

A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE SALESIAN KOREAN MISSION

*Michael Chang SDB**

1. Don Bosco arrived before the Salesians

Don Bosco was a man who dreamed dreams. His dreams became reality and are still becoming reality. A lot of people think that he had a dream that is connected with the Korean province. The dream concerns the evangelization of Northeast Asia. I will now attempt to say a few words about how that dream became a reality in Korea.

If we look at the historical records that we have in our possession, the first Salesian confrere to set foot on Korean soil was the “Don Bosco of the East”, the Eastern Interpretation of Don Bosco’s Preventive System, the Venerable, Fr. Vincenzo Cimatti. In 1934, he went to Manchuria to give a concert. At the same time he visited Korea, giving a concert in four cities. After touring Korea, he went back to Japan and wrote an article for the Salesian Bulletin entitled “Don Bosco of Korea.” It appeared in the February 3, 1939 edition of the Italian “Bolletino Salesiano”.

“I went to Korea to give a concert. As I was passing through that land, I saw that the faithful know Don Bosco. The articles that were written about Don Bosco in Japanese were printed in the catholic magazine «KyeongHyang Japji». Therefore, the Koreans know about Don Bosco and some have even taken the baptismal name of Bosco. Bishop Larribeau of Seoul, who is a member of the French Foreign Mission Society, told me this. St. John Bosco has gone before us into this land”.

After that Fr. Cimatti himself as Provincial began to form missionaries in Japan to send to Korea. The first Salesians to enter Korea were the fruits of these endeavors.

2. Invitation

The entrance of the Salesians in Korea has great similarity to the way the Church entered Korea. The Confucian scholars of the closing years of the Lee Dynasty discovered the Church while studying the “new

* Fr. Michael Chang SDB is presently rector of the Salesian High School of Kwangju, Korea.

learning” called western learning. They came to know God, felt a fascination for the values of the Gospel and came to believe. From their ranks, they sent Lee Seung Hun to China to receive baptism and to ask for missionaries from the Chinese Church. After that, the scholars made study of Matteo Ricci’s “De Deo Verax Disputatio” and other catholic books and thus continued their research in the faith.

After a number of years, the Chinese Church was able to send missionaries and from that time on the Church in Korea began in earnest. In Church history, it is difficult to find another example of the Church starting on its own initiative like the Korean Church did; that is, without the help of missionaries but by the people of the land itself studying the values of the Gospel and then spontaneously asking for missionaries. The Salesians also entered Korea in a similar way.

According to our sources, the first time the Salesians were asked to come to Korea was in 1908. At that time, the Ordinary of Korea Bishop Gustav Charles Marie Mutel (1854-1933) was trying to open a teachers’ training school to obtain qualified staff for the catholic schools.

Bishop Mutel went around Europe trying to enlist those religious institutes engaged in education and missionary activity to help open up a teachers’ training school in Korea. At this time, he met Fr. De Bagneux, the Provincial of the southern French Province of the Salesians. He gave him a brief report on the state of the Korean Church and asked that some Salesians be sent to help with the project. But at that time the French Salesians were short of personnel and could not possibly send anyone to Korea.

However, he did send the brief report to Fr. Rua who was then Rector Major. Unfortunately there was no response from Fr. Rua either. In spite of that, the desires of Bishop Mutel to have the Salesians were taken up by his successors. In 1935, Bishop Adrien Joseph Larribeau M.E.P. (1883-1974) asked that they print the life of St. John Bosco and an introduction to the Salesian Society in the “KyeongHyang Japji” on the occasion of Don Bosco’s beatification. The life of Don Bosco that was printed in this magazine gave great impetus to vocations for the first Salesians when they finally did arrive and began to accept aspirants. This was also a record giving testimony to the truth of Fr. Cimatti’s words: “Don Bosco has gone to Korea before the Salesians”.

In May 1936, Bishop Larribeau constructed a new parish church in Torimdong, which was part of a newly developing industrial section of Seoul called Yeong Deung Po. He gave the church the title of St. John

Bosco. He then invited the Salesians to come and take up the pastoral work connected with this zone. But again the Society was unable to respond. After the expulsion of all foreign missionaries by the Japanese, Bishop Larribeau's successor, Bishop Paul Ki Nam Ro (1902-1984), also asked for the Salesians to come; but his desires were not answered in the affirmative at that time.

When the Second World War finished, Korea became an independent nation. But soon the Korean War began. Even during the war, again in 1951, Bishop Ro repeatedly asked for Salesians through the Apostolic Delegate residing in Japan, Bishop Massimiliano Furstenberg. But the time for the Salesians to enter Korea still had not arrived.

3. The beginnings of Salesian work in Kwangju, Korea

In 1953, the Bishop of the Diocese of Kwangju, (Bishop Harold W. Henry S.S.C. 1909-1976) in the southwest of South Korea, made a concrete proposal to the Salesians of Japan. He asked that they send confreres and build a school. At that time, Bishop Henry had received an offer of U.S.\$100,000 from a foundation established to set up a school in memory of an American chaplain who was killed during the Korean War (Fr. Emil Joseph Kapaun 1916-1951). In 1954, the Provincial of Japan, Fr. Clodovico Tassinari (1912) visited the Diocese of Kwangju to look over the situation. At that time, Bishop Henry again beseeched him to send Salesians to open a school. He returned to Japan and after hesitating a bit decided to send confreres from Japan to Kwangju. On 12 August 1954, Fr. Archimede Martelli (1916-1984) was the first Salesian missionary to enter Korea on a permanent basis. He arrived in Kwangju on the directive of Fr. Renato Ziggotti, then Rector Major.

At that time Korea had just finished a three-year war (1950-1953). Korea was devastated, poor and wretched. There were a lot of orphans and it was a period in which the financial, political and social aspects of Korean society were in great confusion. It was a period of great hardship. Upon arriving in Korea Fr. Martelli writes the following:

“Everywhere you can see the spoils of war and a lot of poor people. There is no order in society. There are a lot of beggars and especially many young people on the streets. They don't even have the basic necessities of life. It is like it was in Japan after the Second World War. I have discovered a very surprising thing. There is a big church named after St. John Bosco. It seats

over 1,000 people. I have also met a lot of faithful whose baptismal name is Bosco. A lot of people know about Don Bosco. There is even an orphanage named 'John Bosco's House' and at the parish there is a society called 'The Don Bosco Society'".

Fr. Martelli, just like Fr. Cimatti, was able to feel that Don Bosco preceded the Salesians to Korea. At that time and under those circumstances one can imagine how difficult it was to build a school. But there was a government official named John Bosco and with his help the difficulties in construction could be overcome. The diocese helped financially in part so that in 1956, Salesian Middle School and in turn, in 1959, Salesian High School came into being.

4. Growth

In 1958, the Salesians were again invited by the Archdiocese of Seoul to take over the pastoral administration of the above-mentioned parish of Torimdong, named after St. John Bosco. At that time the surrounding area was a place where very poor people gathered to live. There were many young people who could not afford to go to school due to poverty. Therefore, the Salesians ran a school and an oratory from the parish and put all their strength into charity work, education and vocational recruitment. After these facilities were established, many Salesians and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, many priests of the Seoul Archdiocese and other dioceses got their training and formation here. (The present Provincial of Korea is a product of this Oratory). As vocations to the Salesian life increased in 1963, the province built the formation house of Taerimdong and from that time on the province seriously started to give the young Salesians a formation adapted to Korea.

In 1968, in order to give young people a technical education, the province started Don Bosco Vocational Training Center. It was the fruit of financial aid from Misereor, the Korean government and money collected by the confreres. Many difficulties had to be overcome and now with the financial help from the government it is doing very good work among poor and abandoned boys in difficulty.

After that, the Korean Province continued to grow. Together with the government and the local Church, the confreres were working enthusiastically in schools, parishes, social work for youth, correctional institutes for young people, youth training centers, vocational-technical schools,

media education, vocational recruitment, the labor movement and migrant workers. In 1998, the Province established a technical school in Yanji, China and through this technical education, it endeavors to spread the Gospel and Gospel values. The Province had also sent missionaries to Mongolia and the Sudan.

Presently, the Korean Province has 55 priests, 17 perpetually professed brothers, 35 temporary professed, four novices and 31 aspirants attending the first two years of major seminary. We receive numerous invitations from different dioceses and the government to do work for youth and are doing our best to respond. During our 50th anniversary celebrations, Archbishop Nicholas Jeong JinSeok of Seoul mentioned in his homily that he expects a contribution of the Salesians toward the evangelization of North Korea. The unification of the Korean peninsula is the desire of our people and our Province is preparing itself to do its part in fulfilling that desire.

5. Characteristics that appear in the history of the Korean Province

Above, we have briefly considered the start and development of the Korean Province. When we look at the history of the Salesians in Korea we can find the following characteristics.

First, The Korean Province and the Korean Church both have the same kind of beginning. We can see the hand of Divine Providence in these beginnings. In that Province, we came to realize that Don Bosco was with us in realizing his dream. The history of the Korean Province was the discovery that Don Bosco was present in Korea before his Salesians in order to realize his vision for the Province.

Secondly, as the Salesians grew in Korea, they were able to establish very good relations with many people. Government officials, diocesan priests, lay collaborators, the Salesian Sisters and other congregations of men and women all wished us well and showed great concern for the education of youth. The first Salesians in Korea were great animators of people.

Thirdly, the direction of our Province was focused on “the preferential choice of poor youth”. The early missionaries handed down to us this core of our spirit and still today it is operating as the most important criterion in deciding our pastoral directions.