

Theme Issue

Diversity and Difference in Korean Catholicism

Guest Editors' Introduction

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The Korean Catholic Church is often celebrated as a success story. Established without the direct intervention of missionaries on the peninsula, it endured fearsome persecution creating heroic martyrs, gained an increasing number of blessed and saints, and has attained a respected place in Korean society and the international Catholic community. Contacts with Catholicism exposed Koreans, both Catholic and non-Catholic, to Western science and technology. While those Koreans were primarily educated male *yangban*, new ways of understanding the world trickled down to women and lost-status men, opening new vistas of human dignity and freedom. The story of Catholicism in Korea thus presents an image of Koreans dynamically reacting to the challenges they faced in the late Joseon period, such as discrimination based on gender and social status and a path that might have led to a modern, independent, and unified nation-state. This is, of course, not to say that the Korean Catholic Church is seen as perfect in Korea—far from it. Nevertheless, its history evinces a narrative typically more positive than not.

Such a narrative is naturally attractive to Koreans, both Catholic and non-Catholic, and shapes a significant amount of Korean-language scholarship on Catholicism. Yet the same is true of English-language scholarship. There are, in this author's opinion, three primary reasons for this. First, to a significant degree, Korean-language and English-language scholarship share thematic interests. For example, cultural interaction, social change, and religion and

violence are all areas that receive significant attention. Second, extant sources on Korean Catholicism support research in these areas. Catholics and Joseon officials left behind large amounts of materials related to martyrdom, and missionaries and Korean priests wrote about their own impressions of each other and their respective cultures, covering subjects related to gender and society. Despite these similarities, Korean-language scholarship has outpaced English-language work in terms of the number of publications. Over the last decade and a half, however, works in English focusing on Korean Catholicism have increased dramatically. The number of publications might have been one per year between 2000 and 2011 but rose to several per year between 2012 and 2025, buoyed by special journal issues and edited volumes. Notable in this regard were a special issue of *Acta Koreana* on Korean Catholicism in 2012 and the multi-volume *Palgrave Handbook of the Catholic Church in East Asia* published in the early 2020s.

Having reached such a stage of development, it is useful to reflect on the state of the field to identify areas in the scholarship on Korean Catholicism in need of greater attention. Studies on Korean Catholicism tend to focus on the Joseon period and treat Catholics as a single entity. Future scholarship might consider the diverse ways in which various Korean Catholics were persecuted by the Joseon state. The exploration of differences within the Korean Catholic community outside of the Joseon period, moreover, would also enrich our understanding of Korean Catholicism and its place in Korea and the world. It is precisely this objective that this first special issue of two on Korean Catholicism sets out to achieve.

These special issues originated in a panel organized by Jieun Han as part of the 2024 Kyujanggak International Symposium entitled “Catholicism and Korean Nation-Building.” While continuing with the thematic focus of the nation and Korean Catholicism, this panel, and the papers that developed from it, explored that subject in new and creative ways. This special issue begins chronologically with Shalon Park’s “Care Under Empire: Catholic Orphanages and Colonial Welfare in Korea, 1888–1945.” This work makes important contributions to English-language scholarship on Korean Catholicism. For one, Park focuses on organized social work, a subject in need of attention, bringing diverse actors into conversation, including Korean lay Catholics in Manchuria, Korean and foreign priests and nuns, and French and Japanese donors. Second, Park focuses on a period that became increasingly awkward for the Catholic Church in Korea as Japanese power on the peninsula expanded. To conduct social work that directly benefitted Korean people, particularly the poor and marginalized, Catholics had to establish some sort of working relationship with

the Japanese colonial state, which itself created misery for a great number of Koreans. Park sensitively treats this difficult matter, helping us to see how Catholics navigated the demands of faith, nation, and the Japanese colonial state. Park thus encourages a humble and humanistic approach to this controversial subject that recognizes the difficult choices that people of the time had to make.

Michel Chambon's "The Dialogic Culturation of Mother Mary in South Korea: Between Universal Aspirations and Local Footprints" likewise considers the diversity of Catholicism in Korea and between Korea and Singapore, focusing on artistic and devotional representations of Mary. Chambon's theoretically rich and comparative exploration of art, gender and motherhood, inculturation, and national identity reveals important characteristics of Korean and Singaporean Catholicism. This approach is significant largely because comparative studies on Korean Catholicism often focus on elite individuals or small groups in the more distant past, but Chambon is interested in much more recent interactions, primarily between Catholics in the pews and the art that shapes their devotional lives. Chambon points to significant differences among Korean Catholics. For instance, while some Korean nuns and artists have promoted what Chambon terms the "hanbok Mary," a consciously indigenized Mary that appears Korean, traditional Western versions have proven to be much more popular among the laity. This paper is particularly significant owing to the important role Marian piety plays in Korean Catholicism, with Mother Mary, under the title of the Immaculate Conception, serving as co-patron of the Korean Church along with Saint Joseph.

Finally, there is Franklin Rausch's "Through a Glass Darkly: Contemporary Korean Catholic Portrayals of Paul Yun Jichung." At first glance, this article appears to clash with the other two in this special issue. Besides not being presented at the 2024 Kyujanggak Symposium, its focus on 1791 martyr Yun Jichung seems to accord with the traditional theme of persecution that, while deserving of continued attention, this special issue tries to avoid. However, this article does not focus on Yun himself but on how Korean Catholics have interacted with the martyr from the 1980s to today, utilizing materials such as YouTube videos, newspaper articles, and even a comic book. Specifically, Rausch shows how Koreans look to Yun and his story as a model for how Korean Catholics should behave, what stance Koreans should take toward the society in which they live, and what that society should look like. Rausch thus reveals a multiplicity of approaches to Yun. Some Koreans embrace the supernatural aspects of his story, while others play them down; some see in Yun an apostle of a social gospel, while others an otherworldly martyr. New figures even come to

the fore, with a statue of Yun and two relatives who were martyred as boys being led by his mother, presented as a strong female leader. Yet whatever the approach, all must deal with the tensions that arise from trying to make the story of a man born more than 250 years ago relevant today. For instance, there is the awkward fact of Yun's execution for burning the ancestral tablets in his possession, a rejection of the practice of ancestral rites still valued by many in Korean society. Thus, Rausch shares with Park and Chambon attention to the theme of diversity in more recent Korean Catholic history.

These three articles build upon previous studies, considering anew the relationship between Korean Catholicism and the nation with a focus on periods that deserve more attention. They help reveal in new ways the diversity and dynamism that animate the Korean Catholic community. These authors hope this will contribute to the ongoing renaissance in English-language scholarship on Korean Catholicism and would like to express their gratitude to the *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* for making these special issues possible.