

Why Korea?

WHY KOREA?

A Short History for Pilgrims · Seoul, August 2027

The thing that makes this country different

Every other local Church in the world began because someone was sent. A missionary arrived, preached, baptized, and a community formed around him.

Korea did not happen that way.

In 1784 the son of a Korean official, Yi Seung-hun, travelled to Beijing with the annual tribute embassy. He went on instructions from a friend at home named Yi Byeok, who had been reading Christian books in Chinese — books written by European Jesuits for a Chinese readership, which had been drifting into Korea for over a century among treatises on astronomy and mathematics. Yi Byeok had read his way into belief and wanted a priest's confirmation of what he had found.

Neither man had ever seen a priest. Yi Byeok never would.

In Beijing, Yi Seung-hun found Jean-Joseph de Grammont, a Frenchman who had come out as a Jesuit and was now simply a priest, holding on in a mission whose order had just been suppressed out from under him. The two had no spoken language in common: the Korean could read and compose classical Chinese but not speak it. So they wrote. The instruction that produced the first Korean Catholic was conducted in characters on paper, a brush passed back and forth across a table.

He was baptized early in 1784 and given the name Peter. He came home in the spring with mathematical treatises, images, crucifixes, rosaries, and the doctrinal books his friend had asked for. Nobody stopped him at the border. There was no law to stop him under. The kingdom had not yet imagined the offence.

Within a year a congregation was meeting in a house in Seoul. Within two, the laymen had studied their books, concluded that a church requires bishops and priests, and appointed their own — a decision Beijing later ruled invalid, which they accepted and undid.

The first priest entered Korea in 1794. By then the Church here had been running for eleven years without one. It lost him in 1801 and went another thirty-three years before it had another.

That is what you are coming to. Not a mission field. A church that assembled itself out of documents, chose its own officers, baptized its own members, and had already decided what it was by the time the professionals arrived to take charge of it.

Why it became a capital crime

In the spring of 1785 a police patrol walked into a house in the Myeongnye-bang quarter of Seoul. They were not looking for a religion. They had been told there was gambling: a dozen men behind closed doors in the middle of the day, in a quiet street.

What they found was a room with a picture of a European in a robe hung at one end, a man in the middle of speaking, and everyone else sitting in front of him in no arrangement that made sense.

That last detail is the whole story. In a Confucian house every person present has a place fixed by rank, age and sex, and the placing is not etiquette — it is the visible form of the moral order itself. In that room a middle-class

interpreter sat among aristocrats as though the distinction had been suspended. Within a few years there were household slaves in the room. Within a few more there were women, and one of them was running the Seoul church.

A Confucian state could tolerate a gentleman's eccentric reading. What it could not tolerate was a room in which a slave and a scholar knelt in the same rite, addressed the same being, and called each other brother.

The theology was strange. The seating was seditious.

The killing that followed was not one event. It came in waves — 1801, 1839, 1846, 1866 — across eighty-five years, and it was still legal when it simply lapsed in 1873. The last wave alone is thought to have taken thousands.

Five names worth carrying

Yi Seung-hun (1756–1801) — the first Korean baptized. He recanted more than once under interrogation and was beheaded anyway. His story is in the book because a history of this Church that includes only the people who behaved well is not a history of it.

Jeong Yak-jong (1760–1801) — wrote the first catechism in the Korean alphabet, so that people who could not read Chinese could read the faith. Led the lay church. Beheaded outside the Small West Gate. Beatified 2014.

Kang Wan-suk (1761–1801) — left her husband's house, hid the first priest in Korea for six years, and ran the women's side of the church as its first female officer. Beatified 2014.

Paul Chong Ha-sang (1795–1839) — Jeong Yak-jong's son. His father was executed when he was five. He spent roughly twenty years walking back and forth to Beijing to get his church a bishop, and in 1825 he and a companion wrote directly to the Pope. Rome made Korea a vicariate in 1831 because a layman would not stop walking. He was beheaded on the same ground as his father, thirty-eight years later. Canonized 1984.

Andrew Kim Taegon (1821–1846) — sent abroad at fifteen, ordained at twenty-four in Shanghai, beheaded at twenty-five at Saenamteo. He had been a priest for thirteen months. His last letter to his congregation says: *though our bodies are many, be one heart; do not let your love go; bear with one another and look after one another*. There is almost nothing in it about himself.

A sixth, if you have room: **Choe Yang-eop** (1821–1861), the second Korean priest, who walked a circuit of some 120 mountain villages twice a year for eleven and a half years until he died on the road. His father was flogged to death in 1839. His mother was beheaded in 1840 because her son was in Macau learning Latin.

Where you will be standing

The Seoul Catholic Pilgrimage Route was designated by the Holy See in September 2018 — the first international pilgrimage site in Asia. It is three walks, and the people above died on them.

Way of the Word · 8.7 km

The beginning. The house sites of Yi Byeok and of Thomas Kim Beom-u, whose home in Myeongnye-bang was raided in 1785 and who died of the injuries. This is where a reading circle became a church.

Way of Life · 5.9 km

Seosomun, outside the Small West Gate, where the state killed ordinary criminals — and therefore where it killed most Catholics, because that was the charge it chose. Jeong Yak-jong died here in 1801. His son Paul Chong Ha-sang died here in 1839. His daughter Jeong Jeong-hye was beheaded three months after her brother. More Catholics died at this one place than anywhere else in Korea.

Way of Unity · 29.5 km

Saenamteo, the sand on the Han where the state killed traitors and military offenders — which is why the three

French bishops and priests died here in 1839 and Andrew Kim in 1846. The government was not executing clergymen. It was executing foreign agents. Where you were killed was itself a statement of the charge.

Danggogae, where Choe Yang-eop's mother was beheaded in 1840.

Jeoldusan — once called Silkworm's Head. After the French fleet withdrew in 1866 the regent made it an execution ground, and the reasoning was written down: the river had been defiled by foreigners, and it would be washed with the blood of the Koreans who had brought them. The condemned were walked out along the towpath, beheaded at the top, and tipped over the edge into the water, which disposed of the body and saved the state the cost of a grave. *Jeoldusan* means the hill where the heads were cut off.

If you have a free afternoon: drive forty minutes east of Seoul to where the Bukhan and the Namhan join and become the Han. The village on the north bank is **Majae**. At one end is the house and grave of Jeong Yak-yong, the great philosopher — school groups come by the busload. A few hundred metres away is a Catholic shrine to his elder brother Jeong Yak-jong, who wrote the catechism and was beheaded. Most visitors at each end do not know the other site is there, or that the two men were brothers, raised in that house, taught by the same father, and first opened the same books.

Timeline

1784	Yi Seung-hun baptized in Beijing; comes home with the books
1785	The Myeongnye-bang raid. Kim Beom-u dies of his injuries
1786	The laymen ordain their own clergy; Beijing rules it invalid
1794	The first priest enters Korea — eleven years in
1801	The Sinyu persecution. Jeong Yak-jong beheaded; the church loses its priest
1831	Rome makes Korea a vicariate, after a layman's letters
1839	The Gihae persecution. Paul Chong Ha-sang beheaded
1846	Andrew Kim Taegon beheaded at Saenamteo, aged twenty-five
1866	The Byeongin persecution — the largest of all. Jeoldusan
1873	The killing lapses. It is never formally revoked
1984	103 martyrs canonized in Seoul
2014	124 more beatified at Gwanghwamun
2027	You arrive

The feast of the Korean Martyrs is 20 September.

One question to carry

The people in this story were not a separate cast of heroes. They were one family. Of four brothers raised in the same house and taught from the same books: one was beheaded, one was exiled and catalogued fish, one recanted and became the most quoted thinker of his century, and the eldest never converted at all — and it was his household that fed his executed brother's widow and children for years, in a village where everyone knew exactly what they were.

There is no version of this story in which the people who kept the faith are the only ones who behaved well.

So: **what did each of them actually decide, on the day, with the information they had?** That is a better question to carry through Seosomun than *how brave were they*, and it is the question this history is built around.

For group leaders: five things worth doing before you fly

- 1. Give them one name each.** Twelve pilgrims, twelve people from the list above and from the martyrs' rolls. Ask each to find out one thing their person decided. It converts a shrine visit from sightseeing into recognition.
 - 2. Teach the difference between the two execution grounds.** Seosomun was where the state killed criminals; Saenamteo was where it killed traitors. Knowing which is which tells your group what the Korean government thought it was doing — and that is the whole political argument of the persecution, in one fact they can hold.
 - 3. Do not skip the women.** Kang Wan-suk hid a priest for six years and ran the Seoul church. Yun Jeom-hye had her wedding clothes cut down into men's clothes rather than marry. Yu So-sa taught her children out of her dead husband's book and died in prison at seventy-eight. A group that comes home able to name only Andrew Kim has been shown half of it.
 - 4. Read the last letter out loud at Saenamteo.** Andrew Kim's farewell to his congregation is short, and almost none of it is about him. Ten minutes of preparation, and your group will remember that stop for years.
 - 5. Point at Majae on the map.** It is forty minutes from Seoul and it is the reason any of this exists. Most Korean visitors there have no idea the Catholic shrine and the philosopher's grave commemorate two brothers.
-

Adapted from **The House at Majae: One Family and the Church Korea Built from Books, 1784–1886** by Tae Ho Guak, MD. Free to reproduce in pilgrim materials, with or without credit. The full book is available in paperback and Kindle editions on Amazon — [amazon.com/dp/B0HLCPRSZ6](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0HLCPRSZ6). If anything here raises a question your group leaders cannot answer, the author will answer it by email: dr.guak@gmail.com