The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Korea: Past, Present, Future



Article by Archbishop Theophan of Korea *in the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate (**No. 9, 2024**).*

The Missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox Church in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reached unprecedented growth, which was connected with the need to develop the lands of Siberia and the Far East taken in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Orthodox Russian Missionaries appeared in the new territories of the Russian state together with the advancement of the Russian military and the resettlement of the civilian population. Through the tireless labors of Saint Innocent of Irkutsk, Saint Macarius (Glukharev), Saint Herman of Alaska, and Saint Innocent of Moscow, entire peoples were brought to Christ. The educational and Missionary work of the Russian Orthodox Church was not limited to Russian territory. Beyond the borders of the Russian state, Ecclesiastical Missions were established and successfully operated in the Near and Far East—in Persia, China, and Japan. In the late 19th century, the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Korea was founded, becoming the youngest Mission in terms of its establishment date.

Past

Korea is located in the east of Eurasia and occupies the Korean Peninsula, which stretches 1,100

kilometres fr om north to south. It is washed by the waters of the Sea of Japan, the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea, and shares a common border with China and Russia in the north. The territory of Korea besides the mainland includes 3200 islands. Fr om ancient times, the only form of religious beliefs here was shamanism, and with the appearance of Christianity, Nestorianism as well. The penetration of Buddhism, Taoism, and later Confucianism into the Korean Peninsula, which was under the cultural and political influence of China, weakened shamanism's influence, though it never lost its significance as a folk religion. Buddhism, which spread to the Korean Peninsula in the 4th–6th centuries, became an integral part of state ideology fr om the era of the Three Kingdoms and Unified Silla until the end of the Goryeo dynasty. In the early 14th century, Neo-Confucianism entered Korea and began to assert exclusive dominance in the spiritual life of the country, while Buddhism gradually lost state support.

However, by the late 18th century, Christianity (Catholicism) began to penetrate Korea from China, but it soon faced persecution. The Korean government, seeing Catholicism as a threat to the foundations of Korean society and the state, issued a decree banning it in 1785 and subjected Christians to harsh repression until 1872. Nevertheless, the number of Christians continued to grow, first among intellectuals and later among the general population. By 1801, the number of baptized Koreans reached 10,000. In 1872, after King Gojong came to power, Christianity was unofficially recognized as a "tolerated" religion. After Korea opened in 1882, Protestant Missionaries began to enter the country, and their preaching also proved very successful. By the beginning of 1897, the total number of Christians in Korea was approximately 30,000, of which about 29,000 were Catholics and fewer than 1,000 were Protestants.

The first encounter of Koreans with Orthodoxy occurred in the 1860s on Russian territory. During these years, due to natural disasters and famine, there was a mass migration of Koreans to Russian borderlands. The state was interested in Korean settlers, who were known for their industriousness and agricultural talents. Among the measures that contributed to the assimilation of Koreans in Russia was the educational activity of the Orthodox Church among the Korean population. This activity began in the 1860s, when Saint Innocent (Veniaminov) baptized the first Korean immigrants living near Novgorod Harbor (in the Far East). In 1872, the first church for Koreans was built in the village of Korsakovka, dedicated to Saint Innocent of Irkutsk. By the late 1870s, independent Korean parishes had emerged, with Koreans themselves donating funds for the construction of churches and school buildings. By the late 19th century, the number of Orthodox Koreans had reached up to 10,000.

Proposals to establish an Orthodox Mission in Korea itself were repeatedly made in the late 19th century by various figures. Reflections on this topic can be found in the diary entries of Saint Nicholas (Kasatkin), the Apostle of Japan. Diplomats such as N.A. Shuisky and Z.M. Polyanovsky insisted on the establishment of a Mission in Korea. The Minister of Finance, S.Yu. Witte, also showed interest in the Mission's establishment and took care of securing the necessary funds.

On July 2, 1897, the Holy Synod decreed "to establish an Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission in Korea on the general grounds of our foreign Orthodox Missions." The Mission was subordinated to the Saint Petersburg diocesan authority. The first head of the Mission was Archimandrite Ambrose (Gudko; †1918).

The initial members of the Mission also included Hierodeacon Nicholas (Alekseyev; †1952) and psalmist A. Krasin. In early 1898, the Mission members departed from Russia to Korea. However, due to the complex political situation, the Missionaries waited for over a year for perMission to enter Korea, residing near Vladivostok in the military settlement of Novokievsk. During that time, Archimandrite Ambrose left the Mission. The remaining members arrived in Korea in January 1899, later joined by the new head of the Mission, Archimandrite Chrysanthos (Schetkovsky; †1906).

The Missionaries' primary concern upon arrival was arranging a space for worship. Initially, it was decided to use the living room of the head of the Russian diplomatic Mission in Korea, A.I. Pavlov, which could accommodate up to 60 people. An iconostasis was installed in the room, and liturgical utensils were available. On Sunday, February 17, 1900, the feast day of the Holy Martyr Theodore the Recruit, Archimandrite Chrysanthos performed the consecration of the chapel and celebrated the first Divine Liturgy on Korean soil.

Archimandrite Chrysanthos’ first sermon upon arriving in Korea was directed at Koreans already familiar with Orthodoxy. About 30 Koreans—subjects of the Russian Empire who had previously served as interpreters for Russian officials working in the Korean government—temporarily resided in Seoul. Chrysanthos conducted catechetical work with them, and soon, during one of the weeks of Great Lent, they participated in the sacraments of Confession and Communion. Some of them were offered positions as translators and teachers at the school that was soon opened.

Local residents also showed interest in the Russian Missionaries. Shortly after their arrival, Koreans began visiting the head of the Mission's residence with questions about his faith. Archimandrite Chrysanthos and other Mission members began holding discussions with visitors about Orthodox teachings. Over time, the initial curiosity of the Koreans was satisfied, and they began appearing at the Mission less frequently, which did not discourage the Missionaries or affect their zealous approach to their work.

One of the most significant undertakings by Archimandrite Chrysanthos was the translation of prayers and liturgical texts into Korean. Russian-speaking Koreans were invited to work at the Mission to assist with this task. Initially, texts were translated from Church Slavonic into Russian, then from Russian into Korean, and the resulting text was checked using English-Russian-French dictionaries. However, this

method proved ineffective due to numerous errors, leading to the adoption of a more reliable approach—translation from Chinese, which was closer and more comprehensible to Koreans. Archimandrite Chrysanthos reached out to the head of the Russian Spiritual Mission in Beijing, Archimandrite Innocent (Figurovsky; †1931), with a request to send liturgical and doctrinal literature in Chinese, and after the books were received, the translation work became significantly easier.

On October 15, 1900, a school for Korean children was opened at the Ecclesiastical Mission. The school taught basic subjects, Korean, and Russian. The number of students was small—8 to 12—since their upkeep was mainly funded by the personal resources of Archimandrite Chrysanthos.

The primary issue Archimandrite Chrysanthos and subsequent heads of the Ecclesiastical Mission had to address was the construction of a church. The space in the living room of the Russian ambassador's residence, wh ere services were held, was considered temporary and created inconveniences both for parishioners, who could not enter the ambassador's home without some hesitation, and for the ambassador himself.

Even before the Missionaries arrived in 1898, a plot of land in the capital district of Jeongdong was purchased for the Mission through the mediation of Russian diplomats, using funds fr om the imperial government. On this plot, buildings were constructed for the Missionaries, a bell tower, a house for translators, and a school. It was decided to use the school building as a church, and on April 17, 1903, the church was solemnly consecrated in honor of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker. Bells were specially cast in Moscow at the Mission's request, and Saint John of Kronstadt, who maintained close ties with Father Chrysanthos, sent his festive vestments to the Mission.

With the new church building, a belfry was set up, giving the structure a more Ecclesiastical appearance, but even that space was considered temporary. The fervent desire of the Mission's members was to have a standalone church built according to the canons of Orthodox architecture.

Donations for the construction of a church in Seoul began to be collected in Russian churches even before Archimandrite Chrysanthos departed for Korea. By the spring of 1901, 2,984 rubles and 87 kopecks had been raised. While in Korea, Father Chrysanthos submitted a petition to the Holy Synod requesting the immediate construction of a church at the Mission. In November 1903, the State Council reviewed the Holy Synod's proposal to allocate funds for the construction of an Orthodox church in Seoul during 1904–1905. However, the onset of the Russo-Japanese War halted the Mission's activities.

In four years of the Mission's work, 14 Koreans were baptized. This does not suggest that the Missionaries lacked zeal in their service. Archimandrite Chrysanthos wrote: "If we had aimed to baptize

as many as possible, we could have baptized tens of thousands over three years in Korea, for there were many who wished to adopt the ‘Russian faith.’ However, upon thorough investigation and strict examination, it always turned out that their concern was not for faith or the salvation of their souls, but to find in the Missionary a protector for their unlawful actions toward their neighbors or superiors…” **[1]**

Evaluating the slightly over four years of Father Chrysanthos’ tenure as head of the Ecclesiastical Mission in Korea, it can be confidently stated that much was accomplished during this time: the Mission’s property was developed, necessary buildings were constructed, a school for boys and a Missionary outpost in Munsanpo were established, and the first translations of essential prayers and liturgical texts into Korean were completed.

The Ecclesiastical Mission resumed its activities in August 1906 when a new group of Missionaries, led by Archimandrite Paul (Ivanovsky; †1919), arrived in Korea a year after the end of the Russo-Japanese War. In 1908, the Mission was subordinated to the Vladivostok diocese, wh ere it remained until 1921. Archimandrite Paul’s administration marked a period of flourishing for the Mission. Father Paul managed not only to continue the work started by Father Chrysanthos but also to significantly expand Missionary efforts, resulting in the establishment of several new Missionary outposts and the baptism of several hundred Koreans.

The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission resumed its work under entirely new conditions that were far fr om favorable: Korea was rapidly losing its sovereignty and was annexed by Japan in 1910. The Mission’s clergy had to demonstrate that the Orthodox Church in Korea was independent of diplomatic representations and served exclusively peaceful purposes.

First and foremost, the translation of liturgical texts and catechetical materials continued. Unlike the Missionaries of the first group, Father Paul arrived in Korea already possessing a good command of the Korean language. For the translation work, he enlisted the help of John Kan, a Korean teacher at the Mission school who was fluent in Russian. The translation of texts took five to six years. Some of the translations made by Father Chrysanthos were revised, and new ones were prepared: a short Prayer Book, the Horologion, a collection of readings, the Priest’s Service Book, the Book of Needs, selected hymns from the Octoechos, the Festal and Lenten Triodions, the Festal Menaion, the order of Holy Communion, the order of the moleben and panikhida, a brief Sacred History, a Catechism, and others, some of which were printed. The Gospel, Apostolic Epistles, and Psalter were used in the translation provided by the British Bible Society.

Special attention during worship was given to organizing a church choir. The duties of the choir director were assigned to Theodore Perevalov, who tirelessly taught music theory and choral singing to the children of the Mission school for several years, introducing part-singing, which was practically unknown

in Korea. He also adapted the newly translated church hymns into musical notation in Korean. The melodies were based on Moscow and Kiev chants, as well as compositions by 19th-century church composers such as D. Bortnyansky, G. Lomakin, N. Bakhmetev, V. Vinogradov, D. Allemanov, D. Solovyov, and others. Hymns for the All-Night Vigil, the Liturgy, stichera, troparia, and kontakia for Sundays and feast days were arranged.

By 1910, most of the Liturgies were conducted in Korean, the native language of the local population, which greatly contributed to the Mission's efforts.

The order established by the head of the Mission was close to monastic: daily morning and evening services were held, and all members of the Mission carried out their assigned obediences. In their free time, the members of the Mission studied the Korean language, for which teachers from the local population were invited. The only exceptions to the usual schedule were Sundays and feast days, when most of the time was devoted to festive services and rest.

Father Paul continued to establish Missionary outposts in the provinces and made Missionary trips throughout Korea. He held conversations with the local population in the homes wh ere he stayed or in other various locations. Later, the Mission began acquiring small plots of land, building prayer houses on them, and organizing Missionary outposts. In addition to the already functioning outpost in Munsanpo, new ones were established in nearby villages such as Gyoha, Karagai, Seongjeon, Ilsan, and Marisim. Schools were gradually opened at each outpost, with Korean teachers and catechists appointed. A total of seven schools were opened, employing 20 teachers and educating 250–260 students.

Among other notable events during Father Paul's leadership of the Mission, the appearance of the first Korean cleric, John Kan, who had previously been a teacher at the Mission school, stands out.

During Father Paul's tenure as head of the Mission in Korea, 322 people were baptized. This is a significant number, considering the small size of the Mission and the lengthy preparation process for catechumens before receiving the sacrament of Baptism.

In 1912, Archimandrite Paul was elected Bishop of Nikolsk-Ussuriysk, a vicar of the Vladivostok diocese, and he continued the Mission's work among Koreans in the Russian Far East. It was planned that Bishop Paul would combine the activities of the Korean Mission within the Vladivostok diocese with the work of the Seoul Mission. Therefore, the Archpastor did not lose sight of the Seoul Mission and issued direct instructions concerning its affairs and its leaders.

On October 1, 1917, Hieromonk Theodosius (Perevalov; †1933), dispatched fr om Vladivostok, assumed leadership of the Mission as acting head. Having been part of the Mission since 1906, he was

well acquainted with the practices established by Archimandrite Paul. However, from the very beginning of Hieromonk Theodosius's service in Korea, the Mission faced numerous difficulties. In Russia, the old order was rapidly collapsing. The separation of the Church from the state led to the cessation of financial support for the Mission. While funds remained in the Mission in 1917 from previous allocations, by 1918, it had lost its annual subsidies.

With the closure of schools and the dismissal of catechists in 1917, the Mission's activities were reduced to maintaining what had been achieved in previous years. The closure of schools led to a decline in the number of baptisms, though baptisms still occurred. During Father Theodosius's leadership, 46 people were baptized. Services continued to be held unfailingly on all Sundays and feast days, and various needs of the faithful were met. Occasionally, trips were made to outposts and other locations in the provinces. According to statistics provided by Father Theodosius, by early 1925, there were about 600 Orthodox Koreans throughout Korea.

In 1921, the Mission in Seoul was placed under the jurisdiction of the Orthodox bishop based in Japan. This decision was timely for the circumstances of the period and may have been the reason the Mission survived for a relatively long time. At a time when communication with Moscow and Vladivostok was extremely difficult and Korea had been annexed by Japan, the subordination of the Seoul Mission to the Japanese diocese was necessary and justified. On March 5, 1923, in the Tokyo Cathedral, Archbishop Sergius (Tikhomirov; †1945) of Tokyo and Japan elevated the Mission's head, Hieromonk Theodosius, to the rank of archimandrite.

Archimandrite Theodosius led the Mission until 1930, when he was reassigned to serve in Harbin. In 1936, Archimandrite Polycarp (Priymak; †1989) was sent to Korea.

Father Polycarp served under challenging conditions. By this time, Korea, turned into a colony, was being used by the Japanese occupiers as a source of raw materials and agriculture. The Korean population lived in extreme poverty. Japan pursued a policy of total assimilation of the Korean nation. To avoid provocations from the authorities, Metropolitan Sergius of Tokyo and Japan blessed the Mission to lim it its activities to pastoral care for Russian parishioners. However, Orthodox Koreans also continued to attend services. Father Polycarp estimated the number of Orthodox Koreans to be around 150. In 1940, due to pressure from the Japanese authorities, Metropolitan Sergius was forced to relinquish the administration of the diocese, and in 1941, the Russian Spiritual Mission in Korea transitioned to self-governance. This arrangement remained in place until 1945, when the Mission came under the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan of Harbin.

As a result of the clash of interests between the USSR and the USA, Korea was divided along the 38th parallel, and the process of forming two Korean states began in the north and south, aligned

respectively with the USSR and the USA. A split occurred within the Mission, provoked by Russian White émigrés and Koreans who supported the American presence in southern Korea. Father Polycarp's decision to accept Soviet citizenship and his cooperation with the USSR consulate in Korea caused sharp hostility toward him from certain parishioners. The main initiator of Father Polycarp's removal from leadership was Deacon Alexei (Kim Eui Han), who gained the support of Bishop Benjamin (Basalyga; †1963), a hierarch of the American Metropolia who headed the Japanese Church.

The American Metropolia was in schism with the Russian Orthodox Church, and de facto, Bishop Benjamin had been appointed to the Tokyo See by the American occupation authorities. During the conflict, property disputes arose. Opponents of Archimandrite Polycarp demanded that he hand over control of the Mission, but after Father Polycarp refused, a protocol was drawn up without his consent or signature, transferring the Mission's rights to the American Metropolia. After being arrested twice, Archimandrite Polycarp left Korea in 1949. Thus ended the history of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Korea.

Most researchers consider the activities of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Korea to be not very successful, especially when compared to the Chinese and Japanese Ecclesiastical Missions, which later grew into autonomous Churches. However, when evaluating the work of the Korean Mission, it is important to take into account that, first, it was established significantly later than the aforementioned Missions, and second, it barely had time to gain a foothold before encountering numerous difficulties related to the changing political situation in both Russia and Korea. These included the Russo-Japanese War, which had the Korean Peninsula as one of its theaters of operations; the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910, which temporarily deprived Korea of its statehood; and the revolution in Russia in 1917, which resulted in the creation of the Soviet state, which pursued a hostile policy toward the Church. The direct consequences of the revolution in Russia included the mass emigration of Russians abroad, the Civil War, and the division within the Church. All these tragic events in the histories of the two countries, as well as the formation of two states in Korea and the Korean Civil War of 1950–1953, one way or another contributed to the eventual closure of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Korea. The continuation of the Mission's work after the 1917 revolution in Russia, when its funding was cut off, and up until 1949, can be attributed to the selflessness of Russian clergy and their deep dedication to the Missionary cause.

In 1955, Orthodox believers in the Republic of Korea joined the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Later, all the property and land of the church that had belonged to the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Korea were transferred to the Orthodox Korean community by court decision, following their request. Thus, the property and land of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Korea were lost.

Present

Seventy years later, the Russian Orthodox Church returned to the Korean Peninsula. On February 26, 2019, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church established an independent Korean Diocese within the territories of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (South Korea). Even before the creation of the diocese, a church dedicated to the Life-Giving Trinity was built in the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, in 2006. The church community was accepted into the fold of the Russian Orthodox Church. The consecration of the church in August 2006 was performed by Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad (now His Holiness Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus'). The clergy of the church were trained at Russian theological schools and ordained by Russian hierarchs.

In South Korea, two parishes have been established: the Parish of the Resurrection of Christ in Seoul and the Parish of the Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos in Busan, wh ere services are held regularly. The parishes currently rent spaces for worship, as they do not yet have their own church buildings. The clergy of the South Korean parishes consist of two hieromonks and one hierodeacon. Hieromonk Pavel (Choi) and Hierodeacon Nektarios (Lim) are citizens of the Republic of Korea, while one hieromonk has been sent to Korea fr om Russia. The parish communities include both Russian-speaking parishioners and Koreans, with services conducted in both Russian and Korean.

Efforts are currently underway to establish new parishes in provinces wh ere Russian-speaking populations are concentrated. In the city of Incheon, groundwork has been laid for the creation of a future monastery. Monastic clergy of the diocese conduct services according to the liturgical rule in a temporary house church.

Future

Today, the Korean Diocese faces the task of establishing a full-fledged church life in cities wh ere Russian-speaking populations reside. In the Republic of Korea, there are approximately 60,000 permanent residents who are citizens of the Russian Federation. In addition, a significant number of Russian-speaking citizens from CIS countries are registered in Korea. Every year, South Korea is visited by hundreds of thousands of Russian tourists. In recent years, a substantial number of ethnic Russian-speaking Koreans from Central Asian countries have moved to the Republic of Korea for permanent residence. Their ancestors were baptized into the Orthodox faith about 150 years ago. Currently, their number has reached 100,000 people. A significant portion of these groups living in Korea identify as Orthodox Christians and wish to actively participate in church life. Requests for the establishment of parishes in other settlements across Korea are being submitted to the ruling bishop.

In addition to direct Missionary work, the Church in Korea is tasked with preserving national identity and the Russian language within the Russian-speaking community.

The activities of the Russian Orthodox Church on the Korean Peninsula will not only help Orthodox believers live a full church life but will also contribute to the development of intercultural relations between our peoples.

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[1] Chrysanthos (Schetkovsky), Bishop. From the Letters of a Korean Missionary. URL: **https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/missiya/iz-pisem-korejskogo-Missionera/**

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