Fr. John Lee Tae-Seok
The 21st-century ‘saint’ you’ve never heard of

By Mary O’Regan on Friday, 25 February 2011

In January 2010, Fr. John Lee Tae-Seok, a Korean priest nicknamed “the Schweitzer of Sudan”, lay dying of cancer. Father John had worked tirelessly for nine years as part of the Salesian mission in war-ravaged southern Sudan: as a doctor treating leprosy, as a teacher and as a musician.

John Lee Tae-Seok was born in 1962, the ninth of 10 children. His parents, humble and committed Catholics, lived in the town of Busan in South Korea. Fr. John lost his father at the age of nine and his mother supported the family by eking out a living as a seamstress in the market. John excelled at school. He had been very impressed by the biography of Albert Schweitzer and wondered about becoming a doctor.

But as he watched his older brother become a Franciscan friar he felt the stirrings of a religious vocation. His mother, however, was keen that John study medicine first. Partly in obedience to her he became a doctor. He worked first as a surgeon in the Korean army but felt the calling to be a priest so his mother finally gave him her blessing.

John joined the Salesian order. As a deacon, John visited the Salesian mission in southern Sudan. At first sight he found the leper colony a shock. He had been accustomed to practicing medicine in the spotless conditions of Korean army wards. The normally upbeat doctor was so overcome upon seeing the Hansen’s disease patients with their rotting limbs that he fled from their sight and ran into the bush. Once he had recovered he promised his fellow Salesians that he would “get used to it”, but they did not expect him to come back. To their surprise Fr. John wrote to them after his ordination in June 2001 to say that he would be coming soon. He explained that working among the lepers would be “the best way to be a doctor, priest and Salesian”.

In Tonj, Sudan, he built a medical clinic with his own hands. He treated some 300 patients a day there. He had a Jeep so that he could make personal visits to patients who could never travel to him. In particular, he sought out Hansen’s disease victims. Fr. John had grown up in grinding poverty and never kept himself aloof from the poor of Tonj. He could have lived the affluent life of a highly qualified doctor. But instead, day after day, he was both nurse and doctor to some of the world’s poorest people. No longer daunted by the sight of the lepers, Fr. John spent long hours cleaning and bandaging their wounds. He recorded his experience of helping them in two books, The Rays of the Sun in Africa are Still Sad and Will You Be My Friend?
Bishop Paul Choi Duk-ki, the bishop of the diocese that Fr. John hailed from, was moved to tears after seeing footage of the priest caring for the lepers on Korean television. Bishop Choi Duk-ki was determined to travel to Tonj to see Fr. John in the flesh. The bishop was greatly inspired by what he saw and said Fr. John was "like a saint" – one who let the love of Christ be the guiding light in all his endeavours with the lepers and showed clearly that “we have to treat them like Jesus”.

Fr. John was known to have a special way with the young people of Tonj. They were drawn to his winning personality and radiant smile. The locals knew the gentle confessor as “Fr. Jolly” – a name that stuck. He built the local school with the help of students and taught math and music. Fr. John also started the Don Bosco Brass Band and found that music lifted up the youth, who were in dire circumstances.

But one day Fr. John took a rare holiday to Seoul. He had a routine check-up and was diagnosed with cancer of the colon and liver. At first he responded well to chemotherapy, but in the last months of his life his condition rapidly worsened and he died on January 14 2010, aged 47.

Fr. John was extremely bright and had a joyful temperament. His all too brief life shows the great feats just one missionary can accomplish. As a result of his work there is now an infinitely higher standard of care for the victims of Hansen’s disease in southern Sudan. Fr. John also passed on his love of music to the youngsters he taught and the Don Bosco Brass Band is now the most famous music group in southern Sudan.

A Korean television documentary about Fr. John’s life in Tonj has been adapted into a powerful film, Don’t Cry For Me Sudan. Within 10 minutes of watching the film most people are reduced to tears. Some 120,000 people have watched the film in Seoul alone. Members of the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, the largest Buddhist denomination in South Korea, were greatly moved by the scenes depicting Fr. John tending the lepers. Venerable Jaseung, the head of the order, admitted that he was unsure whether to show it to Buddhist monks and lay workers for fear they would convert to Catholicism after seeing it. “It depicts the good life of a Catholic missioner and I was worried some of us would convert to Catholicism after being moved by the film,” he said. But he went ahead because he believed that Fr. John was a good role model for Buddhists. “If we could have one Buddhist cleric like him, the better it would be for Buddhism,” he said.


Reflection Questions

1. Put yourself in the shoes of some of the lepers, who not only had to deal with their disease, but also with the conflict going on in the Sudan. What kind of risks would Fr. John have to take and what kind of sacrifices might he make in order to help you?
2. Read the Scripture passage from Mark 1:40-45. How did Fr. John bear witness to this Gospel Reading? Give specific examples that bear witness to his love for those at Tonj?

3. For those familiar with Buddhism, what teachings promote the importance of serving with the love and compassion that Fr. John showed?