

Lessons of Martyrdom on Contemporary Immigration

by Simon C. Kim and Elizabeth Oh

From the beginning of Jesus's ministry, the call to "follow me" was not a foreign invitation, but one that resonated with the disciples. Otherwise, how could one literally drop everything to follow at a moment's notice? What resonated was not only the hope afforded them by the person standing in front of them, but also the redirecting of their talents to a greater purpose in life. How many times do we say that there "must be more to life than this," and when the opportunity affords itself, how many of us have the courage to act upon it? This is precisely what was presented to the disciples, and they were the ones with enough courage to follow through with it. Thus, the simple words "Come follow me," in fact, resonate at a much deeper level for those who respond. Christ reminds us of this reality when he tells the first of his disciples that they will no longer be just fishermen but will be netting people as fishers of humanity (Mt 4:19, Mk 1:17, Lk 5:10).

Fishing was a lucrative business at the time of Jesus. Ownership meant both a successful fishing operation as well as a "secure and stable lifestyle" which the first disciples left completely behind.¹ Their response was not a calculated decision, but rather a direct response to Jesus's invitation as indicated by the Greek term *eutheōs* in the Matthean account.² To become fishers, netting people instead of fish meant that those called would not be just adding another activity in their busy lives, but, rather, embracing a totally new way of life.³

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Thus, the years spent with Jesus before his crucifixion were a formation period where the skill-set one already possessed was reformulated. The lessons of living with their master can be interpreted as an invitation to live according to the reign of God by retooling one's ability within the kingdom. In particular, fishing was the skill-set or ability that Simon, James, and John possessed prior to their engagement with Jesus. Watching and imitating their teacher allowed the Twelve to witness God's economy and eventually

embrace a mindset where their abilities could be recalibrated in continuing the work of Christ with the grace of the Holy Spirit. In particular, the willingness to labor all night, casting one's nets into the deep and reaping the

1 Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew, Sacra Pagina Series*, Daniel Harrington, ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 72.

2 Greg Garrett, "Matthew 4:12-23: Homiletical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Year A*, vol. 1, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, 289 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2010.

3 Ted A. Smith, "Mark 1:14-20: Homiletical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Year B*, vol. 1, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, 289 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2008.

rewards of a bountiful haul were repetitive habits (Jn 21). However, these were soon transformed into powerful tools utilized in furthering the reign of God.

In the opening narratives of the gospels where we see Jesus bringing together the Twelve, the paradigm for ministry is not about the qualifications we might value today through educational achievement, work experience, or leadership abilities. Rather, the call of these men was related to their occupation and willingness to shift their worldview by leaving everything behind. These two aspects are then utilized in creating disciples whose faithfulness is revealed in all aspects of our abilities, a further sign that the reign of God is comprised of all aspects of our humanity. What Jesus saw in the Twelve was their ability to fish as well as their willingness to follow. These two elements—one's talent and one's obedience—are also evident in the lives of the Korean Martyrs, and, therefore, must also be uncovered in the Korean immigrant experience to the U.S. as part of the ongoing faith tradition.

Korean Martyrs as Loyal Scholars

Korea first encountered Classical Confucian thought as a tributary of China and eventually established its own Confucian ideals to create a national identity.⁴ Therefore, Korean Confucianism became the belief system of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) to unite the kingdom. Rulers either legitimized their reign or the overthrow of previous regimes by appealing to the Korean people's loyalty. As a result, Koreans viewed the king as worthy of their loyalty since "kingship was supposed to embody both inherent moral superiority through a royal bloodline, and individual greatness expressed in superior feats of prowess, both intellectual and physical."⁵

As Confucianism valued respect for authority and for the group rather than the individual, namely to the king and to one's parents, Koreans had a deep respect for the practice of loyalty found in filial piety for family and society to function harmoniously.⁶ Joseon literature shows evidence of this in stories of children, subjects, and wives who suffered to remain loyal to parents, rulers, and husbands. Some Koreans, in fact, took suffering to the extreme in following Confucian teachings by giving up their lives. "Taking one's life was not only appropriate, but an honorable act"; for instance, women committed suicide to protect their chastity and government officials killed themselves honorably before enemies reached them during the seventeenth-century struggle.⁷ Korean subjects also gave up their lives to remain loyal to the king.

Not all of Catholicism aligned with Confucianism, however, and Koreans would suffer greatly for their newfound faith. Their loyalty toward the king was challenged by their new love for God. This transition was not difficult within a Confucian hierarchical system since humans were subject under one another, thereby upholding the community. Thus, an earthly king would naturally be subject to a heavenly king. God became their ultimate ruler, not their king; consequently, this became an act of treason, punishable by death.

Despite strong resistance, local writers brought the Catholic faithful together and inspired them to endure great persecution. The first Catholics were the highly educated elite *yangban* class. Later, those unable to read Classical Chinese required Catholic literature in the Korean vernacular. For example, Augustine Jeong Yakjong produced the first Korean catechism using examples from daily life. In it, Jeong explains why ancestor worship was against the Catholic faith, as the Lord of Heaven deserved all the praise. He also describes Jesus as sharing the noblest bloodline of every human on earth, which clearly went against the monarchs whose very claim to the throne was

4 William Callahan, "Negotiating Cultural Boundaries: Confucianism and Trans/National Identity in Korea," *Cultural Values* 3 (1999): 336.

5 Patrick Kilkelly, "Orthodox Heresy: Chŏng Yakchong and the Chugyo yoji," *Irish Journal of Asian Studies* 1 (2015): 12.

6 Callahan, "Negotiating Cultural Boundaries," 344.

7 Franklin D. Rausch, "Choosing to Die: Catholic Voluntary Martyrdom in the late Joseon Korea" (paper presented at the University of Washington Workshop on the Politics of Honorable Death and Martyrdom in Korean History, Seattle, Washington, June 8, 2013), 5.

based on having the purest bloodline.⁸ Thus, Catholic ideals of human equality, along with the belief in God and concern for the afterlife, conflicted with Confucian thought, inciting persecution of believers.

Jeong's son, Paul Chong Hasang, wrote the first apologetic work. Through his writings, he attempted to revive the church after severe persecutions during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. His letter attempted to persuade the prime minister that Catholicism was compatible with Confucian thought, while surpassing it. Chong's tone reflects his zeal and passion in arguing how one must adhere to the Catholic faith. Quite contrary to Confucian beliefs, he asserts that status and wealth are worthless in the present world, and nothing compares to attaining the joy of eternity in heaven.⁹ He further notes the compatibility of filial piety and the Fourth Commandment to honor one's parents, and how one should serve parents and also offer one's life in loyalty to the king. Ultimately, Chong argues that one must obey God, as he ranks the highest. He writes, "The father is the highest in a household, yet the king of the country is higher than the father; and though the king is the highest in country, the one who is higher than the king is the Great King of heaven and earth."¹⁰

The ease with which some Koreans were able to integrate themselves into Catholic doctrine of piety is evidenced in their extraordinarily high rates of martyrdom. Though some scholars may wonder at their courage, their self-sacrifice may have been easier than other non-Confucian-based cultures as they were merely transferring their loyalty from a king to God. In other words, just as the fishermen adapted their abilities to become fishers of humanity, Koreans adjusted where to place their loyalty from their existing allegiance to the king to their newfound heavenly Father. As Koreans merged Confucian notions of filial piety to fit their Catholic beliefs, martyrs were also able to eventually reconcile their filial duties in caring for their parents by praying for them in heaven. They also thought of suffering and martyrdom as a "debt owed to God" that helped to "expiate their sins."

One martyr, Magdalena Son Sobyok, "held that her life was not her own but a gift from God."¹¹ Others, Magdalena Yi Yonghui and her sister Barbara Yi Chonghui, were tortured several times and asked if they understood their offenses, to which they replied, "If we intended to reject the Lord, why would we have surrendered ourselves?... If the law says we should die, then we should die."¹² With complete and utter loyalty to God and king, they gave themselves up to the authorities, choosing to surrender themselves. However, martyrdom was not romantic by any means. The recorded hagiographies often depict harrowing images of torture and suffering. For example, Johannes Cho Haesong was tortured so that his flesh was torn and his bones protruded from his body.¹³ Maria Yi Yonhui was struck over 300 times leaving no part of her body unharmed. Despite extreme suffering, these martyrs "connected violence with sincerity—the willingness to suffer showed one's true loyalty and devotion."¹⁴

Confucian beliefs not only helped convert Koreans to Catholicism but also provided courage to remain loyal to their faith, as it also strengthened the entire community. As Confucian teachings emphasized relationships, several martyrs shared their final breaths with family members as a way to fulfill their filial duties:

The marital bond proved strong with eight couples suffering martyrdom. In eight other cases, children followed their parents' example, and in a further nine siblings paid the ultimate price. The presence of aunts and uncles together with their nieces and nephews hints at other wider family relationships

8 Kil Kelly, "Orthodox Heresy," 15.

9 Paul Chong Hasang, "Sang-Jaesang-Seo," *KIATS Theological Journal* (2005): 143.

10 Chong, "Sang-Jaesang-Seo," 144.

11 Andrew Finch, "The Pursuit of Martyrdom in the Catholic Church in Korea before 1866," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 60 (2009): 103.

12 Rausch, "Choosing to Die," 10.

13 Finch, "The Pursuit of Martyrdom," 100.

14 Rausch, "Choosing to Die," 5.

which could encourage and support confessors. This network of responsibilities might extend beyond the kin group.¹⁵

Not only did families desire to obtain martyrdom together to fulfill filial obligations, they also wanted to share in the honor of experiencing and reaching eternal glory in heaven. Martyrdom, in fact, became an honorable achievement to be noted in the family genealogy. The strong familial bonds also helped provide support in refusing to apostatize or betray one another to authorities. Many would suffer torture when asked to confess the location of relatives, as one betrayal could lead to the discovery of several others.¹⁶ One might speculate that these communal ties contributed to the fact that so many Catholics had been willing to die for the faith.

Spiritual support along with practical assistance further aided Catholics in coping with persecution. While imprisoned, Christians prayed for each other for God's grace to endure torture and attended to each other's wounds. Outside of prison, Christians continued their support through any means. As Confucian ideals aim toward the common good, Catholic efforts during the hardships of persecution demonstrated this teaching well.

Therefore, the early Christians reinterpreted Confucian ideals of filial piety to become compatible with their Catholic faith, preserving their sense of community and familial bonds while still remaining faithful to God. Their re-envisioning of their purpose as fishers of men by giving up their lives for God's greater glory resulted in converting thousands. The concept of filial piety, present today globally, has been passed down through generations. However, the challenge remains with Korean American Catholics to reshape Confucian ideals to make them still relevant to contemporary faith.

Expectations of Korean American Catholics

Most Koreans today immigrated to the U.S. with the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 (a.k.a. Hart-Celler Act). In addition, the close of the Second Vatican Council also allowed for such cultural awareness within the church. For example, the Archdiocese of San Francisco acknowledged the presence of the Korean faithful in their midst in 1966. Although Korean immigration has been over a century old, such a description as Korean American Catholics was not available until social and religious events changed the mindset of those on the streets as well as in the pews.¹⁷ Not until 1966 did dioceses across the country officially recognize Korean immigrants in their midst. Thus, Korean American Catholics are celebrating their golden jubilee in 2016.

As with any other ethnic group, Korean immigrants have a variety of push-and-pull factors bringing them to the U.S. Those who came in the decades of the 1970s and 80s left their homeland trying to rebuild, as Korea still struggled to recover after the civil war. Those who came in these two decades escaped political unrest of a dictatorial regime and economic instability in an impoverished country (push factors). The U.S. provided a stable environment in which to raise their families by affording recent arrivals both economic and educational opportunities (pull factors) not available back home, as Korea was just developing societal and religious infrastructures.

In recent decades, Korean immigration has continued at a consistent level with only slight dips accounting for drastic events such as the IMF bailout of Korea in 1997. However, the push factors of Korea have dramatically changed and are almost nonexistent with today's stable democratic government, unprecedented economic growth, and global cultural expansion primarily through K-Pop and Korean dramas. Nevertheless, pull factors found in the U.S. continue to attract immigrants from the Korean peninsula. These pull factors have not changed even with

¹⁵ Finch, "The Pursuit of Martyrdom," 107.

¹⁶ Finch, "The Pursuit of Martyrdom," 108.

¹⁷ For more regarding social and ecclesial changes in the U.S. church see Simon C. Kim, *A World Church in Our Backyard: How the Spirit Moved Church and Society* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016).

the political and economic transformation of Korea. Educational and employment opportunities afforded in this country are still strong factors for immigration. Even with the rapid growth and development of Korea, the small country of over 50 million people cannot provide all the opportunities found in the U.S. The “American Dream” is much alive not so much in terms of lifestyle choices but rather in the resources not found elsewhere.

Like other immigrants to the U.S., Koreans also immigrated with their beliefs or embraced the faith soon after based on religious as well as social and cultural needs. In fact, a larger percentage of Koreans professed a Christian belief as immigrants than had done so in the homeland. Pyong Gap Min explains the immigration of primarily Christians as premeditated by missionary activities from the U.S. as well as the Korean government strategically sending their own. Upon arrival, many immigrants were welcomed by religious communities in the resettlement process. Thus, Korean immigration also includes a faith narrative which has not yet taken root in either the people (specifically the next generation) or in U.S. soil as part of the wider church.

Like most immigrants, Korean Americans have not properly reflected on the skillsets brought over with them as well as those developed here. During the 1970s and 80s, those with college degrees or professional occupations in Korea found themselves self-employed with long work hours, further isolating their existence in this country beyond linguistic and cultural differences. Those who immigrated especially in the new millennium are better educated with greater resources in their journey to the U.S. Thus, recent immigrants are no longer relegated to self-employed positions as they possess the skillset, especially language proficiency, to compete in every area of society.

It is undeniable that Korean immigrants have succeeded in many ways in part by a diligent work ethic as well as their willingness to leave their homeland. These two elements continue the faith narrative of not only this immigrant country but also the biblical narrative that develops out of the calling of the first disciples. Just as Jesus transformed the fishermen into fishers of men and the Korean Martyrs transferred their loyalty to a heavenly rather than an earthly king, Korean immigration provides a similar context for uncovering one’s identity of concepts such as fishers of men and loyalty within filial piety, which are transformed into a relatable narrative for the next generation.

Filial Piety in the Next Generation

Today, Korean Americans struggle with Confucian ideals while growing up with Western ideals. Immigrant parents demand obedience from children who should not question their authority especially when it comes to worldly success such as academic, career, and marriage ideals. Furthermore, children are later expected to care for their elderly parents. Not only do subsequent generations not understand this principle as well—in part because Western society emphasizes the individual over the group—they also do not comprehend their parents’ sometimes unattainable expectations. The great divide exists because of the misinterpretation of filial piety of the first generation and the lack of cultural understanding of the next, as well as the unwillingness to accept the differences of both.

Children of the next generation first learn about filial piety while assisting their parents to navigate through the struggles of immigrant life. Role reversal of immigrant children “parenting their parents” is a common experience. From a series of interviews in California from 2006-2012, several 1.5 and second-generation Korean Americans responded that they had a limited childhood, having to provide emotional and physical support by coping with their parents’ absences and financial ups and downs, and helping out with the family business, all without any complaint or sign of unhappiness or frustration.¹⁸ Later in adulthood, these children appreciate their parents’ sacrifices and feel they tried to please their parents to help ease their burdens. One respondent, who achieved straight

18 Grace J. Yoo and Barbara W. Kim, *Caring Across Generations* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 22.

As, described how her mother kept her report card in her purse not only to show others but also to comfort her during difficult times at work. Satisfying immigrant parents is an act of filial piety, and many children come to understand this only after discovering their parents' past, especially within the context of Korean culture.

Much of the knowledge gap is due to parents' lack of communication of themselves and the country they left behind. Many children have heard vague accounts about the Japanese Occupation and the Korean War. They may have picked up stories of poverty and hunger or of a relative who had died or was missing. Much of the details, emotions, and suffering the first-generation immigrants had undergone remain untold. These scarring memories are most likely too painful to recount, and a profound silence exists in each household regarding the trauma immigrants experienced. This reticence among immigrants is a coping mechanism used for survival. Crying or self-pity would have done nothing to help feed a family or save anyone from danger. The strength and resilience practiced throughout a lifetime of trauma, for instance, carried over into their work ethic and outlook as an immigrant. When children discover the details of the harsh realities their parents faced prior to coming to the U.S., they become more understanding and sympathetic. Often, details are revealed indirectly or sought out when children are older, in the hopes of learning more about their own identity and family history.

In general, many children of Korean immigrants experience a lack of emotional support from their parents. The first generation, with a survivor mentality, is focused more on working to support their children and is unwilling to express love, especially through words. Often in Korean families, overt displays of affection are thought to show weakness in a person's character. Instead, love was shown through actions and hard work in supporting the family. Children found this type of love challenging to grasp in the midst of dealing with feelings of discrimination and alienation from the mainstream culture. This lack of intimacy exacerbated even more the children's understanding of not only their parents' expectations for them but also their own Korean American identity. Given knowledge of their parents' past and of Korean history, as the children grow older they are not only more accepting and forgiving of their parents and how their lives had been impacted,¹⁹ but also more aware of their own "Korean-ness."

For many respondents in the study, Korean-ness is defined by carrying out responsibilities for family members and respecting the older generation. Almost all respondents desired to transmit the tradition of respecting elders to subsequent generations. The practice of filial piety, however, becomes more complex as parents age and require care from their adult children. Tensions and misunderstandings arise as parents feel "entitled" to their adult children's attention; all the while, adult children struggle to balance the various responsibilities of their own lives, such as work and raising children. One respondent describes her parents as "[demanding] respect without giving respect. They don't make an effort to understand their children or have an open dialogue and so misunderstandings and resentments get in the way of their relationships."²⁰ In general, adult children of immigrants end up caring for their elderly parents more out of duty and obligation than out of a close bond, as they try to compensate for the lack of parental love they felt during childhood.

Caring for the elderly also involves more than just offering time and attention. Adult children, however, feel a strong sense of obligation to provide for their parents financially by paying mortgages, monthly allowances, and vacations. Moreover, when a parent becomes seriously ill, many adult children take on caregiving duties like medical advocacy and financial support, as well as daily tasks such as bathing, cleaning, and other assistance. In many cases, siblings divide up the responsibilities in caring for parents, as caregiving can be overwhelming, exhausting, and emotionally draining. Commonly, daughters take on the role of caregiving and managing relationships. One such daughter found solace in prayer throughout her mother's hospitalization and recovery process by not only

19 Yoo and Kim, *Caring Across Generations*, 49.

20 Yoo and Kim, *Caring Across Generations*, 131.

praying for her mother, but also for her own healing from painful family conflicts. “[She] describes her brush with martyrdom: she did all she did to be a ‘good daughter,’ and she faced the need to protect herself emotionally from her mother’s behavior when her good intentions were not enough.”²¹

Throughout this study, respondents realized that they had to redefine Confucian ideals of filial piety to fit their needs, namely, to be more practical. One male respondent explains how he has accepted his limitations:

I’ve done this before. I dropped everything, canceled my appointments here at work and just flew out. Sometimes you need to do that, but I’ve also got to be realistic and reasonable as well. So one of the ways that I’ve come to accept is acceptance. Just accepting the fact that pain and suffering and death are part of life...I think the other thing is just reminding myself that I cannot—physically and emotionally—I cannot always be there for my mom... That I can do the best I can but even my best will not be enough sometimes, and then just having to live with that... I don’t want to exceed my capabilities... because that’s not going to make me more effective either. I can lose my concentration at work; it could affect my productivity. It can take away some of the potential money that can go to my mom...so it’s self-preservation, so I can help other people.²²

Filial piety, therefore, is not lost in the next generation, but needs to be transformed into an understandable Christian perspective that honors the individual within our ethnic faith narrative. Just as we must reinterpret what it means to be “fishers of men” in our current reality as Christians, our loyalties within a Confucian system of filial piety also need to be transformed within our current understanding as Korean Americans. Without re-envisioning one’s religious and cultural heritage, faith becomes a relic of the past and unable to make sense of the lived realities, especially for the next generation as they struggle with navigating multiple realities. A lost sense of identity also means a lost sense of our faith.

Re-envisioning Cultural and Religious Identity

Immigration presents many opportunities to transform both cultural and faith traditions. Those who live in a “singular” culture without much human mobility do not find the need to reflect on their lives in the same way as immigrants, who must navigate multiple worlds. Within each world is also a faith tradition, which when uncovered becomes a wealth of spiritual resources. However, the process of uncovering such areas requires a re-envisioning of multiple realities immigrants are bombarded with. As mentioned throughout this article, the sense of loyalty found within filial piety was understood in a specific manner within the educated class as illustrated by their transference of loyalty from the king to their new God. In cases where it was possible, they honored both as witnessed in their surrender to local authorities. However, in other cases where a choice had to be made, they chose to remain resolute in their faith by embracing death. Just as Jesus’s calling of fishermen to become fishers of men, Korean Martyrs took their Confucian-rooted knowledge and skills of their everyday life and transformed them within the reign of God. They refined the idea of filial piety by attaching a purpose behind obeying parents and the king as glorifying God. Re-envisioning, in many ways, was simply an adjustment of what they already possessed.

For Korean Americans today, filial piety has its challenges; yet by viewing the struggle as a blessing, they can approach a renewed vision. The cultural notion of blessings versus the Christian tradition has been viewed as one in the same way as Koreans see both cultural and spiritual blessings in terms of monetary and material gain. Thus, a prosperity gospel or emphasis on successes in the present world is what Koreans value, especially those who im-

21 Yoo and Kim, *Caring Across Generations*, 154.

22 Yoo and Kim, *Caring Across Generations*, 161.

migrate for a better life. A perspective of this nature hinders the lessons of the Korean Martyrs for their loyalties were placed on relationships, eventually on the ultimate relationship with God, that mattered the most. By over-emphasizing the material, such as desiring academic and career successes in the next generation, many Korean immigrants fail to appreciate the richness of the faith found in the relational opportunities of a multicultural reality. In addition, the confusion of identity and culture that the next generation grapples with is rarely seen as a blessing. However, these moments of struggle are opportunities to not only encounter God's presence in the world but also to uncover the richness of such a diverse creation. Similar to the Korean Martyrs, Korean immigrants, possessing the same nature of devotion and solidarity, can re-envision filial piety as a blessing and means to serving one another, and, in doing so, serving God.

By realigning the goals of immigration with a proper understanding of blessings found in God's economy, Korean immigrants can correctly interpret filial obligation and allow their children to better comprehend both a faith and cultural heritage that seem so foreign at times. Only through such a process do we realize the calling of Christ is not only to enter the kingdom, but also to do our part in furthering the reign of God in our midst. In transforming what being faithful means today, especially through the experience of contemporary immigration, we realize that the truth already resides in us and our abilities can add to the diverse blessings of church and society found in our own communities.