



Rev. John Oh Woong-Jin

The story of Rev. John Oh Woong-Jin might as well be the story of postwar Korea in all its complex dimensions, of a nation at its worst and at its best. It is a story of how one mans love and one mans will brought hope to his countrys least wanted and most destitute people.

Oh Woong-Jin (the John would come later, with his baptism) was born on March 22, 1944, in a small city called Cheongju a few hours drive south from Seoul in central Korea. Cheongju today is an agricultural transport center and a gateway to more scenic tourist destinations in Korean peninsula. In 2001 Choongju, another city adjacent to Cheongju, hosted the worlds largest Taekwondo festival, but its martial history goes back much farther. In 1592, only Choongju and its garrison stood between the invading Japanese and Seoul itself; bearing firearms, the Japanese overran the Korean defenses, killed 3,000, and soon after took the capital. Korea would suffer some 900 invasions over 2,000 years.

Japan formally annexed Korea in 1910 and would not let go until the end of the

Second World War on August 14, 1945. It was a brutal occupation during which the Japanese did their best to eradicate all traces of a native Korean culture, forcing people to assume Japanese names and to convert to Shin to while forbidding the use of the Korean language. Koreas resources and thousands of its people were shipped off to Japan to feed its military appetite.

John was born the year before Japanese surrendered to the Allies. Not surprisingly, some of the first stories the young John would hear from his mother were stories of war and suffering at the hands of the Japanese. She told me a lot about the Japanese people. The Japanese took all our possessions. All the men were drafted into the Japanese army. They prevented us from eating cooked rice [which they needed for themselves]. So if we wanted to have cooked rice, we would prepare the rice at dawn and quickly finish it. The we here, of course, was his family, since John was born just one year before the end of the Second World War, and it is telling how he makes the experience his own, how closely he identifies with his families struggle to keep a ?

Ironically, it was the Japanese presence in Korea that brought John's parents together.

His father, Oh Tok Man, was a farmer who grew rice, barley, vegetables, and fruits on a modest plot of land. Chestnut trees and persimmons dotted the hillsides, on which cows grazed. The Oh's had been farmers for generations, living and working in the same area. John's father had little schooling, but could write Chinese characters and could speak Japanese, as Koreans were required to do at the time.

His mother, Yang Yuk Soon, came from another town about 40 kilometers away. Hers had been a well-off family of scholars, people who studied calligraphy and classical literature. She could have looked forward to a relatively quiet and comfortable life, but the sordid reality of war stood just outside their door. The Japanese soldiers had a practice of taking young Korean women from their homes and abusing them, turning them into the comfort women who, half a century later, would emerge from shame and silence in Korea, the Philippines, and other occupied countries to force Japan to face up to its war crimes. To escape this fate, the 16-year-old Yuk Soon married farmer Oh.

Soon after getting married, she prayed for a son who would help deliver Korea from the Japanese. For one year, John says, she would wash her hair, wash her body, and then put the water in front of her and pray to God every night. She would eventually have six children: four sons and two daughters of whom John was the fourth. But it was her

pregnancy with John that was to be the most special, marked by a prophetic dream that would exert a profound influence on the family. When she was pregnant with me, she had a dream, a good dream, of pressing down a hero. She was filled with joy and hope. My father rejoiced very much as well and they anxiously awaited my birth.. John says that, according to family lore, he remained in his mother's womb for far longer than the usual nine months, emerging only in the twelfth month.

I was a big baby. As soon as I was born, they named me Woong-Jin. Woong means hero and jin means pressing down, just as the dream showed. She always told me about the dream. She told me that When you grow up, you will become a great figure. You will do good things, but whatever you do, you have to do it to the end.

The family lived in a large house more than 400 years old, with thick wooden beams and a traditional tiled roof. Early childhood was a happy time for John, who remembers playing in the mountains and fishing in the brooks and streams on the farm. The children were never assigned specific chores, but they learned both by example and by using their own initiative. My mother and father never asked me to work and never asked the other children to work. Their way of education was not to order us to do things. They would just show us by example the way of doing different things and then they waited until we did something on our own initiative. His mother never asked him to study but he picked up the

habit by watching her study every day. She was his first teacher, and while she loved all her children, because of that dream, she held out her highest hopes for him.

John was barely six years old when the Korean War broke out on June 25, 1950.

The United States had taken over what is now South Korea after the war, with the north falling within the Soviet Unions sphere of influence. A military government administered the American zones affairs, and was planning to impose a five-year trusteeship. It was a divisive issue, and the political and economic situation soon turned chaotic. The line of division drawn by the Americans between the two Koreas at the 38th Parallel was an artificial one, and many Koreans on both sides of the line felt torn. Millions of people had returned to the south after the war, from the north, from China, and from Japan; few jobs were to be had, food was scarce, electricity was unpredictable, and the birth rate was rising.

In the face of these problems, the United States turned matters over to the United Nations, which recognized Korean independence and supervised national elections. The Soviet Union resisted this move, and instead of waiting for a unified Korea to be forged by negotiation between the Americans and the Soviets, the south went ahead and established the Republic of Korea in August 1948, with Seunngman Rhee as its president. The north responded very quickly afterward by declaring itself the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea, led by Premier Kim Il Sung. In June 1949, the Americans

withdrew their army from the south.

Within a year, North Korea had built up an overwhelmingly powerful war machine twice as large as the south's; it was ready to roll and it did, taking Seoul within three days. Despite the rapid re-entry of the United States on the side of the south, the war would drag on for more than three years.

For a young boy just about to go to school, it was a frightening time. A few times, the North Koreans would come around to their house at night, and leave at dawn, taking some food and clothes with them. And then, under heavy bombardment, the house became a shelter for refugees. Our house would shake. We all held on to the posts. Thankfully, no one was hurt. But the war would come and go, literally, as soldiers and refugees drifted in and out of the Ohs sturdy house over the next few years.

John entered elementary school in 1952, at the peak of the conflict. It wasn't even a regular school, but a special school that had been set up for refugees in a warehouse for straw mats. When they walked home from school, John and his friends would see aircraft bombing the area. Then we would hide at the bottom of the paddy fields. When the aircraft had passed by, we would come out and walk.

The war fostered violent disagreements among the villagers, whose loyalties were divided and who had to adapt to whoever

happened to be in control at a given moment. John's father, whose sympathies lay squarely with the south, went into hiding when the communists took over, but was finally captured. Along with several hundred other people, he was taken to the mountains, presumably to be executed, but the Americans arrived in the nick of time and saved the captives.

Despite this stroke of luck, survival remained difficult for the family. Because for three years we could not farm, we were so hungry. In the morning, when I woke up, I could not see the smoke in my chimney at the house, because there was no wood and no rice. So it was very difficult for me to go to school.

It came to a point that, dispirited, John refused to go to school. His mother took him by the hand and reminded him of her dream, of the greatness that awaited him and the need to complete whatever he had begun. She sweetened her admonition with a promise: if John went to school that day, she would give him a bowl full of cooked rice upon his return. With the rice in mind, the boy marched the eight kilometers to school. I was so hungry. Because of anemia, I was dizzy and I would see stars in front of me. When I opened the book, I only saw the bowl full of cooked rice. What followed was one of John Woong-Jin Oh's formative experiences.

After school, I came back home. I think I walked about four kilometers. I was too hungry, I just lay down on the street. I felt

my body was going into the earth and the sky began to swerve. The earth felt like it was moving. At that time I thought, I cannot die like this. I should drink water in the brook. So I went down to the brook and drank a lot of water. Then, I lay down again and closed my eyes. I thought some time had passed and when I opened my eyes, I found that the sky had stopped moving. The earth was still, so I got up and went up on the bank. In front of my eyes, I saw a very miserable person, a refugee who had been hit by the bombing and whose leg had been amputated. He was bleeding copiously. He was dying. Next to him was a girl who looked like his daughter, about ten years old. They were talking to each other . . . They were holding one small shrimp. Because they too were hungry, the daughter had gone to the brook and caught the shrimp. The father gave it back to the daughter. It was a scene of love between them, and at that moment, my heart was filled with sorrow . . . I was so unhappy about the war, and [I resolved to] study hard and become a politician, and devote myself to the people who were dying in the streets..

And then I came back home. I called my mother. There was no answer. So I went to my room and put my bag down. Then I heard [my mother's] voice. She was sobbing because she could not keep the promise of one bowl full of rice that she had made to me. I was just about to walk backwards when my mother held my hand and told me to sit down. There was a sweet potato in the room that she had been keeping to sprout.

She took the sprouts off the sweet potato, and gave it to me.

The experience galvanized Johns desire to prepare himself for serving others. After that, in order to become a politician, I started studying public speaking.. I joined a [public speaking] club. I would go up the mountain and give a speech to a big audience, which were little pine trees. I shouted until my throat bled.

It was at this time, when John was in the fourth grade that his father died. The elder Oh had been ill for a while, and called for John before the boy left for school, asking him to massage his aching stomach. The boy did so, but eventually had to leave for school, despite his fathers entreaties for him to stay behind. I told my father that I had to go to school in order for me to become a great man in the future. My father looked up at me. He didnt want to part from me. But when I told him that I had to go to school, he just nodded his head. I went to school. We had two-hour classes and somebody was sent for me. My father had already died.

After her husbands death, Mrs. Oh began collecting and selling wood; collecting it from the family property and selling it in Bugang, eight kilometers away. Johns eldest brother was in the army, but his other siblings helped their mother as well as going to school. They went to the market and sold the wood at the crack of dawn.

Making a living wasnt the only hardship

John had to contend with. His route to and from school took him through villages full of hostile kids and bullies who beat him up. Finally he decided to fight back. By the time I was in the sixth grade, in the whole school, I was the number one fighter.

It was also about this time that Mrs. Oh became a Christian. At the end of the Korean War, American Maryknoll missionaries came to Johns village, bringing two things: One was the Bible, the words of the Bible.. They came with a love of God. And they also brought a lot of bread for the people, so we got rations. The surplus agricultural products from the US were brought to Korea. So when you went to the Catholic Church at that time [not in town but in Bugang], you could get two kinds of help. One was the gift of faith in God, and the other was a lot of flour and milk, so that was how my mother went there and she was baptized.

The Catholic Church had entered Korea through China, gaining headway in the 18th century, by the end of which Korea counted some 10,000 converts. But Catholicity was seen to be a political threat, provoking a wave of persecutions that culminated in the death of 8,000 Catholics in 1866. Christian missionaries also introduced Western education, which many Koreans appreciated, and during the Japanese occupation of 1910-1945 when the Japanese tried to impose Shinto on the Korean people, Christianity even took on a nationalist aspect. Catholic , other Christians and Western relief agencies would play an important role in reconstruc-

tion after the Korean War.

At first, his mothers baptism made John uncomfortable. He resisted going to the Catholic station in Bugang because he did not like receiving rations, preferring to sell wood. But his mother persisted, coming home with an American priest and a delegation of church members in tow. They knelt down to pray and John knelt with them for an hour until his knees hurt. Finally John promised to go to church, thinking that this would end his ordeal, and the visitors left. But then John had to keep his promise, and he went to church for three months. Then One day, I was taking a nap on the wooden floor of the house. My mother put a Bible next to my head. When I opened my eyes, I opened the Bible. It was a story about God. It was very interesting, so every day I read the Bible. I went to church for three more months. After six months, I was baptized. He was then 16 years old.

John had finished elementary school, but the family was too poor to send him on to middle school, and he wept upon seeing his former schoolmates pass by in their uniforms while he cut hay and fed the cows. His mothers dream seemed farther from realization than ever.

But then again, Providence lent a hand in the form of his elementary school teacher, Kim Dong-sook, who wrote him to urge him to pursue his studies, whatever it took. John had once helped Mr. Kims wife recover from the pains of childbirth by giving them a

plant with medicinal properties, which worked. Now his old teacher returned the favor by sending him five packs of pencils, some paper, and with a letter. Dear Woongjin, Nobody can buy hardships encountered with gold when one is young. You have got to learn if you really want to live the letter said. At the bottom of the letter there was an address of Joong-Ang Lectures written that was an important resource to get everything related to self-study.

With the money he earned from selling wood, he bought the books and taught himself, among other things, English. It was hard to learn alone. I could memorize the words, I am a teacher, I am a boy, but I was not confident about my pronunciation of each word. At the last page of the textbook was a list of pen pals. To assuage his loneliness, John wrote one of them, a boy named Kim Joo-yul, who lived in Namwon. Like John, Kim Joo-yul was inflamed with a desire to serve his people and to clean up the government, which was notoriously corrupt. He told John his plans, and John too told him in a reply letter that he would study hard, and put an end to begging in Korea. So, the two boys did study hard, aiming to make their dreams come true.

Both boys drew comfort and inspiration from this friendship, but it was not to last. The country held a presidential election on March 15, 1960. Seungman Rhee had been in power since 1948, and had tried everything, including martial law, to hang on to the presidency. Rhee then 86 years old managed to win again in 1960, but the election was

marked by fraud and massive protests followed. Kim Joo-yul, then a high school student, joined a demonstration during which he was blinded by tear gas and later taken by the police, in whose custody he died, allegedly of natural causes. His body was weighted down with rocks and thrown into the water. When his body resurfaced, Kim Joo-yul's killing became a cause celebre, adding fuel to the continuing protests that culminated in the April 19 Student Revolution. The police killed 142 more students that day, and this time President Rhee could not escape the firestorm. He resigned on April 26. John's brave friend had achieved his goal of reforming the government, but at the cost of his own life.

John's eldest brother came out of the army and started working in Pusan. This allowed him to financially help John go on to the Daesung High School, a private school for boys run by Korean Protestant missionaries in Daejeon, near Cheongju. He would walk six kilometers from his house, and take the train to school.

In high school, John served with the Junior Red Cross, and also volunteered as a lifeguard at the Keum Kang River and the Daecheon beaches. During the winter vacations, John went to farms and taught people how to read and write. He made himself useful even while commuting on the train by organizing study sessions for other commuting students and by arranging rooms in the train for different sexes. And he did the same job for the benefit of other students on

Kyong-bu, Kimcheon and also Homan line train. To expand his train school, he recruited 18 assistants and moved from one train line to another. For his efforts which succeeded impressively where previous ones had failed, John was awarded a Pilot fountain pen by the head of the Daejeon Train Station. This was actually not the first time that John had taken a leadership role; in grade school as well as in high school, he was often selected to represent the class, a position he earned by working harder than the others at such chores as cutting the grass and cleaning the blackboard. John also strove to minimize bullying in school and contributed to organizing a student association of oratory, the members of which were representatives of middle schools, high schools and universities in Daejeon.

But his true mission in life still lay ahead of him. Kim Joo-yul's death had left John horrified and wary of politics and politicians, whom he blamed for Kim's loss. He might have given up on his mother's dream at this point, but another revelation was to come his way. On August 15, 1963, the 18-year-old John attended a large ceremony in Daejeon marking Korea's liberation from the Japanese. Many anti-Japanese and anti-communist slogans were shouted, but the highlight of the event was the conferment of a presidential award on Fr. Oh Ki-sun, a parish priest from a small village called Dae Heung Dong. Father Oh was being recognized for his role in helping about 3,000 orphans during the Korean War; he also had helped shoeshine boys at the train station, as

well as A-frame porters.

I was very surprised at that time, John says. I thought up to that moment that only politicians did good things. It was the first time for me to learn that Catholic priests could do good things as well, so I was very happy. When the ceremony ended, I went to that Dae Heung Dong Parish Church and I also visited the orphanage. I wanted to visit the father and meet him, so I began to go to Mass every day. I made up my mind to go to mass for 100 days. At the end of the hundred days, John tried to see Fr. Oh because he wanted to know how he could become a priest. But John could only get as far as the assistant priest, a Frenchman named Fr. Dubon, who urged him to see his own parish priest in Bugang. In 1965, after graduating from high school, John did that, and knocked on the parish priests door. A tall American named Fr. Maneo stepped out. I honestly want to become a priest, John told the man. In order to save the beggars in Korea, I want to become a Catholic priest, but I dont know much about Catholic priests. Please help me. Maneo asked him what kind of help he wanted. Please let me stay with you as an altar boy for six months, John pleaded. John could afford to leave his family now his eldest brother was making money and life at home had gotten better.

Fr. Maneo granted John his wish and gave him a room and, every morning, two tablets to take, vitamin pills that the priest felt the boy needed to put on some weight. John cleaned up the priests room, his toilet, and

his car, and tended the garden; during mass, he served as an altar boy. When his six months were up, John went on to visit several monasteries, just to see what they were like.

Before he could proceed with his plan to join the priesthood, another calling intervened: he was required to render compulsory military service for three years and joined the army in January 1966. It was not an altogether unpleasant prospect for him. The night before he left for boot camp, John prayed in church for three things: first, that he be steadfast in his vow to become a priest so that he could help the beggars; second, that he be spared from the disabilities that often resulted from the physical abuse heaped on army trainees, again so he could help the needy; and third, that he not fall into the temptations of women, to enable him to pursue his priestly vocation.

Hitting trainees with big sticks was part and parcel of Korean military life then; older and higher-ranking conscripts hit the newer ones, in a descending spiral of abuse. After six months of being hit from behind, John found it excruciatingly painful to sit on the toilet seat. Instead of fighting violence with violence, John took solace in the Bible, reminding himself that in order to achieve a position of authority, one had first to become a servant and so he devoted himself to serving those who hit him, bringing them water, toothbrushes, towels, and food. When it was his turn to hit someone, John made a big joke of it, giving the person a laughably light

tap, despite the efforts of others to make him conform. The uncommon kindness worked: over a year, the hitting gradually stopped in his unit.

John worked for three years in the army's engineering corps building roads, fences, and houses in the Demilitarized Zone on the 38th Parallel. Starting out as a private, he emerged a corporal. Having finished high school, he was given more serious responsibilities in the procurement department, where he was put in charge of the warehouses where the army's rations were stored.

Aside from his soldierly duties, John also assumed another mission: that of establishing a place of prayer in camp. He wanted to go to church, but the nearest church was 20 kilometers away. So he began praying privately with a friend, and soon their prayer circle grew to 16. There was a Protestant chapel within the unit, but the military pastor refused to let the Catholic soldiers use it, despite repeated entreaties from John. Finally, on John's seventeenth visit, the pastor, a Captain Lee, relented.

Soon other units were inviting John's group to come over for prayers, and they obliged, incurring the displeasure of John's superior, who tried to overload John with work. He would order, say, 25 trucks and ask me to deliver a lot of materials in them. But I prayed a lot to my God and my friends began to help me. The superior eventually backed off in the face of John's persistence.

Now John decided that they would build a church where all the Catholic soldiers could worship properly. Since they could not work on it in the daytime, they put in extra hours at night and at daybreak, ferrying sand from the riverbank to make brick blocks. Slowly the structure's walls took shape but when it was time to build the roof, a storm came and the walls collapsed; worse, someone sold off the wood they had been keeping for the roof. Children came around to finish off whatever was left standing, playing house with the broken blocks. John was shattered but was too spent to do anything.

After a few days, John felt that he simply had to leave the camp and go someplace else to regain his strength and his spirit. His master sergeant, a friend, lent him some money for his fare, and John took a bus to the parish of Bupwon-ri, the closest church, to try and convince the parish priest to help him rebuild his chapel. But this priest gave him no help and the next day John decided to go to Myeong Dong Cathedral in Seoul. He made a detour to Pochon to seek out another priest he had written many times before, Fr. Nam Young Hee (Isidore) who then was an army chaplain. However Fr. Nam had no money to help John, either even though he let John know that he had told Archbishop Kim Soo Hwan about him many times and that the archbishop said he would make a visit to the military camps near the demilitarized zone. Fr. Nam also asked him not to forget to bring a picture of the shattered chapel. The archbishop (later a cardinal) was

a very powerful man.

John managed to persuade high-ranking army officers to accompany him on a visit to the archbishop, and after much coming and going, a jeepload of soldiers, including John and Lieut . Yoon Ki-Hyeong , who knew the archbishop personally, went to see the Archbishop Kim, who happened to be visiting nearby. When Archbishop Kim Soo Hwan was looking in my direction, I just jumped inside and showed him the picture of the broken-down chapel and gave him a brief history of it . . . He came closer to me and when he saw my picture, he seemed to be very surprised and deeply touched. How can our military have such a divine person? he said. Those priests there and the military people there all were deeply moved. He told me to visit him. I will help you, he said.

Although John finally had discharged from the army on September 13, 1968, he remained at the site of the shattered church in order to reconstruct the church, putting pertinacious efforts. And so it was that Johns chapel was built. On November 8, 1968, the archbishop came by to bless it at 2:00 PM. At this place there is a man to whom a letter of gratitude must be awarded, Archbishop Kim said to the audience. However I am not the one who should award that person. First of all, he is more outstanding in belief than I am, and secondly, it is not me but God who has asked for this church to be built. Surely, the Lord will award something more than a prize to him. That man of conviction is Corporal Oh Woong-Jin who is standing at the back.

At that very moment, John strongly felt

his heart getting so hot and heard the voice within, saying aloud : You have finished doing things here. It is time to leave now. Go back to the parish of Bugang and pray. And then, I will let you know the way you should walk on As soon as John heard the voice, realizing that one phase of his life had ended, and that another was about to begin, he immediately left the place on the same day for the parish of Bugang to pray. This was the very church where he had stayed 3 years ago before joining the army. John entered the Daegun Seminary College in Kwangju the following year. But the young man remained restless; he wanted to do more than pray. While studying, he collected scrap paper that the other students had thrown away, as well as bottles; he sold them and took the proceeds to help the needy: prisoners, beggars, the elderly, the disabled, tuberculosis patients, orphans. Soon word of his good deeds spread and donations came in through a crack in the glass window of his room. The letters would say, When I was in need, I got a lot of help. But I have no way to give back to those people. Student Oh, I want you to help the needy. When he finally counted how much he had raised at the end of the semester, he was stunned to find that while selling the paper and the bottles had generated some 3,000 won (about US\$2.40, by todays exchange rates), he had actually spent 600,000 won (US\$480) from the contributions to help others. It was at that time that I experienced the miracle of feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. When I give all my heart and all my body, then I am blessed with so much.

So I began to be fascinated with love.

To put this into action, John took it upon himself to perform such thankless tasks as cleaning the floor of the seminary at night and ringing the school bell as often as 26 times a day. Ringing the bell used to be looked upon as one of the schools worst punishments but it soon became a chore of honor.

Finally, on May 3, 1976, John was ordained a priest at the Nae Duck Dong church in Cheongju. He worked as the assistant priest in Soo Dong church, also in that city, until he was sent to North Chungcheong province, to become the parish priest of Mugeuk church in Geumwang town. And whom would he find there whom would he be replacing? but Fr. Maneo, the American Maryknoll priest he had served as an altar boy for six months. He was very, very happy to see me.. He took me in like a son. Father Maneo confessed his sins to me and also I blessed him and I prayed for him. On Christmas day, he gave me a picture that showed the birth of Jesus. Then he gave me a bank account that had a balance of 430,000 won (about US\$344). That church was a very poor church. Because I was the first Korean priest, in order to help feed us, they had planted sixty apple trees in the church front yard. Until that time, Americans had brought their own money and used it to spread the gospel.

It was a very poor parish and the apples were meant to supplement his diet. But the

little children who came home from school in the afternoon had a habit of picking the apples even before they could ripen, so John took to walking through the churchyard at dusk to guard the apple trees.

It was on one of these walks that an encounter took place that would change the young priests life forever. John remembers that moment clearly:

It was the 12th of September, in the evening. The sun was about to set and the sky was beautiful with the sunset. I was just walking back and forth in the churchyard so that the children would not pick the apples. An old beggar was passing by in front of the church. One hand had a can full of cooked rice that he had begged for. The other hand was holding a sack over his shoulder with something inside. He was limping as he passed the church. I began to follow him. I went about three hundred meters. There was a hill called Yongdam behind the church. He went around that hill to a hovel made of straw mats, where some beggars lived. The old beggar entered the hovel, which looked like a tent. Inside were three family members—a man, a woman, and a child. The woman, because of tuberculosis, was just skin and bones. The six-year-old son couldnt even stand up and was crawling because of malnutrition. The husband was an alcoholic and was also suffering from his severe mistrust of his wife. He obsessively watched his wife so that the other beggars would not do anything to her. Because of this, he could not go out to beg for food. He was also skin and bones.

There were other beggars living outside the hovel who had been driven out from living under a bridge; John counted 18 in all. Much to his surprise, the old beggar handed over the ricesomething he would have direly needed himself to the family in the hovel. It was to be Johns introduction to the extraordinary kindness and of a man with greatest love who was like Little Jesus he would come to know as Grandpa Choi Kwi Dong (Kyung Rak), who had fed the other beggars around him for more than 40 years.

Choi Kwi-dong had been born Choi Kyung Rak around 1910 to a wealthy family; the villagers nicknamed him Kwi-dong, meaning precious son of the noble family. He married a pretty young woman; they lived with and served his parents. But then the War came, and the Japanese brought him to Japan to work at a mine in Hokkaido. He tried to escape, but was caught and brutally tortured. The experience destroyed Kwi-dongs mind; battered and broken and unable to do any more work, he was sent back by the Japanese to Shinuiju in northern Korea, with little more than an address tag on his back. Shinuiju was still 400 kilometers away from his hometown of Eumsong, but he somehow managed to make it back home. But instead of rejoicing, only grief met Kwi-dong: his parents had become opium addicts and had lost all their property, and his wife had left them. There was no one left to care for him, and soon Kwi-dongs life fell deeper into a dark and seemingly unstoppable decline. He became a beggar, living with others of his kind, village outcasts who lived

under a bridge that spanned the Mugeuk River.

But unlike other beggars, Kwi-dong begged not for himself but for others, especially those who were ill and near death. He sought and accepted leftover food, but refused money; he asked that fruit be given to children, who needed it more. Carrying a sack on his back, he went around in the day-time picking up shards of metal, ceramic, and glass that might hurt children playing in the area. He did this for more than 40 years, his body ravaged by hypertension, his feet by frostbite, wearing the paper of cement sacks for shoes.

The sight of the old man and of his deeds struck Fr. Oh hard, and he spent a long night trying to understand the man and his motives, which seemed nothing less than those of a living Christ. At dawn, John realized that Even if you have only some strength to beg for food, it is a gift of Gods grace.

That day, John emptied his pockets of everything he had about US\$2 and went out to buy one pack of cement to make bricks for a house for the beggars. He made the rounds of the village and secured commitments from local leaders for materials and resources with which to build this house. A small lot of about 300 square meters was bought behind the church, where Fr. Oh planned to build a house for the beggars. The priest used his pulpit to urge people to contribute to his dream. I used to think that this was the poorest, the most miserable,

ordinary place, he said in his homily, but because Grandpa Choi Kwi-dong, who is like the Son of God, Jesus, lives in this village, so this village will become a great village. If we live the love of Grandpa Choi Kwi-dong together, all the people of this whole nation, Korea, will come to see this village. Many responded with money, building materials, and labor.

Soon enough, however, a delegation of village dignitaries, led by a doctor, came to Fr. Oh to warn him against the folly of his plans. If you persist in doing this, he was told, all the beggars throughout the country might come to our village. How responsible will you be for that? Their resistance troubled John, but he regained his composure and asked them, in turn, If you and your families were beggars your wife dying of tuberculosis, your son of malnutrition, and yourself of alcoholism how would you feel if I built houses for you? Chastened, the leaders withdrew their objections, and the houses construction continued.

On November 15, 1976, the house finally opened. It had five rooms and five kitchens, and its first occupants were the 18 beggars who lived under the bridge. And the house was called The House of Love by the villagers. They were, indeed, to be the first of many, as the towns elders had predicted, and soon Fr. Oh found himself overwhelmed by the needs of the newcomers, who quickly numbered 60. He was receiving no help from the government. People were critically ill and had to be brought to the hospital, then

housed and cared for when they got out.

Once again, Fr. Oh felt himself standing on the verge of dismay and defeat. But again something happened to strengthen his resolve. Sometime in August 16th, 1978, on his way to the diocesan office some 20 kilometers away from the city, John saw an old man collapse on Bantan Bridge in Jeungpyeong-eup. I stopped the car and saw the old beggar dying on the bridge. His body reeked from urine and excrement. I took him in my car to the hospital. While driving, I vomited because of the stench. I stopped the car and prayed to God not to be sickened by the smell because I could not waste a second. As I was driving again, I suddenly heard a shout from the sky: How joyful and proud today is! Father Oh has saved a son whom I love. I am grateful and thankful. I will give you a new promise. From now on, if you welcome these pitiable people, I will be responsible for all of them.

From that time on, he welcomed the most miserable people in Korea, trusting Providence to produce the means. And in time, all the resources he needed food, clothes, money for medicine, volunteers were given to him. This was the start of the largest and most ambitious project of his life the establishment of a sanatorium he would call Kkottongne, after kkot, flower, and tongne, village, a reference to the original meaning of Nazareth.

In September 1979, the Congregation of Kkottongne Brothers and Sisters of Jesus was

founded. It now numbers over 300 and the congregation is supported by 200 long-term and 1,000 daily volunteers, who include businessmen, soldiers, government officials, and students. Membership in the congregation is reserved for volunteers who have been baptized for at least three years, possess a high school diploma or its equivalent, and are willing to devote their entire lives practicing the love of Christ.

The original Kkottongne at Eumseong grew into a large complex on a 200-hectare hillside campus comprising a hospital and several residence halls or recuperating centers, one each for the mentally ill, for tuberculosis patients, and for the elderly, as well as a facility for the homeless. Eventually it accommodated more than 2,700 people who are served by the congregation members, as well as by lay volunteers who come daily. A second Kkottongne followed in Gapyeong, Seoul in 1995, and took in 1,100 people. Fr. Oh serves as president of Kkottongne, which is administered by an Advisory Committee and a Steering Committee. Some 200,000 visitors come to Kkottongne each year to witness for themselves Fr. Oh's work and to learn from his example.

Fr. Oh envisions building five or six of these complexes over time, with enough resources. In 1994, Fr. Oh also led the groundbreaking ceremony for a Training Institute of Love, a place designed to teach love to individual citizens, from which point the love learned may spread to their family, workplace, neighborhood, and society at

large. Fr. Oh sees the lack of love as his nation's chief failing, contributing not only to greed and crime, but also to the continuing division between the two Koreas. Harking back to his military stint, Fr. Oh secured the help of the Korean Army Engineers Corps to build the Training Institute.

Resources are raised by a Donations Group, which initially involved some of Korea's most distinguished prelates, including Cardinal Kim Soo Hwan and the Most Rev. Jung Jin Seok. The group was organized on Easter Sunday 1981, and what began with a membership of 60 grew to 720,000 as of July 1996. Uniquely among charitable organizations, Kkottongne discourages large monetary donations, insisting that each contribution be no more than 1,000 won, or about 80 US cents. Since then, the number of people in Kkottongne has been rapidly increasing. So it seemed that the limit amount of contribution had to be raised. However, just like the miracle that Jesus performed in order to feed five thousand people, the number of contributors has also increased so the people in Kkottongne were able to live without big worries. And that is a miracle we all experience in the community. Meanwhile, Fr. Oh has also, on rare occasions, accepted larger donations on behalf of Kkottongne, once he was convinced of the donors' sincerity. For example, an anonymous couple donated almost 10 million won, earned from collecting paper for recycling, toward building the Recuperating Center for the Mentally and Physically Disabled.

Meanwhile, on February 15, 1986, Grandpa Choi won the Catholic Grand Prize of Korea for his lifelong service to the neediest members of his community. Predictably, Grandpa Choi donated the prize money 1.2 million won, or about US\$960 toward the construction of a House for the Dying within Kkottongne. The house for the terminally ill was built in September 1987, and Grandpa Choi himself would live there until his own death on January 4, 1990. Even in death, the old mans generosity prevailed; he had willed his eyes to the blind, and a young man of 26 soon began to see the world through Choi Kwi-dongs bequests. A five-day funeral was held in honor of Grandpa Choi, who was then buried on a sunny hill-top at the entrance of Kkottongnae.

Fr. John Oh Woong-Jins own will reflects Grandpa Chois sentiment: If I will die, give my eyes to those who are blind, my body to the people of Kkottongne who are needed most. Only my heart which breathes by beat of love so that love of God may love the poor, leave it apart and bury at the corner of Kkottongne family cemetery. And make sure that the followings are engraved on my epitaph; Please donate only one thousand won for the people of Kkottongne and tell your friends and neighbors to join the members (supporters) of Kkottongne. This is my last wish..

For his services to Koreas most destitute and desperate people, Fr. John Oh Woong-Jin received the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Public Service on August 31, 1996. (In

May 1991, he had also been given the Dongbaek-jang, Koreas national medal for service.) In a public lecture he delivered in conjunction with the Magsaysay award, which he titled Love Thy Neighbor: Compassion in Todays Modern World, Fr. Oh adverted to the irony of runaway prosperity in many parts of the world including present-day Korea, long risen from its sorry past to become one of Asias economic powerhouses: the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

Today South Korea is a country of close to 50 million people. Between 1965 and 1990, the growth rate of its per-capita Gross National Product was the highest in the world. (Per-capita GNP rose from only US\$100 in 1963 to US\$10,000 in 1997.) It is a global leader in shipbuilding, semiconductors, and consumer electronics. While deep tensions and suspicions remain between the South and the North, new efforts are underway to repair relations and achieve a stable peace on the peninsula.

But the figures belie a disturbing fact that in this thoroughly modern society and robust economy, pockets of abject poverty exist and may even be growing, as people fall through the cracks of government social welfare programs. The Asian financial crisis of 1997 dealt a massive blow to the economy; the won lost half its value between October and December 1997, effectively doubling the cost of what was already relatively expensive medical care. The ranks of the unemployed swelled.

For such crises and their effects, Fr. Oh's prescription, as ever, is unconditional love: With love, nothing is impossible. Even beggars who have been abandoned and know only how to beg but not how to give, after they come to Kkotongne where love of God is strong, they also come to love others. Jesus said that there is no greater love than to dedicate one's life for a friend. Even if the family members of Kkotongne come from the most miserable circumstances because they have been deserted and have no place to lean on nor strength to beg for food, they can love enormously because they have a life. Therefore, all of those who are alive can love.

Written by Jose Dalisay
Manila

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* US\$1.00=1,250 Korean won (April 2003)

