

Today is the memorial of 103 Korean Martyrs.

The two named, Fr. Andrew Tae-Gon and Paul Chong Ha-sang ... help to explain some of the character of this feast.

Several hundred years ago, Korea was known as “The Hermit Kingdom.” The peninsula is pretty isolated, and for many years, that is how they wanted things. Only once a year did emissaries go to China to give tribute to the Emperor ... and it was through this contact that the first knowledge of Catholicism came to Korea.

Books on the Faith written in Chinese by Jesuit priests made their way to Korea, and lay led groups began to form. Baptism was the only Sacrament available without missionary priests.

For roughly 200 years, the Faith grew this way in Korea.

In the mid-19th century, the first priests came to Korea - but only to minister to occupying Japanese forces ... and discovered the nascent Catholic community ... who had never before seen a priest.

Fr. Andrew Tae-Gon was the first native Korean priest. He had to travel 1,300 miles from Korea to Macao (a Portuguese colony west of Hong Kong) to attend seminary; and was ordained in Shanghai.

He was “caught” by authorities working on a way to bring missionaries into the Korean peninsula, and for that was beheaded.

Paul Chong Ha-sang was a 45 year old married man who was a lay catechist. He too was martyred for the Faith ... as well as 101 others, mostly lay people.

Today, about 10% of Koreans are Christian - the largest percentage in all of any east Asian nation.

And their story should inspire us ... The story of the Korean Martyrs shows that the graces of Baptism bring with it a mission ... and the power ... to spread the Faith ... and to live the Faith.

Certainly living without the fullness of the Sacraments is not ideal, but what this small community did in an isolated place 300-400 years ago ... should inspire us to up the ante in our own evangelization.

As we approach this altar to receive the Sacred Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ ... let us pray for zeal in our Faith ... to be more open to speak about ... and spread our Faith ... to welcome others into our community ... and to share our life in Christ with those who may not know Him as we do. And let us also pray for Christians who are persecuted for their Faith. May they persevere in the face of violent opposition ... and may our prayers strengthen their resolve in difficult situations.