The 14th Monastic Interreligious Dialogue in Korea

Pusan
September 1-2, 2025

The Korean Commission for Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MIDK) held its 14th meeting at the Monastery of the Olivetan Benedictine Sisters of Busan. The theme of the meeting was "Come and See" (John 1:39). Thirty Korean Buddhist, Won Buddhist, and Catholic monastics and also some some Protestants gathered at the monastery to experience Catholic monastic life.

Schedule

September 1 (Monday) Meeting Day

3:00 PM Arrival
3:10 PM Meditation and Orientation (Fr. Anselmo Park)
3:40 PM Visit to the Historical Exhibition Hall
4:40 PM Introduction to Catholic Monastic Life (Sr. Eucaria Jeong)
6:00 PM Evening Prayer with the Monastic Community
6:30 PM Dinner
7:30 PM "My Life: Poetry and Prayer" (Sr. Hae-in Lee)
8:30 PM Time for Socializing (until 10:00 PM)

September 2 (Tuesday) Sharing Day

5:40 AM Morning Meditation with the Monastic Community
6:10 AM Morning Prayer and Mass with the Monastic Community
7:30 AM Breakfast
9:00 AM Meeting with the Superior General, Mother Jo Lugalda
9:50 AM Commemorative photo
10:00 AM Introduction to and practice of a meditation method of each religion
Catholic: Sr. Bernardo Ann (Lectio Divina)
Buddhism 1: Ven. Haegwang (Concentration and Observation Meditation)
Won Buddhism: Ven. Dongju Kim (Won Buddhism Diary Method)
Buddhism 2: Venerable Seonyeop (Tea Meditation)
12:30 PM Lunch
1:30 PM Sharing Time
2:30 PM Return

The Purpose of the Gathering

While Catholic clergy and monastics have frequently visited neighboring religious temples and institutions in Korea for Buddha's Birthday celebrations or meetings for interreligious dialogue, it has been rare for Buddhist monks and nuns to stay at a Catholic monastery and experience Benedictine monastic life. While they may be interested in visiting Catholic monasteries or even experiencing Catholic monastic life, they often do not know how to go about making a request to do so. In some cases, Catholic monasteries are perceived as taboo. Therefore, the Korean Commission for Monastic Interreligious Dialogue invited Buddhist and Won Buddhist monastics as well as lay contemplatives to visit Catholic Benedictine monasteries. The purpose of this gathering is to offer them an experience of Benedictine monastic life, deepen their understanding of Catholic monasticism, foster friendships, and promote spiritual exchange and communion.

An Interreligious Gathering of Monastics at a Benedictine Monastery

On the first day of September, the bus bringing Buddhist monks and nuns to Busan left Seoul at 9:00 AM. It was due to arrive before 2:00 PM, but because of heavy rain, it was delayed. The program that was scheduled to begin at two o'clock could only begin at three. There were thirty participants. Fr. Anselmo Park opened this interreligious experience of Catholic Benedictine monasticism with a brief period of meditation followed by an introduction to the program. He noted that those who achieve self-transcendence and transformation of consciousness through their religious practice become more open minded and move toward universal, borderless love and compassion. Interreligious dialogue is thus a fruit of spiritual growth and can serve as a tool for further self-transcendence and transformation of consciousness. He explained the Catholic Church's shift in its approach to other religious/spiritual traditions following the Second Vatican Council. With photographs, Fr. Park then presented the various forms of Catholic interreligious dialogue: "dialogue of life, dialogue of theological exchange, dialogue of action, and dialogue of religious experience" ("Dialogue and Proclamation," no. 42). Next, he described the organization and activities of *Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique* · Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (DIM·MID). He also showed the participants a video of the activities of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue in Korea (MIDK), a commission of DIM·MID. Finally, Fr. Park stressed the importance and

necessity of interreligious dialogue among monastics and expressed his hope that this gathering would foster a deeper understanding of Catholic monastic life, promote spiritual exchange, and foster spiritual friendships.

Next, the group toured the historical exhibition hall of the Olivetan Benedictine Sisters of Busan. The nun in charge of the exhibition explained the history of the convent, which began in 1931 when Korean nuns moved to Busan after the Korean War and settled there. The monastery was originally known as the "Yeongil Holy Cross Convent."

Due to time constraints, the planned visits to workshops and a tour of the monastery were not possible.

The participants learned about Catholic monastic life from Sr. Eukaria Jeong, who has a doctorate in monastic theology. Sr. Jeong explained the origins of Catholic monastic life, the differences between monastic life and other forms of religious life, the life of St. Benedict, and the characteristics of Benedictine monastic life. The participants were deeply impressed by her clear, in-depth lecture, and the Buddhist monastics expressed their gratitude for her insightful lecture, which allowed them to renew their understanding of the essence of monastic life. A Won Buddhist nun confessed that after hearing Sr. Jeong say that one of the essential characteristics Christian monasticism is that "a monk is a person who strives," she was able to reflect deeply on her own monastic life.

After the presentation, the participants moved to the monastery chapel and joined the monastic community for evening prayer. As one of the participants said, "The beauty of the prayers, sung by nuns in white, was heavenly, and the service was deeply moving."

The vegetarian meals at the convent retreat house were specially prepared for the Buddhist practitioners by the nuns in charge of the kitchen, and all the participants enjoyed the simple but delicious and nutritious fare.

The presence at this gathering of Sr. Claudia Hae-in Lee, a well-known poet in Korea, was a special gift of the Holy Spirit. She shared her journey as a nun in a presentation entitled “My Life: Poetry and Prayer.” Her honesty, openness, ease, naturalness, and humor revealed the spiritual depth of her long monastic life. She then invited the participants to recite her poems and shared the stories behind them. She also distributed gifts, including her books, various sacred objects, and scarves, to all the participants. Despite her advanced age of eighty, she actively participated in the entire program. The participants were deeply moved by her presence and sharing.

Following Sister Claudia’s presentation, there was time for socializing. Participants enjoyed refreshments as they shared stories about their lives.

The second day began with meditation with the monastic community followed by Morning Prayer and Mass. For many of the participants who were not Catholic, this was the first time they attended a Catholic Mass. At the time for Communion, they formed a procession to the altar and received a blessing.

After breakfast, the participants met with Sr. Jo Lugalda, Mother Superior of the Olivetan Benedictine Sisters of Busan. Sr. Jo spoke of the two challenges faced by many Korean religious communities today: the decline in the number of vocations and the aging of their members.

She also emphasized the need for our monastics to discern what should remain unchanged and what should change in the digital age. She emphasized that if monks and nuns hold on to the essential elements of the monastic life and are faithful to their spiritual practice, they will find a way to resolve their vocational challenges even in a secularized and pluralistic world. Sr. Jo also shared several firsthand experiences as she spoke about the need to understand younger nuns and overcome generational tensions within the monastic community. She also spoke of her personal relationship with God: “I thought I was a pretty decent person, but I came to understand that I wasn’t truly honest with myself. I realized how good other people were and how poor and insignificant I was. This experience led me to entrust my monastic journey to God’s providence. I now live freely in the mercy and love of God, who in prayer reveals how I can resolve the many difficult issues I encounter.” She said that when the community gathers in the church for prayer several times a day, she offers her “baggage of life” to God and entrusts it to Him.

After gathering for a group photo, the participants shared their monastic practices and meditation methods. Sr. Bernardo Ann spoke on Lectio Divina, a practice inherited from the early Christian monastic tradition. A Buddhist monk, Ven. Haegwang, the head of "The Mind Meditation Center" in Chuncheon, explained and demonstrated the practice of "Concentration and Observation Meditation." A Won Buddhist clergyman, Ven. Kim Dong-ju introduced "Ilgibeop," one of the many Won Buddhist practices. Participants from other religions were surprised to learn that journaling can be a form of spiritual practice as it offers those who journal an opportunity to reflect on their daily lives and inner selves. Finally, A Buddhist nun, Ven. Seonyeop presented the tea ceremony as a spiritual practice that begins with cultivating the body, which depends on the food we eat. Having suffered from illness for several years and become paralyzed from the waist down because of overexertion, she urged the participants to take diligent care of their bodies while training their minds.

The participants concluded the meeting by sitting in a circle and sharing their reflections on the meeting and their previous experiences of monastic interreligious dialogue. One participant suggested that a two-day, one-night retreat was too short, and that a longer retreat with more time to rest and relax would offer a better opportunity to experience Benedictine monastic life. Another participant suggested that the next meeting could be spent experiencing Buddhist monastic life together at Seonamsa Temple. Lay Buddhist contemplatives expressed gratitude for the opportunity to experience Catholic monastic life, particularly the holiness of the monastic prayers and Mass. They also said that experiencing the Catholic monastic life allowed them to reflect on their own contemplative life. One of the Won Buddhist nuns expressed her

admiration for the Catholic monastic community's efforts to foster dialogue among monastics.

The participants concluded the meeting by holding hands, standing in a circle, and praying silently for one another and for world peace.

Evaluation

Over the past six years, the Korean Commission for Monastic Interreligious Dialogue has visited various Benedictine and Trappist monasteries in Korea to educate them on the necessity of interreligious dialogue among monastics. They have also visited various Buddhist temples and Won Buddhist holy sites, experiencing their spiritual lives firsthand. Initially, when the Catholic Benedictine monastics stayed at the Buddhist temples, the Buddhist monks were puzzled, asking, "Why are you here?" However, when the Catholics answered, "We came to become friends with you and to learn your methods of practice," the Buddhist monks began to open their hearts to them. As the Buddhist monks shared their struggles as fellow practitioners, they soon became close friends. One of the reasons for this is that, even though beliefs may differ, there are practices and experiences that are common to all monks and nuns.

This gathering can be seen as a modest outcome our past efforts. The very fact that fellow religious practitioners want to experience Benedictine monastic life has profound significance. Life experiences not only facilitate communication, they also transcend language, fostering empathy and friendship.

Furthermore, the life experiences of other religious practitioners provide a platform for reflection on one's own practice. This dialogue of religious experiences holds a crucial place in the Catholic Church's interreligious dialogue. If monastics of various religions in Korea continue to share their spiritual journeys and methods for achieving enlightenment, they will both challenge and enrich each other. Moreover, such examples of interreligious dialogue based on a spiritual foundation can contribute to the "spiritualization" of other forms of interreligious dialogue.

Monastic interreligious dialogue is one expression of the "dialogue religious practice experience" and the "dialogue of life." It develops slowly, often without immediate visible results. Just as monastic life itself is a long journey through the wilderness, encountering Christ in various forms while living in community with God and struggling with oneself, so too is monastic interreligious dialogue a long journey, discerning the diverse workings of the Holy Spirit through spiritual exchange with monastics of other religions.

The Korean Commission for Interreligious Monastic Dialogue is only just beginning. Even within the Benedictine Order, some monks and nuns still do not recognize the need for such dialogue, and some communities face difficulties in sending monks and nuns to participate in dialogue due to a decline in the number of vocations. The Commission itself has experienced various trials and errors over the past six years. Nevertheless,

under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we continue to pray and to sow small seeds of friendship through spiritual exchange with monks and nuns of other religions. While some of these seeds may fall among thorns or on rocky soil, we believe that those that fall on good soil will bear fruit in good time, the fruits of peace, mercy, and love.

By Fr. Anselmo Park