An important part of Catholic Theological Union’s five-year strategic plan adopted in 2011 was to respond to the needs of underserved cultural groups within the Archdiocese of Chicago and in the US Church. In addition to CTU’s now-twenty-five-year program for African American lay ministers (Augustus Tolton Program) and twenty-year program for Hispanic ministers (Oscar Romero Program) it was determined that CTU was in a position to try to offer some special programing to help form Asian ministers within the Chicago region and the Midwest.

Asians and Pacific Islanders constitute one of the fastest-growing ethnic groups in the United States, and in the Chicago area. A study done by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops based on the 2010 US Census data indicated that, just within the dioceses of Chicago, Joliet, and Gary, Indiana, there are more than 500,000 Asians and Pacific Islanders living in this region. A significant number of these people are Catholic, especially those from the Philippines, Vietnam, Korea, India, and China. The pastoral needs and concerns vary from group to group, but the changing nature of these communities require that the Church adapt to the new reality of their interaction with the larger US society.

One of the key changes is the ever-increasing number of second- and third-generation Asians and Pacific Islanders who have grown up in the United States and speak English fluently, and who serve as a bridge to many of their elders who emigrated from their homelands in the 1970s and 1980s. The newer generations wish to respect the religious and cultural traditions of their families, but also seek to integrate more fully into the fabric of US society and the Church. Their ranks continue to be augmented every year by newcomers who are experiencing the challenge of any recent immigrant to the country—the struggle to adapt to new ways and learn a new language.

While the majority of these groups have been served by national shrines where the liturgy is conducted in their mother tongue, and the customs from the old country are observed, there are some groups, like the Filipinos, who constitute sizeable minorities in mainstream parishes. They too seek to maintain their customs and traditions, yet also be a more integrated part of the larger US Church. These complex situations call for pastoral ministers who are sensitive to cultural differences and who are able to be real “bridge builders” between Asian and Pacific Islanders and mainstream parishes, as well as other ethnic groups that are also an increasing reality, such as the Hispanic community.
It is in the light of these needs that a group of faculty and administrators was convened with Mrs. Teri Nuval, Director of the Office of Asian Catholics of the Archdiocese of Chicago, to explore possible ways of meeting the need to form ministers to serve this very diverse community. Asians and Asian Americans Catholics, however, share two central values, whatever their particular culture: family and education. In the words of the US bishops’ pastoral statement *Asian and Pacific Presence: Harmony in Faith*:

Asian and Pacific families affirm many basic family values including love, integrity, honesty, thrift, and mutual support. Respect for elders and authority and sacrifice for children figure prominently in shaping their experience. Harmony is crucial, along with the notion that the individual must sacrifice his or her interests to serve the greater needs of the group. . . . For Catholics of Asian and Pacific heritage, Catholic identity is intimately connected with family and local community.

After the family, education is most valued by Asian and Pacific peoples. Thirty-eight percent of Asians in the United States have bachelor’s degrees or higher education, compared with 20 percent of the total population.¹

The bishops’ statement also notes that, in addition to the cultural emphasis on family and education, most Asian groups have a long experience of lay leadership due to the unique history of evangelization of Asia, where lay people are the primary evangelizers in many parts of this continent. Asian lay people come to this country already having experience in providing leadership in the areas of liturgy, social services, and parish life.

The task set before the planning committee was to design a program that would both enhance and inform the talents of the leaders already present in the Asian Catholic community and to inspire new ministers from the ranks of the new generations to serve their communities and at the same time, help them to connect to the wider church community.

Although we would like to have started a scholarship program similar to the Tolton and Romero programs specifically for Asian ministers, due to financial constraints on the part of the archdiocese and CTU, it was decided that a more modest certificate program would be the best way to start—always with the possibility of expanding this program in the future. The planning committee is in the process of determining the courses that will be required for the certificate, and this recommendation will be presented to the CTU faculty for approval. Both “residential” courses at our Chicago campus and online courses are being planned for this certificate.

By a fortuitous coincidence, CTU is bestowing an honorary doctorate in theology on Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila and an honorary doctorate in ministry on Mrs. Teresita Nuval of the archdiocese at our graduation on May 14, 2015. We will use this happy occasion to announce the beginning of the Certificate in Asian Pastoral Theology and Ministry and begin a more focused outreach to the Asian Catholic people of greater Chicago and the Midwest.

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