



A Faith matters article about Ireland's missionary tradition encouraged reader **Mary Kane** to share the remarkable story of Fr James Maginn, a relative. The priest, who grew up in Co Down, was one of seven Columbans martyred in 1950, killed for their faith by Communist forces during the Korean War. She tells the story of the seven – who have been referred for beatification – and, in particular, Fr Maginn, who stayed with his parishioners to “defend the church until death”

Priests' heroic martyrdom echoes across the decades

IN the summer of 1950, three Columban priests serving in Korea were murdered. By the end of that bloody year, a further four Columbans had been martyred for their faith.

The first, Fr Tony Collier, was killed on June 27, just days after the war between North Korea and South Korea started. Originally from Clogherhead in Co Louth, the 37-year-old was detained and gunned down in the street. With China and the Soviet Union supporting the North and the United Nations – chiefly through the United States – backing the South, the Korean conflict was something of a proxy for the Cold War.

Within days of Fr Collier's death, a second Columban, Fr James Maginn (38), was targeted.

He was dragged out of his tiny church and beaten mercilessly. His attackers then took him to prison, where he was starved and tortured, and eventually he was marched along a mountain road and shot dead.

Fr Maginn was killed on July 4, US Independence Day.

He had been born in the US to parents who had emigrated from Co Down – his father was from Glasdrumman and his mother from Killowen – and later returned to the Mourmes with their young family. The Communists who murdered him wanted him to confess to being an American spy.

Meanwhile, a few miles away, Fr Patrick Reilly (35) from Co Westmeath, refused to leave his parishioners and escape to safety.

“No thank you, my place is here,”



Paying the ultimate price

BETWEEN 1929 and 2001, 24 Columban missionaries died for the Gospel while serving on mission. Their stories – including those of Fr James Maginn and his colleagues martyred in Korea in 1950 – feature in a book compiled by the Columban Missionaries.

Columban Martyrs 1929-2001 can be ordered online at www.columbans.ie, by telephoning 00353 46 909 8275 or writing to Columban Missionaries, Dalgan Park, Navan, Co Meath, C15 AY2Y. More information about the work of the Columbans can also be found on the website www.columbans.ie. Details can be found at www.columbans.ie/about-us/columban-martyrs about the Columbans who have died serving the Gospel.

was his response to the threat of death.

With the help of loyal parishioners, he survived for a month in the hills,



PICTURES: Missionary Society of St Columban

VICTORY: This Second World War Japanese propaganda photograph shows 14 Columbans serving in Chuncheon who were interned in 1942. They were placed under house arrest by the occupying Japanese forces. Pictured front row from left, are Brian Geraghty, Thomas Quinlan and Pat Brennan; second row from left, James Maginn, Frank McGann and, giving the victory sign, Tony Collier; third row, Pat McGowan, Phil Crosbie, Tom Neligan; back row, Paddy Deery, Frank Herlihy, James Doyle, Frank Gallagher and Hubert Hayward. Columban Martyrs, top from left, Fr James Maginn, Fr Francis Canavan, Fr Patrick O'Reilly, Fr Tom Cusack, Fr Tony Collier, Fr John O'Brien and Mgrn Patrick Brennan

before being captured, imprisoned and shot on August 29 1950.

At the start of the invasion a US army adviser to the South Korean forces wanted Monsignor Thomas Quinlan and his assistant Fr Francis Canavan to go south with him towards safety, but the monsignor said he felt it was his duty to stay.

He did tell Fr Canavan: “You're free to go. You're not responsible for this district. I'll give you my blessing, and think as much of you as if you stayed.”

Fr Canavan, however, preferred to stay. Just a week later, while the monsignor was saying Sunday Mass, the Communist soldiers came for him.

After shooting up the church, they marched Msgr Quinlan and Fr Canavan, along with several hundred other prisoners, to Seoul, and then on to an internment camp at Manpo in the far north of Korea.

This became known as ‘The Death March’; although they didn't know it at the time, this march was part of the Communist army's retreat before the advancing units of the US Infantry.

Several hundred prisoners – including soldiers, journalists, missionaries, some old, many sick and all feeble from near starvation – died during the 10-day march.

Fr Canavan (34) contracted pneumonia on the march and was ill for some time and, although he seemed to recover, he had a relapse and died on December 6 1950.

Msgr Patrick Brennan (49), who was born in Chicago, was superior at the Columban mission in the southwest province of Chollanamdo in the 1940s. The pastor was Fr Tom Cusack (40), from Lisnaccorn in Co Clare, and his assistant was Fr John O'Brien (31).

On July 17 1950 an official from the US Consulate called to warn Msgr Brennan to leave with his personnel because the UN would not be able to defend his mission.

Msgr Brennan said that he was staying, declaring “it goes with the job”.

Fr Cusack immediately said he too would stay. “I would not be able to live with myself if I left and Catholics were killed,” he said in a message sent to his mother through fellow Columban Michael O'Connor.

Fr O'Brien would also stay. Like their fellow Columbans, they all opted to stay with their people and would also pay the ultimate price.

On July 24 the North Korean forces entered Mokpo and the three priests were arrested and transferred to jail in Kwangju city.

On August 26 they were ordered to travel to Seoul. However, the convoy was attacked and the three Columbans were jailed in Daejon.

Towards the latter half of September

‘I hope to see you in Paradise’ – last words of Fr James Maginn

FR James Maginn was born in Butte, Montana in the United States on November 15 1911.

His parents, James Maginn from Glasdrumman and Annie Murphy from Killowen, had emigrated from Co Down.

Fr James was the second of four sons. The family home was in Granite Street, Butte and James went to school at Sisters of Mercy Convent School, Park Street, Butte City.

In 1921 the family returned to Co Down, where his father opened a new hotel in Newcastle, at the foot of the Mourne Mountains.

The Montana Hotel, as it was called, later became a popular meeting place for the American soldiers stationed in the area during the Second World War.

The young James attended St Mary's National School in Newcastle before going off to St Malachy's College in Belfast in September 1925.

In 1929 James began his preparation for priesthood in the Columban seminary in Galway and, after ordination in 1936, he left for the Missions in Korea.

He had only one trip home – in 1948 – by which time his mother had died.

Fr Maginn was pastor in the village of Sam Cheok, a parish on the east coast, about 50 miles south of the border between North Korea and South Korea.

In the week between the outbreak of war in June 1950 and the occupation of his parish, he had been urged by his people to leave town before the Communists came.

He advised them to go and some did. Fr Maginn gave them money to help them survive, but he chose to stay, saying: “I shall remain here and defend the Church until death. I shall bear witness for God to the Communists who deny Jesus Christ.”

John Kim Soo Sung, a teacher in the High School, was very devoted to Fr Maginn, who had baptised him. He declared that he could not leave and vowed to stay, knowing that Fr Maginn was willing to face death at the hands of the Communists.

On July 2 the North Korean forces invaded the village. Two days later, acting on information from the local communists, they came to arrest the priest.

As John Kim recalled, “Fr Jim received them with calmness and composure.”

Entering the church, he knelt before the altar for a short final prayer. The impatient soldiers shouted to him from outside

the North Koreans had to abandon Daejon as UN forces advanced.

As they fled, they executed all of the prisoners, including the priests, and dumped their bodies in a deep well. The well was emptied in 1952 and the bodies cremated. The remains and bones were buried in a grave on a nearby hill.



REMEMBERED: Fr James Maginn's grave in Chuncheon, Korea. Fr Maginn, inset, was shot dead by North Korean troops in on July 4 1950



FAMILY: A memorial to Fr James Maginn on the family grave in Newcastle, Co Down

Next morning his body was found by villagers, who charitably buried it at the very spot.

Fr Maginn had spent 14 years in Korea, including a brief term of imprisonment and eight years under police observation by the occupying Japanese until they were ejected in 1945, only to be killed by the North Korean troops, who saw him and his faith as the enemy.

He was 38 years old. It was not until March 1952, after the liberation of Chuncheon city, that his grave and body were located by Fr Brian Geraghty, on information of eyewitnesses of his last hours.

His body was exhumed and laid to rest beside his fellow Columbans Fr Tony Collier and Fr Patrick Reilly in the church yard in Chukrimdong, now the Cathedral Church of Chuncheon Diocese, South Korea.

Later the Holy Trinity Church was built in Sam Cheok in memory of Fr James – my late father's cousin.

On our once-in-a-lifetime visit to Korea in September 2018, we were completely overwhelmed by the devotion of the parishioners of Sam Cheok to his memory, all these years later.

He disappeared into the pitch-black night and John Kim's mourning walls followed him and continued long after he had gone.

Fr Maginn was hustled barefooted along the rugged mountain road as far as Cha-chi-ri. A shot echoed through the ravine and he fell.

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and shouted at him to get up and come out of his cell.

Fr Maginn had already guessed the reason. He asked them to let him say a word of farewell to John Kim, who was still in the adjacent cell.

The warders could not refuse the last request of a man about to die. Passing his fingers through John Kim's hair, he gave him his final blessing, saying: “John, I hope to see you in Paradise.”

“Whatever pain you have to suffer, bear it patiently and never lose your faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ.”

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WITNESS: During a Red Wednesday event in St Patrick's Cathedral, Armagh last year, Archbishop Eamon Martin spoke to teachers Colleen Gribben and Gerard Devine about how they give witness to their own faith
PICTURE: Gerard Ryan

Religious persecution a daily reality for millions

AID to the Church in Need is a charity that works to protect the rights of Christians and to support the suffering and persecuted Church.

It points out that today, Christians are the most persecuted people in the world, with religious freedom in decline in many countries.

To help highlight the plight of persecuted Christians and those martyred for their faith, it runs an annual ‘week of witness’ campaign, with the Wednesday of the week marked as ‘Red Wednesday’.

ACN Ireland says it is an opportunity to “stand in solidarity with, and bear witness to the heroic example of, our persecuted brothers and sisters in faith across the world”.

Christians in more than 95 countries face daily persecution for their faith, says ACN, with an estimated 80 per cent of all acts of religious persecution committed against Christians. It says that 245 million Christians are “facing extreme persecution”.

This year's week of witness runs from November 25 to December 1, with Red Wednesday falling on November 25.

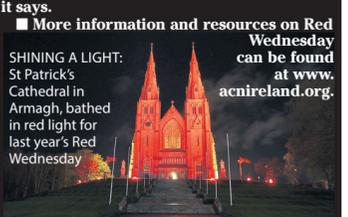
St Patrick's Cathedral in Armagh has been bathed in red light in recent years on Red Wednesday to raise awareness of the campaign.

The charity suggests that people can also wear a piece of red clothing. “As a mark of the blood lost by Christians all over the world in defence of our faith” – and pray “for the suffering and persecuted Church”.

ACN says that Red Wednesday is “an opportunity for the faithful to gather as a community of witnesses – even if these days this is only possible electronically, we can always unite spiritually in Christ – and pray not only for persecuted Christians, but also for the persecutors of Christians”.

People can be “a vibrant example of the beauty and dignity of Christian culture as well as a witness to the reality of the historic and current oppression and martyrdom of Christian peoples globally”, it says.

More information and resources on Red Wednesday can be found at www.acnireland.org.



SHINING A LIGHT: St Patrick's Cathedral in Armagh, bathed in red light for last year's Red Wednesday

“I would not be able to live with myself if I left and Catholics were killed”

Fr Tom Cusack