Asian Theology and the Catholic Community

by Carolyn Chau

How might theology done from within an Asia context contribute to the way in which the Catholic community catechizes and forms faith in the twenty-first century? As a college professor, teaching provides a key source of theological reflection. The people I hear from most often are young adults striving to understand the truths and insights of Catholic Christianity. Considering the contribution of Asian theology to renewing Catholic catechesis and faith formation in the twenty-first century is, then, for me, a matter of asking how the questions of “the seeker” and of the contemporary young adult generation may be addressed effectively.

The conception of “Asian theology” as I discuss it here comes from the work of Peter Phan. He has done more than anyone in the contemporary Catholic theological world to bring out the riches of the Asian contribution to the life and mind of the Catholic Church and its ongoing ability to bring new life and growth to the Church universal. In “Reception of and Trajectories for Vatican II in Asia”¹ Phan lists several features of Asian Catholicism that he believes comprise an ecclesiological treasure trove for the Church around the world. I want to lift up five aspects of the Asian Church as Phan describes them in this article to consider their value for the ongoing challenge of catechesis and faith formation today.

One of the contextual realities that marks the Catholic Church in Asia is, Phan reminds us, great diversity. Differences in the Asian context are geographic, ranging from South Asia (e.g. India) to East Asia (e.g. China, including Southeast Asia [e.g. Laos], Southwest Asia and Central Asia). Economic diversity includes capitalism to communism, and religious variation spans Buddhism to Zoroastrianism. Asian reality can hardly be reduced to a single essence. Being the Church in a religiously diverse culture requires, thus, a degree of comfort and peace with difference that Catholic catechesis today would do well to embrace.

Though so many since Vatican II have decried the uniformity of the Church in favor of unity amidst difference and plurality, it still seems that catechesis in particular suffers from the challenge of implementing this insight into the practice of teaching the faith. The concern for consistency in the handing on of tradition is certainly understand-


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able; yet a recognition of the way in which creativity may aid the passing on of a unified, orthodox tradition in manners that affirm the truths of Nostra aetate will likely encourage young people to open their hearts to ongoing formation by the Church. Perhaps, one of the lessons from Asian theology for contemporary Catholic catechesis and faith formation is a learned hospitality to diversity.

Phan observes that the context of the Church in Asia is one marked by profound poverty. Some of the poorest countries in the world, including Cambodia and Bangladesh, are in Asia. The attention to the poor and the preferential option for those who live on the margins is something that the young people I encounter in my college classrooms respond to passionately in their attempts to grow in understanding the faith. Being the Church among the poor and learning from a paradigmatic Church among the poor, such as the Church in Asia, is one way to help welcome newcomers and existing pilgrims to the Catholic community.

Hospitality to those on the margins of a society may translate in the world of catechesis and faith formation to openness to those who have deep-seated questions about the faith, and to persons of other religious traditions. This might transform in tangible ways the tone of Catholic catechesis from a tone of potentially monological information transfer to one of dialogical clarification. We have seen from the papacy of Pope Francis how much the attitude of welcome towards the little ones has enabled receptivity, even in the most minor of ways, among those hitherto completely closed to the faith.

Additionally, Christianity, despite being born in Asia (in the Middle East), Phan observes, is still perceived by many to be a colonial enterprise of the West. The charge of colonialism is something it seems that catechists and leaders of faith formation programs might incorporate into their conversations with those seeking and growing in faith. How might an openness to dialogue about difficult truths and an exploration of the aspects of both light and darkness in the history of Christianity assist the Church in communicating a deeper, humbler, and more honest version of herself to the ones who are discovering her for the first time or anew?

Phan also notes that the Church exists as a minority in many parts of Asia and alongside other Christian families such as Presbyterians and the Orthodox Church in its many varieties. Continuous with the acknowledgment of the cultural situation of the Church in many parts of the world today, as a bad memory of colonialism and oppression, is a frank recognition of the status of the Church in rapidly secularizing North Atlantic countries such as Canada. Even as many might identify themselves on official surveys as “Catholic,” the cultural, social imagination is one that is hardly Catholic, or at least not robustly so. Facing this minority status directly as one develops catechetical programs and tools for persons preparing for sacraments, retreats, Bible studies, conferences, and spiritual direction, may also lead to a different form and content to all of the aforementioned.

Finally, the reality of migration is an aspect of Asian contextual theology that may shed light on how faith formation today may reconsider style and priorities. It would seem that a sense of instability and homelessness are two defining features of migrant experience. These tropes apply, arguably, to the current situation of many who are enrolling in catechesis and trying to grow in their faith. It is important to recognize that welcoming people in the Catholic community must involve a conscientious attempt to draw them into that most basic and foundational story of salvation, that story of the deep love of God for humanity, that delineates the very heart of the Christian faith. As philosopher Charles Taylor has shown us, the horizon of Christian faith has been very much “wiped away” in a secular age, and is replaced, unwittingly for many, by a frame of immanence: this world, this finite, temporary, temporal world, with its imperfections and delights, is all there is.2 It takes many steps, and naming of the many basic visions and teachings of the Church, to reinscribe a sense of that sweeping human—divine drama into the hearts of believers, old and new.

The realities of openness to diversity, solidarity with the poor, honesty about charges of colonialism, recognition of being a minority community alongside myriad other Christian ‘options,’ and awareness of the experience of the migrant are, then, aspects of the Asian Church and Asian theology, as Phan has outlined it, that may help the Church to communicate to new generations of believers and seekers. Too often, the Church shares its wisdom in a way that minimizes the message of freedom that it contains and its desire to help realize God’s vision of authentic persons and communities that reveal light and encourage transformation in the world. Ecclesial humility, honesty, charity, and prudence will likely go a long way toward attracting persons who have not felt able to adopt the “party line” of orthodoxy from the outset. In addition to these insights from Asian theology, we might also consider how theological method “from below” may be a boon as well, in a North Atlantic context in particular, where the challenge to authority has been percolating for centuries. This distrust of ecclesial authority, fuelled especially by the pain and scandal of the sex abuse crises in recent decades, leads perhaps to finally ushering in the age of the laity that theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar so presciently envisioned. Perhaps it is time for the married or consecrated layperson, responding to the call of holiness with her or his life, to take a more central role in communicating the wisdom of the tradition to all those who seek it. It would seem to speak to the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity that Phan has also noted mark many of the meetings of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC).3

In short, we live in a time when closure to questions, blindness to the need for basic theological truths and narratives to be communicated, and indifference to pluralism, poverty, and personhood come at great cost to catechesis and faith formation opportunities. The Church in Asia has much to teach us. Let us receive it with open eyes, ears, minds, and hearts.

3 Phan, “Reception of and Trajectories for Vatican II in Asia,” 312—318.