

CHAPTER FIVE

ASIAN AND PACIFIC PRESENCE IN THE USA AND IN THE CHURCH

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Provenance and History:

The Vatican Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples commonly describe the continent of Asia as comprising Western Asia (or the Middle East), Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. Asia includes 53 countries stretching from Armenia to Japan, from Kazakhstan to East Timor. It is the earth's largest continent and is home to two-thirds of the world's population. The Pacific states and territories number 26 and are strewn all over the Pacific Ocean from the Northern Marianas in the west to Pitcairn Islands in the east. Each country in Asia and the Pacific Islands has its own language or languages and many dialects.

The Asian continent is the birthplace of the great religions of the world including Christianity. Pope John Paul II began his apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia* by saying, "The Church in Asia sings the praises of the God of Salvation for choosing to initiate his saving plan on Asian soil... Jesus was born, lived, died and rose from the dead in the Holy Land, that small portion of Western Asia..." Christianity spread from Jerusalem to Antioch to Rome and beyond. St. Thomas, one of the apostles of Christ, brought Christianity to India in 52 AD; Sts. Thaddeus (Jude) and St. Bartholomew Christianized Armenia. From the 13th century through the 19th century, thousands of missionaries including St. Francis Xavier brought the faith to many parts of Asia and the Pacific Islands. Missionary work continues to the present time.

In addition, Eastern Churches in the Middle East and India have been the "custodians of a precious spiritual, liturgical and theological heritage. Their traditions and rites, born of a deep inculturation of the faith in the soil of many Asian countries deserve the greatest respect." (*Ecclesia in Asia*, No. 27)

Demographics and Context:

The Asian and Pacific Islanders population in the United States has grown rapidly in the last 50 years. Since 1990, the most recent 17 year period, Asian and Pacific Americans have more than doubled in number. The 2007 American Community Survey indicates an Asian and Pacific Islander population totaling 16,141,315 combined.

In 2007, among single-race Asians, the Chinese are the largest group with 3,045,592 persons, followed by the Asian Indians (2,570,166) and Filipinos (2,412,446). The Vietnamese (1,508,489), Koreans (1,344, 171), and Japanese (803,092) round out the list of Asian communities with the largest numbers. The other Asian groups have less than three hundred

thousand members. In 2007, among the Pacific Islanders, the Native Hawaiians are by far the largest group (142,919), followed by the Guamanian or Chamorro (74,947) and Samoan (69,615) communities.

The Asian and Pacific population is present in large numbers throughout the United States. More than two-thirds of this population lives in six states: California, Hawaii, Illinois, Texas, New Jersey and New York. Dioceses with more than 200,000 persons of Asian or Pacific origins include: Los Angeles, Honolulu, Brooklyn, San Jose, Oakland, Orange, Seattle, San Francisco, Sacramento, New York, San Diego, Chicago, Galveston-Houston, Arlington, San Bernardino, Newark, Atlanta, Boston, Washington, DC., Dallas, Philadelphia and Metuchen.

Asian and Pacific Islanders in the United States exhibit great disparities not only in ethnicity, language, and culture but also in their religious traditions, human capital, and socio-economic realities. Except for the Filipinos who are 85% Catholic and East Timorese who are 94% Catholic, the majority of other Asian and Pacific communities in the United States are Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, or Protestants Christians. Many are socially and economically integrated as a result of more than six generations of presence in this country and high educational credentials. On the other hand, thousands more continue to suffer exploitative working conditions, low-paying jobs and long work hours in order to survive in this country.

Asian and Pacific communities migrated to the USA in various waves and for varying reasons – better economic and educational opportunities, better working conditions, refuge from war and natural disasters in the homelands. Large-scale Asian immigration began in the mid 19th century with the Chinese and the Indian Sikhs who came to work in the gold mines, the railroads and the agricultural farms in the west. In the early 1900's through the 1920's hundreds of thousands of impoverished Japanese, Korean and Filipino single male farm laborers were recruited to work in the agricultural fields of Hawaii, the western states, and the fishing ports of Alaska. When jobs were plentiful and labor in short supply, Asians were tolerated necessary labor for economic growth. When the economy was down, they found their dreams and hopes dashed by antagonistic sentiments and racist exclusionary legislation which suspended or restricted immigration, outlawed marriage between Asians and white Americans, and promoted anti-immigrant discrimination. In the aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the height of these series of exclusionary measures was Executive Order 9066 which resulted in the forcible seizure of assets, removal, relocation, and incarceration without trial of some 120,000 Japanese in ten concentration camps scattered around the country, including 77,000 who possessed U.S. citizenship from birth.

While some programs have changed attitudes somewhat, discrimination and prejudice against Asian and Pacific people sadly persist in many forms, especially after the September 11, 2001 tragedy.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 opened wide the doors for new waves of immigrants from all over the globe including Asian and the Pacific Islanders. Then in the late 1970's, after the Indochinese war, the United States welcomed waves of refugees from Vietnam,

Laos and Cambodia. Today, refugees from Asian countries including Burma and the Middle East migrate for family reunification and humanitarian reasons.

On the other hand, entry points for Pacific Islanders are U.S. military service and enrollment in higher education. They are becoming more and more attached to the greater affluence that they can attain in the U.S. mainland and are finding it difficult to return and readjust to the limited horizons of island life.

Gifts They Bring:

Asian and Pacific Islander Americans stand proud of their achievements as faithful citizens of this country and the Church. Through persistence, perseverance and a high value for education, many Asian and Pacific immigrants have been able to savor the American Dream. Emerging leadership includes governors, U.S. senators, representatives in the US Congress, and cabinet members. There is also Nobel Prize winners, U.S. Olympic athletes, respected scholars and scientists, and hundreds of thousands of professional managers, and successful big and small business entrepreneurs.

There are five bishops of Asian and Pacific origins in the episcopate of the Catholic Church in this country. Several Asian women religious are mother generals of their congregations. Many Asian and Pacific theologians, scholars, and lay pastoral leaders hold high positions in Catholic educational institutions, theological unions, and national or diocesan structures. Moreover, thousands of lay Asian and Pacific Catholics are active ministers and pastoral agents in liturgy, music, hospitality, religious education, catechesis, and social services in the local churches.

Asian and Pacific communities bring a strong sense of family and community with a loving respect for the elderly, a high regard for education, and a fervent religious faith kept vibrant through popular devotions, especially to Mary and the saints. They contribute a spirituality which is eastern and rooted in an Asian Pacific cultural value for harmony.

Leadership formation programs designed specifically for those ministering to Asian and Pacific communities have formed several hundred pastoral leaders. Inspired by the pastoral statement, *Asian and Pacific Presence: Harmony in Faith*, Asian and Pacific pastoral institutes have been conducted on the west, Midwest, and on the east coasts since 2001. The first national convening of Asian and Pacific Catholics was held in 2006, with more than a thousand participants from across the country and from diverse groups. Several national Catholic ethnic organizations provide annual conferences and catechists' formation programs. And USCCB supports pastoral initiatives of Asian and Pacific communities through a network of National Advisers for Bangali, Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Indian Roman, Indian Syro-Malabar, Indian Syro-Malankara, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Kmhmu, Laotian, Montagnard, Pakistani, Thai, Vietnamese, Chamorro, Hawaiian, Samoan and Tongan Catholics.

Asian and Pacific Catholics have visibly transformed the American Church landscape

with personal parish churches bearing touches of Asian architectural design. Many priests (including more than 800 Filipinos and more than 750 Vietnamese), deacons, religious, and lay persons serve as pastors, assistant pastors and parish administrators, principals and faculty of parochial schools, chaplains in hospitals, prisons, and the military. Vocations abound. Asian Pacific Americans are only 5% of the Catholic population in the country yet 13% of all ordinands in diocesan seminaries in 2008 were of Asian Pacific descent.

Challenges:

Asian and Pacific communities are so diverse, have grown in different ways and independently, and have sought to maintain separate communities fueled mainly by linguistic expediency. How to bring them together locally and nationally to get to know each other, to experience a more pan-Asian Pacific community, and to work in solidarity to address common issues of concern is a continuing challenge.

Asian and Pacific Islanders are reared in cultures of harmony and hospitality where person-to-person relationships are vital to human interaction, community-building, and to drawing them into parish life. Building “interculturality” among them and with all the people of God is a great challenge.

Some Asian and Pacific Catholics are still young in their Catholic faith and need continued faith formation. In addition, drawing Asian and Pacific resources into more active pastoral leadership, encouraging and supporting their formation, and building their confidence to take their place as equal partners in the common mission of evangelization is critical. Providing opportunities for continuing faith formation and pastoral leadership formation in varying Asian and Pacific communities and languages is a persistent challenge.

Questions for discussion:

1. What is your parish/diocese/organization doing to assist non-English-speaking Asian and Pacific families to integrate to the local church community?
2. How can your parish/diocese/organization reach younger generations of Asian and Pacific Americans to include them in the life and leadership of the Church?
3. What is your parish/diocese/organization doing to encourage the building of a more inclusive membership and leadership?