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ASIAN AMERICAN CATHOLICS: DIVERSITY WITHIN DIVERSITY

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At its November 2001 General Meeting, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) approved a landmark pastoral letter, *Asian and Pacific Presence: Harmony in Faith*. For the first time, the episcopal leadership of the U.S. Catholic Church has publicly acknowledged the presence of Asian American Catholics and the rich diversity of cultures, traditions, and gifts that they bring to the U.S. Catholic Church. At the same time, the U.S. bishops also concede that Asian Americans, be they newly arrived immigrants or native-born whose roots in the United States extend many generations, “have remained, until very recently, nearly invisible in the Church in the United States” (USCCB 2001, 4). This admission echoes an earlier statement in the 1992 position paper of the USCCB’s Office for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees, *The Pastoral Care of Immigrants from the Philippines* that the “Filipino Catholic community has been one of the least recognized in the country,” because their surnames often result in them being mistaken for Latino/as, and since many of them are fluent in English, they are expected to assimilate fully into the “American style” of Catholicism (USCCB-PCMR 1992). More importantly, the U.S. Catholic Bishops went on to say in *Asian and Pacific Presence* that the “tremendous increase in Asian and Pacific Catholics across the United States at the beginning of the third millennium is a teaching moment,” and hence, “this pastoral statement focuses attention on the little-known Asian and Pacific communities rooted in the United States, as well as new immigrants about whom we should learn more, and whom we should acknowledge as integral parts of the Church in the United States” (USCCB 2001, 4).

It is in this context of “learning about” and “acknowledging” the Asian Americans as “integral parts of the Church in the United States” that this essay seeks to introduce the Asian American Catholics and the diversity with which they enrich the U.S. Catholic Church. First, it discusses the term “Asian American” and examines the principal demographic data from the United States Census Bureau. Next, it surveys the history of Asian immigration to the United States with the intention of giving the reader some basic knowledge and understanding of the emergence of various Asian American communities and their many struggles to be accepted by mainstream America. Finally, Asian American Catholics are well known, not only for their deep faith and devotion, but also for their distinctive cultural-religious traditions that enrich the wider U.S. Catholic Church. As space does not allow for an extended discussion of each Asian American Catholic community, this essay concludes with an analysis of the principal traits that appear to be common, in varying degrees, to the various Asian American Catholic communities.

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I. A Snapshot of Asian American Demographics

Many Americans often use the term “Asian American” in contemporary discourse as a convenient shorthand to categorize all Americans of Asian ancestry and heritage, with their bewilderingly diverse languages, cultures and traditions. The 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, e.g., Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam” (U.S. Census Bureau 2003, 1), and this understanding of “Asian American” is adopted in this essay. In the past, the Census Bureau lumped Asian Americans together with Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, a category that includes Samoans, Tongans, Tahitians, Fijians, and other ethnicities, even though in many instances, in their life experiences, socio-cultural and economic-political concerns the Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders have more in common with Native Americans than with Asian Americans. In the 2000 Census, the Census Bureau have differentiated Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders into separate categories for the first time.

Nonetheless, the term “Asian American” masks distinct racial-ethnic communities under the facade of a homogenous and monolithic “pan-Asian American” identity that exists more in theory than in practice. In truth, the category of “Asian Americans” encompass groups of peoples of diverse languages, cultures, spiritual traditions, worldviews, socio-economic classes, generational levels, historical rivalries and animosities, such that all attempts at generalizations run the significant risk of error. In addition, the concerns of first generation Asian immigrants are very different from those of subsequent generations of Asians born and bred in the United States.

Since the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act (Harte-Celler Act) that 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 (U.S. Census Bureau 2002a, 9). 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 (U.S. Census Bureau 2002, 1).

II. Asian Immigration to the United States

The Asian American community traces its earliest beginnings to the arrival of Filipino sailors who sought to escape the harsh realities of the Spanish galleon trade by jumping ship and settling down in Louisiana (Bautista 1998). However, large-scale Asian immigration to the United States first began in the early nineteenth century with the arrival of the Chinese, who came in search of a better future for themselves and their families. To this first wave of Asian immigrants, the United States was a land of opportunity and a beacon of hope, and accordingly their adopted country was (and still is) the “Beautiful Land” (*Mei Kuok* in Cantonese, *Mei Guo* in Mandarin), while San

Francisco, the port of entry for many of these Chinese was named the “Golden Mountain” (*Kam San* in Cantonese, *Jin Shan* in Mandarin). These optimistic names, which were born in the Californian “Gold Rush” of the 1840s and 1850s, belied the excruciatingly harsh and exploitative reality that awaited them in the gold mines of the Sierra Nevada foothills. When the gold mines became exhausted, many Chinese worked as unskilled farmhands in the booming farms, some became coolies, artisans and tradesmen, while a number opened small businesses that catered to Chinese migrants. More than 10,000 Chinese laborers toiled on the Central Pacific Railroad, the monumental transcontinental railroad that cut across the Sierra Nevada and the Rockies, until its completion in 1869.

On the one hand, the Chinese laborers were often prized by their employers for their industrious work-ethic and willingness to endure a harsh life and accept low wages. On the other hand, other newly-arrived European immigrants viewed the Chinese as rivals and competitors for the same pool of jobs. Over time, the labor unions, which these working class European immigrants belonged to, engaged in anti-Chinese agitation. In response, the U.S. Congress enacted a series of legislation seeking to end Chinese immigration to the United States, viz., the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, renewed in 1892, and made permanent in 1902. The Chinese became infamous as the first ethnic group to be prevented specifically from immigrating to the United States *solely* on the basis of their country of origin, and this injustice was sanctioned by the highest legislative authority in the United States (Salyer 1995).

Nevertheless, the economic opportunities that resulted from the opening up of the West necessitated the supply of low-cost labor for their success and profitability. In place of the Chinese, immigrant laborers from Japan, Korea, and the Philippines flocked to the United States to fill these jobs. Many impoverished Japanese farmers and unemployed men were attracted by the growing agribusinesses in Hawaii and California, and opportunities in the fishing, lumber, and construction industries in the Western States. Filipinos arrived in the United States in large waves beginning in the early 1900s to work as agricultural workers in the plantations of Hawaii and produce farms of California. The first wave of large scale Korean immigration to the United States took place from 1903 to 1905, with the arrival in Hawaii of boatloads of impoverished Korean farmers who were brought in to work on the island’s sugarcane plantations, as well as a smaller number who came to the West Coast of the United States. The Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910 led to many Korean intellectuals, anti-Japanese student activists, and political exiles arriving as refugees, followed by many Korean women who came as picture-brides.

The Japanese, Filipino, and Korean laborers also encountered the same racist and discriminatory treatment that the Chinese of an earlier generation had experienced, especially in California. In 1906, California passed anti-miscegenation legislation that outlawed marriages among whites and Asians. The subsequent attempt of the Californian authorities to segregate schoolchildren of Japanese ancestry from white students resulted in a school crisis, the San Francisco School Incident of 1906. This led to the Gentlemen’s Agreement between President Theodore Roosevelt and the Japanese government in 1908, in which the Japanese government agreed to a voluntary restraint of Japanese immigration to the United States. The Gentlemen’s Agreement was followed by the 1917 Immigration Act (Asiatic Barred Zone Act), which expanded the exclusionary measures that were previously leveled against China to encompass the “Asiatic Barred Zone,” a region that extended to India, Indochina, the Middle East, and a host of smaller Asian nations. Japanese

immigration was eventually curtailed completely under the 1924 Immigration Act (Johnson-Reed Act or “Japanese Exclusion Act”), while the 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act, which conferred U.S. commonwealth status on the Philippines, limited Filipino immigration to an annual quota of fifty persons. However, the worst was yet to come.

The ensuing public hysteria that followed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 led to the signing of Executive Order 9066 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on February 19, 1942, resulting in the forcible seizure of assets, removal, relocation and incarceration of some 120,000 Japanese without trial in ten concentration camps scattered around the country until the end of the war, including 77,000 who possessed U.S. citizenship from birth. Although practically all the Japanese Americans with U.S. citizenship affirmed their unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and indicated their unconditional willingness to serve in the United States Armed Forces on combat duty, nonetheless they were denied their rights to exercise their fundamental rights as citizens under the United States Constitution and branded as enemy aliens. Thus, the Japanese were the only racial-ethnic group in the United States who suffered the ignominy of incarceration without trial in concentration camps merely on the basis of their Japanese ethnicity. By contrast, neither the German Americans nor the Italian Americans were incarcerated wholesale in concentration camps as enemy aliens during that period.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, legislation was introduced to relax the absolute restrictions of previous exclusionary legislation, and accept war refugees under the quota category, as well as spouses and children of U.S. servicemen under the non-quota category, thereby enabling numerous Korean War refugees, war babies and orphans being adopted by American families, as well as Korean wives of U.S. servicemen to enter the United States. This culminated in the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act (McCarran-Walter Act), which reopened the United States to Asian immigration. However, new restrictive immigration quotas were introduced: each Asian-Pacific nation could send up to 100 quota immigrants annually, with a maximum annual ceiling of 2,000 immigrants in total from the entire Asia-Pacific triangle (Hing 1993, 38-39). Not surprisingly, most Asian immigrants admitted between 1945 and 1964 were Asian women married to U.S. servicemen who were admitted as non-quota immigrants.

With the passage of the landmark 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act (Harte-Celler Act), a new immigration regime was introduced, transforming the shape and pattern of Asian immigration to the United States. Among other things, the 1965 law abolished the national origins quota system of the 1952 legislation and raised the limits on total annual immigration. The implications of this law were felt in the ensuing decades, as the doors were now flung wide open for new waves of immigrants from Asia that has continued unabated to this day. Beginning in the late 1970s and continuing through the 1980s to the early 1990s, the United States welcomed waves of refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Collectively, they number about 1.5 million in the year 2000.

Of the three Indochinese countries, Vietnamese immigrants form the largest group, arriving in the United States in five broad waves. The first exodus of some 130,000 Vietnamese arrived in the United States in the aftermath of the Fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. The second wave comprised mainly ethnic Chinese who fled Vietnam in 1978-1979 to escape persecution by the Vietnamese government. The third wave consisted of about 300,000 Vietnamese “boat people” who fled Vietnam between 1978 and 1982. After being rescued from the high seas and interned in transit

camps in Hong Kong, Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, many of them were eventually resettled in the United States. The fourth wave occurred between 1983 and 1989, and involved mainly relatives and family members of Vietnamese who arrived in the first three waves. These new arrivals were brought into the country under the auspices of the Order Departure Program and Humanitarian Operations. Finally, the fifth wave is a very much smaller-scale immigration under current family-based or employment immigration provisions, after the existing resettlement programs ended in 1989 (Phan 2003a, 229).

III. The Varieties of Asian American Catholicism

In the context of U.S. 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 U.S. Catholic Church. While accurate statistics are hard to come by, *Asian and Pacific Presence* 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).

Asian American Catholic communities may be organized as: (1) one of many diverse ethnic communities within a large multicultural parish, (2) a territorial parish, or (3) a personal parish. In the first scenario, a typical multicultural parish often offers special liturgical services and programs for different ethnic communities, including various Asian American communities. This is by far the most common setup in many parts of the United States. Among the Asian American Catholic communities, the territorial parish is common for Vietnamese American Catholic communities in those areas with sufficiently large numbers of Vietnamese American Catholics. As for the third option, many U.S. bishops have established personal parishes for specific Asian American communities. A personal parish is an extra-territorial parish within a diocese that may be erected to minister to the particular needs of a specific community by reason of language, nationality, or liturgical rite. In this regard, many Vietnamese American territorial parishes are, in reality, also personal parishes for other Vietnamese living outside their geographical confines. The personal parish setup is common for Vietnamese American, Korean American, and Chinese American Catholic communities, where there is a pastoral need for liturgical services and other programs in the Asian mother tongues, but where the numbers do not justify the establishment of a territorial parish for those groups.

As space does not permit us to go at length into each Asian American Catholic community, this essay concludes with a discussion of six principal traits that appear to be common, in varying degrees, to the various Asian American Catholic communities, social, cultural, historical, and regional differences notwithstanding.

1. Popular Piety and Devotions

One obvious trait of Asian American Catholic communities which they share with Latino/a Catholic communities, and which set them apart from their Caucasian American cousins, is the prominence given to popular devotions, e.g., the Black Nazarene, Santo Niño, and *Simbang Gabi*

(a novena of masses in the octave before Christmas) devotions for the Filipino American Catholic community, the various Marian devotions in Asian American Catholic communities (e.g., Our Lady of La Vang for the Vietnamese Americans, Our Lady of Vailankanni for the Indians Americans, Our Lady of Antipolo for the Filipino Americans, etc.). The annual Vietnamese American Marian pilgrimage in Carthage, MO every August draws more than 50,000 Vietnamese American Catholics each year. The dedication of the shrines to Our Lady of Antipolo and Our Lady of Vailankanni in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in 1997, and the annual Asian American Catholic pilgrimage to these shrines every May bear testimony to the vibrancy Asian American Catholic devotional piety. Based on ethnographical studies of various immigrant groups in Houston, Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz observe that popular devotions play an important role in maintaining ethnic culture and identity:

“Religious items representing ethnic culture include specific patron saints for Catholics, evidence of traditional ancestor veneration for Vietnamese Catholics, and Hindu saints veneration among some Parsi Zoroastrians, and religiously specific deity statues for Hindus. Home-centered religious devotions and celebrations of life-cycle events are also heavily tinged by the ethnic culture of participants. In these ways, the practice of domestic religion reinforces cultural identity, and women are centrally involved in such practices.” (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, 392-393).

2. Close Identification between Faith, Ethnicity and Culture

Another important characteristic of many Asian American Catholic communities is the centrality of the church as a hub for communal fellowship and mutual support, a situation that arises in part because of language barriers, cultural differences, and other adjustment issues. For many Asian American Catholics, the Church is the venue for all communal celebrations and traditional cultural festivities (e.g., Lunar New Year, Mid-Autumn Festival, etc.), the preserver of their language and cultural traditions (e.g., classes in the mother tongue and cultural heritage are offered to their American-born children), as well as the provider of social, welfare, and other support services (e.g., English literacy classes are offered to adults, immigration services and citizenship classes are offered to new immigrants, and job opportunities are advertised). While it is certainly true that Asian American Catholics consider themselves fully Catholic and part of the Universal Church, nonetheless, they also perceive their own distinctive religious worldview, traditions, and practices as integral to their ethnic and socio-cultural identities, such that their Catholic faith often becomes the focus of minority ethnic identification, providing the framework for addressing life issues, as well as assisting to preserve, negotiate, and perpetuate their distinctive ethnic identities and cultural traditions in the wider American mainstream.

For example, in many Vietnamese American ethnic communities, a Catholic parish is often the most important ethnic institution serving various socio-cultural roles in addition to the usual religious functions (Zhou and Bankston 1998, 98), and the tendency of the parish church to serve as a community center results in a close connection between the Vietnamese American ethnic community and their Catholic faith (Rutledge 1985, 65-67). As Fr. Francis Bui, a Vietnamese American Catholic priest in Louisiana puts it succinctly: “We have the Vietnamese church to preserve Vietnamese culture and to pass on the language. If it wasn’t for that, we could just assimilate into other churches for religion” (quoted in Bankston 2000, 44).

3. Communal Fellowship

Many Asian American Catholic communities have active religious groups such as lay associations, youth groups, bible study groups, charismatic prayer groups, RENEW and Cursillo groups for communal fellowship and empowerment. For example, the Eucharistic Youth Association of Vietnamese American Catholicism is an organization for young Vietnamese American Catholic boys and girls that is modeled after the boy scouts. The most common and prominent lay association in many Vietnamese American, Korean American, Chinese American, and Filipino American Catholic communities is the Legion of Mary. In particular, the Legion of Mary affords an avenue for Asian American Catholic women, who are otherwise marginalized in a traditional patriarchal communal structure and male-oriented clerical parish framework, to play an active role in parish and community life.

4. Religious Vocations

One silver lining in the declining rate of religious vocations in the U.S. Catholic Church is the significant growth of Asian American priestly and religious vocations in general, and the Vietnamese American Catholic community's significant contribution to priestly and religious vocations in particular. As the Vietnamese American theologian, Peter C. Phan describes it:

There are currently some five hundred Vietnamese priests (diocesan and religious), some twenty permanent deacons, and several hundred sisters. Even among the clergy, there are "success stories": a good number of Vietnamese priests are pastors, responsible for not only the Vietnamese but also American parishes; a few of them hold the office of vicar general, and some have even been made monsignors [and recently, one has been made a bishop]! Vietnamese vocations to the priesthood and religious life have been numerous. In some dioceses (e.g., Orange, California and New Orleans, Louisiana), Vietnamese priests constitute a significant percentage of the clergy; and in some religious societies, e.g., the Society of the Divine Word, a high number of membership is Vietnamese. ... Also to be mentioned are hundreds of sisters of various orders, some of which are of Vietnamese origin (such as the Lovers of the Cross)...(Phan 2003a, 230-231, 233).

The Vietnamese American Catholic community stands out with its many indigenous religious congregations, including the Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix (CMC, *Dòng Đông Công*) a male religious order based in Carthage, MO, the Lovers of the Holy Cross (LHC, *Dòng Mên Thánh Gia*), the oldest and largest of the Vietnamese female religious congregations, both in Vietnam and the United States), the Congregation of Mary, Queen (CMR, *Trinh Vương*), a female religious order that is an offshoot of the Lovers of the Holy Cross, with its headquarters in Springfield, MO, and the Vietnamese Dominican Sisters (headquartered in Houston, TX).

5. A Holistic Spirituality

Asian and Pacific Presence reminds us that "Asian and Pacific Catholic Americans and immigrants migrated with the experience and sensibilities of the great religions and spiritual traditions of the world – Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shintoism, Sikhism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism – together with Christianity. Their experience of the great religions and spiritual traditions teaches them to live with a profound sense of the sacred, a holistic approach to life and salvation, and a spirituality adapted to their needs and a life-giving vitality"

(USCCB 2001, 15). In addition, many Asian American Catholics come from cultures that have been shaped by indigenous spirituality and religiosity, and they invariably find themselves negotiating back and forth between their multiple religious worlds. The comments of the Vietnamese American theologian Peter Phan, albeit on Vietnamese American Catholics, is illustrative of the “holistic approach to life and salvation” that arises from the “experience of the great religions and spiritual traditions” that *Asian and Pacific Presence* speaks of:

Asia is the birthplace of almost all world religions (including Christianity!). In Vietnam the three main religious traditions are Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist. Scratch the surface of every Vietnamese Catholic and you will find a Confucian, a Taoist, and a Buddhist, or more often than not, an indistinguishable mixture of the three. Vietnamese Catholics live within a cultural framework undergirded by Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist values and moral norms. They are socialized into these values and norms not only through formal teachings but also, and primarily, through thousands of proverbs, folk sayings, songs, and of course, family rituals and cultural festivals. Many Vietnamese Catholics do not find it strange or difficult to inhabit different religious universes. It is this rich and varied religious heritage, latent but pervasive, that Asian American Catholics bring with them to the United States. It will be one of their most significant contributions to the American Church (Phan 2003a, 234).

6. Martyrdom

Asian and Pacific Presence also celebrates the “long heritage of extraordinary witness of life and martyrdom” in the Asian Church: the 120 Chinese Martyrs, the 117 Vietnamese Martyrs, the 103 Korean Martyrs, San Lorenzo Ruiz for Filipino American Catholics, Saint Paul Miki and his companions for Japanese American Catholics, etc. (USCCB 2001, 10-11). For many Asian American Catholics, martyrdom and persecution is not a historical footnote, but a contemporary experience. The past few decades have witnessed the arrival in the United States of Vietnamese and mainland Chinese Catholics who have been persecuted by communist regimes. Their experiences serve not only to strengthen and enrich their own faith, but also to remind those American Catholics who have no experience of martyrdom, not to take their faith for granted.

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