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Ressort: Politik

Interview with the Ambassador of Korea to Holy See

Rome/Vatican, 01.02.2026 [ENA]

Your Excellency, Hyung-sik SHIN, thank you for your time.

To begin, the diplomatic relationship between the Republic of Korea and the Holy See is one of the most unique and longest-standing on the Korean Peninsula, established in 1963.

? In your view, what is the core strategic or moral value of this relationship today, beyond the historical context?

"The relationship between the Republic of Korea and the Holy See

is a profound bond that transcends mere diplomacy; it is a testament to shared history and spiritual solidarity. The Holy See played a providential role in the very genesis of our Republic, offering crucial support during the formation of our government and its subsequent recognition by the United Nations as a legitimate sovereign state. This bond was further solidified through the courageous contributions of the Korean Catholic Church and its faithful, who served as a moral compass during our nation's arduous journey toward democratization.

As we mark the 63rd anniversary of our diplomatic ties, we celebrate a mature relationship rooted in a unique trilateral synergy between the Holy See, the Korean Government, and the Korean Catholic Church. We are now transcending traditional bilateral friendship to forge a global partnership aimed at addressing the pressing challenges of the international community—ranging from the protection of human rights and the eradication of poverty to conflict resolution and the promotion of a lasting peace.

Korea's unique trajectory—marked by a history of martyrdom, rapid economic ascent, and the steadfast defense of democracy—combined with our dynamic culture and technological leadership, creates a powerful platform for collaboration with the

Holy See.

Most importantly, Korea possesses a profound, existential understanding of 'Peace.' Having endured the ravages of war 76 years ago and continuing to live as a divided nation, we understand all too well that without peace, human dignity and sustainable development are hauntingly fragile. It is this shared conviction that drives our commitment to stand hand-in-hand with the Holy See as a force for good in the world."

? The Holy See's diplomacy is deeply focused on peace, human dignity, and reconciliation. Korea remains a divided nation. How active a role does the Holy See play, or can it play, as a neutral moral voice in the

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ongoing dialogue about peace and eventual reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula?

"In his inaugural Urbi et Orbi message, His Holiness Pope Leo XIV set a profound tone for his pontificate by extending a greeting of peace and expressing his desire for a Church that dwells close to those who suffer. As he continues to raise a prophetic voice against the conflicts marring our global village, I, as the Ambassador of Republic of Korea to the Holy See, view the establishment of peace on the Korean Peninsula as my most sacred and paramount mission. Peace is not merely the absence of war; it is the indispensable bedrock upon which human dignity, democracy, and sustainable prosperity are built. The Government of the Republic of Korea remains steadfast in seeking a path toward easing military tensions and restoring mutual trust.

Rooted in the historical lesson that exchange and cooperation are the surest shortcuts to reconciliation, we aim to conclude the era of confrontation and usher in a new dawn of 'Peaceful Coexistence and Shared Growth.' His Holiness possesses an exceptionally deep affinity for the Korean people, having visited our nation five times during his years with the Order of Saint Augustine. When I had the honor of an audience during the presentation of my credentials last December, the Holy Father moved me deeply by stating that he frequently remembers Korean people and prays for peace on the Korean Peninsula.

We look forward with great anticipation to World Youth Day 2027 in Seoul, where the Holy Father will meet the youth of the world to offer

them a message of consolation and hope. Furthermore, I am convinced that should the Holy Father's apostolic journey include a visit to North Korea, it would serve as a decisive catalyst for the de-escalation of tensions on the peninsula. As the Ambassador of Republic of Korea to the Holy See, I am fully committed to fostering the necessary international environment to support such a historic milestone."

Pope Francis has consistently highlighted the crisis of "demographic winter," declining births, in many developed nations.

? South Korea now has the world's lowest fertility rate. From your perspective, is this primarily a policy challenge, or does it reflect a deeper cultural or spiritual crisis that the Church's social teaching might address?

"South Korea's demographic decline is a complex synthesis of profound cultural and social transformations. While our society was traditionally rooted in a patriarchal structure based on Confucian values, the rapid era of economic development and democratization has shifted these foundations. The rise of higher education and the active social participation of women have led to a natural evolution where traditional gender roles no longer suffice.

Consequently, the low birth rate has transcended a mere statistical

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concern to become a 'crisis of national existence.' In response, the Korean government has undergone a fundamental paradigm shift. We have moved beyond simply encouraging childbirth to an 'effective guarantee of the right to conceive, nurture, and raise children.' To this end, creating a 'family-friendly environment' is a top national priority. Our comprehensive policy framework includes:

- Expanded support for infertility treatments and prenatal care;
- Strengthened childcare subsidies and universal care services;
- Enhanced protection for children and support for vulnerable or migrant families;
- Robust measures for the harmonization of professional and familial life.

However, we recognize that policy alone is not the panacea. Many in the younger generation now perceive marriage and parenthood as an 'option' rather than a 'necessity,' prioritizing individual fulfillment and economic stability. This shift is deeply intertwined with a changing perception of the meaning of life and the essence of community.

This is precisely where the Social Teaching of the Church offers invaluable wisdom. The Church's emphasis on human dignity, solidarity, and the intrinsic value of the family serves as a vital moral and cultural resource. It invites our entire society to reflect once more on the 'meaning of living together.' I believe we are in a season where we must rediscover the beauty of the family and the strength

of communal bonds, fostering a culture where every member can find true happiness within a supportive solidarity."

? The Korean Catholic Church is vibrant, growing, and has given us saints like St. Andrew Kim Taegon. How does the Embassy serve as a bridge between this dynamic local Church and the universal governance of the Vatican? Are there specific areas where Korean Catholicism is contributing uniquely to the global Church?

"The Korean Catholic Church holds a singular and luminous place in the annals of the universal Church. It is the only community in the world where the Gospel was embraced through the spontaneous initiative of laypeople and scholars some 240 years ago, rather than through foreign missionaries. In an era where the influence of religion is waning globally, the Korean Church continues to enjoy the profound trust of our citizens. This is largely because our clergy and religious orders never hesitated to act as the 'conscience of the era' even under the harshest dictatorial regimes. In particular, the activities of the Catholic Priests' Association for Justice (CPAJ), established in 1974, played a monumental role in our nation's journey toward

justice and democracy.

Today, Korea has transformed into one of the leading nations in Asia for sending overseas missionaries.

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We contribute to the universal Church through 'solidarity in action' across diverse fields, including education, healthcare, social welfare, and international development cooperation.

The Holy See holds the mature and proactive role of the Korean Church in high regard. As South Korea's international standing rises, so too does our diplomatic and spiritual influence within the Vatican. This is evidenced by the presence of numerous Korean clergy in high-ranking positions, most notably His Eminence Cardinal Lazzaro You Heung-sik, who serves as the Prefect of the Dicastery for the Clergy.

With World Youth Day 2027 scheduled to take place in Seoul, I believe Korea and its Church will play a pivotal role in radiating messages of peace, solidarity, and hope to the global youth and the Asian Church. As the Ambassador of Republic of Korea to the Holy See, I am fully committed to serving as a diplomatic and spiritual bridge to ensure this historic gathering becomes a transformative moment for the world."

? Pope Francis urged us to care for our "common home." South Korea is a technological and industrial powerhouse. In your diplomatic exchanges, is there a conversation about balancing rapid technological progress with integral ecology and ethical responsibility, and what might the world learn from Korea's experience?

"In the face of the global climate crisis, South Korea has embarked on a bold transition from a fossil-fuel-dependent economy to a 'Low-carbon, Green Growth' paradigm. Our goal is to present a growth model that harmonizes economic prosperity with ecological stewardship. We are firmly committed to the global collective response to the environmental crisis, positioning ourselves as a bridge-builder between advanced and developing nations. Through this intermediary leadership, Korea aims to contribute to the realization of an inclusive carbon-neutral world, ensuring that no nation is left behind in our care for our 'common home.'

We also recognize that we live in an era where rapid technological acceleration poses new challenges to human dignity. While South Korea strives to lead in digital innovation and cutting-edge technology, we are equally dedicated to the establishment of ethical tech governance. As a proactive participant in international discussions on digital norms, Korea is recognized as a pivotal partner in defining the ethical boundaries of innovation.

The profound impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer a distant future but a present reality. Believing that institutional frameworks for accountability and ethics are essential, South Korea has become the first in the world to fully implement the 'Artificial Intelligence Basic Act' as of

January 22, 2026. This legislation focuses on establishing AI management systems, supporting industrial vitality, and building a foundation of safety and trust.

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In this journey, the Holy See's vision regarding human dignity, ethics, and human rights serves as an invaluable moral compass, guiding our technological progress away from potential ethical vacuums. As the Ambassador of Republic of Korea, I am deeply committed to collaborating with the Holy See to ensure that the digital revolution remains a servant to humanity, guided by the light of conscience and the primacy of the human person."

? Given the Holy See's global moral voice, how do you present the unique aspects of Korean culture—which has deep Confucian, Buddhist, and vibrant modern influences—in this particular diplomatic context?

"South Korea is a land where the legacies of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Catholicism breathe together in a syncretic harmony of tradition and modernity. One of the greatest strengths of Korean culture is its dynamic adaptability—the ability to evolve alongside the rapid currents of time while remaining anchored in deep spiritual values.

The global phenomenon of K-pop, K-dramas, and Korean cinema is not merely a triumph of market strategy; rather, it is a product of an ethical attitude and communal effort. In the diplomatic circles of Rome, many see K-Culture as a medium of 'profound relationship' and 'shared resilience.' This creates a vital foundation of trust, where a fascination with our music and films often matures into a sincere interest in Korea's history, religion, and social values.

At the heart of this cultural wave lies authenticity, diligence, and the human story. The global success of BTS illustrates this most dramatically. Recently, on January 26, Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum even sent a formal letter to President Lee Jae-myung, requesting additional

BTS concerts in Mexico to meet the overwhelming demand of over a million fans. The reason for such fervor lies in the fact that BTS offers more than just spectacle; they provide healing messages and honest vulnerability.

This resonates deeply because the 'growth narrative' of BTS—ordinary boys rising to the global summit—perfectly mirrors the dramatic trajectory of modern Korea: from the ruins of war and poverty to a powerhouse of democracy and technology. This shared narrative sends a powerful message of hope to the world's youth: 'I can do it, too.' I am convinced that this spirit of harmony and inclusive growth will create a powerful synergy with the Holy See's values of solidarity and universal fraternity."

? Shifting to contemporary culture, the "Korean Wave" or Hallyu—from K-pop to films like "Parasite"—has captivated the world. From your vantage point in Rome, how do you see this modern

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cultural phenomenon interacting with or complementing the traditional spiritual and ethical values of Korea? Is there a dialogue about this new form of soft power at the diplomatic level here?

"The strength of Hallyu can be analyzed through various lenses, but I believe its core lies in its relentless dynamism—an agility that refuses to settle, constantly adapting to and evolving with the rapid currents of our time. In an era of unprecedented change, this inherent resilience of the Korean people has become our greatest diplomatic asset, positioning Korean

culture as a pioneer of global trends. More importantly, Korean contemporary culture possesses a singular gift for translating our unique historical lessons and emotions into a universal language that resonates with the hearts of all humanity.

A quintessential example is Han Kang, the 2024 Nobel Laureate in Literature. Her masterpiece, *Human Acts*, delves into the inner lives of victims and survivors of Korea's democratization movement, posing the fundamental ontological question: 'What is humanity, and to what lengths can human cruelty reach?' While deeply rooted in the Korean experience, its message is profoundly universal, touching the very essence of human dignity.

Similarly, the recent Netflix global hit, *K-pop Demon Hunters*, masterfully synthesizes traditional motifs—such as Hanbok, Hanok, and Hansik—with the vibrant energy of K-pop. Beyond the spectacle, it offers a poignant message of inner healing: the courage to embrace one's 'shame' and achieve true self-love. It is this psychological depth and authenticity that have garnered such an enthusiastic response from youth worldwide.

Ultimately, K-Culture has transcended mere entertainment to become a 'Culture of Values.' By sharing messages of self-love, solidarity, communal responsibility, and sensitivity toward the marginalized, it elevates the ethical standing of Korean culture on the world stage.

In Korea, tradition and modernity are not antithetical; they are in constant dialogue, enriching one another through continuous interaction. As I engage with my fellow ambassadors in Rome, I can personally testify that this cultural resonance has become a powerful foundation for trust and diplomatic cooperation."

? Finally, a lighter question. If you were to recommend one Korean cultural experience—be it a place, a tradition, a book, or even a dish—to Pope Leo XIV and the diplomats at the Holy See to truly understand the "soul" of Korea, what would it be and why?

"If I were to recommend a single experience to truly understand the 'soul' of Korea to His Holiness and the diplomats at the Holy See, it would be the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone). The DMZ is far more than a military boundary; it is a paradoxical space where Korea's deepest wounds coexist with its most courageous hopes.

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It is a place where the past, present, and future of the Korean soul are etched into the landscape.

To visit the DMZ is to witness the living heart of Korean modern history—the scars of war, division, and the Cold War. Yet, it also serves as the starting point for understanding how, upon these very wounds, Korea cultivated a vibrant democracy and achieved an economic miracle. It is perhaps the only place on Earth where a

theater of extreme military tension has inadvertently become one of the world's most pristine ecosystems. In the absence of human interference, nature has reclaimed the land, symbolizing a silent but powerful triumph of life over conflict.

This striking contradiction mirrors the quintessential Korean soul, where the deep-seated grief of 'han' coexists with an unyielding hope, and the scars of our past find their meaning in a journey toward restoration and peace. The DMZ represents the immense patience and tension that Korea has endured for over 70 years to preserve peace.

For the diplomats at the Holy See, the DMZ offers a visceral, intuitive understanding of our nation. It explains why Korea places peace at the absolute zenith of its diplomatic priorities and why we believe that international solidarity is not just a choice, but an existential necessity for the future of humanity."

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