

Theme Issue

Diversity and Difference in Korean Catholicism

Guest Editors' Introduction

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The Korean Catholic Church is a community built upon the blood and faith of its martyrs. At the same time, Catholics in Korea have done more than simply die for their faith. Following liberation from Japanese colonial rule, both Korean and Western Catholics played important roles in the establishment of the Republic of Korea. Moreover, Korean Catholics have not limited their activities to the peninsula, but have gone overseas to share their faith in new and creative ways. Continuing from the previous special issue published in December 2025, we hope that the three papers featured in this second installment will further broaden readers' understanding of the Korean Catholic Church's distinctive identity and historical diversity.

In 1784, intellectuals of the late Joseon Dynasty who had encountered the Catholic faith through academic inquiry spontaneously formed the first Korean Catholic community. Since then, early believers steadfastly held to their faith, enduring over two centuries of severe state oppression and brutal persecution. Even before the establishment of the Apostolic Vicariate of Joseon in 1831 and the arrival of the first priest from the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP) on January 15, 1836, Korean Catholics had already survived multiple waves of violent suppression. Ironically, these early conflicts forced the Joseon state to adapt its legal system, which was heavily modeled on China's *Great Ming Code*, by developing localized penalties and practical mechanisms for state leniency in the prosecution of Catholic converts.

Under Japanese colonial rule (1905–1945), Bishop Adrien-Joseph Larribeau (r. 1933–1942), the ninth Vicar Apostolic of Seoul, initiated a discreet effort to transfer ecclesiastical leadership to indigenous Korean clergy. This historic process culminated on January 7, 1942, when Pope Pius XII appointed Father Paul Ro Ginam (No Kinam) as the first native Vicar Apostolic of Seoul. Following Korea’s liberation in 1945, the Korean Catholic Church began to redefine both its internal structure and its relationship with the state. Under the US Military Government (1945–1948), church leaders actively participated in the nation-building process, a stark contrast to their persecuted status during the late Joseon period. With the onset of the Cold War, the Church became deeply entangled in the ideological confrontations of anticommunism. The religious and diplomatic networks forged during this era proved vital when the Korean War broke out in 1950. Decades later, under successive military dictatorships, the Church took a leading role in the domestic struggle for democracy and human rights. Furthermore, the extensive experience in postwar reconstruction and national development gained through collaboration with international relief organizations built lasting capacity. Ultimately, this institutional growth enabled both the Korean Catholic Church and the South Korean government to transition from recipients of international aid to providers.

Today, the Korean Catholic Church actively dispatches priests, religious sisters, and lay people as missionaries not only across Asia but also to Africa, Europe, and the United States, fostering deep spiritual and cultural exchanges with host nations. Through this outward growth, it has evolved into a vibrant global community that increasingly views itself as an ecclesiastical hub of Asia. Yet, in the post-COVID era, the Church faces significant challenges, including an aging congregation, the disaffiliation of younger believers, a shortage of diocesan priests, declining seminary enrollments, and ongoing internal discussions regarding the role of women as priests and deacons. Nevertheless, carrying the profound pride of a church born spontaneously without foreign missionaries, it continues to move forward, striving to remain a dynamic, creative, and uniquely inculturated presence in Asia and worldwide.

This issue opens chronologically with Meng-Heng Lee’s “Strategic Leniency in State Penalties: Anti-Catholic Legal Practice during King Sunjo’s Reign (1801–1834).” Though not originally presented at the 2024 Kyujanggak Symposium, Lee’s analysis of the three major anti-Catholic crackdowns of 1801, 1815, and 1827 warrants significant scholarly attention. By comparing the severe punishments of the 1801 Sinyu Persecution with the later Eulhae (1815) and Jeonghae (1827) Persecutions, Lee illustrates how King Sunjo and the ruling elite altered their legal and penal approaches toward Catholic converts. He

argues that legal practice gradually shifted from highly politicized punitive measures to a standardized, institutionalized framework. To support this argument, Lee presents case studies of early Catholics, demonstrating that the *jeongbae* penalty, lifelong exile, served as an instrument of state leniency as opposed to execution. Utilizing official Joseon records and church archival materials, the study illustrates how court officials gradually abandoned treason-level political charges in favor of more lenient measures, including *jeongbae*, official releases, and deferred prosecutions. Moreover, Lee highlights how the families of arrested Catholics actively petitioned the court to prevent executions, reduce sentences, or secure releases. Given that the Eulhae and Jeonghae Persecutions have been relatively neglected in mainstream scholarship and rarely analyzed through a legal lens, Lee's innovative framework offers a vital, nuanced understanding of traditional state responses to conversion and apostasy.

Next, Jieun Han's "Between Benevolence and Anticommunism: Cardinal Spellman's Religious Diplomacy and Relief Work in Korea, 1945–1962" contributes to the historiography of modern Korean Catholicism by examining the transnational religious, diplomatic, and humanitarian networks that shaped the Church's post-liberation development. Han's research examines Archbishop of New York Francis Spellman's pivotal role in linking military, ecclesiastical, and diplomatic networks during post-liberation nation-building and the reconstruction in the aftermath of the Korean War (1950–1953). The study highlights Catholic relief initiatives and the work of the Maryknoll Fathers and Sisters within Korea's developing social welfare system. Han argues that while Korean Catholic leaders aligned closely with US military authorities and Vatican geopolitics, the Maryknoll Society, intimately connected to Spellman, emerged as the primary driver of Catholic social welfare, filling the structural vacuum left by the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP) as ecclesiastical leadership transitioned. Within this framework, Catholic Relief Services, operating under the National Catholic Welfare Conference, translated ideological alignment into concrete humanitarian and institutional support. While this partnership provided indispensable resources for national recovery and refugee rehabilitation, it simultaneously contributed to the entrenchment of anticommunist ideology and the moral legitimization of division on the Korean Peninsula. The legacy of this period thus reveals the dual character of modern Korean Catholic engagement: it enabled material reconstruction while inadvertently circumscribing opportunities for historical reconciliation in a divided postwar society.

Finally, Allen J. Kim presents a compelling sociological case study of a contemporary Korean missionary in "Thirty-Six Years a Korean Jesuit in Japan: Relational Incorporation, Lived Religion, and Aging across Borders." Kim traces

the life history of Father Mark Jeong Mo Koo's missionary work in Japan spanning from 1990 to 2026 through the analytical lens of "lived religion." Pioneered in the mid-1990s through scholarship associated with historian David D. Hall of Harvard Divinity School, the lived religion paradigm shifts scholarly focus toward how faith is enacted in everyday life, emphasizing the practices of ordinary people alongside institutional leadership. Utilizing this approach, Kim analyzes how a foreign religious migrant navigates social and structural incorporation in contemporary Japan, a society where Christianity remains a distinct minority and where Father Koo's Korean identity shapes his pastoral care and educational tenure at Sophia University. By foregrounding the concept of "relational incorporation," Kim contributes to migration studies, demonstrating how a missionary priest can cultivate a sense of belonging and societal integration beyond traditional citizenship. He further shows how a minority religious presence derives social meaning through daily pedagogy, ritual, accompaniment, and localized care. A particularly remarkable feature of Kim's study is its methodology: the article draws upon interviews with Father Koo conducted over more than a decade, from 2015 to 2026. This longitudinal approach offers readers a rare opportunity to engage directly with a migrant missionary's evolving thoughts, emotions, and memories in his own voice.

As the World Youth Day Seoul 2027 festival approaches, global interest in Korean Catholicism is rising among both religious and secular audiences worldwide. We hope that this two-part special issue makes a lasting contribution to English-language scholarship, fostering a deeper, more contextualized understanding of the Korean Catholic Church. On behalf of our six authors, we extend our sincere gratitude to the *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* for making this two-part publication possible.