



Korean Catholic History

The Joseon Dynasty begins

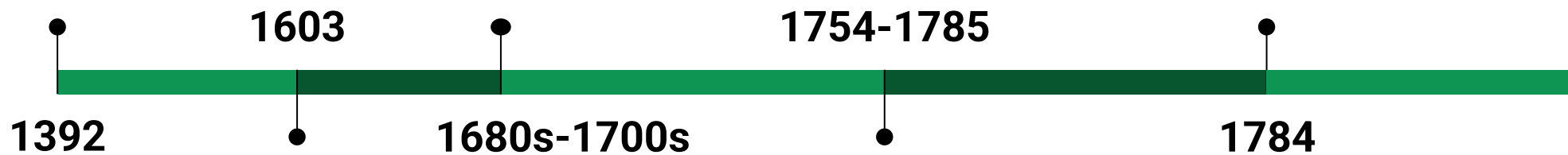
The Joseon Dynasty lasts for 500 years and is the first great enemy and persecutor of Korean Catholics.

Catholicism keeps spreading

Silhak and Catholic scholars share texts that spread Catholic teachings.

Yi Seung-hun is first baptized

Yi Seung-hun is baptized in Beijing by Chinese Jesuit missionary. He is the first Korean layperson and starts lay-led Korean church.



Catholicism is introduced

Catholicism is first introduced to Korean scholars through books, not by missionaries.

Yi Byeok forms the first Korean Catholic community

Yi Byeok gathers a group of intellectuals and scholars who nurture future Catholic leaders such as Yi Seung-hun.

Catholic stays underground

Catholic activity goes underground.

Sin-hae Persecution

First official persecution of Korean Catholics occurs.

1785

1789-1791

1801

1786-1789

1789

The first repression of Catholicism

In Joseon dynasty, the first repression of Catholicism begins and creates tension between the church and the government.

Tensions between the Church and the Joseon government grow

Catholics question Confucian customs like ancestral rites. The conflict between the Church and Joseon government leads to Sin-hae Persecution.

Shin-yu Persecution

King Sunjo views Catholicism as political threat, leading to the execution of more than 300 people.

Byeong-oh Persecution

During the Byeong-oh Persecution, St. Andrew Kim Taegon—the first Korean Catholic priest—is executed at age 25, later canonized by Pope John Paul II in 1984 with 102 other martyrs.

France-Korea Treaty of Amity

The France-Korea Treaty of Amity legalizes Catholicism in Korea, ended formal state persecution, and allows French missionaries to practice their faith freely.

1839

1846

1866

1886

1910-1945

Gi-hae Persecution

Under King Heonjong, the Joseon government executes around 300 Catholics as part of an ongoing campaign to suppress Catholicism amid fears of foreign influence and social disruption.

Byeong-in Persecution

Under Heungseon Daewongun, over 8,000 Catholics are executed in the deadliest persecution in Korean history.

Japan occupies Korea

On August 22, 1910, Japan occupies Korea, ending its sovereignty and imposing colonial rule, while tolerating Catholicism under strict surveillance to appear modern.



Joseon Dynasty

The **Joseon Dynasty** was established in 1392 and lasted for a little over 500 years between **1392-1897**. The Joseon Dynasty was the last and longest ruling Korean dynasty. Joseon was a **Confucian state**, with Neo-Confucianism as the official ideology. **The Joseon Dynasty believed that Catholicism was a threat to their social order** and that it directly contradicted core Confucian values.

Catholicism Began with the Laypeople

Korean Catholicism began in a truly unique way: it was introduced by Korean scholars who discovered Catholic writings through books by Chinese missionaries not by foreign priests or missionaries



Matteo Ricci

Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) was a Jesuit missionary in Ming China. Matteo's book, **Tianzhu Shiyi**, "**The True Meaning of the Lord in Heaven**," was his most influential text that presented Christian theology in Chinese. His book inspired Korea's earliest Catholic intellectuals such as Yi Byeok.



1603 Catholicism was first introduced to Korea through Korean scholars, not by foreign missionaries.

Yi Gwang-jeong, a Korean scholar, brought Catholic books and Westerns texts from Beijing to Korea.

1680s – 1700s **silhak** was a practical learning movement in late Joseon that emphasized empirical study, reform, and practical solutions to social, economic, and political problems over rigid Confucian tradition. **Silhak scholars began studying Western texts that contained Catholic theological ideas.** Silhak and Catholic scholars often belonged to the same elite networks and family lineages. **These scholars shared texts, hosted gatherings, and created intellectual circles that spread Catholic teachings, especially among the yangban (nobility) and educated commoners.**

1754-1785 **Yi Byeok** was a leading intellectual figure in the formation of first Korean Catholic community. He reportedly experienced a spiritual conversion through study alone, before anyone in Korea was baptized. He gathered a group of friends and intellectuals to study Catholicism and formed the first Catholic community in Korea. He played a key role in introducing the faith to others like Yi Seung-hun.



Yi-Seung-hun

1784 Yi Seung-hun was the first Korean Catholic convert, baptized in Beijing in 1784 by a Chinese Jesuit missionary. He took the Christian name “Peter.” He became the first Korean layperson baptized into the Catholic Church. **Yi Seung-hun helped spread Catholicism to Korea as a layman that began a lay-led Korean Church.** Yi performed baptisms and helped Catholicism spread from person to person, starting with a small group of intellectuals and relatives. He converted not just fellow scholars, but entire families.

1785 The first official repression of Catholicism began in Korea.

By 1785 the Joseon officials viewed Catholicism as a threat. Thomas Kim Beom-u hosted Catholic gatherings at his residence in Seoul's Myeongdong district, which led to increased surveillance of Catholic activities and growing tension between the Church and the state.

1786-1789 Catholic activity went underground. Despite persecution risks, communities continued to gather for prayer, catechesis, and discussion of Catholic doctrine. **Catholicism spread quietly among scholars and some commoners despite growing suspicion.**

1789-1790 Catholics began to question Confucian tradition such as ancestral rites, leading to intensified conflict with the state. Catholic rejection of ancestral rites became increasingly visible. Korean Catholics asked the Beijing bishop whether Confucian rites were acceptable. The bishop responded negatively in 1791 and this deepened the Church-state conflict and led to the 1791 Sinhae Persecution- the first to include executions.

1791 *Sin-hae Persecution* The Sin-hae

Persecution was the **first official execution of Korean Catholics** and a critical turning point in the history of the Korean Church. It marked the moment when Catholicism shifted from being a quietly tolerated intellectual movement to a criminalized and persecuted religion under Joseon law. **Two Catholics, Yun Ji-chung and Kwon Sang-yeon refused to perform ancestral rites due to their loyalty to God and not idolatry. Yun and Kwon were beheaded in Jeonju in November 1791.** This marked the first execution in Korean Catholics history and sent a signal throughout Korea that Catholicism was now a punishable crime.

1801 *Shin-yu Persecution* By 1801, Catholicism had spread widely among scholars, officials, and even members of the royal family. King Sunjo viewed the faith as a political threat that undermined social order. Hundreds of believers were arrested, tortured, exiled, or executed as the government launched a nationwide crackdown. **The first foreign priest for the Korean diocese, Fr. Zhou Wen-mo, and other foreign priests were killed, and subsequent foreign clergy were banned, forcing Korean Catholics to practice in secret. The persecution severely impacted the Korean Church. Whang Sa-Yeong lamented, “The Korean church, now, cannot survive any longer even without further persecutions.” Despite being outlawed, Catholicism persisted and grew underground, and many martyrs of 1801 were later canonized by the Church.**

1839 *Gi-hae Persecution*

The Gi-hae Persecution, lasting from March to October 1839 (lunar calendar), was part of a series of campaigns by the Joseon government under King Heonjong to eradicate Catholicism, which it viewed as a threat to social order. Despite earlier persecutions, **Catholicism continued to grow underground**, particularly among peasants, scholars, and some officials. Political power struggles between the Pungyang Jo and Andong Kim families, along with local corruption, also fueled the crackdown. **70 victims of this persecution were included in 103 saints of Korea**, including:

1. **St. Ignatius Kim Chejun (St. Andrew Kim Taegon's father)**
2. **St. Paul Chong Hasang (lay leader)**
3. **St. Agnes Kim Hyo-ju and St. Columba Kim Hyo-im**
4. Three French missionaries:
 - a) **St. Laurent-Joseph Imbert (Bishop)**
 - b) **St. Jacques-Honore Chastan**
 - c) **St. Pierre Philibert Maubant**



St. Laurent-Joseph Imbert (Bishop)

1846 *Byeong-oh Persecution*

The Joseon government targeted Catholics for their perceived opposition to Confucian ideals, particularly ancestral rites. Thirteen months after his ordination, **St. Andrew Kim Taegon, the first Korean Catholic priest**, was captured and tortured in an attempt to make him renounce his faith. He was arrested at Deungsanjin, Sunwido, while contacting a Chinese ship to open a new nautical route for missionary work. Fr. Andrew Kim Taegon, along with Hyeon Seok-Mun, was executed, while Lim Chi-Baek and others were beaten to death. His last words were, ***“It is for Him that I die. My immortal life is on the point of beginning.”*** He was beheaded on September 1846 at the age of 25. **His martyrdom became a major symbol of faith and resilience in Korean Catholic history, and he was later canonized by Pope John Paul II in 1984, along with 102 other Korean martyrs.**



St. Andrew Kim Taegon

1866 *Byeong-in Persecution*, the Deadliest Persecution

The persecution began in 1866 (the 8th year of King Gojong) and continued until 1873, when Heungseon Daewongun resigned from political power. Catholicism, viewed as a threat to the traditional Confucian hierarchy and social order, faced widespread suppression. This campaign became the deadliest and most brutal persecution of Catholics in Korean history:

- **8,000 Catholics** were executed, including both **native believers and foreign missionaries**.
- It marked the **bloodiest religious persecution** in Korean history.
- Among the martyrs were **Bishop Siméon-François Berneux** and other members of the **Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP)**



Bishop Siméon-François Berneux

1886 Catholicism Legalized after France-Korea Treaty of Amity

On June 4, 1886, France and Korea signed the Treaty of Amity, establishing diplomatic and commercial relations. **The treaty protected French missionaries, ended formal state persecution of Catholics, and allowed Catholicism to spread more freely in Korea.**

1910 Japan Occupied Korea

on August 22, 1910 through a treaty signed by a pro-Japanese official, officially incorporating Korea into the Japanese Empire. The occupation marked the formal end of Korea's sovereignty and its transformation into a Japanese colony. **Japan's colonial rule involved efforts to suppress Korean culture, language, and history, including forced name changes and the banning of the Korean language in schools.** Japan tolerated Catholicism as part of its effort to appear modern and civilized on the world stage. **Catholic Church operated under strict Japanese surveillance.**

1945 Korea Liberated after WWII.

After Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945, Catholicism entered a new era of freedom and growth. **Catholic Church re-established openly in South Korea.** After years of forced Shinto workshop and cultural suppression by Japan, Catholics could now worship freely, use Korean language in liturgy and education, reopen and expand Catholic schools, churches, and seminaries.

Saenamteo Martyrs' Shrine



Saenamteo is located on the north bank of the Han River in Seoul, South Korea. Saenamteo is a place where the Joseon dynasty used to execute political offenses. It is most famous as the place of execution of Catholic martyrs during four anti-Catholic persecutions in the 19th century

occurring in 1801, 1839, 1846, and 1866. The victims included Korean, French, and Chinese priests and missionaries and laypeople.

Fr. Zhou Wen-mo (James) was the first martyr of Saenamteo in May 31, 1801 during **Shin-yu Persecution** in Korean history. In 1893 during **Gi-hae Persecution** Fr. Imbert, the second archbishop of the Joseon Diocese also died with Fr. Maubant and Fr. Chastan in Saenamteo. Increasing oppression on Catholicism such as **Byeong-oh** (1946) and **Byeong-in** (1866) persecutions, brought about a series of martyrs: the first Korean priest, Fr. Andrew Kim Taegon, Hyeon Seok-Mun (Charles), the fourth archbishop Fr. Berneux, Fr. Bretenieres, Fr. Beaulieu, Fr. Dorie, Fr. Petitnicolas, Fr. Pourthie, Jeon Ui-Bae (Mark), and U Se-Yeong (Alexio). The Korean Catholic Church designated Saenamteo as a martyrs' shrine in 1950.

Prayer to St. Andrew Kim Taegon, Paul Chong Hasang, and Companions

O God, who have been pleased to increase
your adopted children in all the world,
and who made the blood of the Martyrs
Saint Andrew Kim Taegon and his companions
a most fruitful seed of Christians,
grant that we may be defended by their help
and profit always from their example.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever.
Amen.

***“This is my last hour of life, listen to me attentively:
if I have held communication with foreigners,
it has been for my religion and for my God.
It is for Him that I die.
My immortal life is on the point of beginning.
Become Christians if you wish to be happy after death
because God has eternal chastisements in store
for those who have refused to know Him.”
- The last words of St. Andrew Kim Taegon***