

1. “Even if you only have the strength to beg for food, it is the blessing of the Lord”

Grandfather, Choi Gui-Dong (1909 – Jan. 4, 1990)

The House of Love at Mugeuk-ri, Geumwang-eup, which is the mother-house of Kkottongnae, began with the meeting of the Kkottongnae founder Father, Oh Woong-Jin and Grandfather, Choi Gui-Dong.

Grandfather Guidong’s original name was Choi Gyeong-Lak, but, as a son of a rich family in the Geumwang area he grew up being called Guidong. Geumwang was famous at that time for its gold mine. However, as a result of the Japanese invasion and occupation he was a conscript to Japan and forced to work in the Bukhaedo Mine as a laborer. Due to the harsh conditions and as a result of torture he became mentally ill. After he lost his ability to work he was returned to Korea and made his way to his hometown only having a name label on his clothes. When he returned to his home, he found that his parents had already passed away from opium poisoning and his wife had disappeared. He was reduced to being a beggar, and found a place under Mugeukcheon Bridge. From then on Grandfather Guidong began to live under the bridge and to take care of other sick and dying beggars who had no strength even to go begging.

Dream of a Child

Kkottongnae founder Father Oh Woong-Jin was an elementary school student during the Korean War. One day, on the way home from school while drinking water at a stream, he saw a refugee father and a daughter arguing over a shrimp. Taking a closer look, he could see that their argument was about which one of them should eat the shrimp. The little daughter had caught a shrimp at a stream and she had wanted her father to eat it. The father had only one leg because he had lost the limb from a bomb blast, Watching this, Oh Woong-jin, himself a very hungry boy, began to have a dream of being a person who would live for those who were dying from hunger. To make the dream come true, he wanted to be a politician at first, He became skeptical about politics going through the Student Revolution on April 19th, 1960 and so he changed his chosen way to that of being a priest, realizing that it could be a better way to live his life for dying people. He became a Catholic priest in 1976 and began his assignment at Geumwang Church.

An Encounter

The encounter of the two dates back to 1976. On September 12 of that year Fr. Oh was tak-



Fr. Oh Woong Jin with Grandpa Choi in 1976 when they met for the first time.

ing care of an apple tree in a church garden when he happened to see a beggar passing the church. He became curious and so he followed him. When he reached a dugout on Yongdam mountain, he found that the beggar-grandfather was taking care of 18 sick people who were too weak to go begging for themselves. The grandfather distributed the food he had collected from begging, fed and looked after them, and finally he ate the leftovers.

Even if you only have the strength to beg for food, it is the blessing of the Lord

Returning to the parish house, Fr. Oh could not sleep. He tossed and turned all night thinking about the grandfather: 'While I became a priest to make my dream to live for the poor come true, Guidong is already living a life of practicing love like that, even though he has only the mere strength to go begging, being less healthy and having less knowledge than me.' After thinking over and over about what he had seen, at last around dawn he had a sudden flash of insight that it is still a blessing of God just to have the strength to go begging. So next morning he bought some cement with 1300 Won, which was his whole possession at that time and began to make bricks and build a house of love for the beggars.

Grandfather Guidong who Lived a Spiritual Life

Grandfather Guidong was a person who had been deprived of everything. He had lost his possessions and his house; he had become separated from his family including his wife and parents; and finally he had lost his health. He was the poorest and the least of persons

who had only the mere strength of begging for food. Yet, until he himself became paralyzed by a stroke, he kept on doing these good deeds of bringing and looking after the dying sick that he had found on streets and under bridges, who do not even have the strength to go begging themselves. No one is so poor that they are unable to give love. We all can love so long as we are alive.

Grandfather Guidong loved quietly. He never tried to reveal himself or get credit. He went without being recognized by anybody for 40 years of his tireless life.

Grandfather Guidong begged only for the bare necessities. When offered expensive fruits, candies, money, or new clothes, he declined them with thanks, saying that those good things belong to children or other people who really needed them. He also used to carry a big sack on his shoulder in order to pick up dangerous things that could harm others such as broken glass bottles.

The grandfather gave out everything he owned: his time, health, body, and mind. Through his will he even donated his eyes to the blind after his death. Once when I exaggerated being hungry, whining like a crybaby before the grandfather on a wheelchair, he gave me his whole meal tray asking me to eat first not just sharing some of his meal. The spirit of giving out everything for his neighbors was embodied in him.

The grandfather lived with the poor. Even though he gave a lot of help to the weak, he did not reign over them. He became one with them, and he lived and ate together with them, not making a distinction between the giver and the receiver.



Grandpa Choi was awarded Grand Prize of Love on February 15, 1986.



Many people celebrated the occasion.

The grandfather loved to his last moment. One day, on his way home from getting some food for his brothers, he fell down on a street by a stroke. He had worked for his neighbors to the last moment until he could not work anymore for illness in his body.

The grandfather, Guidong, lying buried next to his statue at the entrance of Kkottongnae, is still quietly awakening people who are wearied of their worldly lives today. Visitors to Kkottongnae while they think about the life of grandfather Guidong, often look back on their own lives: they see that they have often complained even though they have been given, enjoyed, and owned a lot.

“Even if you only have the strength to beg for food, it is the blessing of the Lord.”



The funeral procession of Grandpa Choi Gwi-Dong





Fr. Oh Woong-Jin is looking around the tomb



Grandpa Choi

The tomb of Grandpa Choi located at the main entrance of Kkottongnae.

The Life of Grandfather Choi Gui-Dong (Gyeong-Lak) Peter



Words Written on the Front of the Tombstone of Grandfather Choi Gui-Dong

He was born as a son of a rich family at Mugeuk-Ri, Geumwang-Myun, Eumseong-Gun, Chungbuk in 1909. The neighbors called him Guidongi (a precious boy in English) since he was a son of a noble family. He married a beautiful lady and lived happily, but as a result of the Japanese invasion and occupation he was a conscript and forced to work in Bukhaedo Mine as a laborer, and became mentally ill due to the harsh conditions and torture. After he lost his ability to work, he was returned to Korea only having a name label on his cloths by the Japanese.

Experiencing all kinds of hardships, when he arrived in his hometown, he found that his families had already died or disappeared after getting disease and using up all the money worrying about him.

Grandfather Choi Gui-dong was reduced to a begger and found a place under Mugeukcheon Bridge to live with many other

beggars there. He used to visit round the houses for begging for food for the beggars who did not even have strength to go out for begging, asking, “Do you have any leftovers?” and he used to bury the beggars on the foot of Yongdam mountain when they passed away. He declined expensive fruits or money with thanks, saying, “Those good things belong to children not me,” or “I don’t need money.” He also used to carry a big sack on his shoulder in order to pick up dangerous things that could harm others such as broken glass bottles around playgrounds for about 40 years. One day, on September 10, 1976 in the dusk of the evening, Father Oh happened to see him passing Mugeuk Church after begging and getting some food, and tried following him with curiosity.

There were 18 beggars, who were tuberculosis patients, the mentally-ill, alcoholics, the blind, and cripples in a dugout. They were groaning in the dugout on the foot of Yongdam mountain without anybody to depend on and any strength to beg for food.

That night, Fr. Oh could not sleep all night and finally had a sudden insight that even if you only have the strength to beg for food, it is the blessing of the Lord. He bought some cement with his whole possession of 1300 Won and made bricks. On October 15, 1976 he began to build a house with 5 rooms on the foot of Yongdam mountain, completed it on November 15 and housed the 18 beggars there. The people in the neighborhood called it

House of Love.

Grandfather Choi Gui-dong, who had lived a life of love, was awarded the honorable Catholic Grand Prize in the field of love on February 15, 1986. To pay a tribute to this, about 1500 believers and neighbors with Bishop Chung Jin-Seok, governor of Chungcheongbuk-do, the superintendent of education, a division commander, and congressmen had a street parade and held a congratulatory ceremony at Mugeuk Church.

When he was asked what he would like to use the prize money of 1.2million Won for by Fr. Oh, his answer was really touching to everybody: "There's only one place to use this money for. Please build a house for dying people." Accordingly, people decided to build a nursing home for the elderly with one chord. On October 15, 1986 a sanatorium for the elderly was completed. At a dedication ceremony 50 thousand Kkottongnae members unanimously agreed to build a nursing home for the elderly with the donation of 600 million won and government subsidy of 600 million won. Grandfather Choi Gui-Dong lived in the nursing home completed in 1987 and passed away on January 4, 1990 at the age of 81.

Grandfather Choi Gui-Dong's death was announced to all over the country by the mass media, such as KBS, MBC, and all kinds of newspaper as a special feature, and headline. Under a tombstone, where his words of teaching of 'Even if you only have the strength to beg for food, it is the blessing of the Lord.' were inscribed, he was laid away peacefully.

The stone coffin, statue, and the pedestal of tombstone were built by the chairman of Pyunggok Stone Company, Cha Joo-Won. The

tombstone was unveiled to the illustrious memory of this valuable person with the donation by President Noh Tae-Woo and the first lady Kim Ok-Sook. Many people at the funeral ceremony donated money on the spot to build a statue of a 2.5 meter height, and the statue and the tombstone with an epitaph were unveiled on January 4, 1991 on the 1st anniversary of his death.

He ended his life of love on this earth and went to Heaven, saying his last words, "Life and death are providential."

Catholic Grand Prize in 1985
In the field of Love

To Mr. Choi Gyeong-Lak

We award this medal to you to preserve your sweet fragrance for good; you have shed light in the darkness and inspired people with hope as a little living Christ in this world.

February 15, 1986

Hyun Seok-Ho, the chief member of the Screening Committee for Catholic Grand Prize

Eom Ik-Chae, the president of Korean Catholic Laypeople Apostolate Meeting

Rev. An Sang-In, the advising priest of Korean Catholic Laypeople Apostolate Meeting

Bishop Kim Nam-Su, in charge of Catholic Council

We dedicate this to the spirit of grandfather Choi Gui-Dong Peter



Words Written on the Backside of the Tombstone

On a dark night
that a flowing star
being the soft glow of light
as a friend of a lonely wanderer
stopped its flowing quietly
is never in vain.
It is for the glowing morning star
in your and my shady heart
to shine more brightly
high in the air
so to become a light for everyone.
Grandfather Choi Gui-Dong
lived a life more fruitfully than anyone else
overcoming the pain of being stamped
down
like a plantain trampled on a roadside.
As he was a beggar
he loved beggars more than anybody,
as he was poor
he shared the pain of the poor
as a forerunner of the lonely.

One day
when I said “Give me a half,”
seeing a candy in your hand
you answered,
“Eat it all, I’m OK.”
I used to hold out my hand like this often to
you
since I liked to see your generous mind
and I loved your white smile.
On January 4, 1990
you left us quietly
but the sweet smell of the love
you emitted by practicing God’s words
will be throbbing
in everybody’s heart lively.
The power of love
which lets withered hand
straightened out
makes everybody feel ashamed.
And it will be fumed up
as stronger fragrance than rose color
being a fire of warm love
in the whole world.
Who sang that death is just sad?
I pray to our Father
for grandfather Choi Gui-Dong,
who nestled in Father’s arms
becoming a Nazareth today,
to give him Father’s blessings
not a piece of candy.
Grandfather Choi Gui-Dong Peter,
May you enjoy everlasting rest
in Heaven.



The picture is excerpted from a picture story book, 'The Story of Kkottongnae,' (published in 1991), depicting Grandpa Choi taking a mental patient who was found unconscious on street.