

Asian Culture and Catholicism

Voices of Vietnamese American Youth



“Nhom Tre Vao Doi”
(Youth Entering Life),
Vietnamese Youth
Group of Saint
Felicitas parish,
Oakland diocese,
California.

After the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, the first of four waves of unexpected immigration from Southeast Asia came to the United States. Figures vary, but between six to eight percent of the population in Vietnam was reported to be Catholic. However “from one-fourth to one-third of all the refugees from Vietnam to the United States over the years following 1975 were Catholic.”¹ The high percentage of Catholics who left Vietnam is attributed to the historical connections of the anticommunist stance of the Catholic church and the heritage of President Diem’s regime.

The initial response of the U.S. government was to scatter the Vietnamese refugees across the nation. However, by secondary migration they settled primarily in the states of California, Texas, and Louisiana. In 1980, over a third of the Vietnamese Americans

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were in California. By 1990, almost half had relocated or settled in that one state. No exact figures exist, but currently Vietnamese are most concentrated in the Catholic dioceses of Orange, California; San Jose, California; Galveston-Houston, Texas; New Orleans, Louisiana; Los Angeles, California; and Oakland, California. The 2000 census lists over one million Vietnamese living in the United States. Over one third of them are strongly devoted Catholics, yet the dominant culture of the United States rarely hears from them. Few non-Vietnamese know anything about the Vietnamese integration of Asian culture with Catholicism.²

This article is a brief introduction to Vietnamese Catholicism. However, the thoughts you will read here are not mine but those of Vietnamese youth and young adults. I chose to interview them, Generations 1.5 and 2.0, because they exist in a bilingual and bicultural world and possess the potential for either the continuance or demise of their cultural heritage as it swirls around in the proverbial American “melting pot.”

The youth/young adult group at Saint Felicitas Parish in San Leandro, California, meets on Sunday afternoons before the 4:30 PM Vietnamese Mass.³ Last winter, they agreed to have a special session with me, in which they discussed what they wanted to tell readers of *Rite* magazine about themselves. The following paragraphs are their collective voice, edited by me and selected representatives of the group.⁴ More commentary can be found in the footnotes. The use of the term “Americans” refers to non-Vietnamese.⁵

■ Being Vietnamese American

What do you think is most important about being Vietnamese American?

Wow, that is a difficult question! How can we explain how we were raised and what we take for granted? We are similar to other Asians in that we live in a culture of respect. Our parents teach us to respect everything. First, we respect our ancestors by placing pictures of our deceased family members on a designated wall in our homes. We come to that special place in the house to venerate our ancestors and gather there regularly for family prayer. We also respect our parents. We repay our parents for all they have done for us by taking care of them as they grow older. We also have great respect for priests, sisters, and religious. Even the parents of priests get a special title!⁶ We come from a culture where manners are very important.⁷

Now that you are in the United States, is there a culture clash?

Yes, our parents worked hard in Vietnam and now we have it easy in America, so we must study and work hard to support our families. Our parents have strict standards, different than those of our American friends. Also, females have more restrictions in the household than males do. We are sort of male-dominant. Also, many Americans have strange perceptions of us. For example, just because we are Asian does not mean that we are all good at math!



Incense bowl and incense sticks used by Vietnamese for traditional veneration. (Private residence of the Vietnamese martyr La Van Gam, beheaded in 1847, Saigon).

■ Being Vietnamese Catholic

What does it mean to be both Vietnamese and Catholic?

We feel very proud and special to be Vietnamese Catholics. We enjoy our special festivities and celebrations:

- For the feast of the 117 Martyrs of Vietnam we have a special Mass at the end of November to remember our ancestors in faith.⁸
- For the feast of Our Lady of La Vang we remember Mary appearing to suffering Vietnamese Catholics during the persecutions of the late eighteenth century.⁹

- During the Month of Mary (May) and the Month of the Rosary (November) we have special prayers and processions.
- For Tet (Chinese New Year, which is based on the Asian lunar calendar) we have a special Mass, music, food, and a family party.
- The Moon Festival, which usually takes place in October, is fun for children.

On some of these feast days our group might have special liturgical dances, we may do a gospel skit, or the parish might gather together for a party after Mass.¹⁰

Besides these feast days and festivals how do the Vietnamese express their Catholicism?

We have a high regard for family prayer. Almost all of us were raised with family prayer at least once a week, usually at night before going to bed. If for some reason we cannot go to Sunday Mass, our family spends extra time in prayer.

We dress nicer for Mass than Americans usually do. The elderly people like to wear the traditional long dress called *ao dai*. Our parish has special religious education classes for just the Vietnamese students. The classes are in English, but we like having them separate from the Americans. Also, most of us go to Vietnamese language classes that the parish offers to children on Sundays during the school year.

■ Vietnamese Liturgy

What would you want to tell Americans about Vietnamese liturgy?

We chant a lot. In fact, we chant instead of recite prayers. We are not sure where this comes from, but it is our tradition.¹¹ We also use long incense sticks; the priest and the elders place them in an incense bowl at the beginning of special feast days. Also, we bow during the sign of peace, as a sign of respect. First we bow to the priest, and then we turn to each other and shake hands.¹²

Our songs at Mass tend to be slower, softer, and more sentimental than American songs. Some of them have a special Vietnamese “flavor.”¹³ For big celebrations we will use a large drum (*trong*) and cymbal (*chieng*). We have some special Vietnamese instruments, like the *dan tranh* (a zither style instrument), that might be used.

For special feast days we have sacred dance. Some of us will practice and perform with either flowers or candles in our hands as we do slow movements. In Vietnam only the girls dance, but here both boys and girls do.

Besides Mass, what other customs do you have?

Weddings have special ceremonies in the home before we go to the church. The family gathers and we pray and sing and have lots of speeches. For funerals the family will wear



Liturgical movement is common for major feasts of Mary, Vietnamese Martyrs, Tet (New Year), ordinations, and religious professions. (Members of “Nhom Tre Vao Doi” doing traditional Vietnamese Dance in San Leandro, California).



Although the feast of Our Lady of La Vang is usually celebrated in August, processions with her statue are common at other Marian and intercultural events. ("Nhom Tre Vao Doi" participating in the annual multiethnic celebration of "Chautauqua" in the diocese of Oakland, California).

white and put on special colored headbands.¹⁴ There will be a rosary, lots of chanting, and sometimes big public outbursts of crying.¹⁵ But we don't burn paper money or paper items like the Buddhists do for the afterlife of their deceased relatives.

All of you speak English. Will you still want to go Vietnamese Mass 10 years from now?

Whether Vietnamese Catholics continue going to Mass or not depends on whom we marry. Sometimes Buddhists will convert to a spouse's Catholic religion, but usually the groom converts to the bride's religion.¹⁶

The choice of going to American Mass or Vietnamese Mass is not that important. It depends on our work or Sunday schedule. But on big feast days, we want to go to Vietnamese Mass. On certain days, like Christmas, it would not be the same if we didn't go to Vietnamese Mass. We are happy and proud to be Vietnamese; we will continue to honor our culture, because that is what makes us who we are.

■ An "Outsider's" Pastoral Commentary

The youth at Saint Felicitas parish summarized the major aspects of Vietnamese Catholicism. However, what is equally informative is identifying topics that they did not raise:



Procession with the relics of the Vietnamese Martyrs, Saint Mary–Saint Francis DeSales Parish, Oakland, California.

- There was no mention of "the war." Some of the parents of these youth had devastating losses in their family: years spent in refugee camps after escaping from their country, fathers sentenced to communist "reeducation" camps for years, family members lost at sea as boat people. But none

of this was spoken of. For Americans, the defining relationship to this ethnic group is the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese youth, however, do not cling to that event or consider it a factor in their identity and did not once mention any aspect of that conflict.

- There was no mention of the rapid cultural assimilation. Within one generation, the Vietnamese refugees and immigrants have achieved what took other immigrants 50 or 60

years. In many ways, the Vietnamese are one of the most successful immigrant groups in developing their own businesses and having their children enter professional careers.

- There was no mention of the tension within the mixed parish. The Vietnamese in Saint Felicitas parish exist at the periphery of the primarily American parish. Except for all-parish celebrations about twice a year, they do not interact with the dominant American culture at the parish. Other dioceses such as Houston, New Orleans, and Dallas have been open to national parishes for the Vietnamese.¹⁷



Traditional depiction of the 117 Martyrs of Vietnam. Their feast day is kept on November 24, with the title “Andrew Dung-Lac and companions, martyrs.”

■ Gift of the Vietnamese for the American Church

The Vietnamese American Catholic communities are vibrant, organized, and full of gifts for the American church to discover. Their chanting during liturgy, lyrical song melodies, fervent devotion to Mary and the saints, and their reverence toward ancestors can inspire Americans. Liturgists can be informed by their extensive enculturation with the use of bowing, incense sticks, sacred dance, and wedding customs.

Yet the Vietnamese American Catholic communities remain relatively unknown, in part because of historical memories within the American subconscious and the natural shyness of the members of this Asian culture. Unless Americans take the initiative to reach out and develop relationships with the Vietnamese in their parishes and dioceses, much will be lost. Confucian philosophy teaches that harmony exists when all are in right relationship. Maybe it is time for Americans to advance in this concept and learn from the Vietnamese.¹⁸ The youth are eager and waiting.¹⁹

NOTES

1. Carl L. Bangston, III, “Vietnamese-American Catholicism: Transplanted and Flourishing,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* (Winter 2000), p. 42.

2. Self-promotion (a widely accepted American value) is not as popularly embraced in Asian cultures. One possible reason for this silence is that for the past 25 years the Vietnamese communities have been more focused on achieving some measure of financial security, cultural stability, and assimilation. Informing the dominant culture about Vietnamese culture may be a task for the second generation.

3. The group consists of about 25 to 30 members, 60 percent male and 40 percent female, from 16 to 30 years of age. About two thirds are Generation 1.5 (those born in Vietnam who came to the United States as children about the age of grammar school students); the other third are Generation 2.0 (those born in the United States who have minimal Vietnamese language skills).

4. Three working groups were formed, each with a recorder and facilitator. Each group worked on one of the three themes, but discussion topics overlapped. This article is a summary of the small group discussions, recorded notes, and dialogue with the larger group.

5. This terminology follows their own vocabulary for occasionally attending the non-Vietnamese liturgy. They refer to the parish morning Masses as the “American Mass” (*Le My*) rather than English Mass (*Le Tieng Anh*). The vocabulary used by the Vietnamese indicates that Mass (*Le*) is more than just a Catholic ritual capable of being held in various languages. Rather, they see it as an embodiment of cultural expression and social interaction.

6. The standard Vietnamese greeting of a man and a woman is “*chao ong*” and “*chao ba*,” respectively. The parents of an ordained priest are revered by Catholics by greeting them as “*chao ong co*” and “*chao ba co*.”

7. The themes of respect and proper manners arose consistently in each working group, but none of the groups verbalized the Confucian background for this value system. On a different occasion I was chatting with some of the youth group members about Vietnamese culture and how it espoused Confucian understandings of proper relationships. They had never heard of Confucius, but their thinking and behavior totally espouses Confucian philosophy.

8. On June 19, 1988, Pope John Paul II canonized 117 of the official list of over 130,000 Vietnamese who had given their lives for the Catholic faith. Included in this list were a mixture of European missionaries and Vietnamese: 6 Spanish bishops, 5 Dominican priests, 2 French bishops and 8 French priests, 37 Vietnamese priests, 17 seminarians/catechists, 1 minor seminarian, and 42 Vietnamese faithful. The feast day is November 24 and the title in the General Roman Calendar is “Andrew Dung-Lac, priest and martyr, and his companions, martyrs.”

9. In 1798 Mary appeared to a group of Catholics hiding in a forest near La Vang (in central Vietnam) to escape persecution. This image of the Vietnamese Mary is something of a Vietnamese Lady of Guadalupe in that it is a symbol of the mother who hears the cries of her suffering children. The feast of Our Lady of La Vang is usually celebrated in August, in conjunction with the feast of the Assumption.

10. Brief mention was made about special Holy Week customs. A picture article that tells of the unique Good Friday processions in Vietnam can be found in *The Way of St. Francis IX* (March/April 2003). See www.sbfranciscans.org or call 916-443-2019.

11. Few Vietnamese can explain their chanting of the liturgy. It is based on the tonality of the language and, besides the Hmong and Lao communities, is unique among Asian Catholics in using the natural pitches of their language as a sonic framework for their intonation. An introductory article on this chant style can be found in *Ministry and Liturgy* (November 2001), published by Resource Publications.

12. Shaking hands is an American cultural adaptation. In Vietnam, people do not touch each other during Mass. They do not hold hands during the Lord’s Prayer and there are no handshakes. The sign of peace is a bow first to the presider, and then bows to those around you in the typical Asian gesture of respect.

13. Vietnamese hymns are highly melodic with extensive ranges. In many Vietnamese churches, because the assembly already chants all the responses, the choir sings the four hymns as anthem-style repertoire. An introductory article about Vietnamese liturgical music can be found in *Pastoral Musician* magazine (April/May 2003), National Pastoral Musicians National Office: 240-247-3000, npmisng@npm.org.

14. Funeral headbands (*de tang*) are usually made of white cloth and are wrapped around the forehead and back of the head. More traditional funerals will have separate colors to distinguish family relationship (grandchildren, cousins, and so on).

15. The Vietnamese also have the custom of special memorial Masses and gatherings of the family on the 100-day and first year anniversary of a loved one’s death.

16. The topic of marrying a non-Catholic brought up the most heated discussion among the members of the youth group. It seemed that marriage outside the faith was a bigger issue than marriage outside the race. Perhaps the members of the group felt that their culture and religion are so intertwined that it would be better to marry an American and remain Catholic (and connected with the Vietnamese Catholic community) than to marry a Buddhist and loose community connection, which is primarily an extension of Catholic religious ritual and festivities.

17. “Vietnamese Catholics in the United States: Christian Identity between the Old and New,” an article by Peter C. Phan in *U.S. Catholic Historian* (Winter 2000), is an outstanding reflection on how Vietnamese Americans dwell between two churches and two cultures.

18. *Asian and Pacific Presence: Harmony in Faith* is the title of the first statement of the U.S. bishops on the Asian and Pacific American communities. This 2002 document gives a portrait of the communities, plus a reflection on their contributions and pastoral needs and concerns. Go to www.usccb.org or call 1-800-235-8722.

19. In gratitude to the leaders of the St. Felicitas Youth Group, for their time and interest in forming the future generation, especially Reverend Tran Dinh, Sister Mary Anh Cong, Mr. De Nguyen, Mr. Khai Nguyen, and Ms. Trang Nguyen.

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