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Christian Witness and Proclamation through Migration

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ABSTRACT

People are constantly on the move, more so now than ever before. Crossing international borders is definitely a major characteristic of our present era. No countries or regions are immune from this worldwide migration phenomenon, certainly not Asia. Statistics indicate that Christian immigrants are the largest population on the move, totaling 49 percent of all international migrants on the planet. When Christian immigrants travel, they take their religion with them, or more personally, their God literally migrates with them. If every Christian migrant is a potential missionary, migration then could have enormous prospects and opportunities for evangelism – a communicative act that involves the transmission of beliefs, ideas, or messages regarding their religious worldview. Thus, the aim of this essay is to examine the impact of and contribution to Christian witness and proclamation through today’s global phenomenon of migration. Migrants are indeed a precious gift of the Church, especially Asian Christian migrants, who normally bring their faith with them and bear witness of the Christian faith wherever they are. The effects of their

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plight and emigration not only alter the demographic landscape and the image of Christianity, but also enhance the theology and spirituality of its host country.

Keywords: *migration, Christian migrants, Asian migrants, witness, proclamation*

1. Introduction

It's Saturday evening in Anguilla, a British overseas territory in the Eastern Caribbean also referred to as the West Indies. The choir of about a dozen Filipino migrants who are in their thirties has just gathered at St. Gerard's Roman Catholic Church to go over the songs in preparation for the Sunday Vigil Mass. Some of them are married, but most are single. Their beautiful voices and upbeat songs, accompanied by drum and guitar, usually attract a good crowd to church in spite of the summer heat. During the Communion meditation they sing a traditional Tagalog hymn to add more flavor to an already very cross-cultural liturgy. The members of the congregation are predominantly Caribbean with dark color skin whose ancestors came from Africa. The visiting priest, who was born in Viet Nam but now lives and works in the United States of America, is the main celebrant of the Mass. A few tourists from Europe or North America occasionally come to church.

Anguilla is one of the most northerly of the Leeward Islands, lying east of Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. It is a flat island of coral and limestone and is noted for its spectacular coral reefs and pristine beaches attracting many tourists. Consequently, the island's main source of revenue is tourism. However, these Catholic Filipino migrant workers did not come to Anguilla from the other side of the globe for a vacation but for labor. As migrant workers they take their religion with them and fervently give witness to their faith in songs and service at the local church. Although vulnerable and displaced from their homeland and family, they actively live out their faith, contributing much and becoming a precious gift to this small and seemingly insignificant corner of the world.

Throughout the history of Christian mission, migration has had enormous prospects and opportunities for the church's planting, mission, and evangelism. When Christians travel, whether by force or voluntarily, they take their religion with them. Current statistics indicate that Christian migrants or immigrants are the largest population of people on the move, generating huge possibilities for missionary expansion, especially if every Christian migrant is a potential missionary. Thus, the aim of this essay is to examine the impact of and contribution to Christian witness and proclamation through today's global phenomenon of migration, especially from Asia. This essay will also explore the effects of Asian Catholic immigrants in the United States, whose presence not only alters the demographic landscape and face of Christianity, but also enhances the theology and spirituality of its host country.

2. The Worldwide Immigration Phenomenon

People are constantly on the move, more so now than ever before. In the first decade of the twenty-first century of this third millennium, the number of people on the move has increased from 175 million in 2000 to over 280.6 million people in 2020.² It is estimated that about 3.6 percent of the world's 8.1 billion people are displaced. That means one out of every thirty people in the world today is a migrant.³ From another interesting perspective, migrants would collectively constitute the fifth most populous country in the world. Because of the growing inequalities of wealth caused by globalization, political and ethnic conflicts, environmental disasters, implementation of free trade, and viable means of transportation, more and more

² International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Data and Research," <https://www.iom.int/data-and-research> (accessed on September 1, 2023).

³ For more facts and figures, see the website of International Organization for Migration (IOM): <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/wmr-2022-interactive/> (accessed on September 15, 2023). According to the IOM, world migrants could reach 405 million by 2050, or nearly 7 percent of the present global population. See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-migration/world-migrants-could-total-405-million-by-2050-idUSTRE6AS00320101129> (accessed on September 27, 2023).

people are migrating than ever before, causing some to appropriately designate our era “the age of migration.”⁴

Crossing international borders is definitely a major characteristic of our present era. No countries or regions are immune from this phenomenon, certainly not Asia. In 2005, it was estimated that there were 53 million Asian immigrants scattered across the globe; by 2020, the number had increased to 85.6 million.⁵ Between 2000 and 2013, Asia added more international migrants than any other major area, gaining some 20 million international migrants, or 1.6 million additional migrants per year.⁶ While the total number of refugees in the world was estimated at 15.7 million, a disproportionate number, about 10.4 million of them, came from Asia.

International migration from Asia increased significantly in the 1970s and 1980s. There were basically three major political events that triggered the massive movement of people within and from Asia. In the early 1970s, the West-East Pakistan conflict forced approximately ten million people to flee from East Pakistan to India.⁷ With the fall of Saigon to the communist regime in 1975, millions of refugees—initially from Viet Nam and subsequently from Laos and Cambodia—fled by land and by sea to escape the violence of post-war retribution. It is estimated that between 1975 and 1995, some three million people fled the region. While most Asian countries pushed backed the rickety boats from their shorelines, the United States, Canada, Australia, and a few other European countries rescued these refugees and helped settle them in a foreign land. The third major exodus of people began in 1979 during the successive occupations of Afghanistan. The political conflicts that triggered the massive Afghan refugee crises were first

⁴ See Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, Fourth Edition; Revised and Updated (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁵ Migration Data Portal,
https://www.migrationdataportal.org/international-data?i=stock_abs_&t=2020&m=1&rm49=142 (accessed on September 20, 2023).

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http://esa.un.org/unmigration/documents/The_number_of_international_migrants.pdf

⁷ Maruja M. B. Asis, *Understanding International Migration in Asia*, Exodus Series 2 (Quezon City, Philippines: Scalabrini Migration Center, 2005), 12.

set off by the former U.S.S.R., followed by the Taliban, and have been drawn out even to this day. These events are believed to have displaced millions of people in 71 different countries.⁸

Since the 1990s, especially with the rapid economic growth of several Asian countries, migration in Asia has changed remarkably in character and landscape. While emigration continues, primarily for family reunification outside of the Asian region, for example to North America, Europe, and Australia, recent data show that new trends of migration are happening within Asia itself.⁹ The most noticeable trend is the migration of temporary labor from less developed countries to the increasingly industrializing countries. It is estimated that in the last decade alone there were about 6.1 million Asian economic migrants working outside their own native places, but within East and Southeast Asia (such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore).¹⁰ In the Middle East alone, there are some 8.7 million Asian contract workers employed in the Gulf oil countries like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, and the United Arab Emirates. While some migrant workers are highly skilled workers, many are hired to do the 3D jobs (dirty, difficult, and dangerous).¹¹ Castles and Miller noted that China alone has a “floating population” of 100–150 million people moving from rural areas to the new industrial areas. India too experiences large-scale internal migration and urbanization. There could be as many as 190 million internal migrant workers in India.¹² In any case, the “diaspora” population alone is estimated at

⁸ For a good synopsis of the situation up until 1993, see Silvano M. Tomasi, “The World-wide Context of Migration: The Example of Asia,” in *Migrants and Refugees*, ed. Dietmar Mieth and Lisa Sowle Cahill, Concilium 1993/4 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 3-10.

⁹ Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 125; see also Asis, *Understanding International Migration in Asia*, 17.

¹⁰ Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 127.

¹¹ Asis, *Understanding International Migration in Asia*, 17.

¹² The 2001 Census counted about 191 million people, or 19 percent of the total Indian population at the time, as internal migrants who had moved long distances to other districts or other Indian states. About 70 percent of all internal migrants are women, and marriage is the primary reason for female migration. For more information about India’s internal migration flows, see <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/internal-labor-migration-india-raises-integration-challenges-migrants> (accessed on June 26, 2015).

around 20 million people.¹³ It is well noted that many of the “Tiger economy countries” (Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Thailand, Taiwan, and more recently Malaysia) have huge numbers of migrant workers. Malaysia alone has a foreign work force estimated at 2.6 million, while Japan and Thailand each have around 2 million.¹⁴ It is really impossible to know exactly how many Asian migrant workers there are in the Asian region because many are clandestine (undocumented), overstaying their visa permit, or running away from an employer. However, statistics show that emigration for employment within Asia has grown exponentially, “with about 2.6 million people leaving their homes in search of work each year.”¹⁵

The participation of women in international labor migration is another key recent development in the Asian region.¹⁶ Before the late 1970s, labor migration was predominantly male; by 1985, however, with the demand for domestic workers, nurses, sales clerks, and other female services in the Gulf States, 3.2 million female Asians were working in the Middle East.¹⁷ In the late 1980s and the early 1990s the demand for foreign domestic workers also increased tremendously in the newly industrialized countries in East and Southeast Asia (e.g., Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia). In Taiwan, for example, migrant domestic workers and caretakers comprised 41.5 percent of the foreign work force by 2004.¹⁸ In Indonesia, 81 percent of those who registered to work abroad, mainly in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, were women. Women’s labor migration in the Philippines has also increased significantly in recent years.¹⁹ As of mid-year 2020, the number of Asian female international migrants

¹³ Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 125 and 139.

¹⁴ Castles and Miller, 136-141.

¹⁵ Castles and Miller, 127.

¹⁶ Gemma Tulud Cruz, *Toward a Theology of Migration: Social Justice and Religious Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 33-50.

¹⁷ Cruz, 130.

¹⁸ Asis, *Understanding International Migration in Asia*, 21.

¹⁹ Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 133; see also Gemma Tulud Cruz, “Migration in the Asia Region: Retrospect and Prospects,” in *Migration and Interculturality: Theological and Philosophical Challenges*, edited by Raul Fornet-Betancourt, 21-30 (Aachen: Institute of Missiology, 2004).

reached 35.8 million, which is about 41.8 percent of 85.6 million Asian international migrants.²⁰

Another growing phenomenon related to female migration since the 1990s is international marriages in the Asian region. Foreign brides, who come primarily from the Southeast Asian countries of Viet Nam, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, have been sought especially by men from Taiwan, Japan, China, and South Korea. It is estimated that as of 2004, foreign spouses in Taiwan alone reached around 300,000, and most of the women came from China and Southeast Asia. Notably, between 1995 and 2005, the number of Vietnamese women married to Taiwanese men skyrocketed from 1,476 to about 100,000.²¹ In 2004, there were 57,000 international marriages registered in South Korea.²² It is estimated that since 2006, at least 5,000 Vietnamese brides immigrate to South Korea every year.

Current trends suggest that labor migration in the Asian region will persist and continue to increase as newly industrialized countries demand more foreign migrants to work in 3D (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) jobs as well as more foreign domestic workers.²³ Since

²⁰ Migration Data Portal, https://www.migrationdataportal.org/international-data?i=stock_abs_female_&t=2020&m=1&rm49=142 (accessed on September 27, 2023).

²¹ See Quang Hanh, “VN-Taiwan Discuss Brides’ Rights in Illegally-Made Matches,” *Vietnam Net Bridge*, <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/features/2005/08/482081/> (accessed on September 15, 2010). In the article, Hanh states that “According to Professor Chyong-fang Ko from the Taiwanese Central Research Institute, Vietnamese brides account for 35% of 338,000 foreign brides in Taiwan, or around 118,300 women, mainly from the south of Vietnam.” See also Hsia, http://cc.shu.edu.tw/~e62/NewSiteData/Teacher/Hsia/Hsia_file/imagined%20and%20imagined%20national%20anxiety.pdf (accessed on September 15, 2010).

²² Asis, *Understanding International Migration in Asia*, 28.

²³ While Asian migration has been of low-skilled workers, emerging trends indicate that the mobility of the highly skilled professionals, such as technicians, engineers, nurses, and medical doctors, is growing. Student mobility which is part of the skilled migration is also steadily increasing in numbers. The number is large enough to alarm some countries of the “brain drain” that has been caused by these professionals leaving their countries of origin. See Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 141; Asis, *Understanding International Migration in Asia*, 30.

most migrant workers in Asia are not protected by labor laws, men and, more so women (particularly “professional entertainers,” a euphemism for prostitutes), are vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and violence. Many women and girls run the risk of becoming trafficked or forced into prostitution.²⁴ While the contemporary trends of labor migration have brought “a breath of fresh air”²⁵ to the region’s economic landscape, the situation raises serious concerns about the inhumane treatment of the vulnerable migrant workers and their psychological marginalization and alienation while living away from home.²⁶ It is even more heartbreaking to see the many host countries in Asia treating their own Asian brothers and sisters as aliens and strangers without much dignity or rights.²⁷

3. Migrants as Witnesses

Based on the religious composition of international migrants, approximately 105 million international migrants were Christians.²⁸

²⁴ According to UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women), women and children being trafficked in Southeast Asia could be around 225,000 out of a global figure of over 700,000 annually. For concrete scenarios of abuses of women migration in Asia, see Cruz’s article. For an excellent resource and powerful reflection on the current “terrible scourge” of human trafficking, see the latest document published by the Society of the Divine Word, entitled, *Human Trafficking: Present Day Slavery*.

²⁵ Asis, *Understanding International Migration in Asia*, 21.

²⁶ In her recently published book, Cruz refers to the contemporary migration as “a wound of our time.” She goes on to say, “To be sure, many migrants are victims of injustice before, during, and after migration” (*Toward a Theology of Migration*, 5).

²⁷ Stephen Castles notices three dominant policies or attitudes that host countries in Asia have toward immigrants: 1) immigrants should not be allowed to settle; 2) foreign residents should only be offered citizenship in exceptional cases; and 3) national culture and identity should not be modified in response to external influences. See Stephen Castles, “The Myth of the Controllability of Difference: Labour Migration, Transnational Communities and State Strategies in East Asia,” <http://www.unesco.org/most/apmrcast.htm#attitudes> (accessed on September 16, 2010).

²⁸ For the religious composition of internal migrants in 2010, see <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/03/08/religious-migration-exec/> (accessed September 27, 2023). According to this figure, the top seven religious

Statistics indicate that Christian migrants or immigrants are the largest population on the move, totaling 49 percent of all international migrants on the planet. The top two favorite destinations of Christian immigrants are North America (72 percent of 43 million immigrants) and Europe (57 percent of 40 million immigrants).²⁹ Noticeably, 85 percent of immigrants to Latin America and the Caribbean are Christians.³⁰ If every Christian migrant is a potential missionary, migration then could have enormous prospects and opportunities for evangelism. When Christian immigrants travel, they take their religion with them, or more personally, their God literally migrates with them.³¹ As people in transition, who experience the pain of homelessness and displacement, “they are usually open to new commitments and ready to assume faith in a personal way.”³² Jonathan Tan also notes in his latest book, “In the context of Asia, the movement of peoples also brings about the movement of cultures and religions, resulting in increasing cultural diversity and religious pluralism across Asia, as the majority community in host countries are often faced with the challenges of welcoming and integrating incoming migrant communities.”³³

Jehu Hanciles correctly notes that “Christianity is a migratory religion, and migration movements have been a functional element in

affiliations of international immigrants are as followed: Christian (105,670,000); Muslim (58,580,000); Unaffiliated (19,330,000); Hindu (10,700,000); other religions (9,110,000); Buddhist (7,310,000); and Jewish (3,650,000).

²⁹ For charts and other pertinent statistics, see <http://www.statista.com/statistics/221384/immigration-to-north-america-by-religion/> (accessed August 30, 2012).

³⁰ See, Statista, <http://www.statista.com/statistics/221400/immigration-to-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-by-religion/> (accessed August 30, 2012).

³¹ When the Israelites travelled in the wilderness for forty years, God moved about with them and dwelled among his people in the tabernacle (Ex. 25:8; 29; 45-46; Nm 1:50). Tabernacle means, “tent,” “place of dwelling” or “sanctuary.” It was a sacred place where God chose to meet the Israelites, and the people came together to worship and offer sacrifice during the forty years that they wandered in the desert.

³² Samuel J. Escobar, “Mission Fields on the Move,” *Christianity Today* (May 2010): 31.

³³ Jonathan Y. Tan, *Christian Mission among the Peoples of Asia* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2014), 174.

its expansion.”³⁴ Hanciles observes that the six ages or phases of Christian history that were identified by Andrew Walls were shaped in one way or another by migratory movements.³⁵ From the very beginning, Christian expansion and migratory movement were forcibly and intimately intertwined. In a more comprehensive study, Hanciles’ book explores the massive consequential connection between migration and mission in the history of Christian missionary expansion, starting with the age of European migrations in the sixteenth century.³⁶ The book successfully demonstrates that migratory movement was and remains a prime factor in the global spread of Christianity, Islam, and other world religions. What he says in the concluding section of the book bears truth and wisdom, “Every Christian migrant is a potential missionary.”³⁷

This of course is not new. Migration was a key factor in the expansion of the church in the New Testament times.³⁸ In the book of Acts, the Evangelist Luke records numerous stories of Christian missions advanced in the context of migration. Early Hellenistic Christians who were scattered because of religious persecution founded churches in Samaria (8:1), Damascus (9:2), Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch (11:19). In other cases, voluntary immigrants moved with a missionary purpose in mind. The efforts of Peter, John, and other itinerant missionaries succeeded in planting new communities in various towns throughout the regions of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria

³⁴ Jehu J. Hanciles, “Migration and Mission: Some Implications for the Twenty-first-Century Church,” *Missiology* 27, no. 4 (Oct 2003): 149.

³⁵ Hanciles, 148-49. For a complete study, see Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 16-25. See also his helpful article, Andrew F. Walls, “Mission and Migration: The Diaspora Factor in Christian History,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 5, no. 2 (Dec 2002): 3-11.

³⁶ Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 157ff.

³⁷ Hanciles, 378.

³⁸ The link between migration and mission is already found in the life of Jesus. Jehu J. Hanciles states that “Jesus’ life and ministry embodied the interconnection of mission, boundary-crossing movement, and the alienation of exile and migration” (*Beyond Christendom*, 150). For a brief survey of the theme of migration in the Bible, see vanThanh Nguyen, SVD, “Asia in Motion: A Biblical Reflection on Migration,” *Asian Christian Review* 4, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 22-27.

(9:31; 10:1-48). Paul, Barnabas, and their traveling companions were sent out on various missionary journeys to establish and build up the Christian communities in Celicia, Illyricum, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia (Rom 15:19, 23-24). Paul's list of farewell greetings in Romans 16 likewise gives us a glimpse of his successful mission endeavor, reaching all the way to the imperial capital. We are told that he even planned to travel to Spain (Rom 15:24) to evangelize to the edge of the known world.

The story of Priscilla and Aquila illustrates that migration and mission were closely intertwined.³⁹ This Judean-Christ-believing-couple was constantly on the move for the purpose of communicating the gospel message to potential listeners.⁴⁰ They first settled in Rome, were then forced to migrate to Corinth because of the Edict of Claudius in 49 C.E., relocated in Ephesus for the purpose of evangelization, and finally returned to Rome after Claudius' death in 54 C.E. They relocated both their home and their trade at least three times in three different locations. Their home was as movable as the tents that they erected. Yet, they never faltered in their commitment to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, risking everything because of their faith. Like any immigrant who experiences the trauma of displacement and marginalization, they knew the importance of being welcomed and finding shelter. Their homes became house churches. The case of Priscilla and Aquila is a good example for lay Christian immigrants scattered all over the globe to emulate, for their displacement, whether voluntary or involuntary, can serve as an opportunity for church planting, hospitality, mission, and evangelism. Furthermore, the story of Priscilla and Aquila also serves as a reminder for the church to realize that Christian immigrants, voluntary and involuntary, can fall within the plan of God and become a key factor in the expansion of the church.

³⁹ See vanThanh Nguyen, "Migrants as Missionaries: The Case of Priscilla and Aquila," *Mission Studies* 30 (2013): 192-205.

⁴⁰ The references to Priscilla and Aquila appear six times in the New Testament: three times by Luke (Acts 18:1-3, 18-19, 26-27); twice by Paul (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3); and once by a Deutero-Pauline (2 Tim 4:19).

4. The New Face of Christianity

The map of Christianity is rapidly changing and so are its faces. At the beginning of the twenty-first century there were approximately 2.1 billion Christians or one-third of the world's population.⁴¹ While the majority of Christians still live in Europe and the global North, the sands are quickly shifting, moving away from its epicenter. It is estimated that by the year 2025, the majority of the 2.6 billion Christians will be found in the "global South," namely Africa, Central and Latin America, and much of Asia.⁴² In his award-winning and controversial book, *The Next Christendom*, Philip Jenkins writes, "The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes, and the day of Southern Christianity is dawning. The fact of change itself is undeniable: it has happened, and will continue to happen."⁴³ Both historians and scholars have finally come to acknowledge the accuracy of Jenkins' assertion that the emerging Christian world will be moored in the Southern Hemisphere.⁴⁴ Peter Phan, for example, recognizes that any statistics and projections, especially in terms of religious membership and beliefs, are notoriously unreliable. Yet, Phan states, "Even so, from the major trends in the development of Southern Christianity, one may confidently predict that it will enjoy a 'surging growth' in the next fifty years."⁴⁵ Furthermore, Phan correctly points out that while this demographic shift presents enormous challenges, it

⁴¹ These statistics were based on the 2005 population produced by the respected Center for the Study of Global Christianity; see <http://qideas.org/articles/four-faces-of-global-christianity/>. It is acknowledged by Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

⁴² According to Jenkins (*Next*, 2 and 94), 595 million would live in Africa; 623 million in Central and Latin America; and 498 million in Asia. Europe might still be in third place with 513 million. Jenkins (*Next*, 3) predicts that by 2050 only about one-fifth of the world's three billion Christians will be non-Hispanic whites.

⁴³ Jenkins, *Next*, 3.

⁴⁴ Jenkins, *Next*, 17; Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, "The 'New' Church History," *New Theology Review* 16, no. 4 (2003): 79-81. See also Miriam Adeney, *Kingdom without Borders: The Untold Story of Global Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009).

⁴⁵ Peter Phan, "A New Christianity, but What Kind?" in *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity*, ed. Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 204.

also provides new prospects for Christianity, especially in a host country like the United States of America.

5. A Marvelous Rainbow from the Orient

The United States of America is a country built on the backs of immigrants coming initially from European countries. Subsequently, Catholicism in the United States has benefited much from the multicultural “American” heritage. The mosaic of cultures is becoming increasingly more evident as the Catholic Church in the U.S. continues to welcome more immigrants from around the world, particularly from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Hispanics, for example, comprise more than 35 percent of all Catholics in the U.S., and more than 20 percent of all Catholic parishes have Hispanic ministries. Recent studies suggest that the Latino composition will continue to grow for decades to come.⁴⁶

At our Sunday celebrations, one cannot help but notice the cultural diversity of peoples represented in the pews. The Anglo, African, Asian, and Hispanic faces form a magnificent rainbow of colors. According to 2014 statistics,⁴⁷ there were approximately 15.2 million people in the U.S. who self-identified as Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander, and about 2.9 million people, which is a little over 19 percent, are Catholics. The percentage of Christians in general and Catholics in particular is significantly higher among Asian Americans than in their native lands. For example, Vietnamese Catholics in the U.S. are estimated to number 483,000, which is about 27 percent of the 1.7 million Vietnamese living in the U.S., while the percentage of Catholics in Viet Nam is only 8 percent.⁴⁸ The face

⁴⁶ Approximately 42.5 million US residents who self-identify as non-Hispanic white are estimated to be Catholic, representing about 21.6 percent of the 196.8 million people. Hispanics therefore represent the single largest racial and ethnic ground among Catholics in the USA. See Mark Gray, Mary Gautier, and Thomas Gaunt, “Cultural Diversity in the Catholic Church in the United States,” a CARA Report, June 2014, 7; for online document, see: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/upload/cultural-diversity-cara-report-phase-1.pdf> (accessed on August 15, 2023).

⁴⁷ Gray, Gautier, and Gaunt, “Cultural Diversity,” 7-8.

⁴⁸ Gray, Gautier, and Gaunt, 7.

of the priesthood is also changing. On any given Sunday, thousands of foreign-born priests are preaching from the pulpit. While an exact count is not available, it is estimated that there are about 8,500 foreign-born priests currently serving in the U.S. Each year there are approximately 300 new international priests who come to North America to begin a new ministry.⁴⁹ The majority of these foreign-born priests come from Asia, Africa, and Latin America.⁵⁰ In the archdiocese of Los Angeles, for example, the Mass on any given weekend is conducted in forty-five different languages.

Indeed, the face of the Catholic Church in the U.S. is changing, and it shall continue to be fashioned and enriched by newcomers, many of whom are Catholic immigrants. This transformation, however, brings ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity in our liturgical and sacramental celebrations, influences our religious devotions, and even alters our theology and spirituality.⁵¹ Different cultural practices and expressions of faith can cause tension and disturb the unity of the church. The reality of the church today might cause many Catholics to experience, more acutely perhaps than in previous times, an uneasy tension between unity and diversity. But the question is, “Is it a healthy tension that proves to be enriching or does it cause more misunderstanding and greater separation?”

6. Migrants as Precious Gifts of the Church

In his article, “Mission *among* Migrants, Mission *of* Migrants,” Stephen Bevans makes two important points. First, the church’s mission is among migrants because they represent the face of the “border Christ” who said, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me”

⁴⁹ Aniedi Okure, “International Priests in the United States: An Update,” *Seminary Journal* 1, no. 1 (2012): 35.

⁵⁰ Interestingly the U.S. Catholic Church is becoming a mission-receiving church rather than a mission-sending church. This is a clear sign of “mission-in-reverse.”

⁵¹ See William V. D’Antonio, Michele Dillon, and Mary L. Gautier, *American Catholics in Transition* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013); William Cenkner, ed., *The Multicultural Church: A New Landscape in U.S. Theologies* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996).

(Mt 25:35); second, migrants are also the subjects of the church's mission. Bevens says, "Christian migrants themselves have precious gifts to give to the church itself—to form it more fully into the body of Christ in the world."⁵² Recognizing the "gift" of the migrants, the Catholic Church continually seeks ways to appropriately address the needs and pastoral care of the migrants and refugees. One of its pontifical documents states, "It should be led by the principle that no one, be they migrants, refugees or members of the local population, should be looked upon as a 'stranger', but rather as a 'gift', in parishes and other ecclesial communities. This is an authentic expression of the 'catholicity' of the Church."⁵³ Since migrants are precious gifts of the church, again Bevens correctly states, "The task of the local church is, therefore, not only to respond to migrants' need and to accompany them on their journey, but also to call and equip them for ministry, both within the church and within the world."⁵⁴

Migrants are indeed a precious gift of our church, especially Asian Christian migrants, who normally bring their faith with them and bear witness of the Christian faith wherever they are. Their presence not only alters the demographic landscape but also enhances the spirituality of the host countries.⁵⁵ Recognizing their precious gift

⁵² Stephen Bevens, "Mission *among* Migrants, Mission *of* Migrants," in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration*, eds. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 90.

⁵³ Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of the Migrants and Itinerant People, "Starting Afresh from Christ: Towards a Renewed Pastoral Care for Migrants and Refugees." Fifth World Congress on the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees, (Rome, 2003) Part II, Pastoral Care, #9. See http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/documents/rc_pc_migrants_doc_2004001_Migrants_Vcongress_%20findoc_en.html (accessed September 27, 2023).

⁵⁴ Bevens, "Mission *among* Migrants," 101.

⁵⁵ According to a survey done in 2010, Asian Americans exhibit more religious commitment with 64 percent saying religion is very important in their lives, compared to 54 percent for white Americans. Also, 6 in 10 Asian Catholics say they attend Mass at least once per week, while only 4 in 10 white American Catholics say that. Another interesting statistic is that 61 percent of Asian Americans report that they pray daily, while 55 percent white Americans are likely to do the same thing. See the 2011 survey done by the United States Conference of

to the U.S. Church, the Committee on Migration of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in 2001 wrote a wonderful document entitled, *Asian and Pacific Presence: Harmony in Faith*. This pastoral letter affirms with loving assurance their presence and prominence in the U.S. Catholic Church. It states, “We pray that this pastoral statement will facilitate a fuller appreciation of their communities in our local churches and will encourage Asian and Pacific Catholics to take on active leadership roles in every level of church life.”⁵⁶ The document celebrates numerous gifts and contributions in which Asian and Pacific Catholics have enriched the church communities over many decades. It further states, “The Church is blessed with Asian and Pacific pastors, social workers, educators, diocesan directors, and lay leaders who are actively and selflessly contributing to building the Kingdom of God in this country. The number of Asian and Pacific Catholics who have been given responsibility in church structures, or are well known in their fields of endeavor, is growing.”⁵⁷

7. Conclusion

It might be a surprise for many to hear that Jesus was born in Asia. In his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, Pope John Paul II states:

The Church in Asia sings the praises of the “God of salvation” (*Ps* 68:20) for choosing to initiate his saving plan on Asian soil, through men and women of that continent. It was in fact in Asia that God revealed and fulfilled his saving purpose from the beginning. He guided the patriarchs (cf.

Catholic Bishops under the office of the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church of the Asian and Pacific affairs, which is available online: http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/asian-pacific-islander/demographics/upload/survey_demographics.pdf (accessed on September 27, 2023).

⁵⁶ *Asian and Pacific Presence: Harmony in Faith*, 1. For the online text; go to: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/asian-pacific-islander/resources/upload/AP-Pastoral-Statement-English.pdf> (accessed on September 27, 2023).

⁵⁷ *Asian and Pacific Presence*, 10.

Gen 12) and called Moses to lead his people to freedom (cf. *Ex 3:10*). He spoke to his chosen people through many prophets, judges, kings and valiant women of faith. In “the fullness of time” (*Gal 4:4*), he sent his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ the Savior, who took flesh as an Asian! Exulting in the goodness of the continent’s peoples, cultures, and religious vitality, and conscious at the same time of the unique gift of faith which she has received for the good of all, the Church in Asia cannot cease to proclaim: “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his love endures for ever” (*Ps 118:1*). Because Jesus was born, lived, died and rose from the dead in the Holy Land, that small portion of Western Asia became a land of promise and hope for all [human]kind.⁵⁸

Jesus of Nazareth was born and brought up in a specific culture. He was a Jew who spoke a Palestinian Aramaic and was conditioned by a Semitic way of speaking and thinking. One must realize that Jesus dressed like a Jew, prayed like a Jew, taught and argued like a Jewish Rabbi. His life, mission, and teaching were totally rooted in the Jewish culture and identity. The Evangelist John puts it very plainly, “the Word was made flesh” (1:14). This simple yet profound statement indicates that the Word found human expression in a Jewish culture. Consequently, being born as a Jew, Jesus truly reflects an Asian face.⁵⁹

Like it or not, the face of the church in the twenty-first century will continue to be even more ethnically diverse. Similar to the story of early Christianity, diversity is not a thing to overcome but rather an essential component to foster. We are living in a time when ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity is more evident and intense than ever.

⁵⁸ *Ecclesia in Asia*, paragraph 1. To access online, see http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia.html (accessed on September 27, 2023).

Ecclesia in Asia is a document issued by Pope John Paul II to serve as a blueprint for the expansion of the Roman Catholic faith in Asia. It summarizes ideas and conclusions of the Special Asian Synod held in Rome from April 18 to May 14, 1998. It was officially promulgated by John Paul II in New Delhi, India on November 6, 1999.

⁵⁹ Peter C. Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003); R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Faces of Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993).

This can be an hour of great opportunities, especially with so many Christian migrants who are constantly on the move. These Christian migrants continue to give witness and communicate the gospel message wherever they go, and in doing so, they contribute to and enrich the local church with their strong family values and martyrdom spirituality.

From a communication perspective, the essay delves into the intricate dynamics of religious communication intertwined with the phenomenon of migration and religious adherence. It illustrates how migrants function as communicators of faith, embodying their religious beliefs through actions, rituals, and expressions within their new communities. At its core, migration operates as an intercultural and interreligious communicative act, with individuals traversing geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries while carrying their religious identities with them. Through their presence and activities, migrants engage in both verbal and non-verbal communication, showcasing their faith through participation in religious rituals, service activities, and community engagement.

This essay emphasizes the religious communicative potential of migrants as they navigate the complexities of cultural pluralism and religious diversity in their host countries. Their interactions with local populations, participation in religious gatherings, and contributions to community life serve as channels for the transmission of religious values and beliefs. As agents of religious witness, embodying the message of their faith through lived experiences of displacement, resilience, and commitment, migrants become powerful vehicles for evangelism and proclamation within diverse cultural contexts.

The parallels between contemporary migration patterns and historical instances of Christian mission underscore the enduring link between migration and religious expansion. Just as early Christian believers disseminated the message of the Gospel to new lands, migrants today continue to serve as ambassadors of faith, planting seeds of spiritual renewal and transformation in their adopted communities. In essence, the witness and proclamation by migrants constitute a communicative phenomenon, wherein migrants become agents for the transmission of religious beliefs, values, and practices.

Their presence not only enriches the religious landscape of host countries but also fosters dialogue, understanding, and mutual respect across diverse cultural and religious traditions.

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