

KOREA, LAND OF MARTYRS

The Pope's Visit and the Marist Presence

In coincidence with Pope Francis' visit to South Korea to attend the 6th Asian Youth Day (August 14-18), we offer you a brief interview with brothers Jacobo Song and Alfredo Herrera, who are now in Manziana, Italy, participating in the formators course.

Br Jacobo Song has been co-ordinator of the Sector of Korea for the first 6 years of the Province of East Asia. Before that, he was director of the Chungju Centre for mentally handicapped boys.

Br Alfredo Herrera, native of Mexico, came to Korea as a missionary in August 1975 and has since been involved in various activities, including formation in Korea itself and at the formation centre of MAPAC in Manila, the Philippines.

We know that Christianity arrived in Korea in a very special way. Could you briefly remind us how Christian faith was implanted among the Korean people?

Jacobo Song: This happened at the end of the 17th century – a few years before Marcellin Champagnat's birth, if you want a chronological point of reference – when a number of Korean scholars and officials ran into some Catholic books during their visits to China. These books were obviously written in Chinese characters, which were already used in Korea and widely known by academics and officials in our country.

Alfredo Herrera: When they came back to Korea, some of these scholars organized a study circle to examine and study the books, which strongly called their attention, and started practicing what they read. The group was in search for new ideas and forms, since Korean society at the time was full of stagnation and corruption.



Jacobo Song: So in one of these visits to Beijing, Yi Seung-hun was baptized, in October 1784, and received the name of Peter. His return to the country marks the establishment of

GENERAL ADMINISTRATION

Br Emili Turú has finished his visit to Honduras and will remain in Colombia until 18 August, for the celebration of the 125 years of Marist presence in this country. Br César Rojas, director of the Secretariat Brothers Today, will also attend the celebration.

Br Michael De Waas, having completed his visitation of the District of the Pacific, has begun the visit to the Province of Australia, which he will finish on 20 August.

Br Chris Wills, director of the Secretariat of Collaboration for Mission International (Cmi), is accompanying the Interprovincial mission project of Panamazônia, in Tabatinga, district of Amazonia, in Brasil.

At the beginning of August, Br Santiago Fernández, of the Province of Compostela, took up the position of co-ordinator of translations in the General House, replacing Br Josep Roura, who has returned to the province of L' Hermitage.

General Councillors Brs Víctor Preciado and Ernesto Sánchez are in Mexico and Eugène Kabanguka in Rwanda, on holiday and visiting family.

the Church in Korea. Therefore, our Korean Church has the pride of having been established by laymen from our own land, not by foreign missionaries.

There are 103 canonized Korean martyrs, which probably means there was some kind of religious persecution. What happened?

Jacobo Song: Religious persecution did not take place only once, but in different occasions, from 1791 to the second half of the 18th century. There were around 100 years of intermittent persecution. Research on these facts tells us that more or less ten thousand believers died for their faith in Jesus.

Alfredo Herrera: Yes, there are already 103 canonized martyrs, which include 10 French missionaries. Pope Francis will

beatify another group of 124 martyrs during his visit, among which some of the first Christians.

What is the present situation of the Roman Catholic Church in the country?

Jacobo Song: It was until 1895 that Catholicism started enjoying "official" freedom in Korea, although its activity was strongly restricted during the Japanese occupation. The Church had more freedom only after the liberation of 1945, even though the country still underwent the disastrous war between North and South from 1950 to 1953.

Alfredo Herrera: However, from that moment on the Church has strongly developed. When I arrived in Korea in 1975, Catholics were only 3% of the population. Today they are more than 9%, around 4 and a half million.

Marist presence in Korea

We would also like to know something about the Marist presence in Korea: how it began, your present ministries, the number of brothers, its future projection, etc.

Alfredo Herrera: Marist presence in Korea began on September 13, 1971. The Province of Central Mexico, answering the call from the Superior General, Brother Basilio Rueda, promised to send 8 brothers to Korea, with the primary purpose of implanting Marist life locally as soon as possible. God blessed the brothers' generosity, and very soon a group of boys became interested in Marist life.

Jacobo Song: Specifically, the first three Korean Marists made their religious profession on February 2, 1976, after living with the brothers for a long time.

Alfredo Herrera: Professions took place practically every year for two decades. However, during the last twenty years, vocations have not been as numerous, although God is still blessing us with some new members.

Jacobo Song: There are currently 20 Korean brothers. One is working in Cambodia, Marist District of Asia; another in the Philippines, and one will join the community of Kobe, Japan. The two of us are now in Manzanilla participating in the Formators Course, and the rest of the brothers are in the five communities of Korea.

Alfredo Herrera: Since late 2007, Korea is no longer a District depending on Central Mexico, and is now part of the new Province of East Asia. Japan and Korea form a Sector of the

new Province.

Jacobo Song: Three of the communities are in Seoul, and the other two are in the northern Province of Chungcheong.

Alfredo Herrera: One of the communities in Seoul lives in what we could call the "Sector Central House". The brothers in this community carry out different activities. In the other communities, the brothers are working at what we call "Marist Educational Center". The brothers are currently remodeling this Center, and they will concentrate there when it is ready, together with the formation house, which is now in a small



rented house next to our property.

Regarding the two communities in the northern part of the country, one is in the outskirts of the city of Chungju, and the other is in the mountains, between the cities of Chungju and Jecheon.

Jacobo Song: The brothers living in Seoul Central House work at a center for children called Jiok adong Center, and carry out different activities inside and outside of house: teenager counseling, maintenance of the property, administration and secre-



Chungju, a welfare institution

will also accommodate the Marist aspirants and postulants and their formators.

tariat for the Sector, etc.

At the Marist Educational Center, the brothers organize training programs, retreat sessions, courses for the people in general, and they welcome different groups who use the Center to carry out their own programs regarding education, spirituality, culture, etc. There is a variety of activities. It is the oldest center of this kind in the country. The building, once refurbished,

Marist Activities in Korea

Could you say something more about the brothers' activities in Korea?

Alfredo Herrera: In my opinion, what the brothers are carrying out is very much in tune with Marcellin's heart. As you know, Korean children and young people live in an atmosphere of strong academic competition. Students from well-off families go to private academies after attending school to study the subjects further, learn piano, taekwondo, karate, or participate in cultural activities. Children from low-income families have no alternative but to "fall behind and lose competitiveness", since their classmates are always better prepared for the academic assessments that provide access to educational opportunities.

Various social groups and organizations are sensitive to this inequality, and have organized these after-school

study centers for underprivileged children. Our Center is one of them. When approved by the local government, which allocated an ongoing subsidy, it was officially named Marist Childhood-Center for Local Children. The beautiful thing is that the Center operates thanks to a number of volunteers, who instruct the children in different subjects and organize activities for them. Thanks to the brothers' creativity and enthusiasm, many companies and groups are providing the children and young people from our Center with the opportunity to participate in interesting activities they organize. But above all, the love, interest and attention of the brothers and volunteers for each of the children and young people who come to the Center make them feel as real "people" and not just a number... This center really cares for the children and young people who are in academic, financial, emotional, and social disadvantage.



Marist Asian Youth Meeting

Jacobo Song: The community in the outskirts of the city of Chungju is a welfare institution attending children and young people with different kinds of mental retardation. Those who are able, attend the local school. They all learn a skill that will eventually allow them to live more or less independently, according to their possibilities. It is a work of patience and careful love, carried out by five brothers and a large group of teachers, so-

The services of the Communications Office of the General House will slow down during the next three weeks owing to the holiday period in Europe. The communication of Marist News will resume around 8 September.



cial workers and older sisters, who are always attentive to the children’s needs within the boarding school. As a welfare institution, the government of the city of Seoul, which administratively owns the Center, financially supports the work, while the help of many friends, who contribute with money or personal services, allows the brothers to offer a more complete and careful attention to our children’s needs.

Alfredo Herrera: And finally, the community on the mountains between the cities of Chungju and Jechon offers a Spirituality Centre to the Korean Church and society, in contact and harmony with nature. Founded several years ago, this “ecological center”, as we could call it, offers a new experience of contact with nature – since most people come from the city – to the entire population, but especially to children and young people from parishes, schools, groups and families. The Center offers different training programs, retreat sessions and seminars, tailored to the needs of the groups involved. Children come into contact with the stream, and the animals, plants, vegetables and legumes that thrive in this piece of mountain land. They learn to “feel” nature, listen to it, and discover its secrets and calls.

We are also carrying out a mixed community experience in this place. A diocesan priest, and two women who help prepare the meals for the groups coming to the Center, are part of the community. A brother from the Philippines will soon join in. He is already in Seoul studying the Korean language.

Pope's visit

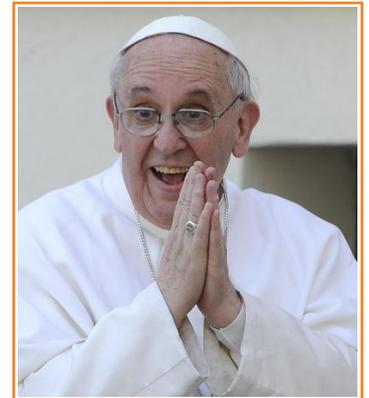
Finally, what are the expectations regarding the Pope's visit?

Jacobo Song: The Pope generates great expectations in Korea. His presence during the 6th Asian Youth Day certainly awakens everybody’s hope that many young people will be strongly stimulated to participate in the life of the Church more actively. In the last few years, young people have been– and I think will remain so – the first concern of the Korean Church’s pastoral activity.

Another great expectation in Korea regarding the Pope is that his visit will somehow help us move more decisively towards a reconciliation between the two parts of the country divided 60 years ago.

My personal expectation is that the Pope’s presence and example may be a stimulus for both the

Church hierarchy and all of us pastoral agents, so that we can learn to live in a more compassionate, simple, and humble way, being closer to people, leaving aside our tendency to be a “separate social class”. We are here to serve and not to be served. Pope Francis is clearly an example in this sense.



Alfredo Herrera: The beatification of the 124 martyrs brings again to our attention the testimony of so many lay people who gave their life for Jesus. May we all learn to live as true followers of Jesus every day. Korea is a land of martyrs! We have the duty and the task of following in the footsteps of our ancestors.

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