In describing the origin of Catholicism in Korea, some Catholic writers do not hesitate to call it a “miracle”: Koreans had organized a church in their capital city by the 1770s before any missions had even begun to direct their organized efforts toward this “hermit nation.” Adrien Launay, an eminent Catholic historian, records this event with these words: “The Church in Korea has a very peculiar origin, marked by the special character of human wisdom guided by divine wisdom. It was not created by missionary zeal as were the churches in Vietnam, Japan or China.” It was a “spontaneous birth, without direct evangelization,” like a sprout that came out of the soil in a field where none was expected. The earliest converts were ones who had made themselves Christians. The introduction of Christianity to Korea was accidental. This does not mean, however, that the Christians themselves were scattered individuals. They were united in an organism, a cell—a living cell—that could respond, suffer, and grow. It was this underground cell that met regularly at Kim Pômu’s Myôngryedong panggal Street, Seoul in the 1770s. And it was a representative of this group, Yi Sûnhun, who was sent over the forbidden border to Beijing, China, and was baptized by the bishop who resided there and thereby linked the isolated member to the main body.

In a discourse delivered before the pope on May 9, 1924, on the occasion of the publication of the papal decree that gave official recognition to the martyrs and the causes of the martyrdom of Mgr. Imbert and his company in Korea, 1838–1846, Mgr. De Guebrant gives an account of the origin of the Korean Church.
The Church of Korea has perhaps offered a unique example in the annals of modern missions, having originated toward the end of the 18th century in a rather spontaneous manner (that is, not through direct evangelization, but through the sole action of divine grace upon arid souls seeking the religious truth). Just as the Wise Men from the Orient after studying the ancient prophecies followed the star which led them to Bethlehem, so did the doctors of Korea, in the isolation of their solitary domain, study the books in which they hoped to find an explanation of the world. To them as well appeared a mysterious light which shone on the writings that had providentially fallen under their perusal.  

The introduction of Christianity to Korea, in this way, was nothing short of a “miracle.” Alexandre de Gouvea, the bishop of Beijing at the time, who was chiefly responsible for the cultivation of this newborn church, wrote to Saint-Martin, the bishop of Ssuch’wan on August 15, 1798, a letter which was published later under the title: De Statu christianismi in Regnum Coreae Mirabiliter Ingressi (On the Status of Christianity Miraculously Entered into the Kingdom of Korea).  

What the author of this letter wanted to do was demonstrate not only the miraculous introduction of Christianity to Korea but also the extraordinary growth of this new Christian community. He repeatedly assured that “within a short period of time, the believers in Christianity had increased. . . . Within five years, the number of Christians had grown to about four thousand.”  

Threatened by the vitality and potential of the new Christian cell, the would-be self-sufficient society of Korea soon organized a persecution which lasted over a century, leading finally to the last Royal Edict against Christianity published in 1881 and enforced that same year. If a similitude is permissible, “the blood of martyrs had fertilized Korean soil” during this “period of catacombs” before the “rich harvest began.” During the Regent Taewŏngun’s rule alone, no less than ten thousand Christians paid the supreme price for joy in heaven. Thus Christianity found fertile soil, and a new “Christian nation” was born. The Korean initiative in all this is quite evident.  

Of course, it is equally true that “the Jesuits, who have zealously watched over the Imperial Court of China for evangelistic opportunities, have certainly not failed to notice similar occasions
for approaching the representatives of a nation that has not yet been evangelized."9

Korea was one of these “non encore” who sent tributary emissaries to China, the Middle Kingdom annually. Matteo Ricci, the great missionary to the East, himself met with Koreans in 1601 at the “Castle of Foreigners” in the Imperial city of Beijing.10

According to the Cheng-chiao-feng-pao,11 as early as in 1644 a Jesuit missionary, Johannes Adam Schall von Bell of Germany, approached for the purpose of evangelism the Korean prince Sohyŏn who had been detained in China at that time.12

In the first year of Shun-ch’ih, a Korean prince, the son of the King Hyojong, was detained in the capital city. He heard of T'ang-jo-wang (Johannes Adam Schall von Bell). So the prince paid him a visit when possible at the church where the priest resided. The prince questioned him about astronomy and other Western sciences. Jo-wang also came to repay the prince his visit on several occasions at the Hall of the prince. They had long talks and they understood each other deeply. As Jo-wang often explained the truth of Catholicism, the prince was glad to hear of it and asked detailed questions. When the prince went back home to his country (as a free man), Jo-wang gave him many kinds of books in translation on astronomy, mathematics and the Truth of Catholicism. A globe and a portrait of God (Jesus) were included among the gifts. The prince complimented him with a letter written by himself:13

Unfortunately the prince died soon after his return without achieving anything Jo-wang had hoped for.

Any missionary, given the same opportunity, might have done the same, and opportunities undoubtedly abounded. Led by their own curiosity, Korean visitors to the capital city of China were often drawn to the strange men from the West. They were fascinated not only by the Western scientific instruments found among the strangers’ possessions, but by the personalities of the men themselves. Ambassador Chông Tuwŏn, in 1631, reports of his meeting with Joannes Rodaniguez: “at the age of ninety-seven he still seemed to enjoy his clear-mindedness and perfect health. He was handsome as one of the shen-hsien (Taoist immortals).”14 It is only natural that the missionaries should have seized every opportunity and used it for their commission. There was, however, no
organized or positive effort on the part of the missionaries to bring forth such explosive results in Korea. When converted, the new Christians had to carry on their work under their own initiative.

The new Christians had no pastor to lead them for ten long years after they were accepted into the world Catholic fellowship. But even before the first decade was over, they had paid heavy prices for their new faith. Thomas Kim Pômu (+1785), Paul Yun Chich’ung [Ioun], and his cousin Jacques Kwôn Sangyôn (+1791) became Korea’s first martyrs for the church.15

It is rather remarkable to note that the missionaries to Korea were brought in by the repeated requests of an already established and very active Christian body in the peninsula and through the heroic deeds of the indigenous new converts themselves. They earnestly requested a priest, knowing that more severe persecutions were to follow. Though the presence of a foreigner might aggravate the situation, they felt the need for a priest who could lead them and officiate at the sacraments for them during the period of their tribulation. Their repeated petitions were received by the bishop in Beijing, and in 1790 he promised them to send a priest as soon as possible.16 A Chinese priest Chou Wen-mo [Jacques Tsiou] was sent and succeeded in entering the forbidden land secretly in 1794, became the first ecclesiastical official in Korea, and was beheaded as a martyr in 1801, after some six years of secret ministry. Chou was sent with the hope that, as a Chinese, he could more easily conceal his identity. After the loss, the new church continued the fight for thirty more years without a pastor.

The resourcefulness of the early Christians of this period is well demonstrated in their devotion and faithful observances of new doctrine in the face of overwhelming adversity.

First of all, it is remarkable indeed to see that these new converts persisted in their struggle to maintain their official relationship with the “Church” through occasional and difficult contact with the Catholic bishop in Beijing. This is in strong contrast to other parallel indigenous “Christian” movements such as the T’ai-p’ing Rebellion in China and the Hirata Shintoism in Japan, which although awakened under the impact of Christianity, developed independently and created “un-Christian” effects in other societies of the changing Orient.17

Maintaining this official relationship through a secret route they established over the border was a vital necessity for this new community; and it is only natural that the energy of the new converts should have been focused around it. The literature of these
men during that eventful period is a powerful testimonial to their resourcefulness.

We now have three letters written by the new converts of this period and addressed to church officials in Beijing and Rome. The first one is the “Silk Letter of Hwang Sayông” of 1801. The letter, addressed to Alexandre de Gouvea, was written on a length of silk measuring 38 cm × 63 cm with 13,311 Chinese characters arranged in 120 vertical columns. It was written on silk so that it could be rolled neatly into a coat collar of Korean dress and carried secretly over the border by the Christian carriers (Hwang Sim and Ok Ch’ŏnhui). These men had originally planned to join the annual envoy bound for Beijing in the winter of 1801. The writer was Hwang Sayông, a noted scholar despite his relative youth. The letter was written under the name of Thomas Hwang Sim, in agreement, because he had already established a personal acquaintance with the bishop during a previous visit with him.

This document, containing valuable firsthand information about the first Korean Christians under the persecution, was given a setting of vivid urgency under the anti-Christian pressure of the age. Hwang recorded it in his village hideout set deep in the mountains, where he had taken refuge from the danger of arrest. Yet the threat of immediate danger was constantly around him as he proceeded to write for forty days in an abandoned pottery kiln on a hillside. Nevertheless, the document contains a balanced view, remarkably free from the usual Oriental exaggerations. It is quite evident that he tried his best to report the situation to the bishop as accurately as possible. This material now provides a reliable source for students of Korean Church history.

Sadly, however, the writer was arrested before he could send the letter away safely, and the letter was seized by the police. Charged with high treason, Hwang was executed with the extreme punishment of Nŭngji ch’ŏch’am before the end of the year. He was twenty-six years old.

The silk letter, soon labeled an “evil letter” (hyungsŏ), astonished the government to an extreme measure. Its capture was immediately reported to the attention of Queen Kim, the great-grandmother and regent of the young King Sunjo. In the government annals we read:

On the day of Kyŏngsin, October, Sinyu Year, that is, the first year of Sunjo (1800), the police officials Im Yŏl and Sin Ungju came to the palace of the Queen and reported that

Catholicism
they brought with them the “evil letter” written by the pagan prisoner Hwang Sayông. She had the letter brought in and saw it. When she gave it back, she commanded them to preserve it in the secret file.

The prisoner Hwang Sayông is a noble man who has been unfortunately very much confused and blinded by the evil religion. Knowing that the danger of arrest was drawing nearer he fled to Kûmo at an early period of police search. He hid himself in a mourner’s hemp clothes, used a false name and lived in an earth cave. For more than half a year he was searched for until he was caught at Chech’ôn.

Police searched through his books and found a document written on a sheet of silk intended to be sent to the Catholic cathedral in Beijing. It is full of evil information such as the event of the executions of Chou Wen-mo [Chinese priest] and others which he intended to report with full details to the Westerners.

There are three points of evil contention: firstly, it requested the Pope to move the Imperial Government of China to force us to enter into friendly contact with the Westerners; secondly, it solicited Chinese interference by establishing an office in An-chu [north of P’yôngyang] to supervise the country [lest it should start more persecutions] and take action immediately [if the prevention does not work]; and thirdly, it asked for an armed intervention of the Christian West by dispatching several hundred warships with fifty or sixty-thousand men in the fighting force and a lot of cannons to threaten us to yield to the freedom of their faith.21

The consternation of the government was doubled by the fact that the letter contained a detailed report of the execution of Priest Chou, a Chinese. The killing of a Chinese was certain to stir up a delicate international situation with the sensitive and powerful neighbor. In response, the queen had to send a special emissary to China to explain the government’s position in these “religious affairs.” The emissary Cho Yundae even carried with him a faked copy of the document.22

The copy was an actual extraction of the original text but gave a special emphasis on the points that would help to justify the Korean government’s actions. The extraction contains only 923 Chinese characters in 16 columns. But there were no insertions or alterations except the corrections of three Chinese characters.
In the precious original document, which is one of the most valuable sources of information about the infant church and a great literature of martyrdom, one finds how mature and far advanced the Korean Christians were in their devotion and dedication to the supreme cause.

The letter raised three points regarding the maintenance of the secret route between Seoul and Beijing. First, it was recommended that a secret agent be placed at the border to make the contacts safer. Second, financial aid was requested to help with the costly maintenance of the transpeninsular route. Third, the dispatch of ecclesiastical officials was repeatedly urged.

The Vatican was not quite ready to send missionaries to Korea. Yet the Macedonian cry of the Christian community was not a visionary one but an earnest plea and demand in Christian fellowship. The new converts were willing to pay any price to keep their official relations with the main Christian body intact. Hwang wrote:

\[ \ldots . \text{We the sinners are scattered as lost sheep.} \ldots \text{We dug holes in the ground like the mouse to hide, or slept on the way to escape. We drank our tears, swallowed our lament and went through sufferings in heart and pains in the bones. Our only plea is to partake in the Blessings of Our Omnipotent Lord on High and the immeasurable Grace of Our Great Father [the Bishop]. We earnestly pray for the help of our Lord his Mercy to us to deliver us from this water and fire of the persecution and lead us to the seats of the saints. The Holy Doctrine is proclaimed all over the world and all peoples of the world sing praises for the holy virtues of Catholicism and emulate each other to promote the work of sanctifying the world. As for the miserable beings of this land, there is no doubt that we are also the children of the Lord on High. Only because of the geographical situation of the land in the far corner, unfortunately, we became the latest hearers of the doctrines. Weak in faith we lament that we do not endure the sufferings very well. And yet we spent ten stormy years in suffering. The persecution of this year was beyond our thought in the day and dream in the night. If these extremity persists we are afraid that the blessed name of Jesus may be erased from this eastern land forever. When we think of these we feel that our liver and bowels are broken to pieces.} \ldots \text{Please hear our plea and extend your help.} \ldots ^{23} \]
Other contemporary pieces of Christian literature bear the same witness to the devotion and resolution of this group. Unlike the ill-fated Hwang Sayông’s silk letter, two other petitions, written by a Français, reached the bishop of Beijing and Pope Pius II. But this occurred during the pope’s captivity at Fountainbleau, and he was not able to respond. One of these two earnest pleas for missionaries was quoted by Adrien Launay in its entirety with Launay’s own remarks that “This pious and touching supplication cannot be passed over in silence.” The letter reads:

Francis and the other Christians in Korea, prostrated on the ground and beating our bosoms, offer this letter to the Head of the Church [Pope], the Father most high and great.

It is with the greatest occasion and the deepest ardor that we implore Your Holiness to have compassion on us, to bestow on us your mercy and to grant us as soon as possible the blessings of the redemption.

We live in a small nation and have had the good fortune of first receiving the holy doctrine through books and, ten years later, through preaching and participation in the seven sacraments.

Seven years later, a persecution has taken place. The missionary Chou who had come to be with us has been put to death along with a large number of other Christians; and all of the others, overwhelmed with fear and sorrow, have dispersed little by little. They have been unable to gather for religious practice, having hidden in fear.

Our only hope lies in the divine mercy and in the great compassion of Your Holiness, which can save us and deliver us from danger. This is the subject of our prayers and longings.

For ten years, we have been subjected to pain and sorrow; many of us have died from old age or other maladies, we do not even know the numbers of us still alive; those who remain do not know when they will be able to receive the holy teachings. They wish to have this grace, as one who is dying of thirst wishes only to satisfy it. They cry out, as in a time of dryness, one calls out for rain. But the heaven is too high, and we cannot attain it; the sea is too vast, and we cannot reach for help on our own.

We, the poor sinners, are unable to express with such sincerity and with such ardor to Your Holiness our desire to receive your immediate assistance. But our nation is so
small, and far away in a far corner of the sea. There is no vessel or vehicle by means of which we can receive your instructions or orders. What is the reason for such deprivation if not our lack of devotion or the enormity of our sins? That is why we now beat our bosom with a profound fear and anguish. We humbly beseech the Lord who died on the cross and who has more compassion for sinners than the just, and Your Holiness who takes the place of God on earth, and who cares for and truly delivers the sinners of the world.

We have been redeemed from our sins and have left the darkness; but the world afflicts our bodies, while sin and malice assault our souls. Our tears, our sighs, and our affliction are of little value; but we consider that the Mercy of Your Holiness is without limits and without measure and will therefore have compassion on the servants of this Kingdom who have been robbed of their pastor, and that you will send missionaries as soon as possible, so that the blessings and merits of our savior, Jesus Christ, will be proclaimed, our souls will be saved and delivered, and the holy names of God will be glorified always and everywhere.25

Such petitions were heard at last. And the missionaries began to arrive after 1831 — only to pay the supreme sacrifice, along with their flocks, one after another. Bringing the missionaries from their temporary stations in China safely into the Korean peninsula through a safer route was the self-imposed duty of a heroic Korean priest named Kim Taegŏn [Andre Kim], whose stories of adventure and ultimate martyrdom are well told by Dallet and Launay.26 He explored the sea route from the west coast of Korea to Shanghai on a small fishing boat with a crew of ten who had more faith than experience in navigation. His initiative powerfully illustrates how the indigenous Christians played a positive role in maintaining their official tie with the main body.

The Korean resourcefulness is also well demonstrated in the activities they organized within their borders. The Hwang Sayŏng silk letter refers, in several passages, to the “Myŏnhoe Society” of the catechumen, as well as to the General Conference of the same body.27 They kept this organization active even in the face of severe persecution, in conformity with instructions received in the Literae Pastorales which were sent to them through a secret route, from Bishop Gouvéa in reply to inquiries from the converts.28 In this
way, the infant church was administered by an inconvenient remote control, but with extremely satisfactory results.

This underground community even produced Christian literature for the purpose of edification and evangelization. Hwang Sayŏng reported that Augustine Chŏng [Yakchong] had written an *Introduction to Catholic Doctrine* (*Chugyo yoji*) in two volumes in the Korean alphabet, Han'gŭl, so that the uneducated and children might read. It is an excellent work in its own right. The Chinese priest Chou Wen-mo endorsed the book, proclaiming it to be even better than the *Sheng-shih-ch’u-jao* of the Jesuit missionary Fengping-cheng. It was warmly received and well read.

Christian heroism was everywhere evident among the persecuted, who believed martyrdom to be the highest glory for them. Hwang reported the cases of the apostasies also as faithfully as he could. There was a Kim Yŏsam, the Judas-like traitor. But it is of special interest for us to note that, according to Hwang, not only most of those who had broken away were continuously faithful “with resolution of death,” but actually testified their faithfulness at the end of their victorious lives to the greater glory of their triumphant faith.

Among the martyrs there were a number of noted scholars of the day, the most illustrious of whom being Ambrose Kwŏn Ch’ŏlsin, Paul Yun Chich’ung, Augustine Chŏng Yakchong, and Alexander Hwang Sayŏng. There were also faithful women of social distinction like Columban Kang Wansuk. There were believers from the slave class like Peter Cho Taesôn. There were also martyrs like Martin Yi Chungbae who always attracted a great crowd of people in front of his prison with his medical ability and flair for faith-healing power. There were many, like John Ch’oe Ch’anghyŏn, who made their prison cell a hall of evangelism, and there were those, like Andre Kim, the heroic Korean priest, who made their scaffold their platform to proclaim their faith.

In short, Catholic evangelism was a success from the very beginning. It began “miraculously” and accidentally, and was carried on heroically by the native converts under their own initiative.