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SUBCOMMITTEE FOR ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLAND AFFAIRS
“FROM ENCOUNTER TO EMBODIMENT: THE RADIANT GIFTS OF THE API
COMMUNITIES”
CATHEDRAL OF CHRIST THE LIGHT, OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA
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My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Chairman of the Subcommittee for Asian and Pacific Island Affairs, I want to welcome you to this regional gathering “New Seasons, New Grounds: From Encounter to Embodiment.” I want to thank Clarissa Martinez of the USCCB for helping to organize this event, as well as Bishop Michael Barber and the good people of the Diocese of Oakland for their hospitality. Following the 2024 Encounter of Asian and Pacific Island Catholics in Indianapolis, immediately prior to the National Eucharistic Congress, our subcommittee thought it wise to hold regional gatherings so as to not lose the momentum of being together. The experience of being together, listening to one another’s stories, and moving forward together as Asian and Pacific Island Catholics in the United States, was fruitful.

Today, I wish to address you regarding the gifts of API Catholics and what our rich cultural and spiritual heritage may offer to the Church in the United States at this critical juncture and as the nation celebrates its 250th anniversary. The National Encounter revealed that API Catholics have many gifts but often feel marginalized, or, if not marginalized, at least unseen. Asian and Pacific Island Catholics have faced challenges that other immigrants face, including racism, discrimination, and a lack of welcome.

Despite some of these challenges, one fruit of the 2024 National Encounter was the articulation of something we already knew or intuited, namely, that we as Asian and Pacific Island Catholics have “radiant gifts” which offer a beautiful contribution to the life of our parishes and to the life of the Church in the United States.

Having worked in the Apostolic Nunciature prior to my appointment to Columbus, I can tell you that throughout the United States, Catholic priests and religious from Asia, especially the Philippines, Vietnam, India, and Korea, and elsewhere, are serving the Christian faithful, the poor and the rich, the ethnic and

Anglo communities, with a true missionary spirit. Parishes that would otherwise have been closed, remain open and even vibrant because of this missionary impulse. At the same time, the presence of these priests, as well as Asian and Pacific Island Catholics, who are members of the flock, enrich the Church with their diversity of culture and religious fervor.

The diversity in the Church should not surprise us as ours is a universal, that is, *catholic* Church. At the same time, the gifts of the different members of the Church can be harmonized to advance the Kingdom of God and show forth the beauty of Christ; thus, the Church becomes the *sponsa ornata monilibus suis* (cf. Is 61:10).

Pope Francis wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*:

“The history of the Church shows that Christianity does not have one cultural expression, but ‘rather remaining true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, it will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root.’ In the diversity of peoples who experience the gift of God, each in accordance with its own culture, the Church expresses her genuine catholicity and shows forth the ‘beauty of her varied face.’” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 24 NOVEMBER 2013, 116)

Thus, I would say that the first contribution of Asian and Pacific Island Catholics to the Church in the United States is that they strengthen the Church’s catholicity. While preserving their own cultural heritage and liturgical traditions, API Catholics can live the faith as an expression of a gift received from God, even in the United States.

We also know how to celebrate what is best in our cultures and to show forth the beauty of God. This is most obvious in liturgical traditions, sacred music, popular piety and devotions, including processions. Inculturation, which involves the encounter of a culture with the Gospel; the appropriation of the best of that culture; and its enrichment by the Gospel, is truly a gift of the Spirit, which shows forth the newness of the face of the Church. This beauty can attract and, therefore, be a useful means of evangelization.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis again says:

“In the Christian customs of an evangelized people, the Holy Spirit adorns the Church showing her new aspects of revelation and giving her a new face. Through inculturation, the Church ‘introduces peoples together with their cultures, into their own community’, for ‘every culture offers positive values and forms which can enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood, and lived.’ (EG, 116)

Pope Leo added to this in his Pentecost homily last year:

Finally, *the Spirit also opens borders between peoples*. At Pentecost, the Apostles spoke the languages of those they met, and the confusion of Babel was finally resolved by the harmony brought about by the Spirit. Whenever God’s “breath” unites our hearts and makes us view others as our brothers and sisters, differences no longer become an occasion for division and conflict but rather a shared patrimony from which we can all draw, and which sets us all on journey together, in fraternity. (LEO XIV, HOMILY FOR PENTECOST, 8 JUNE 2025)

Related to the catholicity manifested by the diversity API communities bring to the Church in the United States is the ability to dialogue with others. Living in and being socialized in a cultural framework suffused with Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian values and moral codes, API Catholics know how to dialogue and how to harmonize diverse religious systems and views, without sacrificing the truth, without losing their own identity, and while respecting the dignity of others. It is not that we dialogue without proclamation; rather, we can appreciate and identify the “religious sense” in others.

This brings me to another contribution of API Catholics: they celebrate their diversity, while preserving unity; they contribute to the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ. Unity is already a key theme in the Pontificate of Leo XIV. Some groups take an “exclusivist” approach to their diversity, not allowing others to be enriched by their gifts. Some want to celebrate Mass or run a parish “their” way, to single themselves out, the way “gnostics” claimed to have “special knowledge.”

In contrast, we have an opportunity to model unity within the Church. Listen to the words of the French Cardinal Henri de Lubac:

“Multiple or multiform, she (the Church) is nonetheless *one*, of a most active and demanding unity. She is a people, a great anonymous crowd and still the most personal of beings. Catholic, that is, universal, she

wishes her members to be open to everything and yet she herself is never fully open but when she is withdrawn into the intimacy of her interior life and in the silence of adoration. She is humble and majestic. She professes a capacity to absorb every culture, to raise up their highest values; at the same time, we see her claim for her own the hearts and homes of the poor, the undistinguished, the simple and destitute masses. Not for an instant does she cease to contemplate Him who is at once crucified and resurrected, the man of sorrows and lord of glory, vanquished by, but savior of, the world. He is her bloodied spouse and her triumphant master.” (HENRI DE LUBAC, *THE CHURCH: PARADOX AND MYSTERY*, TRANSL. JAMES R. DUNNE (STATEN ISLAND: ALBA HOUSE, 1969), 2.)

We also are inclusive of the poor and suffering. They offer to the whole body what is best in their culture and from their ethical tradition. For example, Vietnamese and Indian priests too must manage not only Vietnamese and Indian parishes and communities, but “American” parishes, perhaps even ones without their own ethnic groups. They try to understand different cultures and to adapt in order to evangelize. Often, they make a proposal of the most noble elements of their culture; rarely do they impose it upon others.

This is also true with respect to authority in the Church. One great blessing of the United States is the liberty and freedom it offers. Unfortunately, some go too far, and individualism and self-interest begin to creep into the Church. This is a challenge for API Catholics, especially parents and grandparents, who grew up in the “old country”, who have children and grandchildren raised here.

Culturally (and religiously), API people and priests have great esteem for their elders and their traditions. This esteem for elders and superiors, whether in the family or at work, is manifested ecclesially in respect for the hierarchy, in obedience to ecclesiastical authority, and in humble service, without a great need for affirmation. We know how to live and work with others in the Church through their docility to the Spirit rather than bring disunity through self-assertion and promotion; nevertheless, the challenge remains to promote family and the common good as a remedy to the radical individualism proposed by the secular culture.

API Catholics have an opportunity to contribute to the vibrancy of parish life. In 2019, when I worked at the Nunciature, I had to read the *Ad Limina* Reports of the different dioceses around the country. We see, especially in the Northeast and Midwest, a great decline in sacramental practice and participation in the life of the

Church. In some dioceses, sacramental practice had dropped by 1/3 in just seven years!

I imagine the attrition rate is not so high among API Catholics who continue to have their children baptized; nevertheless, we cannot become complacent. As the general American population falls into religious disaffiliation, it will be incumbent upon API parents to be vigilant in guiding their children to avoid appropriating the worst dimensions of “Americanism.”

API cultural events and celebrations connected with the sacraments engage a larger parish community, especially at weddings, baptisms, First Communions, and funerals. New Year’s celebrations and death anniversaries are another way of keeping the family and communal bond strong.

This sense of community, of belonging to the Church, is further strengthened by the many confraternities, sodalities and pious associations of the faithful that exist among API Catholics. Historically, these groups thrived among the early waves of immigrant Catholics, but for some reason, after the Second Vatican Council, the Church in the United States watched fraternities and sodalities die. Perhaps, it was because Catholics were accepted in society that they began to fade. Mobility of people, many of whom do not have a strong tie to a parish, also contributed to their decline.

In the Vietnamese community, for example, these fraternities and sodalities continue to help build community and provide a reason for people to gather at the parish, beyond liturgical services, sports, or school. Among Filipinos, Couples for Christ help strengthen families and raise up the next generation of leaders.

I believe that API Catholics contribute to evangelization through their personal witness and experience as a people. Many, whether the Vietnamese, Hmong, or Burmese, suffered terrible persecution, imprisonment, and exile. Indian Catholics also are experiencing a new wave of persecution. API Catholics know the experience of enduring persecution, fleeing as refugees, and suffering the loneliness that comes from being separated from family, homeland, and culture. They know well the struggles of being immigrants and of linguistic difficulties, and yet they persevere.

This experience can enrich the Church in the United States, because we do not understand faith as merely a set of teachings or view it as something to be taken for granted. Faith is not lived as something purely formal or abstract; it is a lived reality.

There has been an *existential* experience of suffering, which has led to greater conformity to the Crucified One; this experience has an evangelizing power. Stories of the heroic virtues of your elders in the faith are passed on from generation to generation. The power of these stories, like the power of the Gospel, can lead to the conversion of many in American society.

Renewed fidelity to the Catholic way of life also offers hope for renewal of the Church and is an inspiration to immigrants from the global South who are presently finding a lack of hospitality in American society. The United States is a “melting pot”, and by persevering through hostility toward Catholics, the Church here began to grow.

The Church in the United States is proud of her church buildings, schools, chancery offices, and charitable works. This is right and just, but sometimes I wonder if it has become too proud of its financial resources which have made some of these works possible. The recent scandals, financial losses, and bankruptcies related to clerical sexual abuse have humbled the Church in the United States. API Catholics know how to be the Church without the money, having been reduced to poverty and stripped of everything.

The experience of this should be shared with the Church in the United States as an antidote for the worldliness that has infected the Church. At the same time, many at the 2024 National Encounter and through our young adult listening sessions have voiced concern that the Gospel message is being squelched in our communities when there is too much emphasis on money and giving to the Church.

The experience of many of our Catholics as migrants and refugees in overcoming the language barriers and struggles to find employment can also give hope to new migrants now coming from the global South. Following the Synod on Youth, Pope Francis wrote:

“Migration, considered globally, is a structural phenomenon, and not a passing emergency. It may occur within one country or between different countries. The Church’s concern is focused especially on those fleeing from war, violence, political or religious persecution, from natural disasters including those caused by climate change, and from extreme poverty. Many of them are young. In general, they are seeking opportunities for themselves and their families. They dream of a better future, and they want to create the conditions for achieving

it....” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *CHRISTUS VIVIT*, 25 MARCH 2019, 91)

Beyond personal witness, I believe that API Catholics can help young people stay connected to the Church. These days we often hear about the “nones.” These are the baptized who no longer claim any religious affiliation whatsoever. Nearly 50% of those under age 30 who were baptized as Catholics identify as “nones.”

The Church in the United States is struggling to evangelize young people, and yet, while there are challenges for us, I am firmly convinced that movements, like the Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement, help keep young people Eucharistically-centered. The Servant Leader Training Camps help build a culture of encounter for youth with our Eucharistic Lord. They provide training for future leaders in the Church, thereby allowing young people to exercise leadership and make a valuable contribution to their peers and to their parishes. How the Church in the United States and parishes could benefit from this example!

The preservation and promotion of apostolates like the Apostleship of Prayer sustains the spiritual life of the young, increasing devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and fostering Marian piety, including pilgrimages in which Catholics journey together as families and communities, to bring the scattered together in unity. In my opinion, the Church in the United States has become too sterile, devoid of piety and devotion. Hispanic Catholics and API Catholics, with their Marian devotion and pious practices, can help the Church in the United States recover its warmth and the incarnational reality of faith.

These then are a few ways that I believe that API Catholics can contribute to and enrich the Church in the United States. The Church is now calling you to be missionaries here. The Church goes forth to make Christ known to others in their cultural situations. Pope Francis stated:

When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to unity. The Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, transforms our hearts and enables us to enter into the perfect communion of the blessed Trinity where all things find their unity ... Evangelization joyfully acknowledges these varied treasures which the Holy Spirit pours out upon the Church.” (*EG*, 117)

As API Catholics in the United States, we find ourselves between two cultures and two churches – that of our country of origin and American. There really is only

one Church, but you understand what I mean. Even linguistically and generationally, you may experience yourself as being “in between” – that is, not at the center. That is okay, because in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis used the image of a polyhedron rather than sphere to describe the world.

A polyhedron, “reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 236) A polyhedron is a solid figure with many plane faces, usually more than six. The different faces are connected one to another at the edges. Each surface preserves its uniqueness and identity, which shows its differences with respect to the others, and yet, the whole polyhedron remains a single unit. This is the way we can view the world – as a common home – with many nations and peoples who are interconnected.

Some are living near the center; while others are living at the peripheries. Nevertheless, those near the center can offer what they have to those at the margins, and those at the margins can offer what they have to those at the centers, cooperating in an inter-dependent and fruitful way. Although you may feel “in between” or even at a periphery, there is an opportunity for connection, enrichment, and, therefore, dialogue and evangelization.

God has called you each by name. To be called is also to be sent. You are being asked to share with the Church in the United States – whether you are near the middle, at the center, or at the periphery – the precious treasure of your culture and faith in the service of its evangelizing mission.

In his recent message for World Mission Sunday 2026, themed “One in Christ, united in mission,” Pope Leo outlined that our union with Christ lies at the heart of our mission; that we must be united, even in our diversity, if the world is to believe that Christ is the One sent by the Father; and, that our mission is to proclaim God’s faithful love.

He writes:

If unity is the condition of mission, love is its essence. The Good News that we are sent to proclaim to the world is not an abstract ideal; it is the Gospel of God’s faithful love, which became flesh in the face and life of Jesus Christ. The mission of the disciples and the Church as a whole is to continue the mission of Christ in the Holy Spirit: a mission born of love, lived in love, and leading to love. (LEO XIV, MESSAGE FOR WORLD MISSION SUNDAY 2026, 25 JANUARY 2025)

Knowing the richness of your spiritual and cultural heritage, as well as the depth of your faith and devotion, I am confident that the Church in the United States is enriched by your presence. You have much to offer.

I conclude with the words of this Sunday's Gospel:

Jesus said to his disciples:

"You are the salt of the earth.

But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned?

It is no longer good for anything

but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

You are the light of the world.

A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden.

Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket;

it is set on a lampstand,

where it gives light to all in the house.

Just so, your light must shine before others,

that they may see your good deeds

and glorify your heavenly Father."

Therefore, let your light shine. May the Church in the United States be radiant through the gifts of the Asian and Pacific Island Communities. Thank you.