Colored Faith:
Vietnamese American Catholics Struggle for Equality within Their Multicultural Church

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Vietnamese Americans represent the largest Asian American Catholic group in Orange County, home to a Little Saigon that is synonymous with being the “Capital of Vietnamese America.” Their presence has become, according to Karin Aguilar-San Juan, a “sociological puzzle” because Orange County’s “long reputation as an exclusive, white, affluent, and aggressively conservative region would make it seem inhospitable still to an agglomeration of newcomers, especially non-whites.” Due to their population influx since 1975, Vietnamese Catholics have revitalized the declining church membership in Orange County and, along with other Vietnamese, helped to rebuild its once sluggish economy and attract more immigrants to the region, including Koreans, Filipinos, and Latinos.

Today, the Diocese of Orange has become a laboratory for multicultural management. In this essay, I expose two competing forms of multiculturalism espoused by Vietnamese American Catholics and the local ecclesiastical hierarchy. I begin my analysis by exploring the significance of community centralization for Vietnamese American Catholics to mobilize their political and cultural representation, specifically having their own parish. I examine how this demand has been systematically restricted and denied by the Diocese of Orange. This form of multiculturalism follows the line of reasoning that Auxiliary Bishop Dominic Mai Luong described in a phone interview: “We are all Catholics under one God. If we remain ethnically separated, we will go astray from God. Look at the Irish, Germans, and Italians. They built

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their own national parishes and later left them and their faith.” Nevertheless, this does not explain how Polish and Korean communities have been permitted to construct their own common places of worship. I argue that, within the Diocese of Orange’s multicultural framework, the Vietnamese have been racialized as a threat. This is because, paradoxically, of their great contributions to the church in terms of numerical representation, financial contributions, church membership, and clerical participation in comparison to other ethnic groups. By restricting their attempts at centralization, the diocese has aimed to limit their influences while managing a politically correct form of multiculturalism that is exclusively about the showcasing cultural diversity without challenging the underlying structure of racial inequality.

Demographic and Historical Backgrounds
In 1975, as a result of the fall of Saigon, the first large wave of 125,000 Vietnamese refugees arrived in the U.S. Among them, between about 30% to 40% were Catholics, while this number was approximately 10% in Vietnam. This over-representation of Catholics among Vietnamese refugees was likely due to the fact that many feared religious persecution under Communism in the homeland. Moreover, many Vietnamese refugees converted to Catholicism during the processes of flight and resettlement, especially those who were resettled by Catholic relief agencies.

The influx of Vietnamese to the United States continued to grow rapidly within the next three decades. In 1980, five years later, the Vietnamese population in the U.S. had doubled to approximately 245,000 as a result of the second group known as “boat refugees,” who were mostly businessmen, Chinese, and middle-class families. Between July 1979 and September 30, 1994, an Orderly Departure Program (ODP) permitted another approximately 600,000 Vietnamese refugees to migrate, many of whom were Vietnamese former detainees, immigrants, parolees, and Amerasian children and their family members. Between 1996-2003, the Resettlement Opportunity for Vietnamese Returnees (ROVR) resettled another 20,000 Vietnamese refugees in the U.S. They were mostly Vietnamese who were held at asylum camps or had returned to Vietnam. As a result of these U.S. refugee policies and programs, approximately 750,000 of the 1.2 million Vietnamese in the U.S. had arrived as refugees by 2000. This population count does not include approximately one million other Vietnamese who did not survive their flights.
Today, the Vietnamese American population has been relatively stabilized and has become the largest Vietnamese community outside of Vietnam. Its growth is mostly due to U.S.-born children and Vietnamese who arrived through family unification programs. As of 2010, Vietnamese in the U.S. constitute 1.6 million, making them the fourth largest Asian American group, according to the most recent U.S. Census. They have highest concentrations in California and Texas, which constitute 38% and 14%, respectively.

Orange County, California has the largest Vietnamese Catholic community outside of Vietnam. In 1982, there were approximately 7,000 Vietnamese Catholics in Orange County; by 2010, the size of the community had multiplied ten times to nearly 70,000, with Catholics constituting 40% of the total number of Vietnamese in the region, according to the secretary of the Bishop of Orange. The Vietnamese population is the largest Asian Catholic group in Orange County, representing nearly 6% of the region’s 1.2 million Catholics. Although the Vietnamese Catholic population is smaller than the percentages of Anglo (55%) and Hispanic (35%) Catholics in Orange County, Vietnamese Catholics make up nearly 30% of the religious professionals (priests, brothers, and nuns) in the Orange Diocese.

The proportion of Catholics among the Vietnamese in Orange County is relatively much greater than their respective representation among all Vietnamese Americans. In 2012, the Pew Forum on Research and Public Life has estimated that, among the 1.6 million Vietnamese Americans, 30% are Catholics. This would make Catholics the second largest religious group within this population, behind Buddhists (43%) and followed by those who are unaffiliated (20%) and Protestants (6%).

Community Centralization

Centralization as a religious community has been important to Vietnamese Catholics’ religious identity and survival during periods of trials and tribulations. By the nineteenth century, Vietnamese Catholics had already established a system chrétienté or họ dương (translated as “Christian community”). These were tight-knit religious communities in remote areas in which members protected each other from religious persecutions and non-Catholics. They often named their communities after a saint in order to call on him or her for protection. They honored the saint by giving his or her name to most—if not all—boys and girls,
depending on the saint’s gender, upon their baptism. The Catholic village cultural and religious life was perpetuated through generations, with children and grandchildren usually ending up marrying within the religion.

When they had to flee communism from northern to southern Vietnam in 1954, Vietnamese Catholics were able to rely on their religious communities to facilitate their exodus. They usually followed the lead of a religious leader, especially a priest. In refugee camps, they re-concentrated in enclaves to help each other. As they resettled to life in the new area, many of them rebuilt their community structures as they were in the north.

Historical anecdotes have revealed that this pattern of community centralization also occurred when a large number of Vietnamese Catholics fled to the U.S. after 1975. Priests and religious professionals were central in reviving religious activities on boats, including masses and sacraments. Among the first wave of refugees, there were approximately 200 priests and 250 sisters who accompanied their followers on boats. As in their homeland, they established pastoral committees with assigned roles and responsibilities. The re-institutionalization also expanded to the collectivization of instrumental living activities such as cooking, cleaning, and schooling in refugee camps.

When Vietnamese Catholics transitioned to their new home in Orange County, they immediately organized themselves as a community. In 1976, there was already a formative community with a structure of leadership at St. Barbara parish in Santa Ana. A year later, Vietnamese Catholics began publishing the Hiệp Thông Weekly Bulletin that printed news about religious and community life. By 1978, they had already formed four distinctive communities informally named after the city of residence or the name of their parish: Anaheim, Costa Mesa, Huntington Beach, and St. Barbara. As in Vietnam, these communities also adopted a patroness, such as the Community of Assumption of Mary in Anaheim (Công Đoàn Đức Mê Mông Triệu) and the Community of St. Joseph at St. Barbara Parish (Công Đoàn Thánh Giuse). Each community had a pastoral committee, a laity organization consisting of between three to five members who were representatives and leaders of their respective group. These four original Vietnamese Catholic communities probably had several hundred—if not thousands of—members. Their population influx was one of the main reasons why the Diocese of Orange was established and became separated from the Diocese of Los Angeles.
Although employment opportunities and favorable climate may also be motivating factors, as scholars Min Zhou and Carl Bankston have argued, the institutional strength of the Vietnamese Catholic community consequentially attracted more ethnic co-religionists to Orange County. The area gradually became home to the largest number of Vietnamese Catholics outside of Vietnam.

The four original Vietnamese Catholic communities became the foundation for further centralization and expansion in Orange County. In June 1978, their leaders voted to form an umbrella leadership council, the Pastoral Committee of Vietnamese Catholics in Orange County (Ban Thường Vũ). In July 1978, this group, along with representative leaders of different ministries and religious associations, formed the Executive Council of the Vietnamese Catholic Community (Ban Chấp Hành Cộng Đồng Công Giáo Việt Nam). The Executive Council worked under the leadership of the Committee of Vietnamese Priests. The priest who served as the president of this committee represented all Vietnamese Catholics within the diocese. The formation of this structure also created the Vietnamese Catholic Center as the site of administrative meetings, which was housed at the primary residence of priest members in the Committee of Vietnamese Priests.

Racialized Multiculturalism

However, Orange County Vietnamese American Catholics have been restricted from centralizing their community because of the Diocese of Orange’s policy of multiculturalism. In 1976, in response to the large arrival of Vietnamese Catholic refugees, the U.S. Catholic Church publicly announced that it embraced assimilation in the form of respecting the “mosaic” cultural make-up of different communities. However, this was interpreted variably at the local diocese level.

While other dioceses had permitted smaller Vietnamese Catholic communities to establish their own national parishes during the 1980s, the Diocese of Orange did not give such approval to its Vietnamese Catholics. This disappointed many of them. Although Vietnamese Catholics could be served by any Vietnamese priest regardless of their city of residence and parish affiliation, according to the diocese’s approval in 1978, the lack of a shared national parish further hindered their ability to freely come together and pool resources across congregations.
Many also did not understand why, on the other hand, the diocese had permitted Polish and Korean Catholic communities to build their own national parishes during the 1980s.\textsuperscript{20} Despite their much larger number and significant representation among the religious vocations,\textsuperscript{21} Vietnamese Catholics were prohibited by the diocese from constructing their own religious institution.

Vietnamese Catholic Center, Santa Ana, California
Photograph courtesy of the author
In 1983, in alignment with the diocese’s multicultural platform, Vietnamese Catholics were granted permission to establish a new Vietnamese Catholic Center to showcase the Catholic Church’s ethnic diversity. The center replaced the old one housed at the primary residences of a number of Vietnamese priests, its main purpose to facilitate social functions and community services, such as serving as a meeting site for different religious associations. The bishop of the Diocese of Orange prohibited Vietnamese Catholics from using the center to hold masses, sacraments, and other religious services other than prayers; these religious activities generated the most financial contributions. Without these sources of incomes, the Vietnamese Catholic Center had to depend mostly on individual donations or payments received from non-religious programs, such as English as a Second Language classes and tutoring services.

Meanwhile, Vietnamese Catholics had to continue to be affiliated with local parishes, which were usually led by non-Vietnamese pastors, even when Vietnamese Americans were significantly over-represented among the religious vocations. As members, they were obligated to cover the expenses of their affiliated parishes, which they were not familiar with because, like Filipino American Catholics, they often participated in the religious life of more than one parish. These responsibilities created resentments among Vietnamese American Catholics. They saw the diocese as using them for financial benefits while restricting them from realizing the full promises of multiculturalism through the establishment of a national parish. As in Vietnam, Vietnamese American Catholics viewed the church as an important social institution. While they have been able to preserve pre-Vatican popular devotions and rituals (e.g., Marianism and pilgrimage), the church has also been a key site where they could acquire certain positions of power in relation to their community, history, and culture. Thus, although the construction of the cultural center was a significant stepping stone for them, it was not as important as having their own national parish.

Prompted by these experiences of structural marginalization within the church hierarchy and institution, Vietnamese Catholics began to mobilize outside of the local ecclesiastical hierarchy. In 1980, Vietnamese American Catholics established the Federation of Vietnamese Catholics in the United States. The organization expanded the Community of Vietnamese Clergy and Religious in the U.S., founded in 1976, to include the laity. At its
second bi-annual meeting in 1984, 15,000 Vietnamese Catholics from thirty states congregated in New Orleans. This grassroots organizing created a network among Vietnamese Americans dispersed throughout the U.S. and mobilized their representation within the Catholic Church. It occurred more than a decade before the Vatican and the U.S. church systemically created a mechanism of outreach to Vietnamese Catholics, when the former established the Center of Pastoral Apostolate for Overseas Vietnamese in 1988 and the latter followed with its U.S. counterpart in 1989.

Our Lady of Lavang Church (Santa Ana, CA)
In 2001, after more than two decades of battle, the bishop of Orange finally permitted Vietnamese American Catholics to build and name the first church in southern California with a Vietnamese name—Our Lady of Lavang. It was constructed on a 4.5-acre plot of land located in a poor part of Santa Ana, California and approximately five miles from the heart of Little Saigon. Upon the historic decision, the bishop announced, “The Vietnamese Catholic community is the second-largest ethnic community [behind Latinos] in the Diocese of Orange. . .Yet they were the only ones who didn’t have the privilege of having a parish named after their patron—or in this case, patroness.”

Our Lady of Lavang has become the global symbol of Vietnamese Catholicism. According to an oral tradition, in 1798, the Virgin Mary appeared in a small village named Lavang, 60 kilometers north of Hue, the former capital of Vietnam. She comforted several Vietnamese Catholics who had fled to the village to escape anti-Catholic persecutions under the order of King Canh Thinh (1792-1802). In 1901, upon the occasion of the first annual Lavang Convention that concurred with the Feast of the Assumption, a French local bishop placed a French-modeled statue of Our Lady of Victories (Notre-Dame des Victories) to visually represent Our Lady of Lavang. Throughout the twentieth century, as war and violence divided the Vietnamese Catholic Church, Our Lady of Lavang increasingly became a symbol of unity among Vietnamese Catholics. After 1975, when many Vietnamese Catholics fled communism in Vietnam to the U.S. and other countries, the significance of Our Lady of Lavang became globalized. In 1995, Vietnamese American Catholics reimagined the Blessed Virgin Mary as a Vietnamese woman to represent their lingering symbolic ties to the homeland and to each other.
Our Lady of Lavang, Santa Ana, California

Photograph courtesy of the author
as a globally scattered religious and ethnic community. In 1998, three years after the U.S. lifted its embargo against Vietnam and upon the bicentennial anniversary of the apparition of Our Lady of Lavang, a U.S.-made Vietnamese statue of Mary was exported to Vietnam to serve as a model for the reconstruction of Our Lady of Lavang as a Vietnamese woman. Since then, the Vietnamese-looking Our Lady of Lavang has become a global representation of Vietnamese Catholicism.

This is the context in which the construction of the Our Lady of Lavang Church in Orange County was initiated. On August 20, 2006, after three years of delays due to opposition to the $10 million project, the architectural “Vietnamese and Hispanic” parish opened to serve a multiethnic congregation that is predominantly Latino, Vietnamese, and white. The event coincided with the year in which the first Vietnamese American bishop, Dominic Mai Luong, was ordained to represent the Vietnamese American community in the area. Today, the church is one of fifteen Vietnamese American Catholic parishes dedicated to the Vietnamese form of Mary, making Our Lady of Lavang more popular than other Marian names, such as Our Lady of Fatima and Our Lady of Lourdes.

However, despite being a historic accomplishment, a number of the Vietnamese faithful also felt that the project came too late for the largest Vietnamese Catholic community outside of Vietnam. As early as 1985, Vietnamese Catholics in other dioceses have already had a parish named after Our Lady of Lavang. In 2005, Vietnamese Americans had also successfully constructed a chapel devoted to Our Lady of Lavang inside the National Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C.

A number of my informants shared with me that the Our Lady of Lavang parish in Santa Ana is now very well financed because of donations from Vietnamese Catholics throughout the diocese. However, under this seemingly temperate comment is their skepticism toward the diocese: Why did the bishop wait until 2001 to permit a parish be constructed and named after a Vietnamese Mary? Some of them suspected that the diocese needed their financial support as its budgets were suffering from sex abuse legal cases, while struggling to accommodate a growing local Catholic population that is predominantly poor and Latino in Santa Ana. The Our Lady of Lavang parish alleviated this problem because it attracted large contributions from Vietnamese Cath-
olics in neighboring towns, including the affluent community at St. Bonaventure in Huntington Beach, which donated a half-million dollars towards a parish hall. Not soon after Our Lady of Lavang parish opened, it immediately became the best attended parish in the diocese primarily because of the Vietnamese population.

The continuing exclusion of Vietnamese Catholics in the church hierarchy has been further attested to by the Vietnamese Catholic Center’s threatened closure. In addition to the lack of financial support from the diocese and deferred contributions to parishes, the center has been tightly controlled by the church hierarchy because of its continuing homeland political activities. This is part of the diocese’s threat to terminate the center: one of its former Vietnamese priest directors was pivotal in organizing many large-scale protests against human rights abuses, especially religious freedom, in Vietnam. In 2005, an event at Mile Square Park in Fountain Valley attracted nearly 5,000 protestors.

The diocese did not favor these mass demonstrations. As a result, the bishop assigned the priest to a remote parish with few Vietnamese members. Thereafter, the center came under the direct authority of Auxiliary Bishop Dominic rather than the center’s director. However, as Auxiliary Bishop Dominic personally informed me in a private interview, he is usually at the diocese’s office and does not know much about the activities at the Vietnamese Catholic Center. Nevertheless, he has the highest and final authority over it, rather than the priest director who is at the center full-time during the weekdays.

This re-organization has further restrained the Vietnamese Catholic community under the ecclesiastical hierarchy and marginalized its representation. In addition to the prohibition of religious sacraments and services, it has also been restricted from engaging in homeland politics. The structural containment within the diocese has not guaranteed equal representation for Vietnamese Americans: Whereas Hispanics have a designated ministry within the diocese’s organizational structure, and Korean and Polish communities each have their own parishes, Vietnamese Catholics have been only symbolically represented by Auxiliary Bishop Dominic. In order to assert their voices, they have to organize among themselves and the Catholic Center is the only available meeting point shared across the diocese. Thus, the construction of the Our Lady of Lavang parish does not attest to the inclusion of Vietnamese American Catholics in the Diocese of Orange. On the contrary, it is an extension of the
ecclesiastical hierarchy’s continuing policy of racialized multiculturalism. It embraces displays of cultural equality, while simultaneously turning a blind eye to structural inequality.

Conclusion
Despite their growing presence in Orange County, Vietnamese Catholics have encountered barriers to freely institutionalize their religious community under the Diocese of Orange’s multiculturalism agenda. These are not simply sites of worship and cultural preservation, but also spaces for representing and mobilizing their politics as racial minorities and political refugees from Vietnam. It was not until 2006, more than thirty years after they first arrived in the U.S. in large numbers, that they witnessed the grand opening of a multiethnic church with a Vietnamese name in Orange County, the Our Lady of Lavang parish in the city of Santa Ana. For Vietnamese American Catholics, the event was more of an affirmation of their racialized marginality than a celebration of their community within the diocese.

Why was the largest and most active Vietnamese Catholic group outside of Vietnam forbidden by the upper ecclesiastical echelon from centralizing its community? Paradoxically, the pattern appears that, within multiculturalism, the stronger the Vietnamese Catholic congregation, the less likely that it would be permitted to construct its own ethnic parish. Similar to their counterparts in Orange County, Vietnamese Catholics in the San Jose area have been denied the right to establish their own church even though they constitute the second largest Vietnamese American Catholic population and a significant population within their diocese. In contrast, Vietnamese Catholics in other dioceses who make up a much smaller number and a less influential congregation relative to other racial groups in their dioceses have successfully built their own churches as early as the 1980s; these parishes include the Resurrection of Our Lord Parish in New Orleans, the Our Lady of Lavang Church in Houston, and the Vietnamese Martyrs Parish in Sacramento, all established between 1984 and 1986. Similar to the cases of the Polish and Korean Catholic communities in Orange County, these smaller Vietnamese Catholic communities still maintain allegiance to their dioceses, but function semi-independently within their own ethnic parishes.

Multiculturalism has created a particularly difficult situation for church leaders when an Asian American minority population, such as the Vietnamese, is significant and influential under its ec-
clesiastical jurisdiction. Like other Asian Americans, they threaten the hegemony of whiteness that has rendered them “incongruous” with Christianity. As Rebecca Kim has argued, Asian and Asian Americans could never be considered as true Christians because they lack “white faces.” This racialization misconstrues the fact that Christians constitute the largest religious group among Asian Americans. The pattern echoes Khyati Joshi’s argument that, while the Christian faith presents itself as a possible “entrance to whiteness,” the results of racialization for each ethnic group have presented different entry points. Irish and Italians are exemplar ethnic groups who have become “meltable” through faith. However, this option is not available for Asian Americans.

In order to manage the threat of a large Asian American minority following and sustain white hegemony within Christianity, multiculturalism under the commands of church leaders has re-represented Asian Americans as heathens who need to be saved by white followers. Within this logic, Vietnamese American Catholics in Orange County have been racialized as ethnic separatists or cast as un-American for making demands to have their own ethnic parishes, as was also the case observed in San Jose. This othering allows the diocese to claim acts of heroism for being willing to accept and deal with the “burdens” of Vietnamese Americans in the U.S. society, which Yen Le Espiritu has suggested. As Anthony Alumkal has similarly argued in his study of Asian American evangelicals, such rhetoric of saviorship misconstrues the reality of racial inequities within multiculturalism, while forgiving those in power for the legacy of racism within the church.

Notes


10. Msgr Pham Quoc Tuan, Personal Interview, Marywood Center, Orange, CA, February 1, 2010.


14. Phuc L. Tran, 304.

15. Vietnamese Catholic Center.


17. This was the former home of Oblates sisters, who temporarily stayed there to teach Eucharist courses at St. Polycarp.

18. Phuc L. Tran, 307

19. Some of the Vietnamese Catholic “personal parishes” that have been established are: Resurrection of Our Lord Parish in New Orleans in 1984 (Our Lady of Lavang Shrine in New Orleans, 2013), Our Lady of Lavang Church in Houston in 1985 (The Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, 2013), Vietnamese Martyrs Parish in Sacramento in 1986 (Diocese of Sacramento, 2013), and St. Philip Phan Van Minh Catholic Church in Orlando in 2007 (Persaud, 2007). Currently, Vietnamese American Catholics in San Jose are fundraising to rebuild their recently burned-down St. Patrick’s Church and rename it after Our Lady of Lavang.

20. Krekelberg and Giacomi; Father Henry Noga, director of the John Paul II Polish Center, Phone Interview, October 3, 2012; staff member at the Saint Thomas Korean Catholic Center, Phone Interview, October 3, 2012.

21. The high representation of Vietnamese in the religious vocations has remained today. In the U.S., Vietnam is the most common foreign country-of-birth among the religious of the profession class of 2011 (CARA 2011).

22. By 1978, four Vietnamese American priests had become pastors but none served the largest Vietnamese American Catholic community in Orange County (Phuc L. Tran, 310). As pastors, they managed all functions and
finances of an assigned parish. They also have authority over other priests and staff assigned to their churches.


27. Phuc L. Tran, 314.


34. The earliest “Our Lady of Lavang Church” was established in Houston in 1985 (The Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, 2013), followed by New Orleans in 1988 (Our Lady of Lavang Shrine in New Orleans, 2013).

35. Lobdell and Tran.


38. Bankston.


43. Hoang, 25.
