

Excerpts from Butler's *Lives of The Saints*

THE KOREAN MARTYRS

CHRISTIANITY came late to Korea, for it was the policy of that country's rulers to keep it isolated from foreign influence. Not until the late eighteenth century, more than two hundred years after Francis Xavier had reached Japan, did the Church begin very slowly to take root. The earliest missionaries were all lay people who had been converted outside their country. Pietro Yi was baptized at Pechino in 1784: he was the first Korean to be received into the Church, but he was also the first to apostatize, when persecution broke out in 1791 as the result of the refusal by one Christian nobleman to burn incense in honour of his deceased mother.

Throughout the last years of the eighteenth century persecution was sporadic and localized, but in 1801 it was extended to the whole of the country. One Chinese priest, who had succeeded in entering Korea, offered himself for martyrdom in the hope that his death would bring the sufferings of his fellow Christians to an end. He was beheaded on 31 May 1801, and the persecution went on.

Yet these early martyrs were not among those canonized by Pope John Paul II in the cathedral of Seoul, where the relics of so many of them lie, on 6 May 1984. Of the many thousand - perhaps more than 8,000 not counting those who died of cold or starvation as they fled the tortures of the persecutors - 103 were chosen by name as representatives of the rest. They were selected from those who died in the persecutions which began again in 1839 and lasted till 1846, and those which lasted from 1861 to the beginning of 1866.

By the time of the renewed persecution - brought about both in 1839 and 1861 by the return to power of the conservative faction in the Korean ruling class - there was a small number of missionaries in the country, two French priests and a bishop, Mgr Laurence Imbert: all three died by beheading on 21 September 1839. On 16 September 1846 there died Andrew Kim, the first, and at that time only, Korean-born priest. Two more bishops, and a number of other French missionaries died in the later persecution.

These were the clergy, but by far the greatest number of those named as saints by the pope near the spot where so many of them had died by beheading or strangulation, were ordinary lay people. Some of them were of high rank, but most were ordinary men and women, often linked by family ties as well as by the bonds of the faith, mothers and their children, wives and their husbands. For several their crime was that they had worked as catechists in spreading the faith which, until 1881, was referred to in official documents as "the perverse doctrine"

The persecution which lasted till 1866 was the last: religious liberty was conceded in 1886, and today the Church flourishes. Though the 103 whose sanctity was formally recognized were canonized together, they had been beatified in two groups: those of the earlier persecution by Pius XI in July 1925, those of the later one by Paul VI in October 1968.

ST MICHAEL OF CHERNIGOV AND ST THEODORE, MARTYRS (A.D. 1246)

THE church in Russia had no martyrs, properly speaking, before the Tartar invasions of the thirteenth century. The number who then gave their lives for Christ was very large, and the first to receive both popular and liturgical veneration were those among them who were also nobles and military leaders against the barbarian invaders. Outstanding in popularity among these was Michael, Duke of Chernigov.

The first we hear of him is unpromising. He showed cowardice in face of the enemy and fled from Kiev, abandoning the city to the Tartars. But then, hoping to attract their violence to himself and distract it from the people, he returned of his own will and made his way into the camp of the Horde. Their leader, Bati, tried to persuade Michael to treachery, making great promises if he would only make an act of idolatrous worship. St Michael refused: he was not willing to be a Christian only in name. His friends then formed a plan for his escape from the camp, but this also he refused, lest they should suffer Bati's reprisals. So the Tartars tortured and then beheaded him, on September 20, 1246, and there suffered with him one of his nobles, St Theodore.