

Modern Korean Catholic Church

Characteristics of the Modern Korean Catholic Church



**Significant
Growth**



**Deep Commitment
to Social Justice**



**A Growing Role in
Global Missions**

South Korea - Political & Catholic Timeline (1945 - Present)



Military Coup & Authoritarian Rule

1961	Park Chung-hee Era Military coup puts General Park Chung-hee in power
1963	Park elected as a president and proclaims the Third Republic. Rapid industrialization and export-led growth begin — the “Miracle on the Han River.”
1972	Martial law. Park increases his powers with the adoption of the Yushin (Revitalization Reform) Constitution.
1979	Park assassinated.
1980	Chun Doo-hwan Era General Chun Doo-hwan seizes power. Martial law declared after student demonstrations. In the city of Gwangju, his army kills at least 200 people (Gwangju 5·18 Uprising). Fifth republic and new constitution.
1981	Chun indirectly elected to a seven year term. Martial law ends, but government continues to have strong powers to prevent dissent. Continues rapid economic growth. Increasing shift towards high-tech and the computer industry.

Return to Democracy

1987	June Democratic Uprising for Democratization Nationwide pro-democracy protests (June Democratic Uprising) force regime to allow direct presidential elections. Roh Tae-woo elected president in first direct vote, grants greater degree of political liberalisation and launches anti-corruption drive.
1988	1988 Seoul Olympics Seoul becomes a global city.

Vatican II and Korean Renewal

- **1962:** Pope John XXIII establishes the Catholic hierarchy in Korea; dioceses formally created with Korean bishops leading.
- **1960s:** Second Vatican Council reforms reach in Korea (introduces liturgy in Korean, lay participation, and emphasis on social justice).
- Rapid expansion of Catholic schools, hospitals, and charities.

1970-80s: Growth Amid Dictatorship

- **1970s:** The Catholic church in South Korea becomes a leading voice for **human rights and democracy** under Park Chung-hee's authoritarian rule.
- **1974:** The Catholic Priests' Association for Justice (CPAJ) is founded, outspoken against torture, political oppression, and election rigging.
- **Cardinal Stephen Kim Sou-hwan** emerges as a moral leader and symbol of resistance.
- **1979:** Park Chung-hee assassinated. The church had been a shelter for pro-democracy activists during his final years.
- **1980 (May): Gwangju 5·18 Uprising.** Catholic priests and nuns witness atrocities and later speak out, despite government censorship.
- **1980s:** Catholic churches serve as safe havens for student activists, labor organizers, and democracy advocates.
- **1987 (June Democratic Uprising):** Many Catholics actively participate in pro-democracy protests; churches provide refuge from police crackdowns.

1984: Pope John Paul II visits Korea

- Canonizes **103 Martyrs from Korea** in Seoul (first canonization outside Rome).
- Strengthens Korean Catholic identity worldwide.

2014: Pope Francis Visits Korea

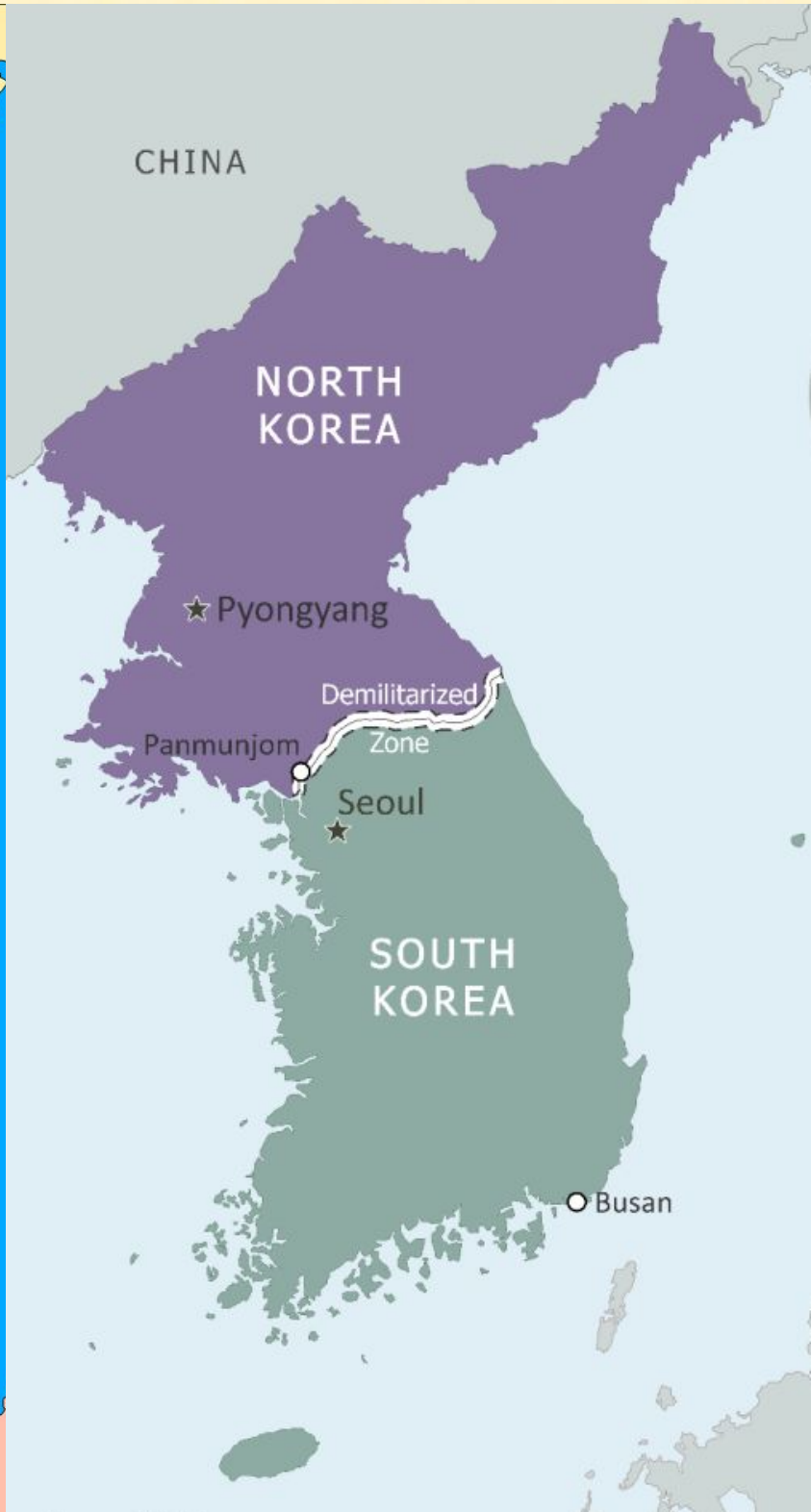
- Beatifies **124 Martyrs from Korea** at Gwanghwamun Square in Seoul, attended by nearly 1 million people.

Korea Maps

Catholic Dioceses Map



Korea Peninsula Map after Korean war





Flourishing South Korean Catholic Church

According to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea, the modern Korean Catholic Church is marked by **significant numerical and institutional growth.**



58,000+ baptisms recorded in 2024, marking a **13.7% increase** from the previous year, driven largely by adult converts and family baptisms



The total number of Catholics in Korea reached **nearly 6 million**, about **11.4% of the national population** as of 2024 and a **12,000% increase in 50 years**



Clergy total: 5,751
(5,578 Korean priests, 131 foreign clergy, 40 bishops, 2 cardinals)

Key Factors that Strengthened Catholicism in Korea



Education, Healthcare and Charity Initiatives

Catholic missionaries and Korean clergy built schools, universities, seminaries, hospitals, and orphanages that provided modern education and medical care while serving the poor. These efforts made the church a trusted institution for both spiritual and practical needs, raising its social standing and influence.

Political Involvement

Catholic clergy and lay leaders courageously opposed authoritarian regimes and human rights abuses and supported democracy movements. This commitment aligned the church with the Korean people's struggles, giving Catholicism a reputation as a defender of justice and freedom.

Sense of Community

Catholic parishes became more than worship spaces. They served as social hubs, offering support networks for converts and marginalized groups. The church fostered a strong lay movement, with small faith groups, youth associations, and volunteer organizations. This sense of belonging gave members both spiritual nourishment and social solidarity, helping Catholicism take root in Korean culture.

Vatican II Influence

The reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) encouraged active lay participation, use of the Korean language in worship, and openness to local traditions. These changes empowered Korean Catholics to link faith with social justice, democracy, and cultural identity.



Persecuted North Korean Catholic Church

During the Korean War, **communist troops persecuted** missionaries, foreign religious, and Korean Christians, pursuing them to the south. In North Korea, all monasteries and churches were destroyed. Monks and priests who could not flee to the south were sentenced to death.

Today, the Church in North Korea has **neither clergy nor religious services**. However, according to official data, there are approximately 4,000 North Korean Catholics belonging to the **Korean Catholic Association, controlled by the communist regime**. This association, which is **not recognized by the Vatican**, has only **one church in the country, in Changchun**, which is considered window dressing by the regime.



Bishop Francis Hong Yong-ho

Francis Hong Yong-ho (1906-2013), appointed the **first Bishop of Pyongyang** in 1944, worked to rebuild the Church after Japanese rule but was arrested by North Korean authorities in 1949, accused as an “enemy of the people.” He disappeared without trial or trace, becoming a symbol of courage and faith. **In 2014, the Vatican recognized him as a Servant of God**, the first step toward sainthood.

He represents the “**Hidden Martyrs of the North**” - priests, religious, and lay leaders who suffered persecution in North Korea from 1945 through the Korean War. Churches were destroyed, and the Catholic hierarchy was silenced. Among them was **Msgr. Patrick Chang**, Apostolic Administrator of Hamhung (disappeared in 1950), **Fr. Peter Ryang** (vanished during the purges), and **countless unnamed catechists and lay leaders** who endured imprisonment or death rather than renounce their faith.



Cardinal Stephen Kim Sou-hwan

The Moral Leader of the Nation



The youngest cardinal in the world in 1969, **Stephen Kim Sou-hwan** (1922-2009) used his influence not for power, but for protection. During Korea's pro-democracy protests, he opened Myeongdong Cathedral to students fleeing police brutality. ***"Step over me first if you must take them."*** - Cardinal Kim. His courage became a spiritual refuge. He led not just the Church, but the nation with love, clarity, and moral strength. He remains a symbol of mercy and truth.



Advocate of Democracy



Bishop Daniel Ji Hak-sun
(the middle)

Bishop Daniel Ji Hak-sun (1921- 1993) was a bishop of the diocese of Wonju and stood boldly against the Park Chung-hee regime. He was associated with Kim Chi-ha, a poet and social activist, and was arrested in 1974 over allegations of providing financial support to opponents of Park's government and sentenced to death. He was sympathetic to the April Revolution and was a leader of the urban poor and supported nonviolent resistance to the regime. ***"The Church cannot be neutral when the people suffer."*** - Bishop Ji. In the shadows of oppression, he became a voice for human dignity and hope, igniting the conscience of a nation.



Msgr. Pius Cho Chul-hyun
(the second from the left)

Msgr. Pius Cho Chul-hyun (1938-2016) was a distinguished Catholic priest enduring efforts toward democracy and social justice. During the Gwangju Uprising, he volunteered as a Citizens' Settlement Committee member after witnessing citizens being shot. He was subsequently arrested by the military regime and imprisoned alongside future president Kim Dae-jung. He became the first to publicly testify about helicopter gunfire used by the martial law forces during the uprising, beginning in a 1989 documentary and later at the national parliamentary hearings for truth-seeking. He declared, ***"The Church must be the voice of the voiceless."***



Global Missionaries of the Korean Catholic Church

From Recipient to Sender

1,000 Korean Missionaries in 64 Countries

Korea has emerged as a vibrant source of Catholic missionary outreach. Nearly 1,000 Korean missionaries are working across 64 countries - more than a quarter of them priests, and the majority composed of religious sisters. From the rural provinces of Zambia to the cities of Vietnam and the highlands of Peru, Korean Catholicism is expanding its reach with quiet persistence. Vietnam leads the list with 129 Korean missionaries, followed by the Philippines, Zambia, Japan, Indonesia, and China - countries where Korean missionaries often serve in difficult pastoral or educational settings.



Motivations for Mission:

The motivation for this global mission is deeply rooted in the **history of Korean Catholicism**. The church's origins, which **began with lay people spreading the faith without a foreign clergy**, have instilled a **strong sense of personal responsibility for evangelization**. This historical context fosters a culture of active discipleship and mission.

Global Reputation:

Korean missionaries are recognized for their **discipline, strong community spirit, and willingness to serve in difficult places**.





Fr. John Lee Tae-seok

Don Bosco (St. John Bosco) of Tonj



Father John Lee Tae-seok (1962–2010) was a Korean Catholic priest, doctor, and Salesian missionary who dedicated his life to serving the poor in Tonj, South Sudan. Combining medicine, education, and music, he cared for leprosy patients, taught children, and brought dignity and hope to war orphans. Known as the “Don Bosco (St. John Bosco) of Tonj,” his legacy of compassion continues to inspire people worldwide even after his death from cancer at age 48.

The Crisis of the Current Catholic Church and the Crisis of Life in Korea

Loss of Direction After Democratization

Failure in Pro-Life Advocacy

Path of National Extinction

Urgent call to Enact Laws Protecting Life

August 17, 2025 | Benedict Kwangho Lee

Having seen Democratic Party lawmakers introduce “unlimited abortion” bills twice, and with a new government now moving to legalize abortion pills, I have come to realize that this is not a problem that can be solved simply by blaming the ruling party or the administration.

The deeper problem is that not a single lawmaker in our country has the will to draft and propose laws that protect life.

In the United States, Catholic churches systematically conduct pro-life education and advocacy. They apply strong pressure on politicians and even train them to craft pro-life legislation. In Korea, however, religious groups rarely do this. At most, they issue declarations and statements, but actual, effective education and organized movements are virtually absent.

This reveals the limitations of Korean Catholicism. It is true that in the 1970s and 1980s, the Church made significant contributions to democratization. But after institutional democracy was achieved in the 1990s, the Church seems to have lost its sense of mission. It has, in a biblical sense, lost its saltiness.

Driven by the inertia of its 1970s–80s democratization activism, the Catholic Church continues to support the Democratic Party and the progressive camp. Yet since the 2000s, these groups have pushed abortion legalization and LGBT and sexual-identity movements—and many Catholics, including some clergy and religious, have stood with them and supported these actions almost without question.

The Church may support the Democratic Party insofar as it pursues social justice. But when that same party advances anti-life policies—such as repealing abortion laws or pushing “unlimited abortion”—the Church must draw a clear line and issue strong warnings. Instead, it often appears more like a follower, or even a subordinate unit, of the party. This is deeply frustrating.

History shows us what true leadership looks like. On December 12, 1979, Cardinal Kim Sou-hwan openly confronted General Chun Doo-hwan, remarking that the situation felt like a Western movie in which the first to shoot wins. Even Chun, an all-powerful dictator, feared the Cardinal. During the industrialization era, Cardinal Kim admonished President Park Chung-hee: “When resources enter a factory, they come out as products. But when human beings go in, they come out as scrap.”

Today, however, the Church no longer fulfills—or perhaps refuses to fulfill—this leadership role.

Since the 2000s, the most marginalized and persecuted group in society has been the unborn. Yet the Church has largely failed to recognize this. Had it defended life as vigorously as it once resisted dictatorship, Korea would not face this tragic state of affairs.

Because the Church has failed to be salt and light, society has decayed. People wander in darkness, unaware that they are joyfully walking down the path of national extinction. It is a truly bleak reality.

In 2025, the Church must bear this social burden and address the nation’s highest leaders: **“For over fifty years, nation-led and nation-neglected mass abortions have brought Korea to the brink of national extinction. It is imperative to enact laws and policies to protect life, as is done in other developed nations. The responsibilities of both the nation and men regarding pregnancy must be legally established.”**

www.youtube.com/@prolifecorpus

