The Faith and Practice of Asian American Catholics

Generational Shifts

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Understanding the different cultural-dynamics-based generational experience will greatly benefit the church in its ministerial, pastoral, and social approaches to the Asian American Catholics.

Catholics coming from Asia and the Pacific Islands to the United States of America are a culturally and ethnically diverse group. The experiences that brought Asian and Pacific Catholics to the shores of the continental United States are also varied, ranging from groups seeking economic betterment in the early nineteenth century to refugees escaping civil unrest and war in the twentieth century. For many of these immigrants, their faith is a bond of continuity with their homeland, making the practice of their religion highly important. Faith takes on new meanings, especially when national and political imaginations become coextensive with the immigrant experience. Faith also shapes a newly created “hyphenated identity” that bridges the old with the new. For the Catholic immigrants, they are adapting to a country where Catholics have historically struggled as an “outsider” group but have also become part of the “mainstream” of American life. They are forced to negotiate between the checkered histories of both countries in order to find a secure and comfortable place to resettle.

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This article examines the Asian American Catholic community generationally as first, second, and subsequent generations. A generational focus allows more concentrated efforts to meet the pastoral and sacramental needs of the first generation, and also to address the specific concerns of the second generation on the issues of identity and participation that embrace a pan-Asian perspective. This might be a way to differentiate among needs, yet hold these diverse generational groups together. To focus only on the needs of one generation will serve neither these groups nor the church well. Hence, there must be a two-pronged approach if the church does not want to risk the loss of participation among many second-generation and the alienation of the first-generation Asian American Catholics from the wider American Catholic Church.

**Defining “Generations”**

Before examining the experiences of the Asian American Catholics, it is necessary to distinguish what is meant by generations and also by the all-encompassing label of Asian American. The term “generation” is defined by three distinct and interrelated meanings: rank, age, and distance. Generational rank implies the relationship between children to parents in the generation before or children in the generation after. The structure of children, parent, grandparents, and great-grandparents describes this model. Generational age cohort indicates that people of the same age experience the same historical events at roughly the same points in their individual development. Some examples are the “beat-generation,” the “me-generation,” and now the “millennial generation.” Generational distance is the measurement away from the “old or home country.” This means that the first generation are those born in the old country, second generation are those born in the new country, and their children are the third generation. This paper employs this three-fold dimension in order to encompass the rather complex understanding of generations.

First-generation Asian and Pacific Islanders (i.e., those who arrived in the United States as adolescents or adults) have tended to identify themselves by ethnicity or nation rather than with a pan-Asian identity. Their reasons for entry into the United States and their modes of doing so (migrants or refugees) have shaped their experience. As either migrants or refugees, the first generations have maintained strong emotional bonds to their homeland and are less likely to “become American.” Maintaining native language and culture have been and continue to be of great importance, especially in regard to raising their children in their new “home.” They have advocated for strong ethnic churches, believing that worship in the mother tongue secures a close, familiar connection in a strange new land. They have also been on the front lines of the struggle for legal acceptance into the United States, challenging old ethnically bounded laws that were exclusive and also discriminatory.
The second generation constitutes those born in the United States or who came here as small children (ages 5–12) and are more likely to embrace a pan-Asian identity. They find themselves caught between two cultures, wishing to remain loyal to the culture and values of their parents, but realizing at the same time that their parents’ homeland cannot be replicated in the United States. They tend to lose fluency in their parents’ mother tongue and are more drawn to “become American.” For the second and subsequent generations, there is a push to move away from just claiming identity (we all have to be something) to that of confronting inequality (the neglectful treatment of different people). The concern is not just for who they are but also for what they have, that is, wanting to do something about the economic and political disparity among the immigrant class to that of the “mainstream.” This civic engagement will be more evident as the second and subsequent generations gain stronger financial security and political visibility.

**Defining “Asian American”**

The label “Asian American” only originated during the late 1960s, as part of a progressive effort that built on the black civil rights movement. It was to eliminate the rather negative connotations of terms such as “Mongolian,” “Asiatic,” and “Oriental” that have been part of the racial vocabulary in America. Ethnic group identification in the past had been the primary label for describing racial difference; early typologies often referred to a particular race such as Filipino or Chinese. “Asian American” reflected both a nationalist identity—Asian to emphasize race, American to emphasize “non-foreignness”—as well as an attempt to dispose of the loaded term “Oriental.” The application “Oriental” is dated and old-fashioned, possessing a layered history of being Eurocentric and in some cases being a means of objectifying. It is still used even among Asian groups but carries a negative punch. It should also be noted that the term “Asian” has traditionally referred to only three Asian ethnic groups: Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. The term “Asian” is employed now more broadly to include all ethnics who were born and whose ancestors came from the eastern part of the Asian continent and the Pacific Islands.

**Generational Attitudes toward Catholicism and the Church**

How do priorities and Catholic beliefs/participation of the second-generation Asian Americans differ from those of the first generation? It is difficult to generalize on these issues, as there are certainly in-group differences among Asian...
Americans. There are however certain general attitudes toward Christianity that can be highlighted.

The first generation sees Catholicism as an ascribed characteristic that comes with family church membership. Being part of a church goes beyond a Catholic mandate but rather is infused in the very nature of the family. Therefore, immigrant churches (specifically ethnic parishes) are strict in observing family traditions and rituals, preserving hierarchy, and financially supporting the church, serving as leaders, and opening their homes to newcomers and guests. Church becomes naturally, then, an extension of the immediate family. The parents will continue to maintain the relationships among each other in the churches as they would within the family structure. This is supported by the practice of filial piety that will be discussed later.

The second generation is less concerned with formal structures and processes and instead stresses social justice and evangelization. They think of themselves as more individualistic and view Christianity as an achieved characteristic that comes through a spiritual journey. They do not find that attending church gives them instant “Christianity.” These differences can be discerned through examining how ethnic church communities built by the first generation are now experienced by the second generation. What has happened is that the second generation does not attend the churches built by the first generation because their participation is limited or not even welcomed, which supports their stance that a Christian identity cannot be instantly obtained. The second generation finds it difficult to attend the same churches as their first generation cohorts and families when their approach to spirituality is so different from their parents and elders.

There are several reasons that Asian American ethnic churches have done so well in the first generation. It needs to be noted that the majority of study on Asian American Christians has been conducted mainly by evangelical and mainline Protestant churches. These studies, however, reflect many of the same experiences of Asian American Catholics. The practical needs that are met by an ethnic church fall into four categories: community, maintenance of cultural tradition, social services, and social status and positions (Min, 1371). The pastoral efforts carried out under these four practical needs categories also helped the first generation to assimilate better to the larger society. Under the added security of the church, the first generation shielded themselves from the glaring scrutiny of the impersonal bureaucracy of the U.S. government.
So how do these four categories operate? First, the church brings individuals together, binding them into a community with regular, face-to-face interaction and rituals. The need for community is heightened among immigrants, who face the “complex conditions of uprooting, existential marginality, and sociocultural adaptation for re-rooting” (Hurh and Kim, 31). The church offers, at minimum, weekly opportunities for interaction with other immigrants and instills in members a sense of belonging, comfort, and meaning. The routine of the church rituals becomes a reminder of an ordered past that was grounded in a regular schedule.

Second, the church helps immigrants maintain their cultural traditions. The celebrations of traditional holidays such as Lunar New Year, anniversaries of dead ancestors, and harvest festivals are marked with signs, foods, activities, and rituals from the home country. For many immigrants, the church is the only place where they experience these celebrations and can meet others of the same cultural heritage. These traditional holidays are then infused with the life of the new church community that they have adopted. As a result, Catholicism and ethnic identity often become closely associated in their lives.

Third, the church provides social services and community development efforts for members. Through financial donations and personal support, people can collect basic needs from the food pantry or clothes of the parish thrift stores. There are also job training, legal aid, and citizenship classes. Some parishes also run English as a second language (ESL) classes. Priests and parish leaders advise members on such matters as family relations, employment, housing, health care, and education. For the first generation, these supportive measures are trustworthy because they are church sponsored.

Fourth, the ethnic church plays an important role in satisfying the needs for social status, prestige, power, and recognition within the immigrant community. The opportunities to read at Mass, to be an extraordinary minister of holy communion, and to become a parish council member give the immigrants authority that they would not have found readily in their workplaces. This is particularly important in compensating for the downward mobility that usually accompanies immigration. The first generation will also gain more respect from their children and families if they have positions of responsibility within their newly adopted community.

Despite the valiant efforts made by the first-generation Asian Americans in different spheres of their lives, adapting to life in a new country has proven to be
difficult. Sociologists Kitano and Daniels observe the existential reality of first-generation Asian Americans who are

contending with a multitude of issues, including cultural and linguistic differences, parent-child stresses, changes in roles, conflicts in norms and values, achieving a healthy identity in a predominantly white society, and varied levels of acceptance by both the majority and other minorities already living here. (Kitano and Daniels, 119)

These concerns are still part of the first-generation tension in dealing with the second generation. Families that came to the United States because of war have the added problem of post-traumatic symptoms that still needs further study.

Pan-Asian Shift in the Second Generation

What has developed within the first-generation ethnic parishes is diminished in the second generation. The second generation relies less on the church helping them to assimilate into the larger society; thus, the boundaries and protections built in the church by the first generation become more relaxed to the point of reflecting only a symbolic expression. These symbols are embedded in such experiences as a common upbringing, a professional status, a marginal status, and community concerns. Therefore, the symbolic boundaries of pan-Asian churches are meant primarily to distinguish them from the ethnic churches from which they develop. Pan-Asian churches are composed of the plurality of ethnic Asians. They are attractive to the second generation because the common language is English with activities and programs geared toward the young people. These pan-Asian churches also cut across historical and ethnic hatred that many in the first generation still harbor. The second generation is more accepting of the reality of living within a society where being “Asian” represents more than their own ethnic background. They come to share in a commonality that is not recognized in ethnic churches.

Second Generation’s Exodus from Ethnic Churches

The diminished reliance of the second generation on the church is quite complex. There are no official data on the number of second-generation Asian Americans who attend church, but community leaders and scholars estimate that the figure is quite low. For example, second-generation Korean Americans do not attend their parents’ church, even if they reside in the same city (Kim and Pyle,
Many of these immigrant churches are gradually transforming from a “church of family members” into a “church of parents” (Kim and Pyle, 323). A study of Korean Americans in the New York City area found that while up to 75 percent of the first generation attends church, only 5 percent of the second generation remains in the church after college. This percentage is not so different for other Asian American Catholic groups such as the Vietnamese and Filipinos.

For some second-generation Asian American Catholics, it is ironic that the first-generation leaders incorporate the English-speaking second generation at any cost, but also, consistently exclude the second generation from leadership roles. The second generation is also seizing the opportunity to obtain a theological education. They are becoming more educated about their religion than their parents. This may be a reason why they are moving away from their parents’ more devotional Catholicism.

The tension between the learned faith and the pious devotion needs further examination. It is a tension that is a concern between not only the generations within the Asian American Catholic community but also extends to the larger American Catholic Church.

Also, second-generation Asian Americans struggle to understand the relationship between the church and the family. They believe that the family or home should be as much or even more important for being formed into a “Christian.” They find, however, that their parents spend so much time in church that they neglect this aspect of their familial duties. “They lamented the fact that their parents have been and continue to spend too much time attending church programs, further separating both nuclear as well as extended family ties” (Kang, 207). For the second generation, they see their parents as relying so much on the church both from the aspect of the parents’ own assimilation strategy and also forming the children’s faith formation that they ultimately neglect the immediate family. Some second generation believe that their parents and the church, fearing possible dishonor associated with open sharing, have socialized them to be silent about their family issues and pretend that everything is fine. They maintain a functional relationship within the family that may hide real-life issues and problems.

The differences in church participation can be understood from the following experiences: first, the pastoral needs of people in their twenties differ from those of a group in their forties and fifties, as the types of challenges that one faces vary according to one’s stage in life. Second, first-generation immigrants generally lack
integration into American society and depend heavily on contact with others from their native country. In contrast, members of the second generation can choose from more organizational options. They generally feel more comfortable in American society and are not restricted to ethnic organizations. Third, there are differences in education and religious experiences that shape their expectations of what to expect from the church. The second generation is more likely to work toward a formal degree in theology or religious studies in order to have a better understanding of their faith. They are absorbed into a culture where achievement in everything is the mode of operation.

Filial Piety and the Challenge of Mainstreaming

With these three points in mind, there is another factor that profoundly underscores the source of generational conflict between Asian American parents and children—the varied understandings and manifestations of filial piety. The first generation, especially the elderly, consider filial piety as the key cultural variable for the functioning of the family. Filial piety consists of several factors. Basically it is to respect and to obey one’s parents unconditionally while they are living and to provide a proper funeral and remembrance/veneration of them when they die. This cultural tradition preceded but was formalized in the Confucian ideal of maintaining an orderly society through the five right relationships. These are the subject/ruler, father/son, older brother/younger brother, husband/wife and friend/friend. Thus, respect is shown not only toward immediate family members but also to everyone in society. What these relationships accentuate is the Confucian ideal of deference to the elder or hierarchy in society. This ideal may not have been formally learned in school, but for the Asian family it is handed down informally within the familial relationships. For many Asian American parents, the continual practice of this filial ideal becomes part of what they must instill in the second and subsequent generations. It is a duty of passing on this tradition that Asian parents feel highly responsible in order to maintain their respect and place within their community.

The emphasis on the centrality of filial piety so important to Asian American parents comes into conflict with the Euro-American idea that parents should have greater intimacy with their children. Asian American parents think that such intimacy undermines the children’s respect for their parents. Second-generation Asian Americans, on the other hand, have absorbed this value placed on intimacy and expect it of their first-generation parents. The conflict between the values of filial piety and family intimacy (respect and proper distance versus intimacy) widens in America when the parents need to work long hours and do not have time to teach their children the native languages. The gap widens also because many parents work in isolated environments removed from “mainstream” American
society and so remain highly ethnic and “un-Americanized.” Such isolation contributes to the parents’ already great difficulty in acquiring English, the language in which second-generation children typically feel more comfortable as their mode of communication. These factors add to an already formalized relationship, creating a larger communication gap both linguistically and culturally.

As intimacy wanes and the gaps widen between the generations, there is still the insatiable expectation that the first generation brings to bear on the second generation—repaying the sacrifice the parents made. This payback rarely involves monetary or any other tangible compensation. The most important payback is through high educational achievements, making the parents proud and their sacrifice worthwhile. For example, the parents want the children to be successful in school but also to be obedient, respectful, and humble at home, not realizing that the attributes needed to succeed in American schools are assertiveness, initiative, and independent thinking. They want their children to be proficient in English and retain fluency in their native tongue. They restrict after-school activities with English-speaking peers but also expect them to be socially popular. They profess no prejudice toward other racial and ethnic groups, yet resist interracial dating and marriage.

First-generation parents manifest their authority over their children by supervising and making unilateral decisions in terms of career choice. The parents’ prevalent preferences for occupations involve those that are prestigious and financially secure, such as medicine, the physical sciences, and law. Many second-generation Asian Americans indeed choose occupations consistent with values of success fostered by the larger society, such as becoming a medical doctor, engineer, or lawyer. These expectations can become a weighty burden on many second- and subsequent-generation Asian Americans that only add to the distance between parents and their children. They must continue to be addressed within the wider context of the adaptation and participation of the Asian American in the American Catholic community and larger American society.

Engaging Asian American Catholics

Churches are havens of integration, where immigrants, refugees, and their children address some of the issues of living in a strange new land and acquire tools and resources, moral and spiritual, social and economic, for making their way in American society. The efforts of churches to shape the identities and involvement of their members inevitably have implications for incorporating and also sustaining recent immigrants and their offspring into American life. Understanding the different cultural dynamics of the first and second generation will greatly benefit the church in its ministerial, pastoral, and social approaches to the Asian American Catholics. These dynamics are only beginning to be addressed
within the Asian American Catholic community and will need to be acknowledged by the wider American Catholic Church.

The second-generation Asian American Catholics’ participation (probably not unlike previous immigrants such as the Irish, Germans, and Italians) will require ongoing encouragement by the church through programs and opportunities for leadership. It is important to know that the practices instilled by the first generation will not be lost; however, this needs ongoing shaping. Already, there are a relatively large number of vocations among Vietnamese and Filipinos in the priesthood and religious life. This is an indication that the interest in the church is not completely lost on the second generation. But for this to continue, there need to be efforts to sustain and nurture these vocations. The second generation’s seemingly lower participation in church life can be attributed in important measure to the gap of communication with the first generation but also the lack of opportunities of leadership and engagement for them. These trends must be changed for the benefit of the different Asian American generations in the American Catholic Church.

Efforts are underway to engage the Asian American Catholic community on the local and national levels. It is being organized by the Asian American Catholic lay leaders, scholars, religious, and bishops. What needs to come out of these efforts are not more affirmations of the uniqueness, devotion, and worship practices of the Asian American Catholic community but rather programs and gatherings that address honestly the needs within the Asian American family, the struggles of assimilation, and the leadership role that the church can play in supporting the growing Asian American Catholic community. The Asian American Catholics will continue to maintain their dedication to the church because it is so important to their identity, but also their needs in a new country must be addressed in order to continue to involve the subsequent generations.

References


