WORLD

Pope Francis Holds Mass to Huge Crowd in Seoul for Korean Catholic Martyrs

Pope Recognizes Korean Catholics in the 18th and 19th Centuries Who Died for Their Faith

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Pope Francis arrives at Gwanghwamun Square in central Seoul on Saturday. *AFP/Getty Images*

SEOUL—Before a crowd of hundreds of thousands, Pope Francis led a ceremony Saturday to beatify 124 Korean martyrs, a rite that highlighted the special history of a church that has been referred to as the Asian tiger of Catholicism.

The 77-year-old pope led the ceremony in front of Gwanghwamun Gate in the main square in Seoul. This was the site of the torture and execution of many Korean martyrs in the 18th and 19th century. The willingness of the pope to travel to South Korea for the ceremony highlights the dynamism of the peninsula's Catholic community, which is small but one of the fastest-growing in the world. The pope is looking to highlight the possibilities for the faith to take root elsewhere in Asia.

Pope Francis held Mass at Daejeon World Cup Stadium on the second day of his trip to South Korea. The WSJ's Deborah Kan speaks to Lionel Jensen, associate professor at the University of Notre Dame, about Asia's importance to the Vatica

The martyrs were among about 10,000 Catholics who died for their faith in the 18th and 19th centuries. The large number of martyrs distinguishes the Korean Catholic Church and makes it one of the most persecuted congregations in the history of Catholicism.

The pope led the ceremony before an enthusiastic crowd that filled the huge square, which stretches more than a mile. He toured the entire square in his Kia-made Popemobile, stopping to kiss babies and bless the chanting crowd. On his cassock, he wore the yellow-ribbon pin that is the symbol of the Sewol ferry tragedy, which left more than 300 dead.

He made the driver stop before a group of protesters who have been calling on the Korean government to launch a probe into the ferry sinking, a heated issue domestically. The Pope paused with one protester and accepted a petition from the man, to applause.

Pope Francis was also scheduled Saturday to baptize the father of one of the victims of the Sewol ferry disaster. The man asked the pontiff to baptize him at a meeting the pope held with the ferry survivors and victims' parents on Friday.

The pontiff has enjoyed a warm welcome since arriving in Seoul on Thursday for his first trip to Asia. He was greeted by cheering crowds at a Mass at a soccer stadium in Daejeon on Friday morning and was mobbed by young people at a meeting for Asian Youth Day — the main reason for the pontiff's visit to Korea — in the afternoon.

Oh Sin-buk, a 53-year-old man from Daejeon, attended Friday's Mass at the stadium then woke up at 5:30 a.m. to take the express train to Seoul for Saturday's beatification. He said he was particularly impressed by the pope's call for young people to fight injustice and described the pontiff as cute, innocent and lovely.

Yang Je-su, a 55-year-old lifelong Catholic, arrived in Gwanghwamun at 4:30 a.m. to secure a spot near the podium for Saturday's ceremony. She said she was happy and honored that the pope had

come to Korea. She also saw Pope John Paul II, the last pontiff to visit Korea, when he came in 1984 and 1989.

People gather ahead of a mass by Pope Francis in Seoul's Gwanghwamun area on Saturday. *Agence France-Presse/Getty Images*

The Korean Catholic Church is a rare example of a Christian community that is growing faster than Protestantism. While Protestants outnumber Catholics and their evangelical groups are among the biggest in the world, Catholicism has grown in recent years as Protestant numbers are eroding. Infighting and corruption scandals at Protestant megachurches have driven some faithful away in recent years.

Some of the 124 martyrs beatified Saturday were believers who predate the formal establishment of the Korean church in 1836. St. John Paul II visited Korea in 1984 to preside over the canonization of 103 early believers, but they came after the formal birth of the church.

Seoul's Cardinal, Andrew Yeom Soo-jung, who received his red hat only in February from Pope Francis, was present at the beatification ceremony. He is a direct descendant of one of the first Koreans to embrace Catholicism in the 1700s as well as a Catholic martyr who died in the 1800s.

Later Saturday, the pope will visit Kkottongnae, or Flower Village, a center dedicated to the disabled, elderly and homeless. He will also meet with disabled children who were abandoned by their families.
The village was founded in 1976 by Father John Oh after he saw sick beggars feeding other homeless people, and it is the biggest welfare program run by the Korean Catholic Church. It has opened other

centers overseas and attracted the attention of the pope when he was still Archbishop of Buenos Aires, who invited Father Oh to Argentina to set up a similar institution there.

The pope's election scuttled those plans, but Pope Francis' visit is a vote of confidence in a man and a community that has drawn controversy due to corruption allegations. In 2007, Father Oh was acquitted of embezzlement charges.

Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, said Friday that the Vatican and the Korean bishops' council determined that a visit was appropriate in light of the fact that Father Oh was acquitted.

The pope will meet with lay leaders of the Korean church, underscoring the unusual history of a church that was first propagated by the laity. For decades after Catholicism arrived in Korea in the late 1700s, it was sustained entirely by lay persons.

"The Christian faith was not brought to the shores of Korea through missionaries," the pope said at Saturday's Mass. "It entered through the hearts and minds of the Korean people themselves."

The pope is in Korea until Monday. Before leaving for Rome, he will hold a Mass to conclude the Asian Youth Day celebrations and say another for the peace and reconciliation of the divided Korean peninsula in the main cathedral of Seoul.

A priest passes through a security checkpoint in central Seoul on Saturday. *Agence France-Presse/Getty Images*