

Benedictines open cause for 36 North Korean martyrs

SEOUL, South Korea - The largest Benedictine abbey in Asia has opened the canonization cause for three dozen 20th-century martyrs of the Benedictine mission in North Korea.

Abbot Simon Petro Ri Hyeong-u of the Order of St. Benedict Waegwan Abbey said the order is setting up a tribunal for the cause, so the community can “honor the faith witness of our predecessors.”

The martyrs include a bishop, 18 priests, 13 brothers, three nuns and a laywoman. They died in prison or in detention camps between 1949 and 1952 at the hands of North Korea’s communist regime “due to hostility against Christianity,” said Abbot Ri. His remarks were reported by UCA News, an Asian church news agency, May 31.

The Benedictines, who arrived in northern Korea in 1909, set up an abbey in Tokwon and administered two church jurisdictions. The Korean peninsula was partitioned in 1945, and during the 1950-53 Korean War the Benedictines fled to South Korea and re-established themselves in Waegwan.

Abbot Ri, the apostolic administrator of Tokwon, appointed Benedictine Father Eduardo Lopez-Tello Garcia of St. Ottilien Archabbey as postulator for the cause. The priest teaches at the Pontifical University of St. Anselm in Rome.

Benedictine Father Sabbas Ri Song-gun, vice postulator for the cause, told UCA News May 29, “Although most of (the martyrs) died outside the jurisdiction of Tokwon Territorial Abbey, they are all linked to Tokwon Abbey, and we are trying to proceed with their beatification in a single case.”

Beatification, through which a candidate for sainthood is declared blessed, precedes canonization, the proclamation of a new saint.

Since the Korean War, no hierarchical structures have existed and no Catholic priest has resided in North Korea, so the office for the cause will be located in the South

Korean Archdiocese of Kowngju.

Pope John Paul II canonized 103 Korean martyrs in 1984, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the arrival of Catholicism in Korea. Those martyrs died in the 19th century. In June 2002, the Korean bishops opened canonization proceedings for another 124 early martyrs.

Since last November, they have been proceeding with the cause of Father Thomas Choe Yang-eop separately.