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Aaron Bohr SJ

Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University

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Homiletic Reflection on Anti-Asian Racism

Aaron Bohr, SJ

Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University (Berkeley, CA)

This homily was given on March 28, 2021, Palm Sunday of Holy Week, in reaction to an escalation in anti-Asian hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic and a mass shooting on March 16, 2021 in Atlanta, Georgia that resulted in the deaths of eight people, six of whom were Asian women.

Our readings today focus on the self-giving love of Christ. St. Paul writes of Christ Jesus as emptying himself, coming in our likeness, and walking the way of the Cross. Today's Psalm captures the anguish of Holy Week. The Psalmist cries out to God in lament. A lamentation is a prayer of grief and anguish, a walk deep into the depths of utter sadness and loss. Yet, it is also a prayer of hope and trust in God. It ends on a note of praise: "in the midst of the assembly I will praise you," the Psalmist proclaims. As our Lenten journey enters Holy Week and the holiest days of the Christian year, I would like to reflect for a moment on anti-Asian racism and the shootings in Atlanta. My own prayer throughout these latter weeks of Lent has been to spend time with Christ, who knows suffering, grief, and loss. Many voices within the Asian American community have been encouraging us to share our stories and to reflect upon our collective history. Pope Francis has encouraged Jesuits to engage in the prayer of memory, to see how God has been active in our lives. My prayer of memory is not unlike those of other Asian Americans, especially those of mixed heritage, who have felt both included and excluded from the American narrative.

The Asian American community is incredibly diverse. One of my Jesuit friends, who is from Singapore, found the use of the term Asian American totally foreign to his experience. "I am a Singaporean," he said. He and I would talk about our Chinese families living in the British

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Empire, his in Singapore and Malaysia and mine in Jamaica. We traded stories of great aunts who spoke proper British English and other Anglophile relatives. Arriving in the United States, my family has been adopted by Asian America, even though by nationality and culture my mother's family is Jamaican. Yet, we are often defined by our racial appearance, even though we no longer speak Chinese as a native language. The term "Asian American" includes ethnic groups who would not be natural allies in Asia. Japan and Korea have a fraught history. My Vietnamese brothers in my Jesuit community are very suspicious of China. For Asians in the United States, race and appearance take precedence, even though we come from all parts of the globe.

In the first weeks of the pandemic, I began to hear stories of anti-Asian rhetoric and violence. Reports began to surface, mainly in New York and here in the Bay Area, where I am studying. These reports became more and more frequent. They became more violent: the stabbing of a Burmese American family in Texas, acid thrown on the face of a Chinese American woman in Brooklyn. The San Francisco Chronicle wrote about a Chinese American woman who was spat upon as she walked home from the gym. Right before the lockdown started, my sister Jessica called. We had a long talk about the pandemic and the increasing rise of anti-Asian rhetoric. I told her that we needed to patronize Chinese restaurants because they were reporting dramatic declines in revenue because people associated China and anything Chinese with the coronavirus. Shortly after our conversation, my sister sent my mother and me text messages. She was in a Chinese restaurant ordering take out. She reported that a white woman was glaring at her. The anti-Asian rhetoric and attacks had now impacted my family directly. As the lockdown began, I felt a feeling of fear and dread about the anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiment. Attacks against people of Asian descent were not limited to the US. Reports from

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Europe, Australia, and Africa began circulating in the press. The Chinese community in France began the #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus or #IAmNotAVirus. The governments of China and Korea issued advisories to their citizens living abroad.

The situation grew worse as President Trump intentionally called COVID-19 the “China virus” and the “kung flu.” Many politicians began to use the same rhetoric, dismissing those of us who were offended as being too sensitive. But for those of us who were bullied, punched, and shunned as children because we were of Asian descent, such rhetoric brought back painful memories. As I looked back on my experience, I was shocked to realize that every year I have heard anti-Asian comments and have been the target of many microaggressions. In some Jesuit communities, whenever I cook it is deemed “exotic.” Creative solutions to problems are attributed to secret Oriental powers. Such comments deny my humanity because my attributes and characteristics become racialized.

In order to understand this current moment in time, we must understand American history. All too often, Asian Americans have been erased from American history. Here in San Francisco, Chinese were blamed for an outbreak of the bubonic plague in 1900. Chinese were quarantined in Chinatown. When they did fall sick, they were not admitted to local hospitals. The Chinese community’s response was to found the Chinese Hospital, which is still going strong to this day and has done much to ensure the well being of the local Chinese American community in the midst of the pandemic.

It is also important to understand the impacts of the Page Act of 1875, especially in light of the shootings in Atlanta. The Page Act had the effect of characterizing Chinese men as coolies, that is cheap labor, and Chinese women as prostitutes. The Page Act sought to bar their migration to the United States. This was solidified in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which

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barred most Chinese from immigrating to the United States. From our windows here in the Jesuit community, I can look out at Angel Island. Angel Island has been characterized as the Ellis Island of the West. But it was far from Ellis Island. Here immigrants from China, and later from Japan and other parts of Asia, were held and detained, sometimes for up to two years. Most women were barred entry. One can still see the poignant poems carved in the barracks. It was described by one Chinese American woman who passed through it as a child as a very sad and lonely place. I made a pilgrimage to Angel Island with another Jesuit in the fall of last year. We went from one part of the immigration center to the other, very much like making the Stations of the Cross. We finished our time there at a wall of memorials from descendants of those who passed through Angel Island, commemorating the sacrifices and hopes of those who have gone before. It was not until 1943 that the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed. However, it established a very strict quota system of 105 Chinese persons per year. Importantly, this was based not on nationality but on race.

Violence against the Chinese and Asian American community is not new. In 1871, there was a mass lynching of Chinese men in Los Angeles. In 1886, the Chinese community of Seattle was driven out. They were forced to board ships to take them away from the city. This was one of many “drivings out” here in the American West, in which Chinese communities were forced to flee. Similarly, the Japanese Americans were interned during WWII, their loyalties to the United States questioned simply because of their ancestry. In 1982, Vincent Chin was murdered in Detroit because he was mistaken for being Japanese, and Japan at that time was blamed for the decline of the American auto industry. His murderers received probation and a \$3,000 fine. In 1989, young children of Southeast Asian ancestry were gunned down at Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, CA. As is the case of the shooting in Atlanta, calling this attack racially

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motivated has been dismissed by many. The Atlanta shootings on March 16, 2021 occurred on the anniversary of the MyLai Massacre, in which Vietnamese women were sexually assaulted by American troops and then massacred, along with their children.

The shootings in Atlanta and the vicious attacks on Asian American elders have left the Asian American community reeling. My own reaction when I saw the news felt like I had been kicked in the stomach. “It’s a hate crime,” I said to myself before I even read the story. The Atlanta shooting is unfortunately part of a longer history of violence towards Asians and Asian Americans. Such violence has skyrocketed during the pandemic by 150%.

As we pray about and reflect upon the racism directed towards the Asian American community, let us walk through the pain and the sadness together. I invite you to consider responding to anti-Asian racism by writing to your Congressional representative and senators urging them to support legislation aimed at protecting the Asian American community. Reach out to Asian American friends and family members to see how they have been. Read about Asian America and Asian American history. Pray with Asian representations of Christ and the Blessed Mother and notice what that’s like. As Christ responded to hatred with love and infinite compassion, let us do the same, working for God’s kingdom one step at a time.