

Our Neighbours in Faith (reflection by Peter Thomas)

Australia has long been considered by people both in Australia and elsewhere in the world as a country located near Asia largely populated by Europeans. Although there is a recognition of our First Nation's peoples increasingly Australia is inhabited by peoples of Asian origin bringing with them their languages and cultures. Many of our recent Asian immigrants are Catholics.

Up until the 2016 census adherents of Catholicism in Australia had been growing both numerically and as a percentage of the population but the 2016 census found that the percentage of Catholics is 22.6% of the population down from 25.8% in 2006. Asian religions account for a small but growing percentage of faith groups and the church's own research shows that people of Asian origin make up an increasing percentage of the Catholic population including those that regularly attend Sunday Mass.



Christ of Vũng Tàu, Vietnam

In the Feb.4, 2022 edition of the newsletter 'The Diplomat' authors Bernardo Brown and Michael Chambon penned a challenging article titled "Catholicism's Overlooked Importance in Asia". While they point to the obvious that Timor Leste is the most populous Catholic country in Asia with 97% of the population Catholic, and the only other country to come close the Philippines with 83%, the influence of Catholicism in the region should not be underestimated. The population of Asia is growing more rapidly than anywhere else in the world and the countries it represents in the north and south make-up a third of the world's surface. These are diverse and stimulating societies.

The adoption of Western culture is responsible in some Asian countries for the spread of Christianity but equally the services brought to countries in the form of education, welfare and health have played a significant role especially in the acceptance of Catholicism. Strong loyalty to family and putting the interest of community before that of individuals is an attractive trait in Asian cultures and one that the Church advocates. Religion, long-term loyalties to family and locality and the coherence of the family were easy values for the missionary church to support and embrace. This is not to say that other religious traditions, i.e. Buddhism, Hinduism etc. do not subscribe to these values but rather the services offered by the Church are appreciated and especially welcomed in those countries with the greatest needs. A caveat is that in modern Asia things are rapidly changing as the realities of the global village, technological change, social media, consumerism and economic productivity take precedence.

Although most of Asia is non-Christian there are significant pockets within some countries where the population and therefore the influence of Catholicism is unmistakable. Bernardo Brown and Michael Chambon* write that "*Catholics represent less than 5 percent of the population of most Asian countries yet these statistics hide the significance of Asian Catholicism at the local scale. For instance, while 3 percent of the whole Indonesian population is Catholic, the island of Flores and parts of Papua are overwhelmingly Catholic.*"

In the southern Indian state of Kerala 12.5% are Christian and 61% Catholic. There are 20 million Catholics in India out of a population of 1.38 billion. Similar ratios can be found in the populations of China and Vietnam.

Many missionary endeavors, including members of the Carmelite family have and continue to make a major impact on the lives of people in several Asian countries. In the Parliament of India (Bhāratī Savsad) there are several constitutionally elected parliamentarians who were educated by religious orders.



Dalit Christians of India UCAnews

Though relatively few in a predominantly Hindu country convert to Catholicism there is considerable evidence that the values they have received from their Christian education have a pronounced effect on the people they are elected to serve. Catholic orders in particular together with diocesan clergy, indigenous religious and laypeople that have had the benefit of a Catholic education are making contributions in health, social welfare, scientific advancement, government policy and at a grassroots level to the betterment of the underprivileged. Dalits in India once known derogatively as the “Untouchables”

have benefited greatly from formal education opportunities and programs to lift the status of Dalit women.

For those fortunate to have participated in Church sponsored conferences in Asia there is often surprise at the enthusiasm and degree of involvement. In Thailand where the Catholic population is less than 1 percent major conferences with over 500 delegates are organized meticulously with the vast majority of volunteers young Thai adults. The same can be said of Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, Korea and Japan. Delegates from the West where Catholicism is entrenched are energized to see such zeal.

In some Asian countries there are attempts to acculturate the Church’s customary forms by drawing on ancient symbols within their traditional religions and rituals. In Thailand a parish staffed by a Religious from the United States has a large Buddhist statue at the back of the old ‘high’ altar and in India there is a multiplicity of ways in which the Mass and the Sacraments are ‘tailored’ to an indigenous receptivity. Oddly enough many of these initiatives are introduced by missionaries and ardently adopted by local clergy.



Closing Mass Carmelite Congress Bali

Let’s conclude by once again drawing on the article ‘Catholicism’s Overlooked Importance in Asia’ by Bernardo Brown and Michael Chambon.* *“Clearly, studying the significance of Catholicism in Asia cannot be limited to counting the number of believers.....For many societies and ethnic groups of Asia who strive to define their collective identity and political model, Catholicism is a powerful player that generates a whole range of direct and indirect answers at local and national levels. Whether across the Japanese islands, around the Gulf of Thailand, in Central Asia, or throughout the Indian subcontinent, Catholicism may be perceived as an uncomfortable other, but it influences the ways modern governance, economic exchanges, and systems of knowledge and collective health are defined.”*

**Ref: ‘Diplomat Brief’ Feb ‘ 22 ed. Bernardo Brown is an assoc.prof. of anthropology at International Christian University, Tokyo. Michael Chambon is a research fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National Uni. Of Singapore.*

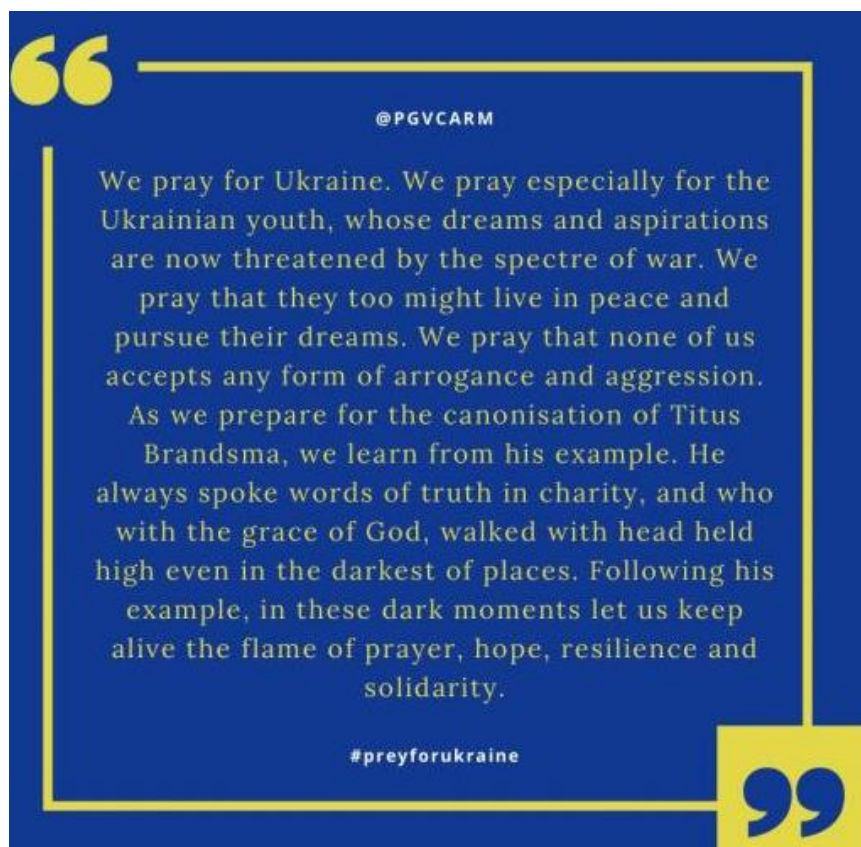
NATIONAL HARMONY DAY Australia

March 21 is Australia's Harmony Day, which celebrates the country's cultural diversity. It coincides with the United Nations' International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. <https://www.harmony.gov.au/>



Carmelite ngo: Interreligious and intercultural relationship in Indonesia

<http://carmelitengo.org/en/projects-en/relacion-interreligiosa-e-intercultural-en-indonesia/>



PEACE is not the product of terror or fear.

PEACE is not the silence of cemeteries.

PEACE is not the silent result of violent repression.

PEACE is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all.

PEACE is dynamism.

PEACE is generosity. It is right and it is duty.

Archbishop Oscar Romero

COVID 19 NEWS FROM TIMOR LESTE - Report from Mayra Walsh, Community Development Ministry

The official case numbers in Timor seem to indicate that Omicron has not yet taken off there like we experienced in Australia. Over the last 3 weeks there have been 6 deaths due to COVID-19. There are currently 7 people in the isolation hospital, and recently the test positivity rate has been at around 11.4%. The official daily case numbers are low, between around 25 to 100 cases/day, partly due to low testing rates (approx. 300-500 tests/day).



THIS WEEK THE IPCC RELEASED THEIR LATEST IPCC WORKING GROUP II REPORT:

The conclusion is deeply confronting, with the result that this group of dedicated scientists have issued an unprecedented emergency warning for humanity and for global ecology. In summary:

- Severe climate impacts are now here and are already causing widespread devastation around the world, with increasingly irreversible consequences.
- It is highly likely that average global temperature rise will exceed 1.5 degrees of global warming as soon as the mid-2030s. We must treat this news as urgent and call for a level of action to reduce emissions.
- Overall, risks and impacts are appearing faster, and are becoming more severe sooner than previously predicted.

WHAT CAN I DO? Stay connected with these latest findings in news reports and on some of these sites:

INTERGOVERNMENTAL PANEL on CLIMATE CHANGE: <https://www.ipcc.ch/working-group/wg2/>

CLIMATE COUNCIL AUSTRALIA: <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resource/media-releases/>