



Inculturation and the Roman Catholic Church in Japan

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Resumen

La Iglesia Católica Romana es quizás uno de los grupos étnicamente más diversos en Japón. Con casi la mitad de sus miembros nacidos en el extranjero, practicar el multiculturalismo se ha convertido en un imperativo religioso para esta iglesia. A través de cuatro secciones, este artículo ofrece un breve bosquejo de la historia japonesa, un análisis de dos conceptos teológicos de la trinidad y la inculturación, y cómo éstos se aplican a los temas contemporáneos del multiculturalismo en Japón. El rastreo de la inculturación a lo largo de la historia católica romana de Japón revela la relación cambiante que Dios mantiene con esta iglesia étnicamente diversa.

Palabras clave: Inculturación, Iglesia Católica Romana de Japón, Multiculturalismo, Inmigración.

Resumo

A Igreja Católica Romana é talvez um dos grupos mais etnicamente diversificados no Japão. Com quase metade de seus membros nascidos no estrangeiro, praticar o multiculturalismo tornou-se um imperativo religioso para esta igreja. Através de quatro seções, este artigo fornece um breve esboço da história japonesa, uma análise de dois conceitos teológicos da trindade e da inculturação, e como estes se aplicam a questões contemporâneas do multiculturalismo no Japão. O rastreamento da inculturação em toda a história católica romana do Japão revela o relacionamento mutável que Deus detém com esta igreja etnicamente diversificada.

Palavras-chave: Inculturação, Igreja Católica Romana do Japão, Multiculturalismo, Imigração.

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Abstract

The Roman Catholic Church is perhaps one of the most ethnically diverse group in Japan. With nearly half of its members being foreign-born, practicing multiculturalism has become a religious imperative for this church. Through four sections, this article provides a brief sketch of Japanese history, an analysis of two theological concepts of the trinity and inculturation, and how these apply to contemporary issues of multiculturalism in Japan. Tracing inculturation throughout Japan's Roman Catholic history reveals the changing relationship God holds with this ethnically diverse church.

Keywords: Inculturation, Roman Catholic Church of Japan, Multiculturalism, Immigration.

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Introduction

The stir caused by the Vatican Council II (1963-1965) pushed talk of faith and culture into the theological limelight. Especially provocative has been how local churches have interpreted the documents *Gaudium et Spes* and *Lumen Gentium* (Pope Paul VI, 1964) —hereinafter cited as «GS» and «LG»—as a recipe for greater inculturation and multiculturalism. In the Roman Catholic Church in Japan—hereinafter cited as «RCCJ»—clergy and those in authority have been at a loss trying to «Japanize» and «diversify» the gospel at first from Rome, and then from Japanese Roman Catholics.

In recent years, it seems that the talk of population decline coupled with an aging population has sent both Japan and the RCCJ into a frenzy. The later to a greater extent than the former has been forced to deal with foreign-born Roman Catholics as half of its nearly one million members are not Japanese. For the RCCJ, migrants coming from Brazil, Peru, and the Philippines undoubtedly mean an increase in young Roman Catholic membership. However, with the participation of these foreigners comes a heavy responsibility for the RCCJ to change its very identity in response to the call to inculturate the gospel into the local setting. Accommodating foreign Roman Catholics is more than just being cordial or being a good host. It is about recognizing other cultures as being part of the Roman Catholic Church on earth and accepting them *as genuine members* not because it is what popularity demands, but because doing so is a theological imperative rooted in Roman Catholic theology.

The following four-part article delineates the history of Christianity in Japan from its initial encounter to the present controversy with multiculturalism. Historical background information has been provided to buttress the theological



exposition concerning diversity rooted within the idea of the Trinity and how this should be inculturated into Japan. The last section offers several examples of multiculturalism—and the lack thereof— within the RCCJ in order to provide the reader with local examples from within the Archdiocese of Tokyo. Rooted in these examples is the dilemma that the RCCJ faces in light of the encounter with Others who share the same faith but a different culture.

This article argues for greater multicultural interaction within the RCCJ. To achieve this, the theological analysis presented here is limited to the Roman Catholic Church. I am aware that validating this theological stance with Roman Catholic dogma may at times exclude other forms of Christianity, this was not intentional. I have chosen to limit this theological discussion to Roman Catholic circles as a means of speaking generally to the membership of the RCCJ, and more specifically to its leadership.

My observations are based on fieldwork conducted from 2008 to 2010 at five Roman Catholic parishes with large Filipino populations from between one to three hundred members. Over this period, I conducted qualitative interviews with twenty-three Filipino mothers, nine Japanese fathers, and twenty-three Filipino-Japanese children. I have also spent the past six years involved with a large multicultural community of nearly five hundred members that is 60% Filipino 30% Japanese and 10% of other nationalities such as Korea, Vietnam, Kenya and Ghana.

The «Three Waves of Christianity» in Japan

Since its arrival in Japan in the sixteenth century, Christianity has always produced what John Clammer (2001) calls «ideological minorities». Namely, religious believers blur many of the norms within Japanese society, by following an



alternative calendar of events and practicing different sets of values than non-Christian Japanese. Acts such as attending church on Sunday are not considered «legitimate» excuses to refrain from school or work activities. The inability of Japanese society to compromise is a leading cause for Christians' poor attendance. The repercussions of faithful church attendance pushes Christians to the margins of society transforming them into «ideological minorities».

Christians have not always occupied marginal positions in society. In fact, there have been three distinct points in history where Christianity claimed a large percentage (5-10%) of the population. These three «waves» of relative popularity have been preceded by condemnation and followed by melancholy. This section follows the work of Aasulv Lande (1993) and begins with a brief summary of his proposed three «waves» of Japanese Christian history as a means of providing basic information consequential to the contemporary critique between theology and culture.

The First Wave: The Christian Beginning

The first and largest period of Christian popularity called the «Christian Century» was when Roman Catholic missionary Francis Xavier arrived in Japan in 1549.¹ At this time, Christianity was enormously popular as missionaries baptized some 130,000 Japanese in a little over two decades (Earhart, 1982: 119). Christians' allegiance to a God superior to the ruling power did not set well with the three military overlords of Japan's medieval age. The first shogun, Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), did not particularly like Christianity, but his hatred for Buddhism and his desire for foreign trade with Europe resulted in his attack on Pure Land Buddhism

¹ All historical dates come from the Haruo Sasoyama et al. (2017) textbook on Japanese history.



and continual trade with the West.

While Christianity grew, the tolerance of Japan's military powers wore thin. As for Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598), he realized that Christian's absolute loyalty to anything other than the state obstructed his attempts to unite the Japanese Islands. His solution was imposing a mild persecution that, in effect, did little to hinder the popularity of Christianity. The curtain fell on Christianity's favor when Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616) decided to make good Hideyoshi's threats by carrying out a bloody persecution that remains «unparalleled in the history of the Christian church» (Earhart, 1982: 113). By 1650 all foreign trade was outlawed, thousands of Christians were killed, and the few remaining were forced into hiding.²

The Second Wave: The Reopening of Japan

To the world's surprise, when Japan's doors opened in 1858, a small group of *Kakure Kirisutan* [hidden Christians] managed to survive almost 300 years of persecution. In addition to rising numbers of Japanese Roman Catholics, Western-learned Japanese Protestants like Ebina Danjō (1856-1937) and Nijijima Jō (1843-90) carried favor through the teaching of their modern ideas. Ebina Danjō and Nijijima Jō were two of the first Protestant missionaries to begin preaching during the Meiji period (1868-1912) in Japan (Thelle, 1987: 175). Danjō was known for practicing «Shinto Christianity» and argued that Japan must accept Christianity because it would one day rule the world (Iwai, 2008). Danjō became the leader of *Kumiai Kyōkai* [the Congregational Church]. On the other hand, Nijijima risked death by escaping Japan to the U.S. where he learned Christianity at Amerst

² For an in depth portrayal of the persecution of Christians in this period, see Otis Cary (1976), especially chapter 7.



University. After returning to Japan he started Dōshisha University, which is now one of the oldest Protestant academic institutions in Japan (Hardy, 1980). During this second wave, Japanese Christians went to great lengths to show that their beliefs did not contradict, but fulfilled their love of Japan.

During the events leading to the Second World War, Christians in support of the Japanese Empire were used by the state in its annexation and pacification of Christian countries like Indonesia and the Philippines (Hara, 1990; Terada, 2003). During this period, Christians made concessions to the war effort that many would later regret.³ This collaboration with the imperial state granted them the right to die for their country, but did not convince the state that Christianity was any less Western. In spite of all the concessions they had made, at the war's beginning Christians still remained unable to shake their association with the West, thus creating a dangerous relationship between them and the «Christian enemy».

The Third Wave: The U.S. Occupation and Japanese Post-Modernity

The last period of Christian popularity is referred to as the «Christian boom». This period was linked to the positive image of Western troops during Japanese occupation. Shortly following the construction of North-American military bases in Japan, Roman Catholic membership increased considerably from wartime numbers of around 100,000 parishioners to 323,599. By the end of 1960, church growth reached an all-time annual rate of 10.4% (Mullins, 1998: 23).

³ The United Church of Christ in Japan was one of the first denominations (followed by the RCCJ) to apologize for their support of the war effort.



The acceptance of Christianity after centuries of persecution and opposition were positive signs that encouraged thousands of Christians —whether Roman Catholic orders or Protestant missionary societies— throughout Western Europe and North America to choose Japan as a future missionary territory.

In the 1970s the «Christian boom» came to as sudden an end as it had begun. Roman Catholic parishioner growth in 1971 took a nosedive as Christian numbers fell to a dismal 0.34% of the Japanese population (Mullins, 1998: 23). This abrupt «fall from grace» can be attributed to —among other things— the United State’s involvement in the Korean and Vietnam wars. The Roman Catholic Church was unable to sever ties with the West before student protests throughout Japan soiled the image of the United States resulting in heavy losses for the Roman Catholic Church (Michael, 2003: 165). To the Japanese, the peaceful teachings of Christianity along with its outspoken stance on the right to life made its association with the United States look hypocritical. During these years, Christians tried to argue the pacifist teachings of their religion, but the damage from its Western image had inflicted a fatal blow to post-war missionary efforts (Kitagawa, 1966).

Throughout the history of Christianity in Japan, its popularity has been connected to its Western roots. In all of its three waves, many have given their lives to make Christianity more acceptable for the Japanese. These efforts have resulted in changes in Christianity’s appearance, but much of its core components remain thoroughly Western. In theory, Roman Catholicism has admitted this bias by writing much on Asian and Japanese Christianity in an attempt to create a more open, global church. This initiative, made some impact in the lives of Japanese by instituting religious customs within the Roman Catholic mass. Some examples of this were the incorporation of ceremonies to honor ancestors



(Komuro, 2003) and to celebrate Japanese customs like *shichi, go, san*.⁴ For all these efforts, these attempts have had little impact on reversing the trends of the RCCJ's dwindling membership (Nicolas, 2008: 110-111). With the time for «Japanizing» the RCCJ having reached its end, the next era of the multiculturalism has arrived.

Diversity and the Christian Tradition

History shows that the ruling elites of Japan interpreted Christianity as a threat to their rule (Cary, 1976; Earhart, 1982). Since the Meiji reformation, any intimidation of the ruling elite became a direct threat toward the Emperor and the Japanese state (Thelle, 1987). This power conflict between the Christian God and the Japanese nation has created a false dichotomy where Christianity has consistently been the underdog. This opposition is the main reason why despite spending vast amounts of resources and manpower, this religion's overall track record in Japan has «hardly been a picture of success» (Mullins, 1987: 325).

This section attempts to explore possibilities for Christianity's acceptance amidst Japanese society in two ways. First, it deconstructs the modern notion that religions are the property of the state. This is achieved by critiquing the idea that a «pure» Roman Catholic culture exists neither in Rome nor anywhere in this world. Second, I argue the need for a multicultural church rooted in the «belief» of a universal Roman Catholic culture that accepts all national

⁴ *Shichi, go, san*, literally means «seven, five, three.» It is a coming of age ritual within the Shinto religion originated in the Heian period (794-185 C.E). Since the Kamakura period (1185-1333 C.E.) the festivity is celebrated on November 15. On that date, girls of three and seven years of age and boys of five years of age dress in kimonos and visit Shinto shrines (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2017).



representations without being limited to any one. This is attempted by expanding the focus of missions from only the Japanese to all the Roman Catholic who live in Japan.

Transforming the Roman Catholic identity of the RCCJ from a culturally homogeneous Japanese body to a multicultural community will require a trajectory that begins with the Trinity—one of the core doctrine of Christianity—, passes through «inculturation», and finishes with an analysis of the «cultural essentialism» that Japanese Roman Catholics have trouble discarding. This analysis will contribute a unique vantage point that connects Christian theology with the multicultural dilemmas of post-modern RCCJ.

The Christian Trinity

The Trinity is perhaps one of the most confusing terms in Christianity. The theologian Friedrich E. D. Schleiermacher placed it at the end of his *summa theologia Christian Faith*, seemingly forgetting it altogether (McGrath, 2001: 215-216). Be that as it may, even though many do not completely comprehend it, most Christians claim the Trinity as a core belief of their religion. For example, the theologian Bradford H. Hinze (1998) claimed the Trinity was so invaluable to Christianity that it «provides the deepest reasons for the church's commitment to dialogical communion» (p. 162). Why is this so? For starters, the belief that within a singular God there exists a Creator, the Created, and the Spirit is a symbol of both unity and diversity. In other words, through the Trinity the Christian deity is *both* singular and plural. The unique relationship within the Trinity is neither homogeneous nor balkanized but vacillates between these two extremes. This is important because in God's non-homogeneity God is incomplete and must relate with the other parts of God's self. On the other hand, God is also not polytheistic, because being so would jeopardize God's unity.



Thus, the Trinitarian God is a unity in diversity and always in dialogue within God's self.

To take this one step further, the Trinity has two properties as the *immanent* and the *economic* Trinity. The *immanent Trinity* is the dialogical relationship that God has within God's self. The *economic Trinity* is the relationship God has with creation. Regardless of creation being begotten from God, creation is never independent and always remains part of God. In this fashion, God and creation maintain a mutual relationship. In the words of Jesuit Father Jon Sobrino (2004),

God never appears as a God-in-himself, but as a God for history, and therefore, as the God-of-a-people [...] God is a God-of, a God-for, a God-in, *never a God-in-himself* (p. 69; italics from original).

This Trinitarian God maintains relations with humanity and creation *because of—not in spite of*—the dialogical relationship maintained within God's self (Phan, 2008: xxi). In the words of Jürgen Moltmann, the triune God loves humanity «with the very same love that he himself is» (Moltmann, 1993: 151). In other words, the grace humans receive from God is a reflection of the intrinsic love born for God's self within the trinity.

Trinitarian Roman Catholicism

Sobrino understands God to be in dialogical communion with the whole of creation. The Vatican Council II explained that the purest relationship with God is the relationship found between the Roman Catholic Church itself and God. LG explains this relationship saying,



This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him [Jesus Christ]. Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines. Since these are gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, they are forces impelling towards Catholic unity (§ 8).

This passage recognizes how identification with Jesus Christ is not limited to membership within the Roman Catholic Church, a statement parallel to the spirit of LG that acknowledged at least in part salvation outside the Roman Catholic Church. According to the spirit of the Trinity, Roman Catholic Bishops acknowledged Christ's presence beyond the confines of the physical church, as included within all of God's creation.

The relationship God shares with the Christian communities is reflected within the Roman Catholic Church's own structure. Ergo, Christians must be in dialogue amongst themselves *and* with the world. According to this divine relationship, as equality and communication exist within the Trinity so too must equality and communication exist amongst all Christian members. The flipside of this teaching is that the Roman Catholic Church must also not be divisive and participate in denominationalism. According to this model of the Trinity, diversity is divine, but it must be practiced without jeopardizing the overall unity of the Roman Catholic Church.

Divine Diversity

What then does the Trinitarian model of God mean for multiculturalism within the Roman Catholic Church? Roman Catholic theology holds that just as God embraces the



diversity within God's triune self, so too must any church community serious about professing belief in a Trinitarian God. Interaction with the diverse membership within the Christian community—especially within the Roman Catholic Church—is not a simple strategy for survival, but the reflection of a Christian community that believes in the communicative love within the Trinitarian Godhead. Accepting the vast cultures within the Roman Catholic Church is an act Roman Catholics can interpret as reflecting a belief in a Trinitarian God. According to this belief, «mutual encounters» and «exchanges» with «others» should be promoted as opportunities to replicate the dialogical relationship God maintains within God's self (Bosch, 1993: 380).

The Roman Catholic Church has for centuries encouraged this diversity by seeking justice for the alien and foreigner. An example of this call to diversity comes from Pope John Paul II who gave an address at the World Migration Day 2000: «so that every person's dignity is respected, the immigrant is welcomed as a brother or sister, and all humanity forms a united family which knows how to appreciate with discernment the different cultures which comprise it» (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000: 17. See also Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 2005: 64-66).

Pope John Paul II builds upon a theme in theology that demands the Roman Catholic community to «show itself as a sign of amity» by practicing «mutual esteem, reverence and harmony» to every nation, race and culture (Gaillardetz, 2008: 50). The former Pope's command to respect the dignity of immigrants as brother and sister relates back to the belief in the ontological diversity of the Trinity. For the Roman Catholic Church to reflect this «Church of Christ,» it must maintain an equilibrium amongst the various cultures of its members.



Diversity as a Power Issue

Diversity within the Roman Catholic Church is never simply a matter of increasing the numbers of «the Other.» Diversity is a power issue that calls for an end to inequality. The Hebrew Bible confronts this inequality by commanding the Israelites to clothe, feed, and love the stranger (Ex 22.21; Dt 10:19; Lev 19.34). However, this does not end here. There were also strict rules to remove the debts from those of the same community every seventh year, and be generous and «open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor» (Dt 15.1-18). These were laws constructed to prevent inequality and the egregious abuse of power, because diversity is always accompanied by the abuse of one group over another. Humans do not have a tendency toward dialogue, but toward avoiding conflict through oppression or evasion. Maintaining a dialogue where all members receive their share of expression takes more energy and patience, perhaps more than most are willing make.

The theologian Eleazar S. Fernandez understands power abuse well in his critique of the *Tower of Babel*. Contrary to the Hollywood movie sharing the same name (González Iñárritu, 2006), this myth is not about how the countless languages of humanity have been given to mankind as a punishment for their impudence. Rather, Eleazar interprets this myth as Yahweh detesting «the univocal linguistic code of the Babylonian Empire, a code of centralized power and control» (Fernandez, 2002: 33). The tower of Babel is the representation of human's attempt at constructing a society with a universal language and culture. The Babylonians did not wish to exert the energy it took to dialogue with other cultures and instead chose forced assimilation and oppression to build its culturally homogeneous empire. Yahweh, having created the diversity of humanity as representing the diversity within God's self, admonished the



construction of an empire with one culture as an act of hubris and insolence. God destroyed the Tower of Babel and freed those people forced to sacrifice their expressions for the Babylonian understanding of a uniform world. Once freed, the formerly oppressed were able to return to a life where they could practice their diverse cultures without fear of persecution.

The story of Babel shows us that societies would rather create a *lingua franca* and a universal culture than struggle with the give-and-take dialogue cultural diversity requires. Like Babylonia, most societies believe there is more to be gained through cultural homogeneity than weeding through the obscurities of cultural diversity. However, the theology of the Trinity teaches us otherwise. If Christianity is to take seriously the necessity of a diversity grounded within the Trinity, then its followers have a religious obligation to actively promote a multicultural society. This begins by engaging in dialogue amongst parishioners of different backgrounds who worship in the same mass or building. This is no easy feat, but believing in success should be what it means to have faith.

The Vatican Council II and Inculturation in Japan

The call for a true multicultural Roman Catholic Church that respects all cultures *equally* was a movement that began at the Vatican II Council. This council gave importance to the local church «as a place where the universal church was concretely realized» and, as a result, «the council discovered and officially acknowledged itself as *world-church*» (Gaillardetz, 2008: 117). This section will examine how this world-church depends on the understanding of Roman Catholicism and its relationship with the local culture of Japan.



A Dialogue with Culture

Before the Vatican Council II, the Roman Catholic Church thought of itself as a Universal Church that had its headquarters in Rome and was ruled by the Pope. Belief in the infallible nature of this religious head and the silencing and excommunication of many controversial parishioners frequently brought it in direct conflict with politicians—not to mention shoguns—the world over. The absolute positions of the Church in Rome made it anything but dialogical. From the time of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) through much of the twenty-first century, the Roman Catholic Church took a counter-reformation stance and was more concerned about condemning Protestants and other religions than dialoging with them. There was an idea that the actions of the Roman Catholic Church were absolute and its position, seeing as it was detached from the world, were all impartial.

The Vatican Council II changed all this. This council took the Roman Catholic Church «kicking and screaming» away from the isolation it constructed for itself and brought it into direct confrontation with the non-Roman Catholic world. This included acknowledging the catholicity of all Christian peoples and recognizing non-Christian religions as possessing—partial—truths of the Christian gospel (LG §15). For the first time, it seemed as if the Roman Catholic Church was serious about communicating with its neighbors.

A significant achievement toward renewing the Roman Catholic Church's understanding of its culture came with GS. This pastoral constitution «initiated a whole new wavelength for Roman Catholic understanding of culture» (Gallagher, 1998: 36). Through GS the Vatican Council II reinterpreted its mission to the world as being a representation of a «Universal Church» that was alive through local communities. The dilemma was to what extent the Roman



Catholic Church considered the authority of these local churches in relation to the authority of Rome. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* —hereinafter cited as «EN»—, Pope Paul VII (1975) explains this relationship when stating,

In the mind of the Lord, the Church is universal by vocation and mission, but when she puts down her roots in a variety of cultural, social, and human terrains, she takes on different external expressions and appearances in each part of the world (§ 62).

In other words, a «Universal» Roman Catholic culture does exist anywhere within this world. All representations of the Christian gospel are mixtures between the Universal Roman Catholic culture found within «the mind of the Lord» and the worldly, local church. This controversial teaching states no one Roman Catholic culture—not even the culture of the Roman Curia—has a monopoly on the Gospel. This means that the representation of the Christian Gospel is as diverse as humanity itself. If the Roman Catholic parishioners wish to better understand this Universal Culture, they are encouraged to observe the many different cultural expressions within the variety of Roman Catholic cultures throughout the world.

Inculturation and Asia

When the Vatican Council II ended, thousands of clergy and non-clergy worked long and hard to implement conciliar reforms into the local Roman Catholic Church. One of the obvious outcomes was a wealth of worship styles from playing the guitar and beating drums, to singing and dancing. As local church members were given more freedom to adapt the Roman Catholic mass to their specific cultural contexts, they naturally began to ask questions about the possibility of



creating their own regional theology. These efforts culminated with the creation of the word «inculturation» in 1979.

Asian theologian Peter C. Phan (2008) explains inculturation as «the double process of inserting the gospel into a particular culture and inserting this culture into the gospel so that both the gospel and the culture are challenged and enriched by each other» (p. 213). This «A+B=C» equation where «A» is the Christian gospel, «B» is human culture, and «C» is the end product gave a voice to mission territories forced to accept Western thought as a *quid pro quo* of Christianity. In Japan, Jesuit missionaries in the past did compromise their culture by accepting Japanese dress and food. This, however, was done out of necessity to gain converts, and was not encouraged for the sake of theological progress (Earhart, 1982: 119).

For the first time, inculturation discourse verified the greater need for Roman Catholic application into Non-Western contexts. This was done in two ways. First, the acknowledgement of a «Universal» Roman Catholicism *not of this world* removed the Roman expression of Christianity as being the religious default for all cultural expressions of Roman Catholicism. The result of inculturation was a more humbled —and less Roman— theology. Second, by disproving the existence of a cultural hierarchy, other cultures were given equality with the Catholic culture of Rome. In effect, the theological equality given to countries with a minority of Christians empowered them and gave them the right to tell Rome who they were in their own words.

In the spirit of inculturation, the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference —hereinafter cited as «FABC»— was created in 1970 after Pope John Paul's visit to the Philippines. From its inception to the present, clergy, lay



people, and even non-Christians have attended FABC annual conferences to discuss theological issues that concern the Roman Catholic Church in Asia. The publications the FABC sponsors yearly have given many forms of expression to an Asian Roman Catholic Church once thought of as only an extension of Rome. No greater event emulates the independence of the Asian Churches than the controversy surrounding the *Limentium* (Suzuki, 2004: 83). In preparation for the 2000 FABC conference a guest from Rome submitted a list of appropriate topics for the Asian Bishops to discuss. The Japanese bishops heatedly contested this list saying that it was out of touch with the theological situation of Asia. They then joined other Asian bishops accusing Rome of trying to manipulate the conference. The FABC was unhappy that Rome was trying to control the conference and unwilling to recognize the autonomy of Asian Churches in making their own decisions. This type of debate between Rome and the Churches of Asia would have been difficult to imagine in a pre-inculturation world.

Inculturation in Japan

Japanese cultural expression within the RCCJ has always been a touchy subject. Even after the Vatican Council II began implementing far-reaching changes to the Japanese liturgy, the first generation of Japanese Roman Catholic inculturalists met extreme opposition from the Roman Catholic elite. For example, in 1969 the English version of Endō Shūsaku's *Chinmoku* [silence] was being called the quintessential representation of «Japanese Christianity,» even though on the home front many Japanese clergy were in fits of rage over his novel and forbid parishioners from reading it. Endō's case is emblematic of those who struggled for years before the RCCJ became committed at opening a dialogue with Japanese culture.



Through a slow process, Japan eventually accepted the need for inculturation through the NICE I and II councils of 1987 and 1989. The goal of these councils was to realize the need to build a church that was open to the world and society. The NICE movement was significant in the following three ways.

- 1) It was in accordance with the spirit of the Vatican II council
- 2) It was determined that Evangelization must start with the realities of the real situation in society
- 3) It encouraged the church to take its stand with the people who find themselves on the margins of society (Catholic Archdiocese of Osaka, 1998: 28-29).

In other words, the overall objective of NICE was to situate the Roman Catholic faith into the reality and lives of the Japanese people — a goal consistent with Vatican Council II initiatives. The NICE councils were signs that the RCCJ had come a long way since its difficulty accepting the controversies in *Chinmoku* (Endō, 1966, 1969). This does not mean, however, that this inculturation was complete.

It may have taken almost two decades, but by the end of the 1980's most Roman Catholic officials accepted the need for some compromise with Western Christianity if it was to survive within the Japanese climate. There were some who approached the thought of Japanizing Christianity to be done as little as possible. But for most, inculturation was an opportunity to strengthen personal identity by adapting the Christian culture from its Western counterparts into Japanese society (McJilton, 1999).



The «Problem» behind Inculturation

The so-called «problem» with inculturation is its tendency to be considered as a uni-directional act. Within the RCCJ, inculturation has predominately been about adapting Roman Catholic culture into a Japanese church. However, now that the RCCJ consists of nearly 50% foreign Roman Catholics, pushing a platform to inculturate Roman Catholicism into a monocultural Japanese Catholic Church that no longer exists can become a form of oppression. This cultural ossification can be witnessed surrounding the event of the beatification of the 188 martyrs.

For the past four decades, the RCCJ has been experimenting with inculturation trying to discover what it means to be Japanese and Roman Catholic. A pinnacle moment in this self-discovery came on November 24, 2008 with the Beatification of Peter Kibe and the 188 Martyrs. According to Monsignor Mizobe Osamu, these martyrs teach the church that, «the most important thing is what the Gospel teaches» («Martyrs» Editorial Committee, 2008: 2). In return for their self-sacrifice, the Roman Catholic Church has proclaimed them as «examples for all the people in the world». This hallmark event was the first time in Japanese history that common Christians like fathers, mothers, and children were beatified. Some might even claim it was the highest recognition Rome has ever given Japan («Martyrs» Editorial Committee, 2008: 2).

The beatification of these martyrs was emblematic of a larger «problem» concerning self-identity. While conducting fieldwork I was fortunate to observe five Roman Catholic in the Tokyo Archdiocese. These communities usually spoke Tagalog or English and were predominately Filipino. During this observation, there was almost no opportunity to learn about Peter Kibe and the 188 martyrs, and most Filipinos



and their children had never heard of them. It is my belief that this ignorance points to a larger problem of Japanese Christian identity. The reason the Japanese Roman Catholic Community did not include the international community within the beatification process was because they *did not consider the international community as full members of the RCCJ*. This is due to many Japanese parishioners believing the beatification was a historical event about, and limited to, the Japanese.

Supposing the beatification was an example «for all the people of the world»—why have ethnic minorities—over half of the Roman Catholic parishioners in Japan—been ignored? If these martyrs are «example for all the people in the world» then why have so many of the RCCJ's ethnic members remain ignorant of this important historical event? Might this disregard of over 500,000 foreign Roman Catholic parishioners by their own church tell us a little about the unequal relationship between foreigners and Japanese Roman Catholics? Better yet, what does this event tell us of how the RCCJ understand itself and the divine diversity of the Trinity?

The Difficulty Opening Church Doors

For the past three decades the RCCJ has been so concerned about inculturating the gospel into the «Japanese» Roman Catholic Church that it overlooked the fundamental ethnic changes that have occurred since the 1989 Immigration Control Act. From the years between 1997 and 2013, the number of foreigners in Japan increased by 150 percent bringing the total number to more two million, or 1.75% of the total population (Statistics Bureau, 2015). In accordance with this trend, the numbers of foreign Roman Catholics have also continued to swell, in many churches surpassing



the numbers of Japanese parishioners (Catholic Bishops Conference of Japan, 2006).⁵

The above has critiqued the static identity of a mono-ethnic, Japanese Roman Catholic Church by arguing the need for a greater multicultural focus. The RCCJ is misinterpreted as the «Japanese Church» because Japanese Roman Catholics have inculturated the gospel into a definition based upon a pre-immigration 1980 model (Nicolas, 2008: 104). These Japanese parishioners forgot that there is no such thing as a fixed or pure culture. By trying to inculturate their culture at all costs, Japanese Roman Catholics essentialize and romanticize what it means to be Japanese. The consequence is that inculturation —meant to liberate local churches by giving them an opportunity to construct their own expressions of the gospel— now oppresses foreign-born members by robbing them of a chance to participate in the RCCJ *through their own culture*.

Cultural Essentialism

Cultures become stagnant when religion becomes the property of a particular nationality. This confusion is emulated in the following conversation I had with an upstanding Japanese church member named Mr. Akita.⁶ Many years ago Mr. Akita was active in the youth mass. Although this mass was discontinued, he expressed the need for its reinstatement. The following conversation took place at a lively Easter celebration where Filipino-Japanese and Japan-born Filipino children were enjoying the food, playing with

⁵ There is a lack of statistical data on the exact numbers of foreign/Japanese parishioner ratio due to many foreign Roman Catholic not registering at their local church, as the registration system is non-existent in other parts of the world.

⁶ The name «Mr. Akita» is an alias.



their friends, and were very noticeable. Mr. Akita (2009) expressed this in the following interview transcript:

Mr. Akita: I used to play the guitar at the [Japanese] youth mass, but we stopped because the priest changed and there were not enough youth.

LeMay: What time was the Mass?

A: 9:00 A.M., once a month.

L: What about these children? [pointing to many children playing in the hall]

A: They are Filipino [not Japanese].

What is important here is Mr. Akita's assumption concerning children and their participation at the youth mass. For Mr. Akita, he is unable to imagine a RCCJ in Japan that is comprised of parishioners other than those with Japanese ethnic roots. The irony of this discourse is that despite Mr. Akita's prior experience in the youth mass, he did not consider church membership as something learned, but rather something that one *possessed*.

Perhaps, the Japanese have spent so much time and effort wrestling to remove the yolk of their Western benefactors that they remain unable to perceive Roman Catholics from developing nations as possessing genuine membership in the RCCJ. Have Japanese Roman Catholics confused their religion as a fixed cultural kernel that only Japanese have the ability to possess? Such an assumption would absolutize Roman Catholicism and deprive this «Universal Culture» from being applicable throughout the world. If we were to follow this assumption to its logical conclusion, Japanese members would be the sole proprietors of the RCCJ. Such an outcome would be antithetical to the theological call for diversity.



Perhaps the comments of Mr. Akita are innocuous and should be ignored. Yet, might feelings be different if the same words had been spoken from the mouth of the bishop? The words of Mr. Akita represent the conflict of equality inherent within the struggle for diversity. When Mr. Akita and other Japanese assume that membership within the RCCJ is limited to the Japanese, what they really mean to say is that the Japanese Roman Catholic are uneasy to relinquish their authority to those not of «pure» Japanese roots. If the Japanese wish to continue inculturating the gospel into Japan, they will have to humbly acknowledge that this requires them to genuinely encounter those diverse cultures that now fill their worship halls. Perhaps this might even require Japanese to place foreigners in positions of authority. For this to occur, diversity must not end at multiplying «interaction,» but must continue to promote equality (Brazal, 2008: 86).

The Reluctance of the RCCJ to See the Future

The level of multicultural dialogue between Japanese and foreign groups is insufficient to meet the current influx of foreign Roman Catholics into Japan. This can be observed how the RCCJ continues to be inattentive to the needs of the international community by relegating multicultural issues to an ancillary position. Intentional or otherwise, foreign-born Roman Catholics are not given the attention their numbers warrant. Foreign groups, rather than petition the diocese for change, have begun self-medicating themselves by meeting their spiritual needs outside church structures such as at home or at other Christian churches (Okada 2014: 10).

The reluctance of Japanese to accept other ethnic groups can be related to infrequency in which Japanese, English, Spanish, and Portuguese speaking communities interact with



each other within the same parish.⁷ Anyone who has spent a Sunday in a Roman Catholic Church in Japan can observe how each mass is separated by a break of two hours or more. During this inactivity, when it comes time for parishioners from the following mass to arrive, most parishioners from the previous mass have already gone home. Communities from different masses have little opportunity to converse and interact with those from other masses. As a result, this separation of time creates «parallel communities» that may share the same building and resources, but seldom interact (Gatpatan, 2006: 2-3). This institutional separation between cultures divides one from the next.

The intent of such a schedule anesthetizes the excitement and intercultural learning that occurs when one language community interacts with another. Communities that avoid interaction, rob themselves of the opportunity to learn from each other and negate the benefits of multiculturalism (Ramachandra 2008: 144-145). If the RCCJ can succeed at uniting its many cultures into a unified whole, this model of multiculturalism may be the most important gift the RCCJ can offer the global Roman Catholic Church, and the wider Japanese society. This, however, cannot become a reality if the various cultures existing within the RCCJ are not given the time for interaction.

Conclusion: Believing in Diversity

The above provided the essential theological justification for diversity within the RCCJ. This journey began with an explanation of Roman Catholicism in Japan and its three waves of missions. Following this historical sketch, the definition of the Trinity provided the theological justification

⁷ I chose these four communities because they are the largest communities in Japan.



for diversity within the RCCJ. In section three, culture defined according to the Vatican Council II provided an introduction for discussion on inculturation and its application into the Japanese climate. Finally, the fourth section raised concerns of how the RCCJ has essentialized «Japanese» culture resulting in a church that considers over half of its parishioners ethnically inferior to the Japanese. Throughout this article on the RCCJ the quintessential nugget is how the call for a greater diversity within the Roman Catholic Community comes from the shared faith of all Roman Catholic believers.

From the perspective of multiculturalism, few advancements have been made in the Tokyo Archdiocese over the past decade. In spite of foreign Roman Catholics and their children receiving special attention, there has been a lukewarm response by church officials at facilitating integration of foreigners into parishes where the Japanese parishioner used to be the majority. As for the success that has been made, much of this has come individually from socially-minded priests, religious or active laity. The lack of a systematic plan toward integrating foreign Roman Catholics into the Japanese hierarchy, structures fundamentally remain Japanese, staffed by a dwindling number of overworked Japanese parishioners. The end result has been a Roman Catholic Church where its non-Japanese members attend church more for the sacraments, and less for community.

From the perspective of the Trinity and the Roman Catholic Church's imperative to accept and promote diversity, the time for each parish to seek out and communicate with its ethnically diverse family is long overdue. Implementing beliefs in divine diversity based on Roman Catholic theology in a way that reflects the ethnically diverse membership within the RCCJ will require a restructuring and redistribution of authority. Until that day comes, the body of the RCCJ that is discussed in official



writings will be only a theological ideal in comparison with the actual body of this church's ethnically diverse, yet bifurcated membership.

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