

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Laurent Imbert

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: September 20

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IN BRIEF

Saint Laurent Imbert

French bishop of the Paris Foreign Missions, missionary in China, vicar apostolic and martyr of Korea.

Feast day	September 20, September 21
Born	March 23, 1796, Marignane, France
Died	September 21, 1839, Saenamteo, Seoul, Korea
Canonized	May 6, 1984, by Pope John Paul II
Era	19th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Laurent Imbert, Good Shepherd

Novena to Saint Laurent Imbert

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Laurent Imbert

Saint Laurent Imbert was a French bishop of the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP), born in Marignane, Provence, in 1796 and martyred in Seoul on September 21, 1839. After more than ten years as a missionary in China, he became the first Catholic bishop to enter Korea, where he gave himself up to the persecutors to spare his flock. Canonized in 1984 with the 103 Korean Martyrs, he is celebrated with them on September 20, the memorial of Saints Andrew Kim Taegon, Paul Chong Hasang and Companions. The Roman Martyrology also remembers him on September 21, the day of his death.

Who was Saint Laurent Imbert?

Laurent-Marie-Joseph Imbert was a child of the Provençal countryside who became a shepherd of souls at the far edge of Asia. A priest of the Paris Foreign Missions, he spent most of his missionary life in Sichuan, China, before being sent as vicar apostolic to Korea. There the Church, founded by lay people at the end of the eighteenth century, lived in hiding and without a bishop. He served there for less than two years. His death, with his two fellow priests Pierre Maubant and Jacques Chastan, has remained in the memory of the Korean Church as the very image of the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

Key dates in the life of Saint Laurent Imbert

- **March 23, 1796**: Born at the Bricard farm, near Marignane (Bouches-du-Rhône).
- **1818-1819**: Enters the seminary of the Paris Foreign Missions, then is ordained a priest.
- **1820**: Leaves for Asia.

- **1820s-1830s**: Missionary in Sichuan, China, where he founds the seminary of Moupin, on the border of Tibet.
- **1827**: Introduces lithography to China to spread Christian texts more easily.
- **May 14, 1837**: Ordained bishop, with the title of bishop of Capsa, and named vicar apostolic of Korea.
- **Late 1837**: Secretly enters Korea and reaches Seoul.
- **1839**: Persecution breaks out; in August he surrenders to the authorities to protect the Christians.
- **September 21, 1839**: Beheaded at Saenamteo, on the bank of the Han River, with Pierre Maubant and Jacques Chastan.
- **July 5, 1925**: Beatified by Pope Pius XI.
- **May 6, 1984**: Canonized in Seoul by Pope John Paul II with the 103 Korean Martyrs.

From Provence to Sichuan

Laurent Imbert was born on March 23, 1796, during the French Revolution, into a modest family in the countryside of Marignane, not far from the Étang de Berre. Local tradition says that he made and sold rosaries to pay for his studies. Feeling called to the distant missions, he entered the seminary of the Paris Foreign Missions on the rue du Bac, a society of secular priests founded in the seventeenth century to evangelize Asia. Once ordained, he left France in 1820.

After a stay in the Society's posts in Southeast Asia, he reached Sichuan, a large province in western China. He worked there for about twelve years, visiting scattered Christian communities, and founded at Moupin, on the border of Tibet, a seminary to train Chinese priests. Curious and practical, he

introduced lithography to China in 1827 to print catechisms and prayer books more easily, and corresponded with the Belgian inventor Marcellin Jobard about a Chinese method of drilling wells.

Bishop of a Church without a shepherd

The Korean Church was born in a unique way. At the end of the eighteenth century, Korean scholars discovered the faith in Christian books from China, before any missionary had arrived. Harshly persecuted, this community begged for priests. Rome entrusted the mission to the Paris Foreign Missions and created a vicariate apostolic. Its first head, Barthélemy Bruguière, died in 1835 without managing to enter the country.

Laurent Imbert was chosen to succeed him. He was ordained bishop on May 14, 1837, crossed Manchuria and secretly entered Korea at the end of the year, in disguise like the missionaries before him. In Seoul he joined Fathers Pierre Maubant and Jacques Chastan, who had arrived shortly before. The three Frenchmen led a hidden and exhausting life: traveling by night, celebrating Mass in Christian homes, hearing confessions and baptizing. In one year they baptized about two thousand catechumens and visited some nine thousand Christians. Bishop Imbert also took notice of a young man, Andrew Kim Taegon, among the seminarians sent to study in Macau.

The good shepherd lays down his life

In 1839 a violent persecution, known as the *Gihae* persecution, fell upon the Christians. Arrests multiplied, and torture was used to obtain the names of the missionaries. From his hiding place, the bishop understood that the hunt would not stop until the foreigners were caught, and that many of the faithful risked death because of them. In August he decided to give himself up. He wrote to his two companions inviting them to do the same, with a sentence that became famous, inspired by the Gospel of John:

> *"In desperate circumstances, the good shepherd gives his life for his sheep."*

Maubant and Chastan joined him. Questioned, beaten and ordered to give up the names of Christians and to deny their faith, they refused. Sentenced to death, they were beheaded together on September 21, 1839, at Saenamteo, a military ground on the bank of the Han River used for public executions. Their bodies, left on the spot, were later gathered in secret by Christians.

One of the 103 Korean Martyrs

Between 1839 and 1866, thousands of Korean Catholics were put to death. The Church has recognized 103 of them, beatified in two groups in the twentieth century and canonized together by John Paul II in Seoul on May 6, 1984: the first canonization celebrated outside Rome in modern times. They include three French bishops (Laurent Imbert, Siméon-François Berneux and Antoine Daveluy), seven French priests, the first Korean priest, Andrew Kim Taegon, and ninety-two lay men and women of every walk of life.

Why is Saint Laurent Imbert a model for bishops and missionaries?

No traditional patronage is attached to him, but he is a natural intercessor for bishops and priests, missionaries, persecuted Christians and the Church in Korea, now one of the most vibrant in Asia. He agreed to leave with no return, to learn difficult languages and to live in hiding. Then, at the decisive moment, he chose to expose himself rather than let his flock suffer.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Laurent Imbert in art

- **Asian scholar's dress**: portraits often show him dressed like the Korean or Chinese scholars among whom he lived in disguise.

- **Bishop's insignia**: statues, such as the one at Calas, present him as a bishop.
- **With his companions**: he is often shown with Pierre Maubant and Jacques Chastan, or in group paintings of the Korean Martyrs.

Where to pray to Saint Laurent Imbert

- **Seoul** (South Korea): the Saenamteo Martyrs' Shrine, where he was beheaded.
- **Seoul**: Myeongdong Cathedral, heart of the Korean Church, whose crypt keeps relics of martyrs.
- **Singapore**: the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd, which keeps a relic of the saint.
- **Marignane** (France): the church of Saint-Laurent-Imbert, in his hometown; a statue also stands before the church of Calas, near Cabriès.
- **Paris**: the chapel of the Paris Foreign Missions on the rue du Bac and its Martyrs' Room.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Laurent Imbert and the novena to Saint Laurent Imbert.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Laurent Imbert, Good Shepherd

Saint Laurent Imbert, the missionary bishop who died in Korea in 1839, is invoked for the shepherds of the Church, for missionaries and for persecuted Christians. No traditional prayer of his own has come down to us, so this page offers an original prayer by Saintspedia, inspired by his life and by his last letter to his companions.

Prayer to Saint Laurent Imbert, good shepherd

Saint Laurent, son of the land of Provence, you left everything to carry the Gospel to the far reaches of China and Korea. Teach me not to keep my faith to myself.

You learned foreign languages and lived in hiding to serve a people who were not your own: give me patience, humility and respect for everyone I meet.

You wrote, "the good shepherd gives his life for his sheep," and you gave yourself up to save the Christians who sheltered you: obtain for our bishops and priests a shepherd's heart, ready to give without counting the cost.

With Saint Pierre Maubant and Saint Jacques Chastan, your companions in martyrdom, watch over Christians who suffer for their faith today. Give them the strength to stay faithful, and give their persecutors the grace of conversion.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Through your intercession, may I too learn to offer my life, day after day, out of love for Christ. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

Prayer for the Church in Korea and the missions

> *Lord Jesus, Good Shepherd, you made your Church grow in Korea from the blood of the martyrs. Through the intercession of Saint Laurent Imbert and all the holy Korean Martyrs, bless the Christian communities of Asia, raise up missionary vocations and grant peace to the Korean peninsula. Amen.*

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

When to pray this prayer

Pray to him especially on September 20, the memorial of the holy Korean Martyrs, and on September 21, the anniversary of his death. He is a natural intercessor for a priest or bishop going through a trial, for a missionary about to leave, for persecuted Christians and for reconciliation in Korea. Korean Catholic communities around the world also honor the martyrs each September. For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Laurent Imbert, and read the life of Saint Laurent Imbert.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Laurent Imbert

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by the life of Saint Laurent Imbert, bishop of the Paris Foreign Missions and martyr of Korea. It is not an official liturgical text. To end it on the memorial of the Korean Martyrs, begin on September 12 and finish on September 20; the next day, September 21, is the anniversary of his death. It can also be prayed at any time for a priest, a missionary or persecuted Christians.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the meditation, say the prayer of the day, then an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The suggested act helps carry the prayer into your day. The nine days follow his road from a farm in Provence to the riverbank at Saenamteo.

You may pray it alone or with others, for example in a parish group or a Korean Catholic community. If you are praying for a particular priest or missionary, name him at the start of each day. The meditations remember not only Laurent Imbert but also his companions, Pierre Maubant and Jacques Chastan, and the lay Christians who sheltered them at the risk of their lives.

Day 1: A humble beginning

Laurent was born in 1796 into a modest family near Marignane, and tradition says he made and sold rosaries to pay for his studies. God often prepares great missions in small and hidden lives.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Laurent Imbert, help me to welcome your call in the simple circumstances of my life. Amen.

Today: Pray a decade of the Rosary for vocations.

Day 2: Leaving everything

In 1820 he left France for Asia, knowing he would probably never return. Every disciple is asked to let go of something to follow Christ more freely.

Prayer: Lord, free my heart from what holds it back, so that I may follow you wherever you lead. Amen.

Today: Give away something you do not need.

Day 3: Learning another people

In Sichuan he learned a difficult language and a new way of life, and he founded a seminary to train Chinese priests. A missionary does not impose himself; he listens, learns and builds up the local Church.

Prayer: Lord, give me respect and patience toward those who are different from me. Amen.

Today: Learn something about the faith of Catholics in another country.

Day 4: Putting gifts to work

Practical and curious, he brought lithography to China to print catechisms and prayer books. Our talents, even the most practical ones, can serve the Gospel.

Prayer: Lord, show me how to put my skills at the service of your Kingdom. Amen.

Today: Use one of your talents to help your parish or a neighbor.

Day 5: A Church born of lay people

The Church in Korea was founded by lay scholars who discovered Christ in books, before any priest arrived. For decades they kept the faith alone, at great risk. Every baptized person is responsible for passing on the faith.

Prayer: Lord, through the faith of the first Korean Christians, make me a courageous witness in my own family and workplace. Amen.

Today: Share something of your faith with someone, simply and without fear.

Day 6: Serving in hiding

In Korea, Bishop Imbert traveled by night, celebrated Mass in hidden homes and baptized about two thousand people in a year. Faithfulness does not need to be seen to be fruitful.

Prayer: Lord, help me to serve faithfully even when no one notices. Bless the priests who serve in secret today. Amen.

Today: Pray for Christians who cannot practice their faith openly.

Day 7: The good shepherd

When the persecution grew, he understood that the faithful were suffering because of the hunt for the missionaries. He gave himself up and wrote: "the good shepherd gives his life for his sheep." This is the love of Christ made visible.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, Good Shepherd, give our bishops and priests hearts like yours, ready to give everything for their people. Amen.

Today: Pray for your bishop and your parish priest by name, and thank them if you can.

Day 8: Faithful under trial

Questioned and beaten, Laurent Imbert, Pierre Maubant and Jacques Chastan refused to betray the Christians or deny their faith. Their strength came from God, not from themselves.

Prayer: Lord, give strength to all who suffer for their faith today, and the grace of conversion to their persecutors. Amen.

Today: Learn about a country where Christians are persecuted and pray for them.

Day 9: The seed of Christians

On September 21, 1839, the three missionaries were beheaded at Saenamteo. From the blood of the martyrs, the Church in Korea grew into one of the most vibrant in Asia. Nothing given to God is lost.

Prayer: Lord, through the intercession of Saint Laurent Imbert and all the holy Korean Martyrs, grant the intention I have entrusted to you, and make me faithful to the end. Amen.

Today: Offer a sacrifice or a Mass for the missions.

Closing prayer

> *Saint Laurent Imbert, good shepherd of Korea, you left your homeland, served in hiding and gave your life for your flock. Pray for our bishops and priests, for missionaries, and for all Christians who suffer for the name of Jesus. Obtain for me a generous heart and the grace I have asked during these nine days. Amen.*

To learn more, read the life of Saint Laurent Imbert or pray the prayer to Saint Laurent Imbert.

CREDITS

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