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## A Brief Theology of Inculturation: A Pastoral Method to Understand and Ease the Generational Tension between Vietnamese Immigrants and Their U.S.-born Children

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**A Brief Theology of Inculturation:  
A Pastoral Method to Understand and Ease  
the Generational Tension between Vietnamese  
Immigrants and Their U.S.-born Children**

By Ho Thi Nguyen

**Abstract:** Encountering different languages, cultures, living conditions, and so on, many immigrants face challenges when arriving to a new country. They often live in-between their native culture and the new culture they are forced to adapt to. They experience both belonging and not belonging, and they are sometimes considered strangers or aliens in a new land. In particular, the generational tension between Vietnamese immigrants and their U.S.-born children produces difficulties within their families, faith communities, and daily life. This leads to specific pastoral concerns in the Church, forcing us to ask how pastoral ministry can cater to different generations effectively especially in light of assimilation into U.S culture. Thus, the aim of this paper will be to demonstrate that the Vietnamese American Church can use a theology of inculturation as a pastoral method to understand and ease the generational tension between Vietnamese immigrants and their U.S.-born children. This paper will illuminate a theological methodology of the pastoral circle, which includes reflexivity, as an insertion recounting concrete stories within the Vietnamese American community. In order to understand why there is a pastoral challenge at all, this paper will provide a social analysis in terms of history, society, and language differences between Confucian and American culture. From analyzing these contexts, I will offer a theological reflection by using the Scriptures and a theology of inculturation as a pastoral foundation. It is important for Christians to use inculturation to nurture the relationship between culture and faith in their own communities and families. Inculturation is a process of incarnation that enables Christians to live their faith in their cultural context. Inculturation is used in a theological context to discuss people of faith in their respective cultural contexts. In particular, it is true that the Catholic Church is the “universal” Church, but it is also diverse in terms of cultures and languages. This reality urges the faithful to create and adapt dialogue within the Vietnamese American Church around the Incarnation of the Word (Jesus), who became a human being in a particular context. Therefore, inculturation can help the Vietnamese American Church understand the process of adaptation for a community of immigrants and their U.S.-born children in terms of pastoral ministry. Finally, this paper will create an effective pastoral plan for different generations of Vietnamese Americans. By following Jesus’ example of incarnation into particular cultures and engaging in dialogue with them, the Vietnamese American Church may do ministry more fruitfully.

**Keywords:** Generational Gap, Vietnamese American Catholics, Pastoral Circle, Social Analysis, Theology of Inculturation, Incarnation of the Word, Pastoral Plan

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## **Introduction**

There is a generational gap between immigrant parents and their children born in a new country, both in terms of culture and the way of practicing their faith. These immigrants often live in both cultures, they live between and betwixt. Vietnamese immigrants come from a collective culture (Confucian culture) while their U.S.-born children are raised in an individualist culture (American culture). They often do not understand each other's languages well and have cultural conflicts amongst themselves. They may have different life values and expressions of their faith in both family and in the Church. This distinction drew me to conduct research about how to effectively provide pastoral ministry to different generations. This research has led me to believe that the Vietnamese American Church should use a theology of inculturation as a pastoral method to understand and ease the generational tension between Vietnamese immigrants and their U.S.-born children. This paper will explain the theological methodology of the pastoral circle, which includes reflexivity as an insertion, social analysis of context, a theology of inculturation to respond to pastoral challenge, and developing a pastoral plan for future ministry.

## **Theological Methodology: The Pastoral Circle**

Joe Holland and Peter Henriot offer a diagram of the pastoral circle. Using the pastoral circle method, I will illustrate insertion to locate my pastoral ministry within the Vietnamese American community. In order to understand why there is a pastoral challenge, I will provide a social analysis in terms of history, society, and culture. From this social analysis, I will demonstrate a theological reflection by using the Scriptures and a theology of inculturation as a pastoral foundation. Finally, I will create a pastoral plan for Vietnamese American communities.<sup>1</sup>

## **Reflexivity as an Insertion**

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<sup>1</sup> Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 8-10.



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For seven years now I have been living and volunteering for pastoral ministry in several Vietnamese American parishes in the United States. I have observed and listened to stories of generational tension between Vietnamese immigrants and their U.S.-born children in the Church. Many immigrant parents expressed that they wanted their children to maintain their Vietnamese culture and language, yet it is hard for their children to maintain their culture because many Vietnamese American parishes do not have this kind of pastoral ministry. There are currently no Vietnamese enculturation or language classes for children in many parts of the United States, except for a few places in California, Texas, and New Orleans. One of the ways to practice the Vietnamese language and culture is at Mass and other cultural events, such as the Lunar New Year.

Parents often desire to pass on their Confucian culture to their children as much as possible. In Vietnamese culture, children are expected to listen to their parents and do what their parents tell them. For example, if a young girl is a lector at Mass, she might want to wear a short skirt; however, her parents will prefer that she wears a Vietnamese dress, called an áo dài, because they often wear áo dài when they go to Church in Vietnam. For many parents, a short skirt is worn for a party or going to the beach; it is not appropriate for Church because it is not considered modest attire for Vietnamese women. Opposing immigrant parents, many children complain that they are forced to follow their parent's demands. They may go to Church, but they lose interest or become confused because the Mass is in Vietnamese. The generational tension calls me to become more aware of this struggle and motivates me to discover the root of it, so I will not make a premature judgment on pastors, ministers, parents, or children. This leads me to support the process of inculturation as a pastoral tool for this generational tension.

## **Context Analysis**

Asian immigrants arrived in the United States throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in waves. These waves of immigrants have changed the face of America regarding social life, culture, and religion. According to the Pew Research Center, about 42% of Asians in the United States are

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Christians: 22% are Protestants, 19% are Catholics, and 2% are from other denominations.<sup>2</sup> In particular, about 30% of Vietnamese Americans are Catholic, 6% are Protestant, 43% are Buddhist, and 20% are unaffiliated with any particular religion.<sup>3</sup> Pastoral ministry to Vietnamese American Catholics is challenging at times because of the generational and cultural gaps between immigrant parents and their U.S.-born children. As Alejandro Portes and Reben G. Rumbaut report, the second generation of immigrant parents has had to face the challenge of growing up in an environment foreign to them--“ethnic identities, and the level of parent-child generation conflict.”<sup>4</sup>

Because of the generational gap, there are different ideas of how to practice faith in the Church, as well as differing ideas surrounding the values of family and culture. Vietnamese immigrant parents value their collective culture, while their children value an individualistic culture. These differences have led to divisions within the family, and young adults have left the Vietnamese American Church as a result. Although I am not a Vietnamese Catholic American, I have been living in the U.S. for more than seven years and I have faced pastoral challenges when helping Vietnamese Americans in parishes. I have often wondered why this happened. I have researched and witnessed the challenges of Vietnamese American Catholics in the Church and within their own families.

According to Nazli Kibria, parents are upset with their children because their children do not heed their direction. Immigrant parents often feel disappointed when attempting to teach their children according to their faith or culture. Many older immigrants desire to return to Vietnam because they do not like this dissonance that has occurred.<sup>5</sup> I have also done pastoral ministry in parishes in Tennessee and in California, and have heard stories of why young adults leave the Vietnamese Catholic Church. It is often because they do not understand the Vietnamese language or mindset, and they feel bored because they do not have the same opportunity to participate at

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<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, “Asian Americans: A Mosaic of Faiths,” *Religion and Public Life*, July 19, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/07/19/asian-americans-a-mosaic-of-faiths-overview/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press; New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001), 22.

<sup>5</sup> Nazli Kibria, *Family Tighrope: The Changing Lives of Vietnamese Americans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 109.

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Mass in a language that is foreign to them. They grow tired of what their parents tell them to do according to Vietnamese faith and culture. With this in mind, I will briefly describe the different values held by different generations of Vietnamese American families that impact their practice of faith through historical, ecclesial, social, and cultural contexts and explain why pastoral practices need to be reformed by both clerical and lay ministers to help bridge the generation gap in the Church.

Historically, most Vietnamese people immigrated to the United States because of war, deprivation, and persecution. According to Peter C. Phan, there were five successive waves of immigrants that came into the U.S. from 1975-1989. In 2000, there were about 1,122,528 Vietnamese Americans in America.<sup>6</sup> There are two narratives that relate to the Vietnamese American Catholic community. The first narrative is related to the Church in Vietnam where Catholics have suffered because of persecution under foreign oppression from Anglo-Europeans, Vietnamese kings, and communists. In fact, there were thousands of faithful who died because of their faith and the Church has canonized at least 117 Vietnamese martyrs. In particular, Catholics experienced horrible things at the hands of communists in the North in 1954. Catholics moved from the North to the South as a result. According to Phan, “having had firsthand experiences of the evils of communism, Catholics had much greater incentives to immigrate into the U.S. in 1975.”<sup>7</sup> Many believed they would at least have freedom of religion in the United States. In this new country, these immigrants attempted to form Vietnamese communities in California, Texas, and Louisiana.

The Church became a place where Catholic immigrants could encourage and help each other to maintain their faith, culture, and find a way to survive in a new environment. However, they eventually had to face the challenges of generational and cultural gaps in the community because of the differences between the first and second generations. Luan-Vu N. Tran reports that, when the first generation experienced the oppressive communist regime and fled to the U.S., they tried to hold onto their manner of worship, aligned with the Vietnamese way, and taught their children to stay true to it as well. They maintained a Confucian-style hierarchy in

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<sup>6</sup> Peter C. Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 66.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

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the Church to teach their children the need to respect and obey authority.<sup>8</sup> However, the second generation of Vietnamese Americans were born in the U.S., so they did not have to suffer the same persecution for their faith. Many did not accept having religion forced onto them. Tran explains that many “youth and young adults leave the church because they do not feel understood or cared for by the adults who hold most leadership positions in the church.”<sup>9</sup> They do not feel that they belong to the Church and cannot understand the Vietnamese language well when they attend Mass. These disparities make it difficult for pastoral ministry.

In addition, social and cultural structures within Vietnamese American Catholic families impact the Vietnamese generation gap. In general, almost every Asian culture values the role of society, community, and family in their lives. According to Jaya Sastry and Catherine E. Ross, Asian cultures “value loyalty to extended family and encourage individuals to subordinate personal wishes to overall goals of family and traditional community.”<sup>10</sup> This culture fits the profile of the first generation of Vietnamese immigrants to the United States. Moreover, according to Peter Phan in his textbook, *Mission and Catechesis*, there are a few Asian countries that follow Confucian beliefs, which include China and Vietnam.

Confucianism “emphasizes the necessity of cultivation of one’s character prior to regulating the family and governing state.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, Confucian culture focuses on the order of a society and family that include governors, grandparents, parents and children, wives and husbands, etc. In this culture, children show a great deal of “filial piety.” Children are supposed to obey their parents and respect their parents’ decisions unconditionally. For example, parents might choose what kind of education their child will receive, what kind of job their child will eventually have, and even a spouse for their child according to their Catholic faith. However, living in the United States, the U.S.-born generation is exposed to a more individualistic culture and tend to assimilate more easily into American culture. Thus, children have the ability to make their own choices. For example, children want to choose their own careers paths. They may be

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<sup>8</sup> Luan-Vu N Tran, “Challenges and Opportunities for the Vietnamese-American Church in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Asian and Asian American Theology* 11 (2011/2013): 141-142.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>10</sup> Jaya Sastry and Catherine E. Ross, “Asian Ethnicity and the Sense of Personal Control,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 61(1998): 102, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2787064>.

<sup>11</sup> Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 89.

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open to interracial marriages, while their parents may prefer their children marry other Vietnamese American people.

This tension between the two cultures also influences the ecclesial community in which pastors, leaders, and parents have the authority and children are expected to obey without question. But children of the second generation are often influenced by the individualistic ideals of the U.S., and cannot accept this notion. In particular, an ecclesiological model is also informed by a social institution that is led by clericalism and faithful respect of the clergy. Therefore, the laity is passive in the Church. According to Phan, even though there are many younger people who have degrees in higher education, “they have as yet no effective voice in the day-to-day operation of parish life.”<sup>12</sup> As a result, many young people feel excluded and leave the Church or prefer going to Mass in English. For example, I know of a number of Vietnamese American families where, on Sundays, parents beg their children to go to a Vietnamese Mass with them. But their children prefer to go mass in English instead. Sometimes, they may not want to attend Sunday mass at all. Although research does not show the exact number of Vietnamese immigrant children regarding religious disaffiliation, in general, “more than half of all Asian high school kids in America have either no religious belief or practice a non-Christian religion.”<sup>13</sup> This is a pastoral concern of many Asian American immigrants.

Moreover, the difference of values in the social and cultural structure within the generation gap creates multiple problems in the family and in the Church. Immigrant parents feel they are not respected by their children who were born in the U.S. Another growing trend is a lack of care as their parents age, often uninterested in caring for them as they grow older. Children let their parents stay in nursing homes instead because they are busy with their jobs or they think it is good for their parents to stay in nursing homes because of the medical care. This thinking is normal in the U.S., but for Vietnamese immigrants, putting them in a nursing home is

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<sup>12</sup> Peter C. Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), 232.

<sup>13</sup> Linh Hoang, “Asian American Catholic Experience and Catholic Studies,” in *The Catholic Studies Reader*, ed. James T. Fisher and Margaret McGuinness (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 298, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13wzvt6>.

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like putting them in a prison. Parents do not like it because “the Vietnamese consider it a sin of filial impiety to do so.”<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to Vietnamese immigrants, the second generation of Vietnamese Americans have to face challenges at home, at school, in the Church, and in society. At home, they may not understand their parents and have fewer conversations with them because they may not know the Vietnamese language well. At school, they may be stressed because they are supposed to succeed to please their parents, but many of them are not successful. They go to Mass, but they do not participate fully because they do not understand the language or culture there either. In addition, pastoral ministry and the Church often do not provide bilingual opportunities such as masses for young children. Moreover, many Vietnamese American parishes do not provide Vietnamese classes for children either. Immigrants of both laity and clergy prefer using Vietnamese instead of English in liturgical celebrations. In the U.S. society, many children have trouble identifying themselves regarding their racial and ethnic backgrounds. They are discriminated against and mocked for their race in the United States, which is abundant with racially motivated hate crimes. As Phan states, people call Vietnamese Americans “bananas” because they are “yellow on the outside but white on the inside.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, according to Hien Duc Do, some young Vietnamese Americans feel hopeless and some feel so outcast that they even join criminal gangs or become robbers at stores in their own communities in Los Angeles County, Orange County, or Riverside County.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, it is true that the American Catholic Church has grown in terms of numbers, faith, and cultures because of Hispanic and Asian immigrants. According to Tran, the U.S. population in 2000 was 282 million, and 69.4% of the population was white. Only 3.8% was Asian. However, by 2050, there will be approximately 420 million people, in which white people will make up 50.1% and Asians will make up 8.0%, effectively doubling the Asian population in 50 years.<sup>17</sup> With the increasing immigrant population, the Vietnamese American Catholic Church should focus on a pastoral plan for families and young adults in order to build a strong foundation, not only for themselves, but also for the Catholic Church in the United States.

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<sup>14</sup> Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 75.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Hien Duc Do, *The Vietnamese Americans* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 60.

<sup>17</sup> Tran, “Challenges and Opportunities for the Vietnamese-American Church in the 21st Century,” 144.

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## **Theological Response of Inculturation**

Inculturation is a theological concept. According to Peter Schineller, inculturation should be thought of as “the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context...”<sup>18</sup> It is important for Catholics to use inculturation to nurture the relationship between culture and faith. Inculturation is used in a theological context to discuss people of faith in their cultural context. It is true that the Catholic Church is the universal Church, but it is also diverse in terms of cultures and languages. With regard to culture, the Church in the United States is not the same as the Church in Mexico. Likewise, a Catholic Church in San Pedro in Los Angeles County will be very different from a Catholic Church in Orange County. The Church of Vietnamese Americans is not the same as the Church in Vietnam. Therefore, there is a need for inculturation in the Church. Vietnamese American ministers of the Church need to contextualize “Gospel values” into their particular cultures in order to do pastoral ministry effectively. The Vietnamese American Church needs to change and adapt her ways of doing pastoral ministry in a particular context that relates to both cultures.

Inculturation is based on the Incarnation of Jesus. In a commentary on St. John’s Gospel, Frederick Dale Bruner describes the Incarnation of the Word in the Prologue (John 1:1-18). The Word is *Logos* and the Word is God. Then: “The Word becomes flesh among us” (John 1: 1, 14). God became a human being and stayed with us in a particular culture.<sup>19</sup> We define inculturation as the Incarnation of the Gospel into particular cultures, and Jesus was the one who exercised primacy this process. Jesus’ Incarnation is the primary example of inculturation or, in other words, the Incarnation of the Word is a cultural incarnation. Through the Incarnation of Jesus, God revealed God’s self within a particular Jewish culture. In this context, “revelation takes cultural forms for its communication and expression.”<sup>20</sup> The Incarnation of Jesus as inculturation

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2012), 3-41.

<sup>20</sup> Mariasusai Dhavamony, “The Christian Theology of Inculturation,” in *Inculturation, Gospel and Culture = Inculturation, Évangile et Culture*, ed. Mariasusai Dhavamony (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1995), 26

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is a perfect example to apply to Vietnamese immigrants who seek to adapt or “incarnate” themselves into American culture.

Inculturation of faith must include a process of dialogue between cultures. Gerard Arbuckle gives lessons about using inculturation to evangelize the Gospel. This process requires us to be open to learning beyond cultural borders, crossing boundaries and dialoguing with different cultures in order to build up the Church and the People of God: “rather than on its hierarchical or institutional aspects.”<sup>21</sup> Arbuckle also uses the example of Jesus encountering the Samaritan woman to demonstrate the inculturation of dialogue. These ideas of inculturation can help the Vietnamese American Church to begin a dialogue between two cultures and understand the process of adaptation for a community of immigrants and their U.S.-born children in terms of pastoral ministry. A dialogue is necessary because, on one hand, immigrants complain that their children do not honor their traditions. On the other, children complain that their parents are not open to adapting to new cultures. In particular, the Vietnamese American Church has been established according to hierarchical Confucian ideas that are based more on authority than the communal nature of the Church.

The Church needs to understand the connection between Christology and inculturation. According to Aylward Shorter, inculturation uses “Christology from above” to understand “the Son of God taking human flesh and adopting a human culture as a necessary concomitant of his human nature.”<sup>22</sup> God was revealed to us in a particular culture through Jesus Christ. Jesus was the one who encountered different people (For example, the Samaritan woman in John 2 and the tax collector in Luke 19: 1-10) when he preached the reign of God. He used the language and symbols of his listeners to dialogue with both Jews and non-Jews. Shorter also refers to scripture to confirm that Jesus dialogued with his own cultures, challenging people to change some regulations related to the Sabbath Day (Matthew 12: 1-14) and opposing the punishment of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). His ministry was inclusive, and his actions demonstrated what he preached.<sup>23</sup> In fact, for inculturation to occur, in terms of creative and dynamic relationships, people sometimes need to change their ways of practicing their cultures if

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<sup>21</sup>Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians: A Postmodern Critique* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), 171.

<sup>22</sup>Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 80.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 119-122.

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they do not reflect the times. The process of adapting or challenging a culture often results in a conflict between old and new cultures, and requires a better way of doing ministry. This process of challenging a culture helps to carry on the cultures of Vietnamese immigrants and Vietnamese Americans. Each needs to understand that sometimes they cannot avoid these conflicts when adapting to a new culture.

Inculturation of faith can be seen in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, according to Mariasusai Dhavamony: "...the Paschal Mystery, in which the Incarnate Word is submitted to death. The inculturation of the Gospel follows the supreme model of the Incarnation of the Word of God."<sup>24</sup> The Church participates in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus through his passion, death and resurrection. With this mystery, "culture itself ought to undergo purification from its defects and from its sinful structures in the light and impact of the Gospel,"<sup>25</sup> and seeks conversion. Therefore, in the situation of the Vietnamese American Church, we need to make critical judgments of the values old and new cultures maintain. We should address, ask questions, reinterpret, and develop those values. The responsibility of the community or leaders is to serve with and for the communities they are part of, and determine what values best speak to the messages of the Gospels. What are the weaknesses and strengths of each culture? Is a culture that prioritizes individualism truly in line with the Gospels? What about when people focus only on their own interests and do not care about those in their broader community and society?

Vietnamese American culture has both strengths and weaknesses. For example, the hierarchical structure and authority of Vietnamese culture, according to Confucian teaching, is at times abused. For example, people who have high status or positions in the Church (bishops, pastors, ministers), or in society: family (fathers), and politics (governors) use their power and authority over others while the subordinates are generally voiceless, obey, and do what their superiors command. These ideas found within Confucian culture are discerned within the context of American culture during the immigration process. It is not easy for Vietnamese American children to accept and follow these values when surrounded by a contrasting world view. Therefore, in this sense, the culture needs to be reexamined. It is like the time of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:1-35, when the Church debated whether to continue practicing circumcision

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<sup>24</sup> Dhavamony, "The Christian Theology of Inculturation," 29.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

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for Gentiles. Eventually, the apostles decided not to force Gentiles to be circumcised in order to become Christians because Peter said converted Christians did not need to be circumcised in order to interact with Jews. According to William S. Kurz, “Acts 15 illustrates the importance of divine guidance as well as human reasoning for resolving even deepest differences.”<sup>26</sup> The Jewish cultural practice of circumcision did not fit the Gentiles, so it needed to be examined and changed.

Alongside the process of analyzing the culture, the Church also values or elevates culture. If the cultural practices serve a good purpose, we should keep and practice them. Arbuckle’s book describes the richness of cultures through symbols, myths, powers, and religious rituals. For example, the Vietnamese culture’s value of respect for elders and authority is seen as good. Vietnamese people carried this cultural practice from “their homeland and transplanted it on American soil.”<sup>27</sup> Parents teach their children how to treat the elders in their families, in society and in the Church. Younger people who come across elders in a shop or on the street are supposed to say “Chào ông” or “Chào bà,” (Hello Sir or Miss or Mrs.) with respect and bow their head a little. Moreover, they respect their elders and ancestors and are bonded together as inclusive families. Vietnamese people practice veneration in their families. They have one day, the Lunar New Year, to celebrate Mass for their ancestors, to remember the death anniversaries of loved ones, and, in November, they go to cemeteries and pray for all souls. Sometimes priests come to the cemetery to say Mass in November. This symbol of revering our ancestors is well-known among Vietnamese American people.

Moreover, the Church needs to understand the value of a culture and the complexity of inculturation. According to Shorter, inculturation is “the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and cultures.”<sup>28</sup> The Church needs to understand inculturation in terms of the relationship between social phenomena and Church theology, the development of it through the history of the Church, and how the Church used it when she did her ministry. In the situation of Asians in the United States—in particular, the Vietnamese American Church—there is more complexity and challenge among cultures. According to Peter C. Phan, the ethnic

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<sup>26</sup> William S. Kurz, *Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 244.

<sup>27</sup> Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston, *Growing up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998), 94.

<sup>28</sup> Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 11.

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situation is multicultural and complex. This is the setting to have theological concerns about the diverse social contexts and cultures of Asian-Americans. Asian immigrants enrich the United States through their cultures, cuisine, ethnic composition, and religions. This includes the way they worship God, the way they live in their families, and the way they dress. Since they live “betwixt-and-between” two cultures (Asian and American cultures), they are able to see more clearly and appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of both cultures, to contribute the benefits of their cultures, and receive a new culture in return.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, Asian people, including Vietnamese Americans, value social harmony, family and kinship networks. They live as inclusive families and support each other to have better lives and adapt to American culture. In contrast, American culture prioritizes the individual and the rights of the individual.

### **Pastoral Ministry Project/Plan**

The Vietnamese American Church should follow Jesus’ example of incarnation into particular cultures and dialogue with cultures, the way Jesus proclaimed the reign of God to different people as he experienced the Paschal Mystery. In managing processes of inculturation, the Vietnamese American Church can mention the values of both cultures, develop them, and elevate cultural practices. Therefore, the Vietnamese American Church needs to know that she does not belong only to the clergy who have power; she belongs to everyone. Thus, she needs to shift from an ecclesial model of social institution to an inclusive Church. In this regard, lay people of different ages are called to do more pastoral ministry these days because the numbers of clergy are decreasing.

I argue the Church should reform her hierarchical structure according to Confucian culture and the way she does ministry with people of newer generations by educating them and encouraging younger generations to participate more, letting their voices be heard in the Church, especially the Vietnamese American Church. Besides Jesus’s example, the Vietnamese American Church should imitate St. Paul, who used inculturation well in his mission. Stanley B. Marrow’s commentary on First Corinthians describes St. Paul as a good example of evangelizing

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<sup>29</sup> Peter C. Phan, “‘Presence and Prominence in the Lord’s House’: Asians and Pacific People in the American Catholic Church,” in *Many Faces, One Church: Cultural Diversity and the American Catholic Experience*, ed. Peter C. Phan and Diana Hayes. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 105-106.

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for the Church today. Paul adapted to cultures wherever he went and preached the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul is truly the Apostle of the nations, especially of the Gentiles. He even identifies himself with different cultures and social categories in order to preach the gospel and persuade people to follow Christ.<sup>30</sup> This is demonstrated in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, as Paul states, even though he was a freeman,

I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews... To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessings.<sup>31</sup>

Paul was ready to adapt his ministry to whomever he served in their particular context of life. This passage of St. Paul gave me a way of adapting my ministry to serve people where they are. This is the way of inculturation, to bring people from where they are to Christ. St. Paul's example of doing ministry helps me to look at the way Vietnamese American ministers do their pastoral ministry in their parishes to people of different ages. Therefore, pastoral ministers can help immigrants be open to learn and adapt to American culture. At the same time, they help children to understand the culture of their parents. Moreover, inculturation is an ongoing process: ministers need to discern, adapt themselves and use the language of the people to evangelize the Gospel effectively.

Pastoral ministry within the Vietnamese American Church should listen to what the mother Church suggests her faithful should do in the process of inculturation. The Church teaches her children about inculturation, to value cultures, through *Gaudium et Spes*. In order to evangelize the Gospel, we need to "foster vital contact and exchange between the Church and

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<sup>30</sup> Stanley B. Marrow, *Paul for Today's Church: A Commentary on First Corinthians* (New York: Paulist Press, 2013), 112-115.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

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different cultures.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the Church provides guidelines for pastoral ministry in terms of adaptation according to the times as an integrated and integrating whole. In this context, the Vietnamese American Church needs to value both cultures and the use of languages in order to do pastoral ministry effectively. Pastoral ministry should focus on teaching Vietnamese so that they can maintain their language and culture. For example, one Buddhist center in “Little Saigon” in California “conducts courses for Vietnamese children on Sunday morning.”<sup>33</sup> The purpose of these courses is to teach the Vietnamese language and culture to the children. In New Orleans, Mary Queen of Vietnam Church ran after-school language classes for young people. Moreover, New Orleans Parishes’ ESL-Bilingual education sessions were offered in the Church. Immigrants learned English and about American culture.

Learning English well was a chance for immigrants to be successful in the U.S.<sup>34</sup> It is very helpful and fruitful for children and their parents to know both Vietnamese and English. This will reduce generational tension and help them understand each other better in daily life and have a happier life. It was in 2012 when a parish in Memphis began program to teach Vietnamese to children. I taught them not only the Vietnamese language, but I also taught Vietnamese culture. Of course, they could not understand Vietnamese very well, so I needed to use English to explain to them. After only three months of learning, many children were able to read basic Vietnamese. They could sing simple songs in Vietnamese. They attended bilingual Masses every day during the summertime. At the end of the summer classes, I let them read in the Church in Vietnamese, put them in charge of helping with liturgies (singing and altar serving), and providing the entertainment of both singing and dancing to Vietnamese music. The pastor and I invited parishioners to stay and enjoy the entertainment. Many people, especially the parents of the children, were happy and thanked me because their children had learned the Vietnamese language and culture. Even today, that parish has kept those summer classes for children as a pastoral ministry.

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<sup>32</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*/Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, December 7, 1965, 44.  
[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat\\_ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat_ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

<sup>33</sup> Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston, *Growing up American*, 98.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.





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Pastoral ministry should be bilingual in churches to encourage parents to teach children Vietnamese culture at home. In my observation, many Vietnamese parishes do not have bilingual Masses. This may lose children's and teenagers' interest quickly because of the language barrier. As Portes and Rumbaut state, immigrant communities as well as the Church should have "selective acculturation and bilingualism" in which they could keep both cultures and languages.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, it is time for the Vietnamese American Catholic Church as a family to look at how they conduct pastoral ministry to prevent new generations from leaving the Church and getting into trouble. She needs to do ministry for families and find a way to balance the two cultures and reinvigorate the Church in the United States. Moreover, pastoral ministry should also encourage children and young adults to get involved in parish activities, such as the Eucharistic Youth Movement. In this movement, they can teach and speak bilingually so that young adults are more interested in activities and develop a close relationship with God.

## **Conclusion**

The Church is the Body of Christ and Jesus is the head of the Church; all parts of the body need to collaborate and participate in building up the Church. To be sure, the Vietnamese American Church is part of the U.S. Church. If she is strengthened and performs her ministry well, she contributes to the Church as a whole. She can also learn from the diversity in the American Church in terms of race, culture, languages. In particular, the Vietnamese American Church needs to build her structure on the foundation of Jesus and his Church. Therefore, the Vietnamese American Church should understand why generational tension is happening through social analysis, and use a theology of inculturation as a pastoral method to understand and do pastoral ministry effectively for Vietnamese Americans. With this foundation, she can become more aware of why there is a pastoral challenge among the Vietnamese American community, and hopefully she can improve her ministry in a way that leads to a full participation in the American Catholic Church. With focused and unwavering efforts, it is possible for her to enrich the American Church in terms of faith practice and cultural adaptation. Her goal of applied

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<sup>35</sup> Portes, and Rumbaut, *Legacies*, 274.



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inculturation could also be applied to other groups of immigrants and their U.S.-born Children in the United States as well.

Besides that, by following the example of Jesus through the process of inculturation as he incarnated into particular culture and dialogued with non-Jews, the Vietnamese American Church will cross a boundary and bridge the gap in terms of cultures and languages; it can also begin a dialogue with other groups in the United States. They might adapt new cultures and live in harmony with others and contribute their works for the good of all people in society of the United States. In order to apply ideas of inculturation into their lives, they need to remember to keep what is good of an inclusive culture (Confucian) and respect the rights of each individual (American culture) in society. They need to maintain a balance of both cultures. Thus, this might be a responsibility of both Vietnamese immigrants and their U.S.-born children toward the process of cultural incarnation in their lives.

Finally, with an understanding of the values of both American and Vietnamese cultures via theology of inculturation, it is possible for Vietnamese immigrants and their U.S.-born children to reduce generational tensions within their families and in society as a whole. In fact, life in both Vietnamese and American cultures “can bring about personal and societal transformation and enrichment.”<sup>36</sup> There is mutuality in this process when immigrants learn and adapt to American culture while their children understand and value Vietnamese culture in terms of respect for their ancestors and living harmoniously in families. In their family, they still are citizens of the American society and members of the American Catholic Church. Therefore, they have the task to share in the Church’s mission and build a just society in the United States. They need to learn to have responsibility toward the common good and live with others in respect and solidarity.

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<sup>36</sup> Peter C. Phan, “Vietnamese Catholics in the United States: Christian Identity between the Old and the New,” *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 18, no. 1 (2020): 28, <http://www.jstor.org.ezp1.villanova.edu/stable/25154702>.



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