



Most Reverend George Leo Thomas, Ph.D.

December 15, 2021  
Simbang Gabi

Guardian Angel Cathedral  
Las Vegas, Nevada

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Exactly one year ago, the Bishops of the United States published a landmark study on the import and impact of Filipino Catholics in the United States of America.

The document concludes with the words that resonate deeply in my heart. They describe who you are and what you mean in my life and the life of the Catholic Diocese of Las Vegas.

The final sentence of this study says, and I quote, "Filipino Catholics will continue to be a treasured presence among us as a symbol of hope as we look toward the future." That, my dear Filipino family, is who you are in the life of this Church -- a treasured presence and a sign of hope for the rest of the Church.

The history of Filipino Catholicism is complex and multi-layered.

In the year 1519, Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan began his famous voyage around the world, arriving in the Visayan Islands of the Philippines in 1521. His arrival on Philippine soil brought both promise and pain to the Filipino people, planting both the seeds of Catholicism and the noxious grains of colonialism and *encomienda*.

In just two short years after Magellan's arrival, 2,200 natives of Cebu had converted to the faith, and from that time on, Catholicism grew like the proverbial mustard seeds of the Gospel, spreading the Church's branches across the archipelago.

In those decades that followed the Magellan arrival, bands of Catholic missionaries worked assiduously among the Philippine people, beginning with the Augustinian Order, and followed by Franciscans, Jesuits, and Dominicans.

The year 1581 was a landmark year in the Philippines, when Dominican Father Domingo de Salazar, O.P., was appointed the first Bishop of Manila.

By the end of the sixteenth century, 687,000 residents of the Philippines had been instructed and Baptized into the Catholic faith.

The first Filipinos to arrive on what is now American soil took place on October 18, 1587, the feast of St. Luke. These were crew members of the Spanish ship, *Nuestra Señora de Buena Esperanza*, Our Lady of Good Hope anchored off the California coast in what is present day San Luis Obispo County.

Since that historic moment, steady waves of hard working Filipinos and their families came to the young United States and its territories in search of a better life.

In the 1830's, some of your countrymen immigrated to Hawaii to work on sugar plantations, while others braved the unforgiving winters of Alaska to work in the fish processing industry. Still others caught "gold fever" and headed to California during the famed Gold Rush of 1848 in search of their fortunes.

No stranger to hard work and long hours, thousands of Filipinos gradually populated California and the Pacific Northwest serving as skilled laborers and farmworkers as the agricultural landscape opened up along the Pacific Coast.

By the middle of the twentieth century, Filipino migration to the United States included a significant infusion of professional women and men who came here as doctors, nurses, engineers, and professors.

Today, there are over four million Filipino Americans in the United States, 69% born in the Philippines, with the overwhelming majority -- 65% -- self-reporting as Roman Catholic.

I cannot state strongly enough what I have witnessed during my years of ministry in the Archdiocese of Seattle, and now here in the Diocese of Las Vegas, that Filipino Americans have been and remain an essential, life-giving and faith-filled community, enriching both Church and society with your deep faith and indomitable spirit.

The Church owes a debt of gratitude (*utang na loob*) to you for all you are and all you do to make our parishes so vital, vibrant, and full of life.

Your deep abiding faith, your love of family, your reverence for the elderly, your unparalleled work ethic, and your fondness for food and friendship make you a cherished and welcoming community.

I propose to you that Simbang Gabi symbolizes the breath, depth, and diversity of the Filipino community, and is an irreplaceable cornerstone of Filipino Catholic identity. Simbang Gabi symbolizes centuries of struggle and hopes, suffering and endurance, dreams and disappointments, blessings and resilience -- all hallmarks of our beloved Filipino community.

It is my hope that the elders of this community will hand on the stories, transmit the traditions, celebrate the victories, and remember the sufferings -- all in an effort to ensure that this living treasure of faith and culture is handed on to each new generation.

I propose that Filipino Catholicism is an example for Catholics of every kind to emulate and celebrate, for Filipino Catholics have set a high bar for themselves and for all of us to follow.

On this day of celebration, I say to you: be proud of your history, be faithful to your heritage, and be true to your precious Catholic faith which flows from the very heart of Jesus Christ, who is the Alpha and the Omega of all we are and do.

At the beginning of Simbang Gabi, we invoke His holy name, and also seek the blessings of Our Lady of Antipolo, asking her to accompany us as we walk in the ways of her Son.

God bless you and protect you on this festival day.

May the blessings that flow from Simbang Gabi keep your faith vital and strong as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ, in whose name we gather, Jesus who is our lord forever and ever.

*MALIGAYANG PASKO!*

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