

Asian American Religious Cultures

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Essays and A–H

American Religious Cultures



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Catholics

Asian American Catholics comprise a small but significant group within the wider world of Asian American Christianity, which is broadly Protestant and Evangelical in character. For a long time, Asian American Catholics were hidden in the background of the broader United States Catholic Church. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) publicly acknowledged for the first time the presence of the Asian American Catholics and the rich diversity of cultures, traditions, and gifts that they bring to the United States Catholic Church in its landmark pastoral letter, *Asian and Pacific Presence: Harmony in Faith* (2001). In this pastoral letter, the United States Catholic bishops concede that Asian Americans, be they newly arrived immigrants or native-born whose roots in the United States extend

dia, who embraced Christianity from as early as the first and second centuries CE.

Among the Indian Americans who are Eastern Catholics, about 85,000 Indian Americans belong to the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church and 10,000 Indian Americans belong to the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church in the United States. Within the Syro-Malabar community in the United States, around 9,000 are Knanaya Catholics who trace their unique ethnic and religious heritage to the Assyrian Christian refugees from Edessa led by Knai Thomman (Thomas of Cana), who arrived in Kodungalloor (Cranganore) in Kerala, India around the year 345. The Knanaya Catholics are distinct from other Indian American Catholics by their continued practice of endogamy in the United States. Notwithstanding their small numbers, Indian American Syro-Malabar Catholics can proudly attest to the fact that they have their own eparchy (diocese) in the United States, the Syro-Malabar Eparchy of Saint Thomas that was established in 2001 in Chicago with Mar Jacob Angadiath (b. 1945) as bishop. In addition, many Syro-Malabar Catholic missionaries have answered the call of the United States Catholic Bishops to minister in Roman Catholic parishes throughout the United States. In 2010, Pope Benedict XVI established an exarchate for the Syro-Malankara Catholic community in New York with Thomas Mar Eusebius (b. 1961) as exarch (bishop).

Beginnings and Growth

The Asian American Catholic community traces its beginnings to the arrival of Filipino sailors during the Spanish colonial

era. The earliest known presence of Asian Catholics on U.S. soil occurred in 1587, when “Luzon Indians” on the Spanish galleon *Nuestra Senora de Buena Esperanza* accompanied Captain Pedro de Unamuno ashore when he landed at Morro Bay on the California coast. Filipino sailors who deserted ashore in the United States to escape the harsh realities of the Spanish galleon trade established the Filipino settlement of Saint Malo in Saint Bernard Parish of Louisiana in 1763. Although the Saint Malo settlement was eventually destroyed in 1915 by the New Orleans Hurricane, the Filipino historical presence on the United States soil, albeit as a small but thriving community, is an important testimony to the fact that Asian American Catholics have been part of the religious landscape of the United States since the mid-18th century.

The massive influx of Asian immigration to the United States since the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Hart-Celler Act), which abolished the restrictive measures that limited Asian immigration, has contributed significantly to the diversity of the United States Catholic Church. Many Filipino, Indian, Chinese, and Korean Catholics and their families took advantage of the 1965 immigration reforms to immigrate to the United States in search of a better future for themselves and their families. A significant number of Vietnamese American Catholics in the United States fled their homeland because of persecution by the Communist regime that seized power in 1975. Recent decades have witnessed a number of mainland Chinese Catholics fleeing from Communist harassment by seeking refuge and sanctuary in the United

States. As a result, persecution and martyrdom are contemporary experiences, rather than historical footnotes for many Asian American Catholic communities.

Church Life

Within the broader ecclesiological framework of the United States Catholic Church, Asian American Catholic communities may be organized as (1) one of many diverse ethnic communities within a large multicultural parish, (2) a territorial parish, or (3) a personal parish. In the first scenario, a typical multicultural parish often offers special liturgical services and programs for different ethnic communities, including various Asian American communities. This is by far the most common setup in many parts of the United States. Among the Asian American Catholic communities, the territorial parish is common for Vietnamese American Catholic communities in those areas with sufficiently large numbers of Vietnamese American Catholics, for example, in New Orleans, Louisiana and Orange County, California. As for the third option, many United States bishops have established personal parishes for specific Asian American communities. A personal parish is an extraterritorial parish within a diocese that may be created to minister to the particular needs of a specific community because of language, nationality, or liturgical rite, for example, Eastern Catholic personal parishes. In this regard, many Vietnamese American territorial parishes also function as personal parishes for other Vietnamese living outside their geographical confines. The personal parish setup is common for Vietnamese Ameri-

can, Korean American, Chinese American, Syro-Malabar, and Syro-Malankara Catholic communities, where there is a pastoral need for liturgical services and other church-based programs but where the numbers do not justify the establishment of a territorial parish for those groups.

While Asian American Catholics consider themselves as members of the universal Catholic Church, they also perceive their own distinctive religious worldviews, traditions, and practices as integral to their ethnic and sociocultural identities. In this respect, their Catholic faith often becomes the focus of minority ethnic identification, providing the framework for addressing life issues, as well as assisting to preserve, negotiate, and perpetuate their distinctive ethnic identities and cultural traditions in the wider mainstream of contemporary U.S. society. This situation is further accentuated in the daily life experiences of first-generation Asian immigrants to the United States because of language barriers, cultural differences, and other adjustment issues.

An important development that flows from the foregoing point is the centrality of the local parish church as a hub for communal fellowship and mutual support in many Asian American Catholic communities. For example, first-generation Asian immigrants in the United States often rely on their local parish church as a community center that provides social, welfare, and other support services, for example, English literacy classes are offered to adults, immigration services and citizenship classes are offered to new immigrants, and job opportunities are advertised. Many Asian American Catholics also perceive the local parish church as the venue for all

traditional cultural festivities and community-centered activities. For example, the Catholic parish church is often the most important ethnic institution serving various sociocultural roles in addition to the usual religious functions in many Vietnamese American communities. Hence, Vietnamese American Catholic parishes typically organize community-based New Year and other cultural celebrations, as well as offer classes in the mother tongue and cultural heritage to the American-born children of first-generation Vietnamese immigrants to the United States. Not surprisingly, many Vietnamese Americans often view the church as the preserver of their language and cultural traditions as they struggle to preserve their distinctive social, cultural, and religious traditions in contemporary U.S. society.

Many Asian American Catholic communities have active national parachurch organizations such as lay associations, youth groups, Bible study groups, charismatic prayer groups, and Cursillo groups for communal fellowship and empowerment. In addition to national organizations, they have also established ethnic-based parachurch organizations, for example, the Eucharistic Youth Society of the Vietnamese American Catholics, which is an organization for young Vietnamese American Catholic boys and girls that is modeled after the Boy Scouts. Other examples of prominent Asian American Catholic organizations include the National Filipino Ministry Council, the Hmong American Catholic National Association, the Federation of Vietnamese Clergy, Religious, and Lay Leaders in the United States, the Korean Priests Association of America and

Canada, the Indian American Catholic Association, the Knanaya Catholic Congress of North America, and the Knanaya Youth League of North America.

Interestingly, the most common and prominent lay association in many Vietnamese American, Korean American, Chinese American, and Filipino American Catholic communities is the Legion of Mary. While the Legion of Mary may be moribund in white American suburban Catholic parishes, nevertheless it is thriving and growing in Asian American Catholic communities. This is because the Legion of Mary enables and empowers Asian American Catholic women to take on public leadership and service roles within the context of these traditional patriarchal Asian cultures that typically do not have public space for such roles. Through the Legion of Mary, many Asian American Catholic women who are otherwise marginalized in a traditional patriarchal communal structure and male-oriented clerical parish framework are now able to participate actively in their parish and community life.

One silver lining in the declining rate of religious vocations in the United States Catholic Church is the significant growth of Asian American priestly and religious vocations in general, and the Vietnamese American Catholic community's significant contribution to priestly and religious vocations in particular. The Vietnamese American Catholic community also stands out with its many indigenous religious congregations from Vietnam that have taken root in the United States. This includes the Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix (*Dòng Đông Công*) a male religious order based in Carthage, Missouri, and the Lov-

ers of the Holy Cross (*Dòng Mên Thánh Gia*), the oldest and largest of the Vietnamese female religious congregations in Vietnam and the United States. Other indigenous Vietnamese American Catholic religious congregations include the Congregation of Mary, Queen (*Trinh Vuong*), a female religious order that is an offshoot of the Lovers of the Holy Cross (headquarters in Springfield, Missouri), and the Vietnamese Dominican Sisters (headquarters in Houston).

Within the United States Catholic Church, Bishop Ignatius Chung Wang (b. 1934) was the first Asian American and Chinese American to become a bishop in the United States Catholic Church when he served as auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of San Francisco from 2002 to 2009. Bishop Dominic Mai Thanh Lương (b. 1940) became the second Asian American and first Vietnamese American bishop when he was appointed as auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Orange, California, in 2003. In 2004, Oscar Azarcon Solis (b. 1953) became the first Filipino American to become bishop when he was consecrated as auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles in 2004. The Pacific Islander Catholics in the United States were justifiably proud when Pope Benedict XVI appointed Guamanian American Randolph Roque Calvo (b. 1951) as bishop of Reno in 2005.

Asian American Catholic Popular Devotions

In the case of many first-generation Asian American Catholics who are immigrants themselves, it is inevitable that their various Asian racial-ethnic identities are indelibly

imprinted in their lives and brought by them from their ancestral lands to the United States. For them, the age-old sociocultural traditions, religious customs, pious and devotional practices, as well as theological perspectives that they brought with them from their ancestral lands are given pride of place and juxtaposed with new traditions, customs, and practices that they encounter in the United States. Asian American Catholic theologians use terms such as “contextualization,” “inculturation,” “interculturalization,” and “dialogue” to describe the foregoing process. In doing so, traditional Asian sociocultural and religious understandings are retrieved, reenvisioned, and reformulated in response to the call to shape emerging Asian American identities.

As a result, a distinctive trait of Asian American Catholic communities that sets them apart from other Asian American Christians is the prominence that they give to popular devotions. For example, Filipino American Catholics are deeply attached to their favorite devotions, such as the Black Nazarene, Santo Niño, and *Simbang Gabi* (a novena of masses in the octave before Christmas). Popular devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary feature prominently in many Asian American Catholic communities, having taken root and demonstrating a remarkable growth in the United States. The dedication of the shrines to Our Lady of Antipolo (June 7, 1997) for the Filipino American Catholics, Our Lady of Velankanni (August 16, 1997) for the Indian American Catholics, Our Lady of China (August 3, 2002), Our Lady of La Vang (October 21, 2006) for the Vietnamese American Catholics, as well as Our Lady of the Korean Martyrs and

Our Lady of Korea at Cana (September 22, 2007) in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC, together with the annual pilgrimages by various Asian American Catholic communities to these shrines bear testimony to the vibrancy of Asian American Catholic devotional piety.

At the same time, Asian American Catholic devotional piety goes beyond mere informal home-based daily or weekly rituals. In several instances, popular devotions also serve important identity formation and maintenance roles. The annual Marian Days (*Ngày Thánh Mẫu*) in honor of Our Lady of La Vang in Carthage, Missouri, every August since 1978 draws more than 70,000 Vietnamese American Catholics, making it not only an important Marian festival and pilgrimage, but also a public celebration of Vietnamese American Catholic identity and pride.

More importantly, traditional Asian popular devotions also have a strong transnational character, originating from the Asian milieu, brought over by the immigrating generations, as well as transplanted and nurtured by subsequent generations. Moreover, many Asian American Catholics continue to maintain and practice the popular devotions that they brought with them from their ancestral lands in part because these devotions not only nurture their faith and spiritual life, but also enable them to extend and maintain continuous transnational ties with their kinfolk or communities from their ancestral lands in an increasingly globalized world. For many Asian American Catholics, the close identification between faith, ethnicity, and culture is so entrenched that when Asian

Americans participate in popular devotional practices, they are asserting their religious, cultural, and transnational identities simultaneously.

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See also: Entries: Maryknoll Catholic Missionaries; Vietnamese American Catholics

Further Reading

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Christian Fellowships

The historical roots of Asian American Christian fellowships date back to a multiplicity of origins. In the late 20th century, as ties to traditional denominations began to wane, Americans witnessed the revitali-