

John Lee Tae Seok (1962-2010), a Salesian who will be spoken of again

written by Redaktor strongy | October 16, 2024

John Lee Tae Seok, also known as 'Fr. Jolly', was a Korean Salesian who dedicated his life to caring for the poorest and most suffering, especially in South Sudan. Although his life was unfortunately short, he left an indelible mark on the hearts of the people he met through his commitment as a doctor, educator and man of faith. His legacy continues to inspire thousands of people around the world.

Childhood and roots of vocation

Yohan Lee Tae Seok (John Lee) was born on 19 September 1962 in [Busan](#), a southern city in South Korea. He was the ninth of ten children, four boys and six girls, in a deeply Catholic family (one brother, Tae-Young Lee, became a Franciscan friar and one sister, Cristina, consecrated in the Focolare Movement). Even as a young man, he showed signs of extraordinary leadership and an inclination towards service to others. He attended daily Mass and was gifted for music. At the age of ten, he lost his father, and his mother became his point of reference, supporting him in his faith journey and studies.

Despite his desire to become a priest at the age of fifteen, his mother convinced him to continue studying medicine.

In 1987, after graduating with honours from [Inje University Medical School](#), John started working as a military doctor during his compulsory military service. It was during this time that he met the Salesians through a military chaplain, an encounter that would change his life forever. Determined to follow the Salesian vocation, John tried for months to communicate his decision to his mother, without success.

He himself recounts:

'It was Mary Help of Christians who took matters into her own hands. I had decided to embark on Salesian life with great joy, but I was anxious to communicate my decision to my mother. Since my father had passed away when I was ten years old, my mother had had to work hard to get me to study

medicine. And thanks to her many sacrifices, I had been able to become a doctor. I should have started helping my mother to reward her for the sacrifices she had made without ever holding anything against me. That was why it was so difficult for me to tell her my decision. It was almost impossible for me to tell her.

I had tried many times, but had never succeeded because looking at her, I lacked courage. I even tried to tell one of my sisters with whom I talked about everything without problems and to whom I confided everything. But I just couldn't. So months passed without me being able to say anything.

But a beautiful day came. I went to my sister for another try, but I was speechless: my sister already knew everything about my decision. A dream the night before had explained everything to her. I would like to tell you the content of the dream, but I cannot without the bishop's permission. Anyway, my sister told my mother about her dream and all my difficulties melted away in an instant.

I had not thought of direct help from Mary Help of Christians until I heard, for the first time, from the novice master that all Salesian vocations are linked to Mary Help of Christians.

*I had not asked Mary for help. Mary had noticed my difficulty and helped me in a silent and discreet way. This was the first experience of Mary that I was able to have. For me, this experience was invaluable because it enabled me to understand the reality of 'Mary help of Christians' and to **learn the attitude we must have when helping others: that is, being attentive to the needs of others and being ready to give them the help they need**. From then on I could speak to the boys with certainty about the presence of Mary Help of Christians'.*

The Salesian vocation and service to the poor

He began his novitiate on 24 January 1993 and made his first profession on 30 January 1994.

After completing his two-year philosophy course at [Gwangju Catholic University](#), he did his practical training at the [Salesian House in Dae Rim Dong](#), Seoul. There he looked after some 80 at-risk boys, with a lot of creativity in the classroom and in the playground. He taught this class of difficult boys, who learned – at the age of 18 – to write the Korean alphabet. With his musical talents he made these boys sing a *Tantum Ergo* in Latin every Sunday evening, to a pop rhythm composed by him. He himself had composed.

He continued his theological studies.

Sent to Rome to study at the Pontifical Salesian University in 1997, he met a

missionary, Brother Comino, who had served for 20 years in South Korea and then was sent to Sudan in 1991, at which time he was on holiday. By recounting his missionary experience, he strengthened John Lee's desire to become a missionary.

Watching the film '[Molokai](#)', a biographical film about Father Damian, a Belgian missionary who worked at the Kalaupapa Leprosy Settlement on the Hawaiian island of Molokai, motivated him even more to commit himself to living as Father Damian.

During the 1999 holidays he did a missionary experience in Kenya and met Fr James Pulickal, a Salesian of Indian origin working in Tonj, South Sudan. He visited Tonj when the war was still going on, was deeply impressed and decided to dedicate his life to the poor children of Tonj. This small village in South Sudan, destroyed by the civil war, where he met lepers and the poor, changed his life forever.

After being ordained a priest in 2001, John Lee returned to Tonj, determined to serve the local population as a doctor, priest and Salesian, and to treat the sick as if they were Jesus. He joined the Salesian community in Tonj, made up of brothers of different nationalities, with the aim of rebuilding - after the war - the Christian community, the oratory, schools and mission stations in the surrounding villages.

The mission in South Sudan: Tonj, a small miracle

The conditions after the war were very bad. This prompted Fr John Lee Tae Seok to work to improve the lives of the villagers. First of all, he opened a small clinic, which quickly became the only medical centre available in a large area. He treated all kinds of illnesses, often with limited means, but with immense dedication. In addition to providing immediate medical care, he made a long-term commitment to educating the local population about disease prevention and hygiene, topics of which the locals were largely unaware due to their lack of education.

In addition to his work as a doctor, Lee Tae Seok was a tireless educator. He founded a school for the village children, where he taught not only school subjects, but also values of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect, which are essential in a post-conflict context like South Sudan. Thanks to his passion for music, he also taught children to play musical instruments, creating a band that became famous in the region. The band not only offered young people a way to express themselves, but also helped to build a sense of community and hope for

the future.

A doctor with a priest's heart

John Lee Tae Seok's work was not limited to medicine and education. As a priest, his main goal was to bring spiritual hope to a population that had experienced years of suffering. He celebrated Mass regularly, administered the sacraments and offered spiritual comfort to those who had lost everything due to the war. His deep faith was evident in every aspect of his work, and his presence brought a sense of peace and hope even in the most difficult times.

One of the most admirable aspects of his mission was his ability to see the dignity in every person, regardless of their social status or state of health. He treated the sick with immense respect and devoted his time to anyone who needed help, even when exhausted by long hours in the clinic or lack of resources. This deep compassion did not go unnoticed: the people of the village regarded him not only as a doctor and a priest, but as a true friend and brother.

The fight against the disease and his legacy

Despite his tireless work and the love he gave to others, John Lee Tae Seok himself was afflicted by a serious illness. During his stay in South Sudan, he began to show signs of an advanced illness, which later turned out to be colon cancer. When the disease was diagnosed, it was already in an advanced stage, but Lee Tae Seok continued his work as long as possible, refusing to abandon the people who depended on him.

On 14 January 2010, aged only 47, John Lee Tae Seok died in Seoul, South Korea, after a thirteen-month battle with cancer. The news of his death left a deep void in the Tonj community and among all those who had known him. His funeral was a moving event, with thousands of people attending to honour a man who had dedicated his life to the service of others.

Despite his untimely death, the legacy of John Lee Tae Seok lives on. His last words were an invitation to pursue his dreams for Tonj: 'I will not be able to realise my dreams for Tonj, but please pursue them'. The clinic he founded in Tonj continues its activities, and many of the people he trained, both in the medical and educational fields, are continuing his work. The band he created continues to play and bring joy into people's lives.

Testimonials

Fr Václav Klement, a Salesian who was his superior (missionary in South Korea from 1986-2002), tells us:

“During the last 22 years, since obedience has taken me to so many countries in East Asia-Oceania and all over the Salesian world, I have seen so many small ‘miracles’ that Fr John Lee has worked through the film (*‘Don’t Cry for Me, Sudan’* and others), his writings (*‘The Rays of the Sun in Africa are still sad’* and *‘Will you be my Friend?’*) or the various publications that tell his life story.

A young high school student in Japan took the step towards the catechumenate after seeing the film *‘Don’t Cry for Me, Sudan’*, a Thai catechumen – on his way to baptism – was ‘confirmed’ in his faith thanks to the witness of Fr John Lee’s joyfully sacrificed life. A young Vietnamese Salesian, enjoying all the happiness in his ‘comfort zone’, was awakened and motivated for missionary life by the very film *‘Don’t Cry for Me, Sudan’*. Yes, there are many Christians and non-Christians who have been awakened, confirmed in the faith or inspired for a vocational journey thanks to Fr John Lee.

The Salesians of the Korean Province have started a new Salesian presence in Busan, Fr John Lee’s hometown. In 2020 they opened a new community based in the *‘Fr John Lee Memorial Hall’* in [Busan](#), right in the neighbourhood where John was born in 1962. The four-storey building constructed by the Busan – Seogu local government is entrusted to the Salesians of Don Bosco. Thus the story of Fr John Lee is told by his Salesian confreres immersed in the life of the neighbourhood who welcome many young people and faithful to bring them closer to the radiant witness of missionary life.”

International impact and spiritual legacy

Fr John Lee’s spirituality was deeply linked to Mary Help of Christians. He interpreted many events in his life as signs of Mary’s motherly presence. This devotion also influenced his approach to service: helping others quietly and discreetly, being attentive to the needs of others and ready to offer support.

Fr John Lee Tae Seok fully embodied the Salesian spirit, dedicating his life to the young and the poor, following Don Bosco’s example. His ability to combine medicine, education and spirituality made him a unique figure, capable of leaving a lasting imprint in a land marked by suffering.

His work continues in the ‘John Lee Foundation’, which continues to support Salesian works in Sudan.

His memory has been immortalised in numerous international awards and documentaries.

In 2011, after his death, the Ministry of Public Administration and Security of South Korea – on the recommendation of the public – presented him with an

award, together with other people who contributed to society through voluntary work, donations and good deeds against all odds. The award is the highest, that of the Mugunghwa Order.

On 9 September 2010, the Korean television station KBS made a film about his work in Tonj, entitled '[Don't Cry For Me Sudan](#)'. The documentary touched the hearts of hundreds of thousands of people and helped raise awareness of Fr John Lee and his mission around the world.

In 2018, the Minister of Education of South Sudan, Deng Deng Hoc Yai, introduced the study of Fr John Lee's life in social studies textbooks for primary schools and in two pages of the citizenship textbook for middle schools. This is the first time that textbooks in South Sudan have included the story of a foreigner for his voluntary service in the country.

The success of the documentary film 'Don't Cry for Me, Sudan' prompted the producers to continue. On 9 September 2020, director Soo-Hwan Goo launched a new documentary entitled '[Resurrection](#)' which follows the story of Lee's students a decade after his death and features around seventy of them, both in the Republic of South Sudan and Ethiopia.

John Lee Tae Seok was a living example of Christian love and solidarity. His life teaches us that even in the most difficult circumstances, with faith and dedication, we can make a difference in the world. John's dreams for Tonj continue to live on thanks to those who, inspired by his figure, work to build a better future for the poorest and most needy.

A Salesian who will be spoken of again.