

## Issues, Challenges and Pastoral Strategies in Asian American Catholic Marriage Ministry

This essay seeks to explore the issues and challenges that surface in contemporary Asian American marriage ministry in typical urban and suburban contexts.\* First, it discusses the term “Asian American” and examines the principal demographic data from the United States Census Bureau. Second, it introduces Asian American Catholics and their presence in the United States. Third, it identifies the unique and distinctive socio-cultural issues that affect Asian American marriages. Finally, it considers the pastoral responses to the challenges of doing Asian American marriage ministry and suggests five possible strategies of responding to these challenges.

### *1. Defining “Asian American”*

The term “Asian American” is often used in contemporary discourse as a generic and convenient shorthand to categorize all Americans of Asian ancestry and heritage, with their diverse languages, cultures, and traditions.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, this term masks distinct racial-ethnic communities under the facade of a rigid, homogenous, and monolithic pan-Asian American identity that exists more in theory than in reality.<sup>2</sup> In reality, the category of “Asian Americans” encompass groups of peoples of diverse languages, cultures, spiritual traditions, worldviews, socio-economic classes, and generational levels, such that all attempts at generalizations run the significant risk of error.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the concerns of first generation Asian immigrants are very different from

those of subsequent generations of Asians born and bred in the United States.

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- 1 The United States Census Bureau adopts a similar approach in its census reports, defining “Asian” as “those having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam” (UNITED STATES CENSUS BUREAU, 2003, 1). In the past, the United States Census Bureau lumped Asian Americans together with Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, a category that includes Samoans, Tongans, Tahitians, Fijians, and other ethnicities, despite the fact that Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders have more in common with Native Americans than with Asian Americans in their life experiences, as well as socio-cultural and economic-political concerns. It is in Census 2000 that the United States Census Bureau differentiated Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders into separate statistical categories for the first time.
- 2 Lisa Lowe explains the implications of Asian American heterogeneity as follows: “what is referred to as ‘Asian American’ is clearly a heterogeneous entity. From the perspective of the majority culture, Asian Americans may very well be constructed as different from, and other than, Euro-Americans. But from the perspectives of Asian Americans, we are perhaps even more different, more diverse among ourselves...As with other diasporas in the United States, the Asian immigrant collectivity is unstable and changeable, with its cohesion complicated by inter-generationality, by various degrees of identification and relation to a ‘homeland’, and by different extent of assimilation to and distinction from ‘majority culture’ in the United States” (LOWE, 1991, 27).
- 3 As the United States Census Bureau explains: “Some of the Asian groups, such as the Chinese and Japanese, have been in the United States for several generations. Others, such as the Hmong, Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians, are comparatively recent immigrants” (UNITED STATES CENSUS BUREAU, 2003, 1).

Since the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Hart-Celler Act) which abolished the restrictive measures that limited Asian immigration, Asian Americans collectively comprise the second fastest-growing and most diverse racial category in the United States. The statistical data from the 2000 Census reveals that as of 1 April 2000, Asian Americans comprise 4.2% (11.9 million) of the total U.S. population of 281.4 million. The largest Asian American ethnic group are the Chinese Americans (2.73 million), followed closely by the Filipino Americans (2.36 million), Indian Americans (1.90 million), Korean Americans (1.23 million), Vietnamese Americans (1.22 million), and Japanese Americans (1.15 million) respectively (UNITED STATES CENSUS BUREAU, 2002a, 9).<sup>4</sup>

In the context of United States Catholicism, the two major Asian American ethnic communities, viz., the Filipino Americans and the Vietnamese Americans, are heavily Roman Catholic. Indeed, the massive influx of Filipino and Vietnamese immigrants in the past forty years has contributed significantly to the diversity of the United States Catholic Church. While accurate statistics are hard to come by, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter *Asian and Pacific Presence: Harmony in Faith* estimates that some 83.0% of Filipino Americans (1.54 million), 29.0% of Vietnamese Americans (0.33 million), 17.0% of Indian Americans (0.29 million), 12.3% of Chinese Americans (0.30 million), 7.0% of Korean Americans (0.07 million), and 4.0% of Japanese Americans (0.03 million) are Catholic (USCCB, 2001, 9).

## 2. Defining Asian American Families

Just as there is no homogeneous and monolithic pan-Asian American identity, so too, a universal and normative definition of Asian American family does not exist. Nonetheless, amidst such multiplicity and plurality, scholars and practitioners have identified five basic categories of

Asian American families: (1) the "traditional" family, (2) the cultural conflict family, (3) the bicultural family, (4) the "Americanized" family, and (5) the interracial family (LEE, 1997).

The first category of "traditional" family refers to Asian American families where all the family members are first generation Asian Americans, i.e., they are born and raised outside of the United States, and emigrated either voluntarily or involuntarily to the United States as children or adults. As first generation families, many of them may have limited English language skills and limited exposure to American culture (e.g. Indochinese refugees). They usually live and congregate within their racial ethnic communities (e.g. Little Saigons). Family members, especially those who emigrate as adults, are often deeply attached to the land of their birth, as well as their native socio-cultural traditions and values. They continue to speak their native tongues fluently, developing only rudimentary English skills at best. As a result of their language limitations, they often look to their families and their specific racial ethnic communities for support, socialization, validation, and stabilization.

The second category of cultural conflict families comprises intergenerational families where Asian-born parents and their 1.5-generation or American-born children hold different and often conflicting cultural values. The term "cultural conflict" refers to the intergenerational stress and conflict arising from different cultural values and expectations between the Asian-born parents and grandparents on the one hand, and the 1.5-generation or American-born generation on the other hand. For example, parents and grandparents who are born in Asia often cling on tenaciously to traditional socio-cultural values and ethical mores. By contrast, their American-born children are more acculturated into an Americanized lifestyle. To worsen matters, the children or grandchildren may not be conversant in their traditional languages, or know much about traditional values that are espoused by their parents and grandparents.

The third category, i.e., the bicultural family refers to the well-educated Asian professionals who emigrate voluntarily to the United States with a familiarity with American way of life and exposed to urbanization, modernity, and Western culture. Bilingual and bicultural, cosmopolitan and urbane, they are fluent in both English and their native languages. In most cases, they espouse a transnational worldview, going back and forth between their traditional and American cultures. Economically and socially, they usually belong to the upper and middle income brackets. Many Chinese Americans, Indian Americans, and Filipino American professionals would belong to this category.

The “Americanized” family refers to those Asian American families where parents and children, are American-born and raised. This category covers mainly the third, fourth, and fifth generation Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans. Unlike the “traditional” family, members of a typical “Americanized” family communicate mostly in English and adopt a more Americanized lifestyle, with an emphasis on personal autonomy and an egalitarian perspective of life. Typically, these families are culturally assimilated into mainstream United States, speaking colloquial American English with an appropriate regional accent, and being at ease with a contemporary American lifestyle.

As second and later generations of Asian Americans engage in interracial dating, a new category of interracial families is emerging from the increasing number of interracial marriages. While many interracial families are able to integrate both cultures with some success, misunderstandings and conflicts often arise between the spouses and in-laws on the questions of values and traditions. Moreover, many interracial families face an uphill battle for acceptance from more traditional first generation parents and older family members who are worried about the disappearance of their traditional racial ethnic heritages and identities in the United States.

### 3. General Characteristics of Asian American Families

An important characteristic that sets a typical Asian American family apart from a typical mainstream, middle-class American family with its nuclear family structure is the fact that the *extended* family structure is often the basic family unit across the various Asian American racial ethnic communities.<sup>5</sup> It is not uncommon to find unmarried adults continuing to live with their parents or older married siblings in an extended household in many Asian American households.<sup>6</sup> More importantly, this multigenerational setup of a typical Asian American extended family is often perceived as its principal strength, enabling children to have greater contact with grandparents and other relatives, family-based childcare rather than outsourced childcare, and the pooling of economic and other resources for the benefit of the family as a whole. Indeed, Asian Americans are often praised for their multigenerational family structure, where a son, usually the eldest, often takes care of his aged parents in his household.

4 In the year 2000, the top five largest immigrant-sending Asian countries were China, Philippines, India, Vietnam, and Korea, with the Indian-born U.S. population showing the biggest increase (UNITED STATES CENSUS BUREAU, 2002b, 1).

5 Statistics show that an average Asian American household has 3.3 members, with the figures higher for specific Asian American communities: Vietnamese American (4.0 members), Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians (5.1 members). By comparison, Japanese Americans have the smallest households (2.5 members) (see McLOYD/CAUCE/TAKEUCHI/WILSON, 2000, 1072). In addition, 22% of all Asian American families comprise five or more persons, compared with 12% of non-Hispanic White families, and 59% of all Asian American households have at least three or more members (DAS, 2006, 257-258).

6 Vonnie C. McLoyd, Ana Mari Cauce, David Takeuchi, and Leon Wilson attribute the greater average Asian American household size to the presence of relatives who are not a child or spouse: “Compared with European Americans and African Americans, Asian Americans are more likely to live in households that are comprised exclusively of family members (i.e., family households, as distinguished from households that include individuals who are not related through family ties)” (McLOYD/CAUCE/TAKEUCHI/WILSON, 2000, 1072).

Statistics show that the divorce rate for Asian Americans is lower than that for the total population of the United States: about 4% of Asian American men and 4.7% of Asian American women are divorced, compared with 8% and 10.3% of the total male and female population respectively in the United States (McLOYD/CAUCE/TAKEUCHI/WILSON, 2000, 1073). This is due to the stigma associated with divorce in many Asian American racial ethnic communities. It appears that divorce is becoming increasingly acceptable and more prevalent among American-born Asian Americans compared with first generation Asian Americans (Ibid.).

Studies show that Asian American immigrants have retained many aspects of their native cultures, especially their traditional values on religion, family, marriage, and children, as well as the value system of traditional patriarchal hierarchy that defines the norms of gender roles and relations, places family interests over individual autonomy, and mandates obedience to parents (filiality). By contrast, the 1.5 and subsequent generations of Asian Americans are becoming increasingly restive and assertive in questioning and challenging these traditional values and ways of life. This is true of Indian Americans,<sup>7</sup> Chinese Americans,<sup>8</sup> Korean Americans,<sup>9</sup> and Vietnamese Americans.<sup>10</sup> Nowhere is this conflict and challenge more acute than with regard to the issue of marriage and family.

#### *4. Marriage in Asian American Families: Examining the Current Status Quaestionis*

Across diverse Asian American racial ethnic communities, marriage is often perceived as the cornerstone of families and communities, especially in the eyes of first generation Asian Americans. In their eyes, marriage confers the socio-cultural identity of adulthood on their children. To put it another way, one is not an adult until one is married. As a result, married persons are more highly regarded and respected than their unmarried counterparts. In particular, unmarried persons are

not only viewed as children despite their age and personal accomplishments, they are often nagged by their families about when they are going to get married. Not surprisingly, many first generation Asian American parents often put an inordinate pressure on their children to get married. Thus, marriage often generates a great deal of intergenerational stress and conflict among Asian American families, especially when parents demand the right to arrange their children's marriages.

In the preceding section, we saw how Asian Americans families are multigenerational, and parents often expect to live with their children. What outsiders fail to realize is that this arrangement frequently adds an inordinate burden to a marriage, especially when the parents intervene in family matters. Indeed, tales of overbearing mothers-in-law, timid and cowering adult sons who find themselves powerless to define their own identity apart from their parents, as well as spouses who clash with their lived-in in-laws are common fodder in Asian and Asian American popular literature, movies, soap operas, and television sitcoms.

More importantly, in the minds of the first generation Asian Americans across the board, marriage is more than an individual choice between two consenting adults in love with each other. Instead, first generation Asian Americans often perceive marriage as a fundamental means of ensuring the survival and continuation of a kin, clan, group, or family name. To put it in another way, when two Asian Americans get married, the reality is that their two families or clans are getting married too. Many Asian American racial ethnic groups celebrate this marriage between two families, groups, or clans with elaborate engagement rituals that comprise formal betrothal announcements, presentation of dowry, and gift exchanges. Hence, the typical prevailing attitude among many first generation Asian Americans is that *one loves the person that one marries, and not marries the person one loves*.

While the colorful marriage rituals and pageantry are a sight to behold, what is often over-

looked is the reality that the deep-rooted patriarchal worldview of many Asian American racial ethnic groups results in sons often deferring obediently to the wishes of their parents, thereby creating friction with their spouses. Here, we see the conflict between self-sacrifice to the family ideals, subservience to ones' elders, preservation of family line and honor, social conformity, and tradition maintenance being espoused by the older generation on the one hand, and the younger generation's yearning for autonomy, individuality, unfettered choice, compatibility, and romantic love on the other hand. When the first generation is neither ready nor willing to concede traditional paternal or patriarchal hierarchy of authority, the ensuing intergenerational conflict generates much disharmony and friction, threatening family ties and the continued viability of parent-child relations. Wrongly handled, this could lead to outright rebellion, and in extreme cases, children eloping to get married or parents disowning their children, thereby severing the parent-child relations. Another sad reality that ensues is that many children associate the Church and their Christian faith with their parents' faith, and this breakdown in parent-child relations often affects the children's continued practice of their family faith.

Hence, many marriages often become unstable and a source of major, recurring conflict, especially when children and their spouses begin to assert their independence, and both the older and younger generations lack the skills to negotiate between their ideals and polarized viewpoints. Rightly or wrongly, parents often accuse their children and in-laws of becoming "Americanized", perceiving them to have imbibed the American ideals of individualism, independence, and assertiveness. They think that their children and their spouses have become too Americanized, too assertive, abandoning traditional (read "patriarchal") gender and spousal roles. One hears of complaints of mothers-in-law accusing daughters-in-law for disobedience and their sons for not disciplining their wives. On their part, the sons and their wives would often counter that the parents fail to

understand the changing expectations in marriage in the contemporary United States context, especially with regard to children, work, gender roles, and family roles. Hence, a new sensitive approach to navigating intergenerational strife on the issues of restrictive socio-cultural traditions, as well as paternalistic and patriarchal gender and hierarchical roles in family and community is needed.

Regrettably, attention is often lavished upon the "model minority" image of Asian Americans, ignoring the underlying interpersonal relations between husband and wife, as well as parent and child. Intergenerational clashes between traditional arranged marriages vs. so-called "love" marriages, as well as *endogamy* (marriage within one's racial ethnic group, kin, clan, or caste) or *homogamy* (marriage within one's socio-economic class) on the one hand vs. *exogamy* (inter-racial, intergroup, intercaste, or interclass marriages) on the other hand, are becoming increasingly common and divisive. Nonetheless, one must not forget that many first generation Asian Americans also experience stresses and problems to their marriages. Many first generation Asian American couples face challenges arising from their new status in the United States. This problem is especially acute in Indochinese refugees who have been forced to leave their countries because of war or persecution. Moving to the United States, many wives who stayed home in their native homelands find themselves entering the workforce to contribute to the family income. While this adds to the family's economic spending power, it also increases the stress level on the family because many husbands are not willing to relinquish the male authority. We will examine this issue in greater detail in the next section, followed by a discussion of the divisive issues of arranged marriages and endogamy.

- 7 See LESSINGER, 1995; LEONARD, 1997; SEGAL, 1991, and SEGAL, 1998.
- 8 See KIBRIA, 2002; SUNG, 1985; TAN, 2004 and TUNG, 2000.
- 9 See HURH, 1998; HERTIG, 2001; KIBRIA, 2002 and MIN, 1998.
- 10 See KIBRIA, 1993; TRAN, 1997 and PHO/MULVEY, 2003.

### 5. *Challenges to the Patriarchal Order of First Generation Asian American Marriages*

Wife abuse and domestic violence are not unique to Asian American communities. Other racial ethnic groups in the United States also experience these horrors that are inflicted on women and children. Nonetheless, they have different root causes within the Asian American communities. Within Asian American communities, wife abuse and domestic violence are rooted in the traditional norms of patriarchy that the first generation brought over from their countries of origin.<sup>11</sup>

Among Vietnamese Americans, the traditional family structure exemplifies the rigid Confucian patriarchal gender roles that define the relations and obligations between husband and wife, parents and children, as well as older and younger siblings.<sup>12</sup> Within a typical Vietnamese family, the gender roles between husband and wife are defined by the Confucian precepts of the “Three Obediences” (*Tam Tông*) that subordinates a woman to her father when she is a minor, then to her husband when she is married, and finally to her eldest son when she is widowed. In other words, Vietnamese women are socialized into accepting a position of subordination to male headship and authority at every stage of her life. In addition, the womenfolk are also taught from young to practice the “Four Womanly Virtues” (*Tứ Đức*) of proper housework (*công*), proper appearance (*dung*), proper speech (*ngôn*) and proper ethical behavior (*hành*). Stephen Young explains these four virtues succinctly as follows:

*Dung* is appearance, which should be neat and attractive. *Công* is industry, which should be precise and careful. *Ngôn* is speech, which should be submissive and respectful. *Hành* is character, which should be upright, filial, devoted, and trustworthy (YOUNG, 1998, 155).

When Vietnamese refugees arrived *en masse* to the United States, they experienced a gender relations framework that is completely different from that in Vietnam, shaped by a twofold socioeco-

nomie force. On the one hand, first generation Vietnamese American women acquired new socioeconomic power when they entered the workforce. But on the other hand, many immigrant Vietnamese men experienced a loss of socioeconomic power.<sup>13</sup> In a similar vein, Tuyet-Lan Pho and Anne Mulvey identify three important factors causing problems in the marriages of Vietnamese Americans:

- (1) the restructuring of family relationships and expectations between wives and husbands and between parents and children in a new community and cultural context;
- (2) the conflicting demands and related personal dilemmas associated with the maintenance of traditional values and changing gender roles;
- and (3) the different approaches among community members to addressing and resolving social problems such as domestic violence (PHO/MULVEY, 2003, 102-103).

More significantly, Pho and Mulvey point out that when women “want to change this traditional structure by changing their roles and becoming more assertive in family affairs”, they “were considered by their partners as being ‘too Americanized’ or were subject to domestic violence” (ibid. 109).

On the one hand, Pho and Mulvey discover that the womenfolk “considered independence from their husbands or parents to be a major aspect of their lives since moving to the United States”, equating economic self-sufficiency with self-empowerment. But on the other hand, they also came face to face with the hostility of the husbands to these changes: “five out of six husbands interviewed considered their wives’ influence on major family decisions a ‘win-lose’ situation, and saw themselves on the losing side. The friction between husband and wife usually stems from the husband’s perception that his wife cannot attend to her responsibilities as a wife, a mother, and a working woman” (ibid. 110). In other words, Vietnamese husbands’ expectations concerning the gender relations and roles between husband and wife remain wedded to the traditional Confucian precepts of the Three Submissions and Four Womanly Virtues,

creating discord and threatening marital relations and family harmony (*ibid.* 112).

In response to these socio-economic pressures and strains, many Vietnamese men resort to wife beating, i.e., husbands exerting physical violence on their wives, which is accepted as the traditional expression and enforcement of patriarchal authority in Vietnam. Kibria notes that physical assaults by men on women in the family regularly occurred, “suggesting that wife beating continues among the Vietnamese in the United States” (KIBRIA, 1990, 14-15). Although it is true that Asian Americans have the lowest reported rates of domestic violence, this may be attributed to the fact of significant underreporting by Asian American women. According to Pho and Mulvey, unreported cases of domestic violence in Southeast Asian immigrant families in the United States are considerably higher than other racial ethnic groups for many reasons, including “adherence to traditional values and roles, fear of government and legal authorities related to political histories, fear of deportation, language barriers, and immigration status”. They find that the “high domestic violence levels are attributed to war-related violence, post-traumatic stress disorder, and urban violence in the United States generally” (PHO/MULVEY, 2003, 115).<sup>14</sup>

11 Sudipta Das summarizes the following contributing factors that are distinctive to Asian American families: “Chinese group participants believed in acquiescing to one’s destiny, and thus acceptance of difficult family situations. Paternalistic values, community reputation, social status and family commitments pressurize women to stay with their husbands and children...For the Korean group, Buddhism and Confucianism, which are the dominant faiths in Korea, emphasize ‘the cycle of life’, in which men rule and are privileged to act as they please. A Korean woman would try to blame herself as the cause of family violence and solve it or bear the consequences in silence without bringing any shame to the family...Members of the South Asian group felt that in their patriarchal society, daughters were “given away” as property when they married. Arranged marriages do not promote family violence, but the view of women as property does. Additionally, the notion of shame prevents South Asian women from reporting domestic violence, and financial dependence on their husbands makes divorce and a single life thereafter immeasurably unattractive and undesirable financially...The Vietnamese

group defined male authority as sacrosanct, as well as male rights and responsibilities to ‘teach’ his wife and children by force if necessary...Finally, the Cambodian group like the Korean blamed women as the cause of family violence and the women’s ultimate responsibility to bear the consequences as a victim. Cambodian men felt psychologically insecure of losing authority, because of the financial independence of their employed wives and children that contributed to a post-traumatic stress disorder provoking aggressive behavior.” (DAS, 2006, 260, citing YOSHIOKA/DANG, 2000).

- 12 As Nazli Kibria explains: “The traditional Vietnamese family was modeled on Confucian principles. In the ideal model, households were extended, and the family was structured around the patrilineage or the ties of the male descent line. Women were married at a young age and then entered the household of their husband’s father. The young bride had minimal status and power until she produced sons. The patriarchal bargain in this setting was one in which women expected significant rewards in their old age from allegiance and deference to the patrilineal family system...because the middle class status of families depended in large part on the incomes of the men, the threat of economic impoverishment sustained the ideals of the traditional family system and men’s authority in the family. Women feared the economic consequences of male desertion, a not uncommon occurrence, especially when men were on military duty for extended periods. The ‘bargain’ between women and men that emerged in this setting was one in which women deferred to men’s authority in exchange for economic protection” (KIBRIA, 1990, 12, 13).
- 13 Nazli Kibria describes the dilemma that many first generation Vietnamese American men experienced: “In the United States, many Vietnamese men faced unemployment or had low-paying jobs that did not usually enable them to support a family. Compounding the men’s economic problems has been a widespread sense of powerlessness and alienation from the institutions of the dominant American society” (*ibid.* 13-14).
- 14 The observations of Pho and Mulvey are especially instructive: “Southeast Asian women who are battered, however, faced cultural and linguistic barriers to services other women do not. Police, the criminal justice system, and social service agencies have neither linguistically nor culturally trained staff to cope with the problem. When available, services are usually not culturally appropriate. In many cases, children are expected to serve as a cultural and linguistic translators for their parents. Christine Cole, a victim witness advocate in Lowell, noted: ‘It’s not fair to say to a child, ‘Get your parents into court so Mom can prosecute Dad.’ Even perpetrators sometimes translate for victims, reinforcing inequity, dependence, and fear. Traditional roles and prohibitions against speaking of private matters publicly add to the devastation of domestic violence. Many Southeast Asian women fear that reporting abuse to authorities will result in the imprisonment or deportation of their partners or that government intervention will be worse than the abuse itself” (PHO/MULVEY, 2003, 114).

Pho and Mulvey identify women who are at high risk of domestic violence: “women who were older, homebound, did not speak English, and were very isolated”, as well as “women who were younger, spoke English, and were immersed in American culture” (ibid. 116). They explain that effective outreach to “older Southeast Asian women is very difficult due to high incidences of trauma-related mental and physical health problems including post-traumatic stress disorder, memory and cognitive losses, and psychosomatic blindness”, and these problems were exacerbated by language barriers and lack of participation in community groups (ibid. 116-117). Ironically, younger women also faced domestic violence, but for different reasons: “women working outside the home, loss of men’s status that was often attributed to women’s public roles and to American culture; gender-based norms for dating, family, and parenting roles; and power inequities associated with hierarchical family structures” (ibid. 117).

### 6. *The Challenges of Arranged Marriages*

Traditional arranged marriages, with its foundational understanding of marriage as union between two families, clans, or groups, stand in stark contrast to the contemporary American understanding of marriage as the union of love between two individuals. The first generation Asian Americans who promote arranged marriages often view marriage as first and foremost, a familial or parental process, where the wishes of the children are subordinated to those of their parents. While the practice of arranged marriages may seem out of place in contemporary United States, one must not forget that many first generation Asian Americans come from countries in Asia where arranged marriages are still widely practiced.

By contrast, for many 1.5 and later generations of Asian Americans, the concept of arranged marriage in any form is not only inimical to their contemporary worldview, it also generates an

inordinate amount of stress as a result of the dissonance between their ideals of personal autonomy, independence, romantic love, as well as their freedom of choice and pursuit of individual goals with their parents’ insistence on playing a very active role in determining or at the very least, influencing their children’s choice of marriage partner through the articulation of specific family goals, limitations, or restrictions on the possible choices of marriage partners.

From the parents’ point of view, it is important that they select or at least approve the choice of marriage partners for their children because marriage represents a continuation of family name or lineage, as well as the continued preservation and survival of their traditional culture and way of life. Not surprisingly, parents often lament that their children are becoming too vocal and assertive, and in certain cases, too rebellious against authority. From the children’s perspective, they are increasingly rejecting any demand of unconditional submission to parental authority when they reject any call to give up their demand for individual choice in favor of family choice. They point to their different lifestyles, professional careers, values, and expectations.

Farha Ternikar notes that formal arranged marriages are still widespread among Indian American families, including Indian American Christian families. In this context, arranged marriages are practiced as a culturally acceptable mechanism to maintain and perpetuate ethnic and religious ties. Ternikar cites a female respondent whose family wanted to find her a marriage partner because they wanted her to marry within the Malayalam ethnicity and the Catholic faith. She further notes that arranged marriages will remain the norm in South Asian immigrant communities because “the traditional arranged marriage allows parents to have great involvement in the selection of their children’s spouse, while ensuring the maintenance of ethnic and religious tradition and racial purity. There is a great emphasis in South Asian immigrant communities to maintain endogamy for both ethnic and religious reasons.” (TERNIKAR, 2004)



An increasing number of parents are opting for the compromise position of “arranged introductions”. On the one hand, “arranged introductions” allow the parents to have a voice in the preliminary selection of their children’s prospective spouses. On the other hand, the children are not compelled to marry someone against their wishes, retaining the freedom to make the final decision on whether to accept or reject their parents’ choices.

### 7. *The Challenges of Endogamy*

For many traditional Asian American parents, race is an important element in identity construction, creating boundaries that define and demarcate a specific racial ethnic identity from others that are defined biologically, i.e., as a matter of “blood”, such that marriage outside the group “carries with it the danger of impurity or contamination, as personified by the ‘mixed-race child’” (KIBRIA, 1997, 530). Many first generation Asian Americans firmly believe that arranged marriage is the key to ensuring the survival of their ethnic, cultural, and religious traditions in the midst of powerful forces of encouraging assimilation into a White American socio-cultural ideal.<sup>15</sup>

The conflicts surrounding arranged marriages often center on the question of endogamy, or marrying within one’s own racial, ethnic, caste, or social group. Among Asian Americans, endogamy is widely practiced by the Indian American Christians who belong to the Knanaya community.<sup>16</sup> Well-educated and ambitious, many Knanayas have emigrated to the United States since 1965 and settled in Chicago and other metropolitan areas. The Knanaya Catholics are distinct from other Indian Catholics (Latin Catholics, Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Catholics) by the fact that they continue to practice one of the most restrictive forms of endogamy.<sup>17</sup> Raymond Williams explains the dilemma well when he writes:

They are small and endogamous like some branches of the Amish, but they live in the world, not

separate from it, distributed in urban areas across the country. They wish to preserve ethnic ties even though they do not follow traditional occupations.

- 15 As Sudipta Das explains: “Most first generation Asian Americans encourage their U.S. raised or U.S. born children to seek same race or ethnic partners. This trend is stronger in some ethnic groups than in others, such as in Asian Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese communities. Even those first-generation Asians who had married out of their race or ethnic group, whether from love or necessity, indulge in exerting pressure on their children to revert to their cultural tradition and choose ethnic wives or husbands” (DAS, 2006, 252-253).
- 16 The Knanayas (also known as *Thekkumbhagar* or “Southists”) trace their unique ethnic and religious heritage to the Jewish Christian refugees from Edessa led by Knai Thomman (Thomas of Cana) who arrived in Cranganore (Kodungalloor) on the Malabar Coast in Kerala, India in the year 345. The practice of endogamy has ensured the continued survival of their distinctive Jewish-Christian heritage and traditions in the midst of the numerically larger ethnic Indian Saint Thomas Christians who comprise the Syro-Malabar Catholics (also known as *Vadakkumbhagar* or “Northists”). On 29 August 1911, Pope Pius X officially recognized and sanctioned their unique status and distinctive Jewish-Christian identity of the Knanaya Catholics by erecting a vicariate apostolic (subsequently elevated to the status of eparchy on 21 December 1923 and archeparchy on 12 May 2005) at Kottayam for their pastoral care (PODIPARA, 1970; KOLLAPARAMBIL, 1992; VELLIAN, 2001).
- 17 Raymond Williams observes that about one-third of the Knanaya community belongs to the Malankara Syriac Oriental Orthodox Church under the oversight of the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch, while two thirds are Syro-Malabar Catholic (WILLIAMS, 1996, 68). According to Williams: “Of the 125,000 Knanaya in the Knanaya Catholic diocese of Kottayam, which was established as a separate jurisdiction in 1911, approximately 9,000 people in 2,000 registered families live in North America, primarily in Chicago (700 families), New York/New Jersey (650 families), and Los Angeles (200 families), which are the only associations that have resident priests (assigned by Bishop Kuriakose Kunnasserry). Other associations are in Houston (160 families), Washington (22 families), Philadelphia (35 families), Tampa (27 families), Miami (35 families), and Detroit (35 families)” (ibid. 146). The first Knanaya organization in the United States is the Knanaya Association of North America (KANA), which was established in Chicago in 1979. Knanaya Catholics organize themselves under the umbrella of the Knanaya Catholic Congress of North America (KCCNA). The Knanaya Archbishop of Kottayam regularly assigns priests to minister to the spiritual and pastoral needs of the Knanaya Catholics in the United States.

Exclusion results from marrying out of the community even though...the community is so small as to make it difficult to find marriage partners inside it. They prefer endogamy within the ethnic group to endogamy within the Church, although all recognized Knanaya are at least nominally Christians, albeit Orthodox and Catholic...Members of the first generation value and pursue an ethnic purity that flies in the face of some contemporary American rhetoric and which leaves many young people uncertain about their individual prospects and the future of their distinctive community in America (WILLIAMS, 1996, 121).

As a result, the Knanaya American community faces two immediate problems, having to (a) justify the continued practice of endogamy to their skeptical children, and equally skeptical public, and (b) find suitable spouses for their children. As Williams explains:

Knanaya youth in America are just coming to the marriage age, so the issue evokes lively debate. Parents prefer that their children return to India for marriage within the community, but the youth look forward to marriage in the United States. A person who marries outside the community is no longer considered to be a practicing Knanaya, nor are the children enrolled. That creates a great deal of resentment and misunderstanding. Already, several young people have married out, some to other Syrian Christians and some into other ethnic groups. That is a grave threat because the very existence of the Knanaya depends on endogamy (WILLIAMS, 1996, 120).

More specifically, endogamy is perceived by the younger generation of American-born Knanayas as unchristian, racist, and smacks of casteism, and therefore has no place in contemporary United States. Again, citing the findings of Williams:

Young people question the rationale for maintaining such strict endogamy in America. Some believe that the claim to be "old Christians" and part of an aristocracy requiring endogamy is casteism at its worst and should not be imported to America. The response in religious terms is to apply to the Knanaya all the injunctions regarding exclusiveness found in some Hebrew texts and in socio-

logical terms is to show that other groups practice *de facto* endogamy. Even if the young people are convinced, it is difficult to find appropriate partners (WILLIAMS, 1996, 119).

A small minority of Knanayas marries outside of their community, but they usually end up being alienated and marginalized for doing so (ibid. 218). For those who accept the fact of endogamy, however grudgingly, the Knanaya Catholic Youth League of North America (KCYLN) sponsors singles events at their annual conferences, hosting dinners, picnics, etc., that are often used as venues for introducing singles to other singles by parents and family members (TERNIKAR, 2004).

### 8. Pastoral Responses

Asian American Catholics face significant challenges in their quest to construct and shape a meaningful identity, peoplehood, worldview, and moral order as a minority community in the socio-cultural environment of contemporary United States that may not always be sympathetic to their concerns. On the one hand, Asian American Catholics have a strong sense of marriage and family life that are often praised by outsiders. But on the other hand, beneath the placid surface of family harmony lurk problems such as gender strife, spousal abuse, domestic violence, as well as the American-born Asian Americans' rejection of socio-cultural traditions that seek to maintain racial ethnic identity and purity, e.g., arranged marriages and endogamy. What follows next is a fivefold proposal for the Church's consideration as it seeks to respond to the challenges of doing Asian American marriage and family ministry.

#### *First Recommendation: Outreach to Asian American Catholics*

Like many minorities, Asian American Catholics are often hesitant to wash their dirty linen in public. Rather than seek assistance for problems, they tend to minimize these problems in a defensive attempt to "save face". Further, many older

Asian American Catholics may not be fluent in English, and have limited skills and experiences in reaching out for help. Hence, the Catholic Church has to take the initiative to reach out to Asian American Catholics, instead of waiting for them to come knocking on the Church's door.

At the same time, church leaders would do well to avoid two common pitfalls that could derail their ministry in their outreach to these Asian American Catholics. First, church leaders have to avoid the temptation of adopting an uncritical and Orientalist approach toward Asian Americans, essentializing and idealizing Asian American socio-cultural traditions and ethnic practices. Second, church leaders should also avoid an *assimilationist* approach which presumes that if Asian American Catholics were more Americanized and assimilated into the norms of a presumed "White" American Catholic suburban family, their problems would disappear.

Asian Americans argue that both viewpoints fail to consider the nuances and complexities of their life experiences. Moving beyond the two extremes of simplistic cultural essentialism and uncritical assimilation, many Asian Americans are increasingly developing hybridized and multidimensional transnational networks, building and nurturing familial, sociocultural, economic, political, and religious bonds with their ancestral lands (LIE, 1995; ONG, 1999; HA, 2002; YANG, 2002; GUEST, 2003; GUEST, 2005). As a result, many Asian Americans are no longer interested or willing to give up their ethnic identity by complete assimilation. Instead, we find Asian Americans becoming creative and adept at negotiating multiple belongings and loyalties, developing a hybridized sense of belonging simultaneously to the United States on the one hand, as well as countries that they or their forebears have left on the other hand.

*Second Recommendation:  
Selection and Training of Pastoral Leaders*

The Catholic Church would have to recruit and train pastoral ministers with the appropriate cul-

tural, linguistic, and psychological skills to minister to Asian American Catholics and their families. In an ideal world, these pastoral leaders would be recruited from within specific ethnic communities. Where this is not feasible, outsiders could be trained for this purpose. While it is desirable that these pastoral leaders who are not members of specific ethnic communities are equipped with the appropriate language skills for their ministry, it is equally important that these pastoral leaders be trained to understand the socio-cultural nuances of the people that they minister to, reading between the lines through the unspoken body language to understand what is really going on beneath the facade of normalcy. Moreover, pastoral leaders have to avoid *essentializing* Asian Americans into stereotypes, e.g., Asian Americans always stress family over individuality, Asian Americans always cling on tightly to their Asian cultural heritage, Asian Americans have no sense of a differentiated self apart from family, etc. In addition, they ought to be aware that all attempts to "change" the situation or to convey the "right" way of doing things would be viewed as interference or meddling by an "outsider".

*Third Recommendation:  
Empathizing with Asian American Catholics*

Pastoral leaders are called to *empathize* with Asian American Catholics and their communities, in solidarity with their daily life experiences as Asians, Americans, and Catholics. They listen to the hopes and aspirations, as well as struggles and broken dreams of these Asian American Catholics, exploring the intersections of faith, ethnicity, culture, as well as the interaction of social, gender, and generational identities. Though such empathy and solidarity, pastoral leaders help Asian Americans navigate the difficult waters between remaining loyal to culture and tradition on the one hand, and realizing that uncritical loyalty could be unhealthy and counterproductive in the long run.

*Fourth Recommendation:  
From Traditional Maintenance to Traditioning*

Pastoral leaders assist and encourage Asian American Catholics to go beyond idealized and essentialized constructions of identity, culture, and ethnicity, moving away from *tradition-maintenance*, i.e., clinging on to ethnic-bound traditions, customs, and theological positions from the “Old World” at all costs, in favor of *traditioning*, i.e., the largely unconscious and ongoing process of shaping, constructing, and negotiating new traditions, practices, and norms that seek to address the issues and questions confronting all Asian Americans Catholics, immigrant or American-born.

The theological process of “traditioning” is not something new or peculiar to Asian American Catholics. Other theologians such as Dale Irvin (1998), Simon Chan (2000), Amos Yong (2002) and Carmen Nanko-Fernández (2005, 2006) have reflected on the various aspects of traditioning in their theological writings. For example, Simon Chan observes that traditioning enables one generation to hand down their faith to the next “in a way that *takes account of the new context of a new generation of faithful*” (CHAN, 2000, 20, emphasis added). In the context of Latino/a pastoral ministry, Carmen Nanko-Fernández observes that traditioning is an ongoing process that not only “occurs in the daily and is integral to the process of constructing identity, personally and collectively”, but also requires “a habit of learning how to read across contexts in order to avoid absolutizing or universalizing the particular” (NANKO-FERNÁNDEZ, 2005).

Hence, the process of *traditioning* is based upon the premise that tradition is not fixed and static, but rather, it is dynamic and contextual.

Lest one thinks that only racial-ethnic minority theologians reflect on *traditioning* in their theological ruminations, the late Jaroslav Pelikan articulated one of the most succinct yet deeply profound understandings of traditioning in an interview with Joseph Carey that appeared in

the June 26, 1989 issue of *U.S. News & World Report*:

Tradition is not fixed for all time...It is the perpetuation of a *changing, developing identity*. Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition lives *in conversation with the past*, while *remembering where we are and when we are* and that *it is we who have to decide*. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time, so all that is needed to solve any problem is to arrive at the supposedly unanimous testimony of this homogenized tradition (CAREY, 1989, emphasis added).

Pelikan’s insights have far reaching consequences for Asian American Catholics who are endeavoring to make sense of their cultural and ethnic traditions in contemporary United States. Although he did not use the specific phrase “traditioning”, it is clear from the extended quotation that the verb “traditioning” best describes what Pelikan had in mind when he spoke about a tradition that “*lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide*”. In other words, Pelikan unequivocally eschewed the static *traditionalism* that clings tenaciously to past precedents without any regard for the contemporary context and its specific needs, in favor of an active and dynamic *traditioning* that pays attention to contemporary social locations, needs, and challenges.

Moreover, Pelikan’s statement highlights the fact that *traditioning* questions simplistic and uncritical reproductions of the past, rejecting all attempts at fossilizing or archaizing the present in a state of *stasis*, as well as challenging any notion that tradition is ahistorical, atemporal, and independent of socio-cultural changes. Instead, *traditioning* entails critical reflections about a community’s present and future. By going beyond mere replication of historical precedents, *traditioning* seeks to retell, reinterpret, and nuance one’s traditions with new layers of meaningfulness that address the concerns of the present context. *Traditioning* also pursues strategic, dynamic, creative, and contextualized inter-

pretations, mediating between historical precedents and current concerns, thereby endeavoring to create a coherent tradition that unites the rich legacy of historical precedents with contemporary needs and challenges. Rather than looking for a single normative, essentialist, and unchanging meaning, *traditioning* seeks hybridized and multiple *meaningfulness*, embodying and integrating both differences and consensus, past and present, precedent and innovation, authority and creativity, thereby facilitating the articulation of new meanings for the present and future. As a result, tradition is constantly being renegotiated, renewed, and nuanced.

### *Fifth Recommendation: Dialogue*

Pastoral leaders would do well to adopt an approach of dialogue that seeks to understand and respect the problems, while gently encouraging all the parties to open up and talk to each other. Rather than a *deus ex machina*, a pastoral leader would be more effective as a collaborator who facilitates the process of dialogue between parties in conflict, gently prodding parties to go beyond what seems immutable to consider alternative meanings and understandings. Members of a family are in a good position to know about the competing worldviews, values, challenges, identity constructions, problems, and other issues confronting that family better than any outsider. They are the ones with the knowledge to change the problematic situation once they feel empowered through dialogue and finding a common ground.

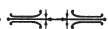
A dialogical approach would enable pastoral leaders to overcome the defensive stonewalling by family elders who often hunker down with a bunker mentality in view of external socio-cultural forces that threaten to change their ways of life. This is because changes come about not by direct intervention in altering the family dynamics, structure, or social conditions, but by facilitating conversation and dialogue. To put it another way, changes come about not by church

leaders “changing” individual family members, but by getting those family members to dialogue about their issues and conflicts, and in doing so, those family members are empowered to change by finding a common ground for compromise. As new understandings are constructed in dialogue, new options and possibilities are opened up for these families.

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• Summary

Issues, Challenges and Pastoral Strategies in Asian American Catholic Marriage Ministry

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This essay explores the issues and challenges that surface in contemporary Asian American marriage ministry in typical urban and suburban contexts. First, it analyzes the principal demographic data from the United States Census Bureau and discusses the complexity, diversity, and ambiguity of the term “Asian American”. Second, it introduces Asian American Catholics and their presence in the United States. Third, it examines the impact that the extended or multigenerational family structure in many Asian American families has on marital relations and daily family life. Fourth, it studies the problems of wife abuse and domestic violence that arise when first generation Asian American women challenge the traditional patriarchal familial structures as a result of acquiring new socioeconomic power and status in the United States. Fifth, it investigates the tensions that result from intergenerational parent-children clashes in many arranged mar-

riages in Asian American communities. Sixth, it considers the complications posed by the practice of endogamy, i.e., marrying within one’s own racial, ethnic, caste, or social group in certain Asian American communities. Finally, it articulates the pastoral responses to the challenges of doing Asian American marriage ministry and suggests five possible strategies of responding to these challenges: (i) a necessity for effective outreach to Asian American Catholics, (ii) the selection and training of suitable pastoral leaders, (iii) encouraging pastoral leaders to empathize with Asian American Catholics and their communities, in solidarity with their daily life experiences as Asians, Americans, and Catholics, (iv) helping Asian American Catholics to move away from tradition-maintenance towards “traditioning”, and (v) promoting dialogue among all the parties to resolve problems and tensions.