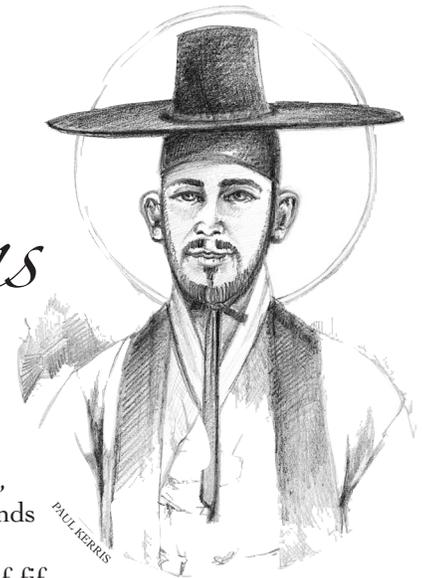




St. Andrew Kim Taegon and Companions

BORN 1822; DIED 1846 (ANDREW KIM TAEAGON);
OTHERS DIED BETWEEN 1839-1846 AND 1862-1867
MARTYRS
FEAST DAY: SEPTEMBER 20



ST. ANDREW KIM TAEAGON and one hundred twelve others who make up the group of the Holy Martyrs of Korea were martyred between 1839 and 1867. Most, one hundred and three, were Korean nationals; the other ten were French missionary bishops and priests. Most of the Korean martyrs, ninety-two, were lay men and women — forty-five men and forty-seven women. Photographs exist of the tortures inflicted on some of these saints.

Almost uniquely in the history of the Church, the first steps in the evangelization of Korea were taken by laymen. Around 1770, a Korean diplomat in China, Chong Tu-won, brought to Korea a Chinese-language book on Catholic doctrine written by an Italian Jesuit who had evangelized China in the first decade of the seventeenth century. Korean intellectuals were first interested in the book because it provided information about European civilization, but soon became interested in the Catholic faith. In 1773, these men asked the son of the ambassador, Yi Sang-hun, to meet with Catholic missionaries to learn about the faith. His discovery led him to embrace Catholicism, and the following year he returned to Korea with books that enabled others to study the faith, and soon they began evangelizing and even baptizing others in the same social class. This small group of Catholics eventually requested a priest from the Chinese mission, who was sent in 1795. Six years later, there were about ten thousand Korean Catholics. In this year, the first government persecution began; missionaries and perhaps three hundred lay Catholics were martyred as threats to state-sanctioned ancestor-worship. Catholics began to practice their faith secretly, suffering local persecutions in 1815 and 1827. In 1831, after repeated appeals from the Korean Catholic community, one Chinese and several French priests were sent, who had to enter the country secretly. Eight years later persecu-

tion began again, and at least one hundred thirty Christians were strangled, beaten to death, beheaded, or died of wounds inflicted in torture.

Baptized at the age of fifteen, Andrew was the son of converts Ignatius Kim, a farmer, and his wife. He left Korea to train for the priesthood at the nearest seminary, in the Portuguese colony of Macao off the coast of China, a distance of thirteen hundred miles. Raised as he was under the threat of persecution — his father was among those martyred in 1839 — Andrew saw it as giving evidence of God's providence: "Persecution, therefore, can only be regarded as the command of the Lord or as a prize he gives or as a punishment he permits." He was ordained in Shanghai and returned to his homeland in 1845 as the first Korean priest, but was arrested less than a year later. During his three months of imprisonment, he wrote: "Do not let misfortunes frighten you, do not lose heart and do not shrink from serving God, but, following in the footsteps of the saints, promote the glory of his Church and show yourselves true soldiers and subjects of God. Even if you are many, be of one heart; always remember charity; support and help one another, and wait for the moment when God will have mercy on you." Following torture, he was beheaded beside a riverbank near Seoul.

In 1866 the final spasm of persecution began, and by 1868 another two thousand Catholics had been martyred. Altogether it is thought that about ten thousand Koreans died for their faith in ten periods of persecution throughout the nineteenth century. These holy disciples were true servants of their Master: "*A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you*" (Jn 15:20). Their fidelity to the faith and the total surrender of themselves to torture and death rather than reject God is a profound example for those who are lukewarm or casual about their faith and what it may require to gain eternal life.

