

An Unfinished Journey or a Journey Without an End?: Asian American Catholics and Harmony and Interculturality in the American Catholic Church

(Extended Summary of Presentation)

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According to the 2019 census there were 17.3 million Americans of Asian descent. The largest groups represented are Chinese (3.8 million), Filipinos (3.4 million), Asian Indians (3.2 million), Vietnamese (1.7 million), Koreans (1.7 million), and Japanese (1.3 million). A June 2019 Pew Research Center report says that, based on race and ethnicity, more Asian immigrants than Hispanic immigrants have arrived in the U.S. in most years since 2010. The Center also projects that Asians will become the largest immigrant group in the U.S. by 2055, surpassing Hispanics with estimates indicating that in 2065, Asians will make up some 38% of all immigrants; Hispanics, 31%; whites, 20%; and Blacks, 9%.

Though they make up about only three percent of the Catholic population and are concentrated mostly along the West Coast of the United States, the presence of Catholics of Asian descent impacts dioceses throughout the country. As could be surmised from the pastoral statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (hereinafter USCCB) in 2001 (*Asian and Pacific Presence: Harmony in Faith*) and in 2018 (*Encountering Christ in Harmony: A Pastoral Response to Our Asian and Pacific Island Brothers and Sisters*) one of the difficulties in discerning and responding to the gifts and challenges presented by Asian American Catholics is that the group, which already comprises an extremely diverse constituency of nationalities and ethnicities, is often lumped with Pacific Islanders. Nevertheless the abovementioned pastoral statements, hereinafter referred to as APP and ECH, the responses to a nationwide questionnaire and online survey conducted by a team of social scientists in 2015 among the Asian and Pacific Island Catholic community in the United States, which ECH tried to address, and the works of the

growing number of Catholic theologians of Asian descent in the U.S., serve as key sources in any discussion on the contribution of Asian American Catholics to the U.S. Catholic Church.

It is my contention that the contribution of Asian American Catholics to the American church, which comes as both gift and challenge, could be articulated and framed into the two interrelated concepts of harmony and interculturality. According to APP, harmony is authentically Christian and intrinsically Asian insofar as it draws its inspiration and strength from the harmonious relationship of the Trinity and teaches a threefold harmony: (1) harmony with a personal God, the source of all genuine harmony; (2) harmony among all people; and (3) harmony with the whole universe. Harmony is not an absence of strife. Nor is it merely a pragmatic strategy for common living amid differences. It is an Asian approach to reality, an Asian understanding of reality that is profoundly organic, i.e., a world-view wherein the whole, the unity, is the sum-total of the web of relations, interaction of the various parts with each other, in a word, harmony, a word that resonates with all Asian cultures.

Interculturality, also known as interculturalism, consists of the three interrelated components of dialogue, unity, and identity flexibility. Unfortunately, “intercultural” tends to be conflated with “cross-cultural” and “multicultural.” In reality they are not really the same. Filipino-American theologian Tito Cruz, for instance, points to the common perception that a “multicultural parish” is synonymous with a biracial or bilingual congregation and argues for giving new meaning to “multicultural.” A “cross-cultural” approach tends to see culture in clearly defined terms with an identifiable set of characteristics uniformly shared across the culture. Cultural identities, however, are much more complex and hybrid than these generalizations: everyone has a unique set of cultural variables and a complex set of sub-cultures. From a multicultural perspective, meanwhile, exclusionary phenomena like racism, sexism, and even genocide are the inescapable byproducts of all the universalizing/totalizing

“grand narratives” of social modernization such that exclusion is not an aberration rather a direct consequence of modernity. Critics of multiculturalism, therefore, contend that it only succeeded in embedding a superficial understanding and accommodation of cultural and ethnic diversity.

An intercultural approach goes further than mere correspondence. It recognizes how postmodernity deconstructs all boundaries and makes communication multi-directional, networked, indiscreet, pluralistic. It sees how, in reality, there are “boundaries” because we experience them as such, but now they are very diffuse and porous, and cultural identities are very complex and changing the whole time. Theologically, an intercultural approach begins from a presumption of cultural and relational equality and mutuality and, from the very outset of the relationship, invites us to put to one side our own cultural predilections, preferences, and prejudices, emptying ourselves kenotically of all power intentions, more willing to receive than to give, open to where the Spirit is leading, and as open to our own spiritual and cultural transformation as to that of others. The aim of interculturality, in other words, is the generation of a society of *convivencia* by transforming ethnocentric rationalities, and by supporting initiatives for the intercultural transformation of societies, fostering inter spaces of intercontextual, intercultural, and interreligious dialogue. Kathleen Garces-Foley sheds light on how these approaches, particularly cross-cultural and multicultural, play out in the American Catholic Church’s response to, as well as engagement of, ethnic diversity in “From the Melting Pot to the Multicultural Table: Filipino Catholics in Los Angeles.”

Interculturality is akin to what Vietnamese-American theologian Peter Phan calls interculturalization, which he describes as the process whereby the American culture and the Asian cultures are brought into a reciprocal engagement in such a way that both of them are transformed from within. Essential to interculturalization is the mutual criticism and enrichment between the American culture and the Asian cultures. The expressions of all these cultures

are transformed as the result of this process. Japanese-Filipino-Canadian theologian Julius Kei-Kato refers to this process as a dynamic boundary crossing and mixing between categories that have been hitherto commonly conceived of as self-contained, and eventually results in a new entity or a *tertium quid*, i.e., a third entity, which carries traits from all the ingredients of the mixture but cannot be identified exclusively any longer with any one of them.

As peoples who come from culturally-diverse countries that have been ravaged by wars, ethnic conflicts, poverty, and various forms of strife, and as peoples who come from a continent that is the cradle of the world's major religions, and where the Catholic Church consequently espouses dialogue as the way of being Church, Asian American Catholics are peace-loving people with a deep faith. The specific contributions of Asian American Catholics to the U.S. Catholic Church, that were identified by Phan, have direct links to these complex contexts as well as richly diverse and deep religio-cultural heritage and values of the group: (1) the number of priestly and religious vocations (especially the Vietnamese) they have produced; (2) fervent faith nourished by the sacraments and popular devotion (see also ECH,47); (3) flourishing of communal activities, often in tandem with sacramental celebrations and cultural customs; (4) the heritage and legacy of Asian peoples' and churches' faith that has been tested in the crucible of suffering and even persecution, including those who have suffered for their faith under the Communist regime, e.g. China, Korea, and Vietnam and; (5) the rich and varied religious heritage, which Phan considers one of the group's most significant contributions to the American church.

The value accorded to harmony and interculturality is obviously an asset and an advantage that has also become, and continues to be, an impediment for Asian Americans, in general, as they end up in a situation of what Stephen Cherry calls the "silent minority," or the more popularly known label of "model minority," which has glamorized a small number

in the Asian American community as normative for minority groups at the expense not just of groups outside of, but also those inside, the Asian American community. Malaysian-American theologian Jonathan Tan proposes an alternative to the idea of “model minority” with what he calls “middle minority,” which approaches Asian Americans as a buffer between the black/white tension but, as Linh Hoang argues, such proposal does not adequately address the issue as it simply continues to focus on Asian Americans as a minority occupying a marginal state in the U.S. This Asian American Catholics’ experience of, what ECH calls, being “perpetual foreigners” is an ongoing lament, as expressed in the ECH and by Asian Americans themselves. Asian Americans are not exempt in the perpetuation of this problem as even what may be regarded as “triumphs” or positive developments (at least in raising the profile of Asian/Asian-American artists) in popular culture in recent times, such as the successful film *Crazy Rich Asians* or the globally-distributed television sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat*, arguably reinforce stereotypes that are often used in the othering of people of Asian descent in the U.S.

The concrete expressions of harmony and interculturality as the contribution of Asian American Catholics to the American church, as both gift and challenge, are embodied in the four central concerns that are based on the responses to a nationwide questionnaire and online survey conducted by a team of social scientists that asked the Asian and Pacific Islander community in 2014-2015 about their pastoral needs and concerns. These four concerns (identity, culture of encounter and dialogue, leadership, and generations) constitute the key issues that underpin ECH, whose aim “is to make Asian and Pacific Island Catholics feel at home, both in the Church and in the United States, while being able to reserve the richness of the spiritual and cultural background that they bring as contributing members to the body of Christ.” For

purposes of brevity I focus here on what, I perceive, are some of the key points under each concern.

The first concern is on identity. According to the abovementioned national study most Catholics of Asian descent in the U.S. see their ethnicity and religion as equally important to their sense of who they are. ECH particularly draws attention to how the reality of being linguistically or physically different from the larger U.S. population remains a constant reminder of the group's marginalized status. Under this concern ECH specifically mentions racism as one of the mainly external challenges confronting Asians and Pacific Islanders be it in the past or the present. This reference to Asian Americans' continuing experience of racism is even more important these days in the context of Asian-American-directed racial tension, even violence, that is connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples include an Asian middle school student from San Fernando Valley, California who ended up in an emergency room after being bullied, physically attacked, and accused of having the coronavirus simply because he was Asian American; the experience of Tanny Jiraprapasuke, a Thai-American, who was on the receiving end of a man's tirade on a Los Angeles subway about Chinese people being putrid and responsible for all diseases; a man assaulting an Asian woman in New York wearing a mask; Kao Lor and his uncle Lee Lor, who are of Hmong descent, being asked by a hotel staff in Indiana whether they are from China while another hotel bluntly told them Asians are not allowed. Many other people of Asian descent in the U.S. and other parts of the world (see #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus -"I am not a virus") have been harassed or attacked because of misguided coronavirus fears. Fears in the Asian American community arising from coronavirus-related stigmatization and attacks even forced some members, especially those of East Asian descent, to engage in self-surveillance while some resorted to buying guns and arming themselves out of fear for coronavirus hate attacks. Jeannie Ding, a Boston University

student, came face-to-face with such self-censorship when a Chinese-American man began yelling at her in Chinese while in the B line train in Boston screaming that she should not wear a mask because it would spread the ugly stereotype of Asian people spreading disease. He screamed at her that “she was bringing shame to all the Chinese people.” The fact is wearing a mask is something many East Asians have done long before the virus outbreak, including for protection from pollution. In East Asia, the act of wearing a mask may also be a gesture that communicates solidarity during an epidemic – a time when a community is vulnerable to being divided by fear between the healthy and the sick. In the West, however, the image of Asian people with masks is sometimes wielded, deliberately or not, as a signifier of otherness. In terms of internal challenges in relation to identity Sharon Tan points to the difficulty of describing a pan-Asian approach to marriage, family, and parenting as illustrated in the complexities of "Tiger Mothers," multigenerational households, the "special case of refugees," transnational families, and biculturality and adaptation. As illustrated by Indian-American theologian Jaisy Joseph in “Negotiations In-Between: Indian Catholics in Diaspora,” various groups within the Asian American Catholic community also experience identity-related internal tensions and, sometimes, open conflicts due to, among others, cultural, religious, and historical differences within their ethnic group.

The second concern relates to the culture of encounter and dialogue. To be sure, American Catholics of Asian descent report high levels of engagement with local parishes. Despite the likelihood of being in the ethnic minority in their parishes, a majority say that they have never felt uncomfortable because of their minority status. Interestingly, most do not attend the parish closest to their home. Many even frequent other parishes in addition to their home or registered parish, to participate in ethnic and national holidays and practices with others of the same background. For some Asian Americans their ethnic and religious identities work in harmony; for others, they present tensions, especially when relating to non-

Catholic co-ethnics in their families and communities. Hence, intergenerational dialogue is highlighted in ECH when it comes to interfaith and intercultural marriages. This does not mean that there are no problems between and across ethnic groups in the Asian American community. Madeline Duntley chronicles the problems and prospects of forging an intercultural parish in “Japanese and Filipino Together: The Transethnic Vision of Our Lady of Queen of Martyrs Parish.”

It is in view of the recognition of the critical role of dialogue and encounter in building and fostering harmony and interculturality that the ECH also recommends ecumenical, interreligious, and intercultural gatherings. It does not help, as Phan observes, that the Catholicism of many Asian American Catholics is still arguably directed mainly toward self-preservation and self-aggrandizement, with emphasis on building churches and church structures. In Phan’s eyes Asian American efforts at inculturation and interreligious dialogue still leaves a lot to be desired as Asian American Catholicism still suffers from self-absorption and neglect of the dialogue with other believers and responsibilities for the world. This deficit is not helped by the privatization of faith that is reinforced by devotional practices, a distinguishing characteristic of Asian American Catholicism that serve as a vehicle and, at the same time, a barrier toward building or enhancing relations with other groups, notably white American Catholics who may look askance at what they may regard as superstition or “pagan” remnants.

The third concern relates to generations. One urgent issue identified along this line in the abovementioned national study is cultural transmission across generations. Many express fears that their children will lose connections to their ethnicity, and/or to Catholicism (ECH, 48), especially as the younger generation are influenced by a more secular American culture. Chaeyoon Lim’s sociological study, for example, points out that the religious trends by which

American Catholics as a whole are moving away from the Catholic Church toward unbelief (the “nones”), or toward other denominations and religions, are operative among younger Korean-American Catholics, even though those who remain are generally more observant than the average white Americans. An in-depth analysis of the cultural and religious factors in the transmission of Catholic faith, especially among Korean Americans, is provided in *Reconciling Cultures and Generations: Reflections on Today's Church by Korean American Catholics*.

Young people today have not known a world without smart phones and social media. Through Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking devices and platforms, they have been communicating with friends across the globe. The traditional understanding of a “local” parish and its congregational form and ethos may seem quite outdated for this generation. There is a need, therefore, for more support for young adult Catholic communities. In fact, one deficient area is ministry to college-and-graduate-educated youth, which is practically non-existent, as ministry still largely focuses mainly on children (preparation for first communion and confirmation) and the old folk with their devotional practices. In addition, ECH says that celebrating liturgies “with an ear to the youth” are vital. There may also be a need for Asian American Catholics to scrutinize what the ECH itself mentions as the tendency to assign strong importance to traditional church teachings, such as the Vatican’s authority and a celibate male clergy (ECH, 47). In a publication representing the culmination of its years of work, CARA (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate) at Georgetown University presents a profile of Catholic parishes in the U.S. in the 21st century, particularly in relation to some of the most striking changes to parishes since the Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life in 1989. These changes include demographic shifts toward the South and West, an increasing number of multicultural parishes, the growing dominance of post Vatican II and Millennial generations, the decrease

in number and increase in size of parishes, and changes in parishioners' loyalty to their "home parish." While it is certainly not always the case that Asian Millennial Catholics have a more progressive, or Vatican II-aligned, ecclesiological model, moving from the "ecclesiological institutionalism," that characterizes Asian American Catholicism and Phan has already strongly criticized about a decade ago, is a challenge for Asian American Catholics, especially older generations, in order to be able to build stronger relations not only with its younger generations but also with the mainstream American church. This, of course, will not be easy especially since ecclesiological institutionalism is, unfortunately, buttressed by the Confucian culture with its emphasis on deference for authority and tradition. In the case of Korean-Americans, Simon Kim argues in *Memory and Honor: Cultural and Generational Ministry with Korean American Communities* that the "survival mode" and the isolationist immigrant church model is no longer adequate to serve the needs of the English-speaking generation born in the U.S. This discrepancy in youth ministry takes on urgency among Korean Americans, like Kim, who worry about Korean evangelical groups who proselytize on campus and turn young people away from their culture of origin.

The ecclesiological institutionalism, which continues to hobble Asian American Catholics, is also a key factor in the fourth concern, that is, leadership. It is a factor, for example, in what Phan describes as the relatively passive role of the laity. Phan says that, besides excessive reliance on the clergy, the laity's lack of competence in theological matters may account for the minimal role of the laity in church organization since training in fields other than secular is arguably regarded as inappropriate for the laity. Phan also highlights the need for better theological training and competence of the Asian American clergy itself. To be sure, Asian American Catholics have made some considerable gains in terms of leadership in the Church from the appointment of a growing number of bishops of Asian descent, e.g.

Bishop Oscar Solis, to the increasing profile of theologians of Asian descent in the American Catholic theological landscape, and the recent offering of the Asian Pastoral Theology and Ministry Certificate at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

In the twenty-first century we need leaders who are cosmopolitan in theological outlook, astute about church-world politics, and imbued with a deep sense of American multiracial and multicultural history, in general, and the issues and challenges confronting Asian Americans, in particular. These leaders would need to take risks, enter new territories, imagine a world with plural centers, and perhaps acquire a new tongue, both literally and metaphorically. The late Bishop Francis DiLorenzo, for instance, notes how the American church cannot respond appropriately to the needs of Asian immigrants without the help of bishops of the local churches in Asia. It is in view of this perspective that Bishop DiLorenzo points to newer ways of doing mission in the context of Asian immigration such as the challenge to learn more about non-Christian religions and their impact on the Catholic experience. For example, one of the poignant questions I heard from the few formation seminars for Asian and Pacific Islander Catholic leaders, that I conducted with my husband-theologian Edmund Chia when we were still serving as consultants for the USCCB's SCAPA (Sub Committee on Asian and Pacific Affairs), was from a Cambodian American who asked "On Sunday morning I go to Mass and when I go home I honor my ancestors. Does that make me less of a Catholic?" The struggle is real, especially for older lay Catholics who are converts to Christianity and may not be abreast of current Church teaching or practice and/or have family members who have not converted to Christianity. I have heard and seen this struggle, as well, among participants in mission formation seminars that my husband and I have conducted, starting in 2017, in a few Asian countries as part of our work for the Pontifical Missionary Union.

Leadership itself was identified by Asian Catholics in the abovementioned national study as a key area of potential improvement. Many speak of their desire for skilled community managers, not just diverse priests. They seek leaders with sensitivity to Asian Catholics' specific needs and practices. A quarter report that their local priest has been at least occasionally insensitive toward their ethnic group. Many convey that they feel unheard, unacknowledged, or even invisible to parish and diocesan leaders (ECH, 47-48). Thus, ECH encourages dioceses and parishes to "include and invite" Asian and Pacific Islanders, especially those who may be geographically or socially isolated into ministry and Church leadership.

One area of development and nurturing of leadership that sorely needs attention in Asian American Catholic communities is among youth and young adults. Asian American cultures typically ascribe (higher) wisdom and authority and, consequently, leadership to older people, sometimes to the detriment and impoverishment of young people's active, effective, and meaningful participation in the churches, including leadership roles. Pope Francis' post synodal apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit* (Christ is Alive) is instructive in this regard as it recognizes the vocation of the youth and their engagement as protagonists in the life and mission of the Church. As Bishop Solis himself notes, the two main questions in *Christus Vivit* are helpful in developing and implementing engagements with youth and young adults: What can the Church teach the young and what can the Church learn from the young? We could take cues from the participants at a national symposium of lay young adult men and women from across the United States working in various professional ministry roles and from a variety of Catholic contexts, including parish, diocesan, and educational institutions. As a participant laments, "Young adults in ministry often experience resistance to their perspectives and have no structured way of including their voices in parish and local church decision making. Steps should be taken to ensure

that structures of leadership in parishes and faith communities include substantial input of young adults in ministry.” Echoing the need for dialogue another participant opines, “Because we are a multigenerational Church, we need to engage in intentional, horizontal, multigenerational dialogue to draw on the gifts and experiences of each generation. We need to increase this kind of communication... if we are to survive.”

Filial piety is obviously a core value most, if not all, Asian American Catholics continue to take pride in. The foregoing discussion, however, shows that for the Asian American Catholic community to be a continuing voice and model for harmony and interculturality in the American church there is a need to reimagine and reappropriate filial piety. *Christus Vivit* provides some inspiration:

If we journey together, young and old, we can be firmly rooted in the present, and from here, revisit the past and look to the future. To revisit the past in order to learn from history and heal old wounds that at times still trouble us. To look to the future in order to nourish our enthusiasm, cause dreams to emerge, awaken prophecies and enable hope to blossom. Together, we can learn from one another, warm hearts, inspire minds with the light of the Gospel, and lend new strength to our hands (CV, 199).

In this ongoing journey there are, ultimately, no incommensurable discourses; there is only the refusal, the lack of intentionality to learn the other’s language, broadly conceived.

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