



Filipino families are fertile ground for religious life vocations. But vocation directors need to understand them to be effective ministers.

# What every vocation director should know about Filipino families

*“All vocations make their first steps in the family.” —Pope Francis*

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**I** LIKE TO THINK OF MY FAMILY as a seedbed for my vocation. Prayer was part of the rhythm of daily life for us. As a child growing up in the Philippines in the late 60s, my mother would wake us at dawn to pray the rosary. I recall sluggishly mumbling the prayers with eyes closed. Every day we would also say the Angelus at 6 p.m. as a family. The highlight of our worship, though, was going to Mass on Sundays together as a family.

Many things have changed in the Philippines over the years, including the cultural landscape, and today modern media and technology have greatly penetrated the fabric of Filipino daily life, and secularization is getting more pervasive. However religious practice there still shows signs of great vitality, and that vitality spills over into the Filipino American church and into Filipino American vocations to religious life.

Because of their great zeal for the faith, Asian Catholics (Filipinos

being the largest sector of this group) have a disproportionately large presence in U.S. religious life. They only account for 2.6 percent of U.S. Catholics. But the 2009 NRVC-CARA study of newer members in the U.S. showed that Asians were 14 percent of all newer vocations, a percentage has slowly risen in recent years.

What then, should vocation directors know about these Filipino families that are the seedbed for many of these vocations? I offer here some considerations for vocation ministers who want to better understand and work with Filipino American Catholics.

## The Filipino diaspora

One begins to understand Filipino American families by exploring where they've come from. The Philippines is one of only two predominantly Christian countries in Asia (the other being East Timor), and it is ranked third in the world for the largest Catholic population, according to the Pew Research Center. About eight-in-ten Filipinos (81 percent) are Catholic.

The number of Filipinos in diaspora is roughly 11 percent of the overall Philippines population. That means over 10 million Filipinos live outside of their home country, either on a regular, temporary, or irregular basis, and the U.S. is the top country of destination, followed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, according to 2013 figures from the Commission on Filipinos Overseas.

Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, Archbishop of Manila, on several occasions has highlighted the exodus experience of Filipinos to other parts of the world in search of better economic opportunities. In a lecture at The Catholic University of America which I attended last March, the cardinal mentioned he was invited to celebrate Mass at the Duomo, Milan's iconic cathedral in Italy. He recounted that the cathedral was packed with over 9,000 Filipino workers, and even the plaza and surrounding streets were overflowing with Filipinos. Tagle recalled that the vicar for migrants whispered to him, "Behold the future of the church in Milan!" But he respectfully corrected the vicar: "Monsignor, they are not the future of the church. They are the present of the church in Milan." Thus, Tagle added, "the migrants had found not only jobs, but a mission."

While Filipino families are prominent in the Italian

church, they are also an important and enthusiastic part of the U.S. church. A study commissioned by the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church (part of the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Conference) shows that among Asian and Pacific Island Catholics in the U.S., roughly 51 to 65 percent are Filipino (depending on which data is analyzed). And out of 3.4 million Filipino Americans, 2.2 million are Catholics. These 2.2 million Catholics have very distinct cultural and faith patterns.

## Key cultural and faith patterns

It must be noted here that while first generation Filipino Americans are familiar with the following cultural patterns, the second and subsequent generations of Filipino Americans may not be aware of or accustomed to these unless they are exposed to, immersed in, or taught about these cultural values.

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**FAMILY ORIENTATION**—Filipinos express genuine love for the family. They are family-oriented, and this goes beyond the immediate family circle of parents and siblings to the extended family of aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and godparents, among others. Deep love for the family motivates countless Filipinos to sacrifice themselves for the good of the other members. Family solidarity makes Filipino Christians relate easily to Jesus (*Anak ng Diyos Ama*, Son of God the Father), as a brother (*kapatid*) who in prayer they can easily turn to in times of difficulty and problems.

**RESPECT FOR ELDERS**—Respect for elders is embedded in the Filipino culture. Gestures and language convey respect for parents, grandparents, *tiya/tiyo* (aunts/uncles), older cousins, friends, and priests. *Mano* (hand in Spanish), is a gesture of bowing slightly and placing gently the right hand of an elder to one's forehead. The word *Po* is used to address elders to show great respect.

**MEAL ORIENTATION**—Filipinos are meal-oriented and love to celebrate any event with a special meal. The Tagalog term for these occasions is *salu-salu kainan*. Filipinos are known to be gracious hosts, and even with unexpect-

ed guests, they try to offer the best of what they have. An example of this custom can be seen in the celebration of the *Simbang Gabi*—the Novena Masses during Advent. In most U.S. parishes that celebrate *Simbang Gabi*, after Mass there is food for everybody prepared by the local Filipino organizers.

**GRATITUDE OR *UTANG NA LOOB***—This value expresses a person’s deep sense of gratitude for help extended.

Surely growing up with community-minded values, such as *Pakikisama* and *Bayanihan*, gives a person a good foundation for living in a religious community.

*Utang na loob* implies a debt that can never be repaid, but can only be reciprocated in a sacrificial manner on the part of the one returning the favor. In the Christian sense, *utang na loob* can be a value and an experience of undying gratitude to Jesus who, out of sheer love, died on the cross to redeem all from sin. This in

return demands a reciprocity from Christians by means of a sacrificial love, that is, to love God and neighbor in faith and action.

**SELF-RELIANCE OR *PAGSASARILI***—The Filipino attribute of self-reliance addresses the development of self-worth and integrity of a person. This personalism of Filipinos is a stimulus to relate to others and to the world on a personal basis. It is rooted in the recognition of the dignity of the human being. *Pagsasarili* in its Christian meaning is grounded in the truth of the dignity of the baptized as adopted children of God. They are then related directly to God our Father, to Christ our Redeemer, and to the Holy Spirit indwelling within us.

However, *pagsasarili* when it is reduced to individualism can swing to the extreme of self-centeredness, which has harmful effects for national and Christian unity. Hence genuine personalism is necessary.

**COME WHAT MAY, *BAHALA NA***—Roughly translated, *bahala na* means “come what may.” Despite often being viewed as a fatalistic resignation, it can be seen positively as an attitude of courage in taking risks and of inspired fidelity when a person is put in a difficult situation. In the Christian perspective, *bahala na* is an attitude of trust, leaving everything in God’s hands when all human efforts are exhausted in the midst of suffering, pain, or loss. Hence *bahala na* can ground genuine faith and trust

in divine providence that will engender a Christian sense of peace and serenity in adversity.

**SHAME OR *HIYA***—The sense of shame encompassed in the value of *hiya* is a potent means of safeguarding individual morals and ethics within Philippine society. It is common to hear Filipinos remark, *nakakahiya*, (it is shameful) when they try to appraise behavior and actions that might lead to moral sanctions in society. Grounded on a Catholic understanding, *hiya* can be applied to the workings of sin and grace in our lives. Thus the discovery of one’s uniqueness and creative powers can help a person overcome the inhibitions and limitations of *hiya*.

**CAMARADERIE (*PAKIKISAMA*) AND COMMUNITY SPIRIT (*BAYANIHAN*)**—These are among the cluster of social acceptance values. The thrust of these values is on working together toward the common good. *Pakikisama*, in the sense of getting along with others, fosters closeness. It is seen not only as trying to be nice in the presence of others. It also implies truthfulness and openness in relating to others.

The *Bayanihan* spirit promotes cooperation among members of the community and has been given much emphasis in the thrust towards nation-building. Both values enhance the formation of a civic conscience which supports social justice. Surely growing up with these community-minded values gives a person a good foundation for living in a religious community.

Thus Filipino cultural values hold great potential for growth and development in the formation of mature Christians. These values, when properly oriented and directed, will deepen authentic Christian living in a uniquely Filipino way. They include values that lend themselves to religious life, emphasizing gratitude to God and a commitment to a positive common life.

## Filipino families and popular religiosity

In the United States, as in their home country, the religiosity of Filipinos is so rich in images of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary that it never fails to amaze non-Filipinos. From the image of the Infant Jesus (*Santo Nino*), to the Black Nazarene of Quiapo, to Our Lady of Antipolo (also known as Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage), Filipino Catholics portray and venerate Christ and express their devotion to Mary in unique and colorful ways.

According to the *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*, “A typical approach to Jesus Christ is with and through



Celebrating special events with food is important to Filipino American families. Serving a meal after a *Simbang Gabi* novena Mass during Advent are the members of the Fil Am Association of St. Anne's parish in Jersey City, New Jersey.

Mary. Devotion to Mary has always been intimately intertwined with Christ.” For Filipinos Mary, the mother of Jesus, is their spiritual mother, and so she is the center of the family for Catholic Filipinos.

In the annual pilgrimage to Our Lady of Antipolo held during the month of June, Filipino devotees flock to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. Prior to Mass, the program includes a procession wherein devotees carry many images of Mary, such as Our Lady of the Barangay, Our Lady of Peñafrancia, Our Lady of Antipolo, Our Lady of Lourdes, and others. Close to 2,000 pilgrims—including families, friends, members of prayer groups, religious organizations, and confraternities—attend this annual pilgrimage.

The month of May is traditionally dedicated to Mary, and for Filipino American families the *Flores de Mayo* (Flowers of May) is a way to honor Mary in a special way. A statue of Mary is crowned by a child dressed in white in the presence of other white clad children who bring flowers to offer to Mary. This popular devotion in the parish is attended mostly by family members of the children.

The feasts of the Filipino saints Lorenzo Ruiz and Pedro Calungsod are widely celebrated by many Filipino families in the U.S. In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the

Filipino Archdiocesan Council forms committees a year in advance to prepare for the joint September feasts of these two saints. About 2,000 people attend the celebration, with Mass as the highlight, followed by cultural presentations, and of course, food for everybody!

## Filipinos an important part of U.S. church

As Filipinos have taken root in the United States, they have begun to take on leadership roles in the American church. In 2004 the first U.S. bishop of Filipino descent was appointed: Bishop Oscar Azarcon Solis, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. In that role, he was the first chairman in 2008 of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Island Affairs. This group of American bishops exists “to affirm the gifts and contributions of Asian and Pacific Island Catholics and to provide more opportunities for Asian and Pacific Island Catholics to engage in the life of the church and help shape its evangelizing mission.”

Over 800 Filipino priests minister in the U.S. today, and they have organized the National Assembly of Filipino Priests-USA to address their own needs. In addition men and women religious of Filipino ancestry are serving the U.S. Catholic Church, but no data is available



## RECOMMENDED READING

*Bamboo Bridge Across the Pacific: Reaching Out to Filipino-American Catholics*, by Loreto Gonzales and Valencia Rose, Filipino Pastoral Ministry, 2004

*Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers*, Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2012

*Faith, Family, and Filipino American Community Life*, by Stephen Cherry, Rutgers University Press, 2014

*Filipino Thought*, by Leonardo Mercado, Logos Publications, 2000

“Incorporating cultural diversity in religious life,” a study for the National Religious Vocation Conference by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. A summary, video, and full report are at [nrvc.net/publications](http://nrvc.net/publications).

*Inculturation and Filipino Theology*, by Leonardo Mercado, Divine Word Publications, 1992

“Who is the Filipino Catholic?” *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*, Word and Life Publications, 1997 (Note: copies of this catechism are posted online.)

“Understanding and working with Filipino candidates,” by Sister Lovina Pammit, HORIZON, Fall 2011

about their estimated numbers. Many of those who have come from the Philippines have been assigned by their major superiors to be missionaries in the U.S., serving in a variety of ministries. What we see is a reverse missionary trend because the American church is now a receiving church for international pastoral ministers.

The growth in the numbers of Filipino American priests and their “increased recognition” in the church is significant, social scientist Stephen Cherry has written in his book *Faith, Family, and American Filipino Life* (Rutgers University Press, 2014). But he also says scholars need to explore what Filipino “presence may mean to the reshaping of American Catholicism.” He adds that with the significant number of Filipino priests and the increase in lay leadership roles, “Filipino immigrants are a mounting force within American Catholicism.”

The American bishops have turned their attention toward Filipinos and other Asian members of their flock. They commissioned the “National Study of Asian and Pacific Island Catholics in the U.S.,” which was conducted by a team of social scientists and was released in August 2015, revealing that Filipino families are actively engaged with their Catholic faith. A few highlights:

- Filipinos constitute the largest ethnic grouping among all U.S. Asian Catholics.
- Even though just over half of Asian Catholics in the U.S. said their parishes do not host programs focused on respondent ethnicity, Filipinos were most likely to say that, yes, their parish *has* hosted a Filipino program.
- Filipino Catholics are also more inclined than Catholics overall to indicate that the Vatican’s authority (69 percent) and celibate male clergy (61 percent) are “very important.”
- While Filipinos are often also minorities in their parishes, they tend to have larger numbers and thus are a more visible and often vocal part of their parishes.

## Family concerns to be aware of

At the same time that Filipino Catholics in the U.S. are noticeably devout, the United States, like most Western societies, is increasingly becoming secularized. This poses a threat to all Christian families, including Filipino American Catholic families. Filipino Americans need to continue to strengthen the faith in their homes and be informal schools of catechesis within the family. Religious communities can support these efforts by reaching out to young people and their families.

For their part vocation directors will want to minister with a sensitivity about Filipino family dynamics. The strong family orientation of Filipinos and their emphasis on respect for elders suggest that any Filipino discerning the priesthood or consecrated life may potentially consult family members in the discernment process. Thus it bodes well for vocation directors to be open to communicating with the family whenever appropriate. However, they also want to keep in mind that if cultural norms are not instilled among second generation Filipino Americans, the communication dynamic could be different from what is presented in this article.

At a very pragmatic level vocation directors should be aware that Filipino American families give priority

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to the education of children. For college graduates, educational debt could be an issue for Filipino Americans considering a vocation to the priesthood or religious life.



Last December, I went to the Philippines for a family visit and a bit of work. The Philippines is composed of 7,107 islands, and one of those is the island of Leyte where my mom and other family members live. From the airport in Cebu Island, I had to take a ship to Leyte. I was thrilled because the ship had a chapel with the crucifix and images of the Santo Nino and Our Lady of Lourdes. Then at 3 p.m., from the ship's public address system, the Divine Mercy chaplet could be heard everywhere. I also flew to another island in the southern tip of the Philippines during Advent and had the opportunity to attend *Simbang Gabi* Mass for a couple of days. The cathedral in Davao City had three Masses a day for nine consecutive days during the *Simbang Gabi* just to accom-

modate the throngs of Filipinos who packed the church and filled the grounds outside. In the Philippines it is not unusual for Mass to be celebrated in big shopping malls on Sundays.

These many expressions of faith during a single visit show that religious fervor and practice still have great vitality among young and old Filipino Catholics. As these families move to the U.S., they bring this intense Catholic practice with them, making them fertile ground for religious life vocations. Certainly these patterns can change in second and third generations, but vocation directors in the U.S. still do well to begin understanding and reaching out to Filipinos and their families. ■

It bodes well for vocation directors to be open to communicating with Filipino families whenever appropriate.