

Faithful for 50 years

Hwan Ja Perreault's studious journey to the church began with her college tutor



Stephen Brashear

By Nathan Whalen

Spread out on Hwan Ja Perreault's kitchen table are the Jerusalem Bible, a Sunday missal and a binder of information about the Second Vatican Council. For 50 years, she has been studying and participating in the Catholic faith. But this year is special: Hwan Ja is becoming a member of the church at the Easter Vigil.

"I thank God for helping give me this opportunity," Hwan Ja said. "I feel every morning: God, I'm privileged to be here."

Born in Tokyo and raised in Korea, Hwan Ja comes from a scholarly family. She is the daughter of a Buddhist and the granddaughter of a Confucian scholar. Although she married a Catholic, John Perreault, in 1966, Hwan Ja chose not to join the church, out of devotion to her deceased mother.

Still, she promised to raise their children in the Catholic faith. But Hwan Ja did more than that, becoming an active participant in Catholic life. The family attended weekly Mass and she made sure her two children attended religious education classes. Through the years Hwan Ja never received Communion, respecting the teaching that non-Catholics should not receive the sacrament.

"I'm very strict that you follow the rules and rituals," she explained. It wasn't until Hwan Ja met Father Tom Belleque, then pastor of St. Louise de Marillac Parish in Bellevue, that she learned she could receive a blessing from the priest during Communion.

Raised in hardship

Hwan Ja was devoted to her mother, Ki Tae Choi, who raised her four children while enduring extreme poverty in the wake of World War II. "My mother was a person who never lost hope," Hwan Ja said.

During the war, her father, Wong Hyung Choi, was imprisoned for about five years by the Japanese for raising money and recruiting people to resist the Japanese occupation of Korea. He died in prison in 1945, just months before the end of the war and Japan's occupation. Shortly afterward, the family moved from Japan to Korea, living in the southern part of the country, including Pusan and Seoul.

Hwan Ja's mother traveled from town to town selling dry goods. She was "a very Buddhist person," Hwan Ja said, living the tradition's ideals of being kind to everyone and striving to incorporate Buddhist principles into everyday life. She commemorated her husband's death three times a year, and the family attended temple for special occasions.

"The way we lived our lives was embedded in Buddhist teachings," Hwan Ja said.

One morning, three years after the armistice in the Korean War, Hwan Ja said goodbye to her mother and went off to work as usual. But before Hwan Ja returned home, her mother died suddenly of penicillin shock.

Learning about Catholicism

Six years later, Hwan Ja had saved enough money from her work as a secretary to travel to Seattle and study psychology at the University of Washington. Her grades were good enough that she earned a scholarship, but she struggled with math and needed a tutor. That's when John Perreault entered her life. His tutoring sessions helped Hwan Ja improve her math skills enough to keep her scholarship and finish college.

The pair spent a lot of time together and eventually began dating. Hwan Ja occasionally accompanied John to Mass at his parish, St. Anne on Seattle's Queen Anne Hill. After they became engaged, the couple participated in the parish's marriage preparation program.

As she learned about the Catholic Church, Hwan Ja recalls being taught that only baptized Catholics can enter heaven. "I took that as a very serious doctrine," she said. It was also a troubling teaching, because Hwan Ja remembered the sacrifices her mother made while raising her family, and hoped to see her again one day.

In June 1966, the couple graduated from college and got married at St. Anne's. Instead of a honeymoon, the Perreaults drove to their new home in California, where John began working as a nuclear engineer for General Electric, designing power plants.

"We were dead broke," John recalled. "All we had was an old car my dad had given me. We had \$85 between us."

His work as a nuclear engineer took the couple to San Jose and Decatur, Alabama — the cities where their two sons were baptized — and other stops in Japan, New Jersey and Illinois before the family settled in Bellevue in 1980. They chose to worship at St. Louise Parish, attracted by its relaxed, welcoming atmosphere.

During the 1980s, Hwan Ja returned to the University of Washington, where she earned an accounting degree, then worked as a CPA until retiring in the late 1990s. It wasn't until 2002 that Hwan Ja and John had a proper honeymoon, to Niagara Falls. The couple celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary last year.

A difficult question

Throughout their marriage, Hwan Ja has attended Mass with John and their family. John never pressured her to become Catholic, and Hwan Ja continued her faith education, reading the Bible and Catholic Church documents.

About a decade ago, she started thinking about entering the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program. Then, about five years ago, her granddaughter, Kate, asked Hwan Ja what she found to be a difficult question: "Grandma, why don't you receive Communion?"

That was part of the final nudge Hwan Ja needed to decide to enroll in RCIA at St. Louise.

Her concerns about whether her mother could go to heaven had been eased over the years by homilies she heard and conversations with friends, Hwan Ja said. (The Catechism of the Catholic Church, quoting Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, explains: "Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere

heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience — those too may achieve eternal salvation.")

"It was a real relief," Hwan Ja said. "I wonder why in the world I didn't find out on my own."

Still, it took a few years after her granddaughter's question before Hwan Ja acted on her decision. The delay, she said, was due to "inertia" and being set in her ways.

She contacted St. Louise Parish before Easter 2016, wanting to enter the church immediately. But she agreed to sign up for RCIA after Easter, said Geri Hanley, pastoral assistant for faith formation, initiation and sacraments at St. Louise.

"She has been so faithful to the process" and has expressed thanks for it every week, Hanley said.

Hwan Ja's sponsor, Benita Almanza, is a familiar face — their kids attended high school together. "She's very excited," Almanza said. "She mentioned she really shouldn't have waited so long."

During her time in RCIA, Hwan Ja has been reading the Bible more carefully.

Today, she studies the Sunday readings before and after Mass and prays throughout each day. "I often, often pray," Hwan Ja said. "It's very comforting to me."

In her prayers, she often expresses gratitude for the blessings God has given her. Two of those blessings are her grandchildren: Kate, now a fourth-grader at St. Louise School, and her brother, Jake, who is in pre-kindergarten there. They spend weekdays after school at their grandparents' house.

Officially entering the church this year at the April 15 Easter Vigil, Hwan Ja said, will make her that much more connected to her family. She isn't sure what may come in the months and years after her baptism, first Communion and confirmation, but she is ready for what God wills.

"It's a spiritual journey," Hwan Ja said, "so I will wait to see what transpires and is revealed to me." Ω



Ki Tae Choi,
Hwan Ja's mother



Hwan Ja Perreault, left, attends Mass with her RCIA sponsor, Benita "Bing" Almanza, and Perreault family members including husband John and son Dan.