

Biography

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Eusèbe-Louis-Armand BRET, born in the parish of Saint-Bénigne in Dijon (Côte-d'Or) on December 17, 1858, studied at the minor seminary of Plombières-lès-Dijon and at the major seminary of his native city. He entered the Foreign Missions Seminary in Paris on September 12, 1879, received the priesthood on March 4, 1882, and left on April 12 for the General College in Pinang. On November 16 of the same year, he was appointed professor of ecclesiastical history, and on December 29 of the following year professor of rhetoric; his teaching was very popular. To these functions, he was added, on November 4, 1884, that of a nurse. In 1890, he published a new edition of two pamphlets in Latin, on Literature and Rhetoric.

The development of the particular seminaries of the missions made the recruitment of students at Pinang more and more difficult. The teaching staff, sufficient for 125 students, had become too numerous for about 30. Mr. Bret measured his strength, took advice, listened to his devotion and his love for Korea, which he had come to know, and one fine day he was seen disembarking at Chemulpo, to the great amazement of many. He had made up his mind to do what he wanted to do, and he did it with determination. The teacher full of knowledge and experience became a missionary apprentice.

What field will be marked to his action? The city of Ouen-san (or Gen-san) was becoming more important every day, all nationalities were rubbing shoulders there, for it was, at that time, the closest port to the eastern Chinese border. Bishop Mutel rightly thought that the newcomer had special aptitudes to be sent there. He therefore entrusted him with Ouen-san. It was there that Mr. Bret studied the language, there that he made his first administrative tours and that he quickly learned to know, with the national idiom, the men and things of Korea. He was to remain in office until his death.

In sending Mr. Bret to Ouen-san, Bishop Mutel had something else in mind besides the good of this one post. For several years, the zeal of the Vicar Apostolic had been cherishing the project of bringing the Gospel to the northern confines of the Korean mission. The province of Ham-kejeng is, if not the most populated, at least the most extensive in all of Korea. It is at least 800 kilometers long and extends along the eastern coast from the port of Ouen-san to the borders of China and Siberia. While the practical means of realizing this project were being deliberated upon, Providence itself intervened and put an end to all hesitation. One day, it was in 1896, a man came to the missionary of Ouen-san: he was a tall man, six feet tall, dry, black, with an austere face and short, jerky words. Coming from the northern mountains, he had made a journey of 950 kilometers on foot to seek the true religion. He was quickly educated and baptized under the name of John the Baptist, which suited his status as a forerunner. When he returned home, John the Baptist told his friends and acquaintances about the treasure of his new faith. Shortly afterwards, he returned to Ouen-san with a dozen catechumens. Mr. Bret baptized them and, when he sent them home, added a catechist who was to gather information on this movement, direct it and prepare the missionary's visit. The missionary, without hiding the difficulties of the undertaking, had fully entered into the views of his apostolic vicar, and he burned with the desire to open these countries to the light of the Gospel. He took advantage of the passage of a steamer bound for the north and on December 29, 1897, he disembarked at Ta-keu-mi, the outport of Kyeng-syeng. There he said goodbye to the ship's staff and also ... to civilization. He has no idea how things will be from now on. He is in a completely new country and thinks with some

concern about his inexperience of mission life, about the insufficiency of his linguistic baggage. But it didn't matter! Forward, in the care of God!

A series of trials greeted the apostolic pioneer from the very beginning. When he entered the city of Hoi-ryong, he found the house he had bought sealed with its doors and windows open to all winds. The pagan notables of the place had affixed these seals on their own authority to prevent the Christians from using this building for religious purposes. This ill will was not denied afterwards: in the streets of the city, a boisterous crowd followed the missionary, stones flew, and one of them, intended for Mr. Bret, no doubt, hit his servant. The enemies of the Christians bribed some scoundrels who, during the night, threw stones over the surrounding wall at the door of the residence. In spite of this opposition, the Father immediately began to administer the sacraments, in order to prepare his Christians and catechumens to withstand the onslaught of persecution. He made several excursions to the surrounding villages, both to accustom the pagans to the sight of the cassock and to comfort the Christians who lived there. He visited the villages of Tai-tjong-tong, Hak-syei-ko, and Sa-ki-tong, usually receiving insults and stones when he returned to town. He had become accustomed to this and, following the example of his patron saint, St. Eusebius, he regarded these stonings as a complement to his apostolate. Unable to move him, the pagans attacked his Christians. In the village of Sa-ki-tong, they rose up against the catechist Luke, took up residence in his house, drove out his wife and children and broke the furniture. To obtain justice, it was necessary to address the Chinese mandarin of Tjeng-syeng, because Sa-ki-tong was situated on the left bank of the Tou-man-kang, in Chinese territory, or at least claimed as such by China. In order to be in a better position to help the Korean Christians scattered over this territory, Father decided to settle in the hamlet of Tja-eui-tong, where the first baptized person in the north, John Baptist Kim, mentioned above, lived. Instead of the calm and fruitful work he had hoped to find in these mountains, Father was assailed by a real turmoil. A first letter arrived from Hoiryeng announcing a riot against the Christians of that city; in Sa-ki-tong, in Hak-syei-kol, the pagans were driving out the Christians, the most sinister rumors were circulating, Job's letters followed one another, and the poor missionary wondered with anguish from which side of the sky a lightning would appear. But, instead of calming down, the storm raged more furiously: a large band of brigands, armed in the European style, and who had become drunk to give themselves courage, massed at the entrance to the Tja-eui-tong valley. In the middle of winter, to avoid the massacre of his Christians, the Father was forced to give the signal for a hasty departure. He and his Christians scattered through the snowy mountain passes and rallied six leagues away at Ho-chyen-hpo. Meanwhile, Tja-eui-tong was ransacked by the rioters, nine houses were burned, and all the furniture, with part of the Father's luggage, disappeared in the fire. In Ho-tchyen-hpo, the hostile dispositions of the population were immediately apparent; it was necessary to go to the court of law and to begin with the authorities one of those negotiations of which only those who had been involved knew the length and the troubles. By dint of perseverance and prudence, however, the Father obtained, in the end, the strict minimum of justice for himself and his Christians, and he was able to think about returning.

What he had suffered during those two and a half months! He himself admitted that his first white hairs were from that campaign. All the hardships had assailed him at once: a diet of millet flour, "as succulent as sawdust," lighting with chenille, exhausting runs to the point of starvation, constant alerts, looting of the Christian communities, the sufferings of his dear neophytes and the powerlessness to come to their aid. After having given all he had, Mr. Bret had to borrow the money necessary for the return. In the midst of all his troubles, Father Bret kept his soul calm enough to minister to souls, to console himself by reading the epistles of St. Paul, to collect notes on administration and linguistics, not to be caught unprepared by any event, and to follow to the end a line of conduct that would eventually ensure the success

of his claims. When, a few weeks later, Bishop Mutel wrote to him: "You have received the baptism of fire, you have just earned your spurs", this praise was nothing but the expression of the truth.

The trials undergone in common, the truly exemplary fervor and the generosity of the neophytes had attached the heart of Mr. Bret to the nascent Christianity of Kan-to. He liked to repeat this laborious expedition every year (except in 1904 because of the war). The first one had been crowned with 461 baptisms; the second one gave him 82. He already saw in perspective the possibility of founding a permanent post in the north and generously offered himself to his bishop to go and organize this station. Bishop Mutel was not then in a position to satisfy this desire, but he compensated Mr. Bret by undertaking with him, in the autumn of 1900, the visit of the Kan-to. This was the consecration of the work accomplished and a guarantee of success for future work. The momentum of the conversions, halted for a moment by the Russo-Japanese war, was resumed in 1905. To ensure the perseverance of these neophytes, the missionary left no stone unturned. His Christians were too scattered among the pagans: he gathered them, as far as he could, in agricultural colonies, so that they could support each other. He multiplied their instructions and examinations. So he had the satisfaction, at the end of the 1906 tour, of meeting Christians who could not be embarrassed by any question, unless it went into details of pure theology.

Thanks to such a vigorous impulse, the development of the Kan-to continued in a remarkable way. Father modestly attributed this progress to the fervor of the ancient Christians. He pointed out that some of them had spent months as voluntary itinerant catechists, devoting themselves, without any hope of a salary, to teaching catechism in villages that were opening up to the faith. Of his own work, he said nothing.

The hopes that he had founded on this dear Kan-to were so great that they inspired his ambition to endow it with a native clergy. In the construction of his presbytery in Ouen-san, he planned and reserved a room to house, during the vacations, the seminarians that the north would provide. He made every effort to realize this idea, and his final failure on this point was sensitive to him. He had counted on the difficulty of bending these strong and independent natures to a rule that thwarted all their whims.

In order to speak of Kan-to, his great work, we had to omit long details about Ouen-san and the other stations of his district. Everywhere he was a zealous missionary, a pious priest, an upright man, too upright no doubt, for the liking of some Christians devoted to commerce, in a cosmopolitan port. Ouen-san owes him a lot, both spiritually and materially. He provided it with a church and a suitable presbytery, and a garden which all those who have seen it say is wonderful. It was there that he relaxed from the work of the ministry and from his studies, rehabilitating the work of the hands, held in too low an esteem by the Koreans.

The life of our dear Mr. Bret was an eminently priestly life, full of supernatural feelings. His piety was deep and unpretentious, his regularity exemplary. Nothing equaled his respect for his superiors and his charity for all his confreres. Those who lived with him know how prudent, delicate and affectionate he was. The respect he showed to all, he inspired for himself. In noisy meetings, he did not like to put himself forward; but, withdrawn a few steps away, he enjoyed the general spirit and smiled finely at the blows well struck. In his company, one was sure not to be bored and always to hear some new and useful insight. His well-chosen readings, his great faculty of observation and a methodical mind, easily provided him with material for conversation. It was especially in the service of the Divine Master, at Mass, at the breviary, in the spiritual exercises that he showed the seriousness of his character. There he freed himself, as if without effort, from all external embarrassments, in order to unite himself to God through prayer.

After such a full life, the great rest came. At the beginning of 1908, several serious illnesses visited Mr. Bret while he was in Kan-to, the main theater of his apostolate. At the invitation of his worried confreres, he returned to Ouen-san to be treated. They sent him a devoted nurse in the person of Mr. Larribeau. They tried to persuade him to go to Hong Kong for treatment. But he felt he was dying and wanted to die at his post. Instead of thinking about the trip to Hong Kong, the dear Father thought only of eternity. From the end of September 1908, his life was a long agony. On Saturday, September 26, and the next day, he was taken in the stomach by intolerable pains: they were the last crises of a cancer. He received the Extreme Unction while answering the prayers himself. When everything was over, he was very happy to be ready to leave. He dictated his farewell to the confreres: "Tell them that I commend myself well to their charitable prayers. I was very happy to learn of Bishop Mutel's successful visit to Europe and his upcoming return to Korea. He had written to me to offer my sufferings for the success of this affair, and now that it is over (we had just learned that the Benedictine Fathers were going to come to Korea and take charge of the work of the schools), I hope I will not have to suffer much longer...".

The end was approaching fast. From October 22 on, he fell into an almost continual slumber, cut off by acts of resignation to the will of God. His charitable nurse did not leave him. On October 24, at 11:½ in the evening, seeing the imminence of danger, he gave him a last absolution and renewed his plenary indulgence. At midnight precisely, eternity opened before our dear confrere and friend. The Blessed Virgin answered the prayers we had addressed to her, inaugurating, by this grace, the feast of her holy patronage.

Mr. Bret now rests in this land where he had worked so hard and where he had desired to sleep his last sleep. When Korea is covered with such graves, it will be close to being Christian. For if the life of a missionary is worn out in the conquest of souls, is not his death the definitive taking possession of them? Mr. Bret will remember Korea, the Kan-to, and they will remember him. R. I. P.!