

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION SEMINARY

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ASIAN CATHOLICS : CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES

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Since the Second World War millions of Asians and Pacific Islanders have emigrated to the United States of America. By "Asians and Pacific Islanders" are meant people who themselves or whose ancestors have immigrated from various countries of Asia and the Pacific islands comprising Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. They include principally the Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Asian Indians, Koreans, Vietnamese, Hmong, Laotians, Cambodians, Hawaiian Samoans, and Guamanians. Their presence has profound and extensive implications for every facet of life in both the American society and the American Catholic Church.

The Presence of Asians as Challenges and Opportunities

In the 1990 census, the population of Asians and Pacific Islanders was counted at about 7.3 million, or 2.9 percent of the 250 million total U.S. population. This number represents more than a doubling of 3.5 million Asian Americans in 1980. Further, it is projected that by the middle of the twenty-first century ten percent of the U.S. population will be Asian, a huge increase from barely three percent in 1990. Among Asian-Americans, the largest number of Catholics is found among Filipinos, Vietnamese, and Koreans.

Needless to say, Asian-American Catholics present serious challenges to the American Catholic Church. These challenges are in part not different from those confronting the Catholic immigrants of the "First Wave" such as the Irish, Germans, Italians, and Eastern Europeans. Like them, the immigrants of the "Second Wave" have to cross the socio-political and economic divide separating them from the American mainstream. On the other hand, unlike them, the recent, at times illegal, immigrants, who are mostly poor and ecclesiastically powerless, have to overcome the gap within the church itself which marginalizes them from the power centers now occupied by the Catholics of the "First Wave."

But these new comers present the church not only with challenges but with opportunities as well. Besides increasing substantially church membership and the number of religious and priestly vocations, they bring with them rich and diverse cultural as well as religious traditions with which the American Catholic Church can be renewed and strengthened. Through various initiatives and organizational structures of the USCC and the NCCB, the church has done a good job of welcoming these strangers. By meeting these challenges and taking advantage of these opportunities, the American Catholic Church has acquired once again the vibrancy of an "immigrant church."

To enhance the effectiveness of the American Church's efforts to welcome Asian Catholics and to make them productive members of the church, the following general reflections are offered on their cultural and religious heritages as well as the type of Catholicism they have inherited. Some familiarity with these aspects of American Asians is necessary not only to avoid misunderstanding and conflict but also for a fruitful ministry among them. Of course, it is important to remember that there is no generic "Asian" but only very distinct Asian ethnic and national groups. Furthermore, within each group, careful attention must be paid to the individual himself and herself who is not just an instance of the group to which he or she belongs but possesses a unique way of feeling, thinking, and acting.

The "Asian Soul" or "Being Asian"

In his recent Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (November 6, 1999) promulgated after the Asian Synod, Pope John Paul II offers a snapshot of what he calls the "Asian soul" or "being Asian": "The people of Asia take pride in their religious and cultural values such as love of silence and contemplation, simplicity, harmony, detachment, non-violence, discipline, frugal living, the thirst for learning and philosophical inquiry ..., respect for life, compassion for all beings, closeness to nature, filial piety toward parents, elders and ancestors, and a highly developed sense of community. In particular, they hold the family to be a vital source of strength, a closely knit community with a powerful sense of solidarity. Asian peoples are known for their spirit of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Without denying the existence of bitter tensions and violent conflicts, it can still be said that Asia has often demonstrated a remarkable capacity for accommodation and a natural openness to the mutual enrichment of peoples in the midst of a plurality of religions and cultures.... All of this indicates an innate spiritual insight and moral wisdom in the Asian soul and it is the core around which a growing sense of 'being Asian' is built"(EA,6).

These characteristics are of course not exclusive of Asians, nor do all Asians practice them equally. We must avoid romanticizing Asians as if with the qualities they were morally superior to other ethnic groups. However, if instead of frenetic activism, Asians practice love of silence and contemplation instead of unbridled consumerism, simplicity, frugal living and detachment; instead of physical and psychological violence, harmony and non-violence instead of ecological destruction, closeness to nature, respect for life and compassion for all beings; instead of racism and sexism, tolerance and peaceful co-existence; instead of anti-family ethos, filial piety toward parents, elders and ancestors; instead of anti-intellectualism and moral pragmatism, thirst for learning and philosophical inquiry; instead of rugged individualism, a powerful sense of solidarity; in short, if Asians live the values which their culture inculcate, they will make an important and much-needed contribution to the American society and the American Church. Of course, Asian-American Catholics, clerical as well as lay, like any other American, have succumbed to the seductive songs of the sirens of the New World, but they can and must draw from their religious and cultural traditions resources to help them in their struggle against the evils of contemporary life in America.

A Different Way of Being a Christian

Besides these general cultural and religious values, Asian-American Catholics have brought with them to the United States their own ways of living the Christian faith. Here again it is necessary to remember that, just as there is no generic "Asian," there is no one type of Asian Catholicism. Each Asian country has its own mode of being Catholic that reflects its cultural and religious traditions.

The history of Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular in Asia developed in dependence on the growth of missionary activity since the sixteenth century. The type of church organization and Christian life that were brought to Asia by missionaries unavoidably mirrored those of contemporary Europe today often referred to as post-Tridentine Catholicism, that is, shaped by the Council of Trent (1545-63). It has of course been renewed in various degrees by the reforms mandated by Vatican II. Asian-American Catholics stand then between a more conservative post-Tridentine Catholicism and a more progressive Vatican II Catholicism. Which side they favor largely depends on the church of their native countries or even of particular regions of these countries. In spite of regional and national differences, the following traits seem to be common to American Asians' experiences of Catholicism.

1. In terms of ecclesiological model, Asian-American Catholics tend to see the church primarily as a social institution. This model exaggerates the role of visible and canonical structures and the importance of the hierarchy. It has often led to the error known as institutionalism characterized by clericalism, juridicism, and triumphalism. This ecclesiological model is strongly buttressed by the Confucian culture with its emphasis on deference for authority and tradition. It also responds well to the Asian churches' need to strengthen their corporate identity and social cohesiveness, given their minority status in Asia (except in the Philippines).

2. Connected with this emphasis on the institutional aspects of the church is the relatively passive role of the laity. Despite the fact that the Asian-American Catholic laity, especially the younger ones, are highly educated and successful in various professions, they have as yet no effective voice in the day-to-day operation of parish life. The local priest most often wields absolute power. Besides excessive reliance on the clergy, the laity's lack of competence in matters theological may account for the minimal role of the laity in church organization, since training in fields other than secular is generally regarded as inappropriate for the laity.

3. Another consequence of institutionalism is an excessive concern with the internal problems of the church and neglect of the dialogue with other believers. Asian-American Catholics still look on the followers of other religions with suspicion, despite Vatican II's insistence on the necessity of interreligious dialogue. Furthermore, they have barely begun to reflect upon, much less enacted, the task and ways of inculcating the faith into their own cultures, in spite of ample resources available in their adopted country for this purpose.

4. Asian-American Catholics are also reluctant to take upon themselves the challenges of social justice, even if most of them are vigorously opposed to Communism, and understandably so, since many of them have been victims of Communist oppression. In general, Asian-American Catholicism is still heavily shaped by individualistic pietism, with insufficient knowledge of the social teaching of the church, and consequently with little engagement in the socio-political and economic realms in the spirit of the Gospel.

The above four observations are not intended to convey a negative evaluation of Asian-American Catholicism. On the contrary, on any showing, Asian-American Catholics form a vibrant and vigorous community that has already made invaluable contributions to both the American society and church, not only from their cultural traditions but also from their Catholic heritage.

5. One area in which Asian-American Catholics have already visibly transformed the American church is the number of priestly and religious vocations they (in particular the Vietnamese) have produced. Beside hundreds of Vietnamese priests who came in and after 1975 and Korean priests who are regularly sent here to minister to their fellow Catholics, many dioceses (e.g., Orange, California and New Orleans, Louisiana) and religious societies (especially the Divine Word Society) have been enormously enriched by new Asian vocations. Also to be mentioned are hundreds of sisters of various orders, some of which are of Vietnamese origin (e.g., the Lovers of the Cross), who are serving generously in many dioceses and who can easily raise vocations in the hundreds if they have the resources. This large number of vocations could be attributed to the high respect in which priests and religious are held among Asians (which has of course its own negative sides) but certainly it has roots in the devout faith of Asian-American Catholic families.

6. This fervent faith is nourished no doubt not only by the sacraments but also by popular devotions. Indeed, the cultivation of popular devotions is a distinguishing characteristic of many Asian-American communities and constitutes an important contribution that Asian-American Catholics make to the American Church. While post-Vatican II Catholics tend to downplay popular devotions for their alleged superstitious character and their tendency to alienate people from this-worldly concerns, Asian Catholics have continued to foster practices of popular devotion (e.g., Marian devotions, pilgrimages, novenas)

Benediction, prayers to the saints, etc.) and derive much spiritual nourishment from them. Every August, the Marian celebrations organized by the Congregation of Mary Coredeptrix in Carthage, Missouri, draws an astonishing crowd of some 40,000 Catholics. These popular devotions will play a much more significant role if their tendency toward excessive sentimentalism and individualism can be minimized and their potential for community-building, liberation and social justice can be retrieved.

7. Intimately connected with popular devotions is another major characteristic of Asian-American Catholic communities and parishes, that is, the flourishing of communal activities, often in tandem with sacramental celebrations (especially baptism, marriage, and funerals), certain calendrical feasts (e.g., the New Year) and cultural customs (e.g., death anniversaries). In addition, there are a large number of pious associations (e.g., confraternities, sodalities, youth groups) which provide the laity with the opportunity to exercise leadership and be actively involved with the community, especially in its liturgical and spiritual life. Recently, more modern associations have been added, such as Bible study groups, charismatic prayers group, RENEW, Cursillo, etc. These associations with their manifold activities are reliable indices of the vibrancy of Asian Catholic communities.

8. In addition to being nourished by sacraments and devotions, the faith of Asian Churches has been tested in the crucible of suffering and even persecution. The memory of martyrdom is still fresh in the minds of Asian-American Catholics, whether it is that of 26 Japanese canonized in 1862, or 10 Koreans canonized in 1984, or 118 Vietnamese (including foreign missionaries) canonized in 1988. More recently, many Asian-American Catholics have suffered for their faith under the Communist regime (e.g., in China, Korea, and Vietnam) and as the result have chosen exile in the United States or elsewhere. While this experience might have rigidified their conservative political views, it has no doubt enriched and fortified their faith in a way not available to those enjoying religious freedom.

9. Asia is the birthplace of almost all world religions (including Christianity!). In Southeast Asia, the three main religious traditions are Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist. Scratch the surface of every Southeast Asian Catholic and you will find a Confucian, a Taoist, and a Buddhist, or more often than not, an indistinguishable mixture of the three. Asian Catholics live within a cultural framework undergirded by Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist values and 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 Asian 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 and will be one of their most significant contributions to the American Church.

10. Lastly, most if not all first-generation Asian immigrants in the United States have experienced socio-economic deprivation, extreme in some cases, before they came here. This experience of poverty makes Asian-American Catholics sensitive to the sufferings and needs of their fellow nationals and generous in their financial support for the church as well as their relatives back home. This sense of solidarity with victims of poverty and of natural disasters is also characteristic of many Asian-American Catholic communities, and should be fostered with care, since the struggle against poverty and oppression is an essential part of the inculturation of the Gospel, especially in a society whose economic and military policies have caused sufferings in many parts of the world and in Asia in particular.

Asian-American Catholics live between two cultures and two Churches. Neither fully American nor fully Asian, they are both Asian and American. Being both, they have the opportunity and the challenge to fuse both worlds, their own cultural values and Catholicism and the American culture and the American Catholic Church into something new, so that they stand not only between these two cultures and Churches, but also beyond them.

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