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Constructing a Eucharistic Celebration of Tết (Vietnamese Lunar New Year)
at Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church

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Abstract

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For the last three years, Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church has experienced a steady decline in the English Ministry membership. The decline is particularly clear among young people — second-generation Vietnamese-American Christians—who are no longer attending church regularly, and state as their reasons either that they do not want to go to church or that they do not feel their spiritual needs are met through this ministry. When surveyed, these former English Ministry members stated that they do not want to identify as Vietnamese and feel alienated by the Vietnamese side of the Morrow church community and their cultural events at church. When asked, these former English Ministry members expressed a longing for a way to represent and embody their Vietnamese values and Christian values together (Group Interview with English Ministry leaders of the Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church, December 13, 2020). In an effort to bridge these values and heritages and to respond to these persons' desires to bring their whole being to church and to how they worship God, this project constructs a Eucharistic celebration for Tết, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year, which is the most important Vietnamese cultural event of the year in the United States.

Constructing a Eucharistic Celebration of Tết (Vietnamese Lunar New Year)
at Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church

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INTRODUCTION

For many second-generation Vietnamese Americans, knowing how to express their dual identity is a daily concern. And it is a concern that each generation has to work out for itself, as respected Vietnamese-American Catholic theologian Peter C. Phan notes: "the challenges facing Vietnamese-Americans, while overlapping to a certain extent, are distinct for each generation."¹ He explains that "for those of the second and third generations, who often speak English fluently and broken or no Vietnamese at all," the challenges are "not so much how to fit into American culture and society but [how] to define themselves racially, ethnically, and culturally."² Although the Vietnamese-American community's future is vested in its second generation, this generation's quandary is unique in that it "dwell[s] at the margins of two cultures, attracted to both but repelled by both, not sufficiently American for one and not sufficiently Vietnamese for the other."³

Religious affiliation only deepens this quandary, this living at the intersection of identities. So, what does it mean in particular to be a Christian and to be Vietnamese (-American), and what makes it unique? Daniel C. Owens, a lecturer at Hanoi Bible College in Vietnam, recognizes that many believers in any culture "must confront this kind of fundamental question, and it deserves careful theological reflection."⁴ In an especially multicultural and multi-ethnic society like the US, the question is all the more pressing. Our biblical forebears also had to address this question. Not surprisingly, the biblical record prioritizes one's relationship to God. We see an example in 1 Peter

¹ Peter C. Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, Pastoral Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 69. In this study, I follow the US Census Bureau, which defines "generational status" as follows: "first generation refers to those who are foreign born, second generation refers to those with at least one foreign-born parent, and third-and-higher generation includes those with two U.S. native parents." (US Census Bureau, "FAQ," The United States Census Bureau, accessed January 18, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/topics/population/foreign-born/about/faq.html>.)

² Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 70.

³ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 76.

⁴ Owens C. Daniel, "Genesis and the Vietnamese Story of Origins: Conversion and Cultural Identity," *Journal of Global Christianity* 1, no. 1 (2015): 24–25, <https://trainingleadersinternational.org/jgc/15/genesis-and-the-vietnamese-story-of-origins-conversion-and-cultural-identity>.

2:10 (NRSV), which boldly reminds believers: “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Although Vietnamese Christians could rightly claim their identity as “God’s people,” it is fair and indeed life-giving for them to want to find a new way of expressing their faith and cultural heritage in their mission and community, a way that honors both. Perhaps Vietnamese-Americans can be encouraged that the faith of fourth and fifth generations of Chinese-American and Japanese-American Christians is “informed by a recovery of ethnic and cultural identity, heritage, and value.”⁵ This they have done by retrieving “treasures in their native Asian stories, festivals, family relationships, and world outlooks,”⁶ and integrating them into their new lives in the US. With such models in mind, Vietnamese-American Christians can rest assured that they can be Vietnamese, American, and Christian in this multicultural and multiethnic society, and not have to abandon one or other of their heritages and identities.

As a pastor at Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church (MVAC), I am particularly interested in discovering ways in which we can hold together all the different aspects of ourselves when we worship God as Vietnamese-American Christians. How can I as a pastor together with my congregation support second-generation Vietnamese-Americans, and in so doing benefit the broader Vietnamese-American communities in the Atlanta region? How do we do this when we are rapidly forgetting or putting out of mind our rich Vietnamese cultural heritage and identity? Franciscan friar and pastor Alphonse Minh notes that the two most significant and distinctly Vietnamese themes likely to be missed and therefore be options for adoption in such Vietnamese-

⁵ David Ng, *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering Christ, Culture, and Community* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1996), xv.

⁶ David Ng, *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering Christ, Culture, and Community* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1996), xv.

American faith communities are the “Lunar New Year and ancestor worship.”⁷ *Tết Nguyên Đán*, or *Tết* for short, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year (VLNY) celebration, is particularly central for those who identify themselves as Vietnamese-Americans because it is the national, most important, popular holiday and festival in Vietnam and for Vietnamese around the world.

Likewise, the Eucharist is a central religious practice for those who follow the Christian faith. Rooted in "the deepest traditions of Christ's church," Christians have for two thousand years gathered to "do this in remembrance" of the risen Christ. The Eucharistic celebration is at the heart of our "identity as the people of God through our participation in prayer, song, proclamation, and the ritual action around the table of the Lord."⁸ Living Eucharistically has been the practice from “the earliest church in Jerusalem; it continued in the apostles' teachings, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and ongoing prayers (Acts 2:42ff)," and is celebrated by millions of Christian churches in the United States and around the world.⁹ Why not marry the two traditions and celebrate the Eucharist at Tết, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year celebration?

The people of Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church (MVAC) do not include a Eucharistic celebration in their worship service at Tết and do not teach their younger generation the connection between the cultural values and national heritage of being Vietnamese and of being Christian in this multicultural and multiethnic society, nor do they teach them that they do not have to abandon one or other of their heritages and identities. The English Ministry has experienced a steady decline because many of its members have left or are leaving the church. Some of those state that they do not want to identify as Vietnamese and feel or felt alienated from Vietnamese cultural events at

⁷ Alphonse Minh and Rufino Zaragoza, “Vietnamese Lunar New Year: Ancestor Worship and Liturgical Inculturation within a Cultural Holiday,” *NTR* 27, no. 2 (March 2015): 105.

⁸ Don E. Saliers, in *Upper Room Worshipbook: Music and Liturgies for Spiritual Formation*, ed. Elise S. Eslinger (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2006), 33.

⁹ Saliers, *Upper Room Worshipbook*, 33.

church. Some others wish there were a way to represent Vietnamese values and Christian values together.

Based on the responses from my congregational study at MVAC that Mary Clark Moschella suggests in *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*,¹⁰ particularly through group and open-ended individual interviews with English- and Vietnamese-speaking members of MVAC, what I hope to achieve by this project is to construct a Eucharistic celebration during Tết especially to benefit second-generation Vietnamese-Americans at this church. In this study, I would like to offer my suggestions on how Vietnamese-American Christians might worship God during Tết. I do so by presenting a quick glimpse of what Tết is and its context, how Tết is celebrated in Vietnam and in the United States, some thoughts on Vietnamese culture and its religions, the fear of syncretism due to ancestor worship among Christians in the Tết celebration, and some guidelines for how to construct a Eucharistic celebration at Tết without the fear of syncretism in the community of Vietnamese Christian churches.

My hope and prayer is that this project might be a way to solve this crisis by showing my current church members there are ways in which they can embrace both their Christian and Vietnamese-American identities, without sacrificing one or the other. Moreover, I hope that once they become familiar with this combined celebration of Tết and the Eucharist, they will become more comfortable combining and expressing their identities as Christians who have a Vietnamese heritage. It is my vision that through this project the second-generation Vietnamese-Americans in my church will begin to appreciate their Vietnamese cultural identity and learn how to worship as Vietnamese-American Christians.

¹⁰ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 68.

MY LOCAL CHURCH CONTEXT

Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church is a member church of the Vietnamese District in the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) which was founded in 1897 by Dr. A.B. Simpson, who sent missionaries to Vietnam and established the first Evangelical church of Vietnam in 1911. Christianity first came to Vietnam through Roman Catholic missionaries beginning in 1524. Due to South Vietnam's Fall in 1975, many Vietnamese Christians subsequently fled to the United States. These Christians inaugurated the Vietnamese District of the C&MA in California on June 29, 1975.

Today, Vietnamese-Americans in the United States are growing quickly to become the fourth largest Asian group: 1,548,449 or 0.5 percent of the United States population on April 1, 2010.¹¹ Specifically, Georgia has the sixth largest Vietnamese population in the United States (45,263). The city of Morrow, Georgia, is the fifth (20.3 percent) of the top five US cities with high Vietnamese population percentages.¹²

Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church (MVAC) was officially established on July 1, 1995 with forty-five founding members. Membership gradually increased due to the activities of witnessing, visiting, and assisting Vietnamese immigrant newcomers. The church sits at the corner of Ash Street and South Avenue in Morrow, a town to the southeast of Atlanta, reflecting our position as a people at the intersection of both Vietnamese and American cultures and first- and second-generation Vietnamese Americans.

¹¹ Anh Nguyen, "The Vietnamese Population in the United States: 2010" (U.S. Census Bureau/Atlanta Region, July 2, 2011), http://www.vasummit2011.org/docs/research/The%20Vietnamese%20Population%202010_July%202.2011.pdf.

¹² Nguyen, "The Vietnamese Population in the United States: 2010."

According to the 2017 Morrow Church Annual Report¹³, the total membership is 195 (194 members in 2016), with an average weekly attendance of 150. Demographically speaking, MVAC includes 93 males (47 percent) and 102 females (53 percent), divided among the following seven age categories:

0–4 years old	4	2%
5–7 years old (Kindergarten)	4	2%
8–12 years old (Elementary)	15	8%
13–18 years old (Youth)	17	9%
19–30 years old (Young Adults)	49	25%
31–60 years old (Career)	73	37%
60–90 years old (Older Adult)	33	17%
Total Members	195	100%

Figure one. Demographics of people of the Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church in 2017.

The daily challenges of Vietnamese-Americans both overlap and are distinct for each generation, largely on account of how each group deals differently with "English language and American cultural customs," as Phan reminds us.¹⁴ In particular, deeper issues of family challenges, social challenges, political challenges, and differences in customs and practices could

¹³ In this study, due to the COVID-19 pandemic I draw on my 2019 congregational study in which I used the data from the 2017 Morrow Church Annual Report.

¹⁴ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 70.

create misunderstanding and problems which requires the church leaders great attention to attend to.¹⁵ This has certainly been true in my experience.

In the beginning of my ministry at MVAC in 2011, it seemed to me that the English Ministry was going well, with encouraging worship attendance of thirty-five to forty-five regular attendees and the strong support of the mother church. However, since July 2015 membership in the English ministry has declined steadily, precipitating what members refer to as "a big crisis," as R. Cao, a member of the leadership team of the English Ministry at MVAC states: "the relationship between the English-speaking congregation and the Vietnamese-speaking congregation lacks strength due to excuses about language barriers and not [having] the same culture."¹⁶

THE STRUGGLES OF BEING SECOND-GENERATION VIETNAMESE-AMERICAN PROTESTANT CHRISTIANS

To understand the struggles of being second-generation Vietnamese-American Christians, one needs first to describe the initial relationship between Protestant Christianity and Vietnamese culture, and then to understand how that relationship was conveyed to contemporary Vietnamese-Americans in the United States. From the beginning, the relationship between Protestant Christianity and Vietnamese culture has not been positive. In terms of H. Richard Niebuhr's paradigm, we might characterize the relationship as one of Christ against Culture.¹⁷ For many Vietnamese Christians, Christianity and Vietnamese culture are incompatible. Christianity has indeed often viewed Vietnamese culture and its symbols as evil and sinful. For example, to non-Christian Vietnamese, Tết (VLNY) has everything to do with filial piety and ancestor worship,

¹⁵ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 71–80.

¹⁶ R Cao, Interview, November 10, 2018.

¹⁷ D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 13.

with ancestor worship considered to be idolatrous. With this in mind, if, as Jennifer R. Ayres states, "worship, in addition to the other important things it does...has the power to express identity," then "does it also have the power to shape identity?" What is at stake here?

Clifford Geertz argues that culture "denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."¹⁸ Andrew Walls, a British theologian and historian of missions, points out two opposing tendencies that originate in the Gospel itself on the frontlines of missions around the world: the "indigenizing principle" and the "pilgrim principle."¹⁹ These two forces are always in relentless tension. While the "indigenizing principle" shows that "God accepts us as we are on the ground of Christ's work alone,"²⁰ the "pilgrim principle" shows that "not only does God in Christ take people as they are: He takes them in order to transform them into what He wants them to be."²¹ Therefore, Christian history shows that Western missionaries also struggled with their two identities during their missions around the world.²² They worked hard to represent Christ, doing overtly Christian things like sharing the Gospel and trying to live in a Christian way in order to communicate the heart of the Gospel to Vietnamese people. Nevertheless, western missionaries in Vietnam were also very much still representative "Westerners, shaped by Western history and conditions and values, and Western social networks and intellectual discourse."²³

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

¹⁹ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 7-9.

²⁰ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 7.

²¹ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 8.

²² Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, xviii.

²³ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, xviii.

Biblically speaking, Acts 15 not only shows the first crisis and most crucial moment of the early Christian Church in responding to conflicts between the Christian identity and the cultural values of its members, it also suggests that the struggles of being Vietnamese and being Christian can be real. Furthermore, it shows Vietnamese Christians what they can learn from the Bible about how to deal with this conflict between Christianity and culture. According to the Christian Scriptures, after the Holy Spirit's coming (Acts 2), the Apostle Peter addressed the crowd, and three thousand new converts were added to the fledgling group's number. The Jerusalem church experienced exponential growth and became far more diverse due to the increasing number of Gentiles who were becoming Christians. Acts 6 describes how seven of them were chosen to serve, and notes the continued growth of converts among a diverse group of Hellenists, Hebrews, and Greeks. Eventually, the Council at Jerusalem was called to resolve the dispute over the requirements for being a Christian, a follower of Jesus as a Gentile Christian, and the tensions over Jewish cultural practices among Gentile believers. For our situation, Acts 15 gives us as historic example a solution in which the Jerusalem Council allows Gentile converts "a place to feel at home," as long as they "abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell" (Acts 15:29, NRSV).²⁴ The door was wide open for Gentile believers to embrace Christ as Lord according to their own cultural identity, and the future proclamation of the Jewish Messiah was now in the hands of those who were "uncircumcised, defective in their knowledge of Law and Prophets."²⁵ I think the first and second-generation Vietnamese-American Christians can learn much from how the early Christian Church council dealt with this struggle when the Gentiles

²⁴ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 8.

²⁵ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 8.

became an important part of the newly developed Christian church, particularly in how they brought their ancestry, culture, identity, and heritage into their ritual life, and how they expressed their new identity in Christ as Gentile Christians.

No doubt this situation of living at the intersection of identities was a challenge to the Gentile Christians in the first century as it is also to the Vietnamese-American Christians of Morrow in the twenty-first century. This challenge manifests itself in disagreements about what is appropriate in Vietnamese Christian worship, as Roman Catholic and Protestant Vietnamese sometimes disagree on the appropriateness of certain liturgical acts such as bowing before the image of ancestors. I agree with Charles E. Farhadian, an expert on Christian missiology, world religions, religion, and globalization, that “Geertz has a high view of worship, and compares the religious perspective with those of common sense and aestheticism to suggest that only the religious perspective moves beyond the realities of everyday life to wider ones which correct and complete them, and its defining concern is not action upon those wider realities but acceptance of them, faith in them.”²⁶ Protestant Vietnamese-American Christians, following the teachings of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, believe they must abstain from what has been sacrificed to ancestor worship, from blood, from what is strangled, and from fornication. Yet the general principle for incorporating non-Christian Vietnamese liturgical acts into Christian worship is articulated in 1 Corinthians 10:31, which states that “so, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.” As God’s people, it is vital for those Vietnamese-American Christians who want to do so to find a new way of expressing their faith and cultural heritage as Vietnamese, American, *and* Christian in this multicultural and multiethnic society.

²⁶ Charles E. Farhadian, *Christian Worship Worldwide: Expanding Horizons, Deepening Practices*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 18.

Further, Walls argues that, “ ‘if any man is in Christ he is a new creation’ does not mean that he starts or continues his life in a vacuum” but that he “has been formed by his own culture and history, and since God has accepted him as he is, his Christian mind will continue to be influenced by what was in it before.”²⁷ Therefore, it is appropriate that if *Tết*, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year (VLNY) celebration, is an act of worship and an expression of identity, one that is particularly central for those who identify themselves as Vietnamese-Americans because it is the most important, popular holiday and festival in Vietnam and for Vietnamese around the world, then the Eucharist, a central Christian ritual, for those who follow the Christian faith, should be included in the worship service of the Lunar New Year.

Historically speaking, although the Protestant Church in Vietnam was founded in 1911, Vietnamese Christians still struggle to this day with how to express the Triune God in their worship in a way that is familiar to ordinary Vietnamese, for after all that Church was heavily influenced by the initial Western missionaries’ identities. When the Christian and Missionary Alliance (the C&MA) missionaries were sent to Vietnam to establish the first Evangelical Church of Vietnam, they tried to put into action the indigenizing principle. They had built a foundation toward the process of indigenization of the faith through the practice of Christianity by, for example, setting the sung Psalms to traditional Vietnamese tunes, tunes that Vietnamese Christians love to this day. In this period, the particularities of the typical Vietnamese Christian’s faith and the ways in which they practiced that faith were very much in imitation of whichever missionary had accompanied them. Thus, they were faithful in prayer and in reading the newly translated Bible and shared the Gospel with everyone in their daily lives. Yet how the missionaries and therefore the early believers expressed their newfound faith symbolically as a cultural system in the Vietnamese

²⁷ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 8.

context was not so obvious then, nor is it today. Though constructed on a foundation that related directly to the Vietnamese culture, the newfound faith of the Vietnamese Christians was understood and practiced in a way that aligned more closely with the Western theological understanding and practice of Christianity. The original idea of indigenous worship is no longer the foundation; western ideas and forms have replaced it.

Since 1975, many Vietnamese have immigrated to America, settling in this new land of promise, and have built their Vietnamese-American community in the United States. Yet their societal integration, personal adjustment, and self-identity in contemporary Vietnamese-American society continue to be a struggle for many of them.²⁸ In my conversations with my interviewees of Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church, both English Ministry leaders and members, a few of them claimed about themselves, that “I do not identify as Vietnamese” due to “my life values, food, or morality.”²⁹ The second generation is much more at home in the US than their parents, and feels less attachment to the practices and beliefs of the Vietnamese homeland. Of course, other Asian American groups have also experienced this identity crisis. As Hiebert and Hertig explain,

“The first-generation immigrants are foreigners in a new land, but they know who they are. The core of their identity was shaped by the old culture. Their children, on the other hand, face a deep identity crisis. At home, these second-generation immigrants learn the beliefs and values of their parents’ first culture, but they are enculturated into the new one in school and in public. They have two worlds at the core of their being. Their identity

²⁸ Paul Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*, Minorities in Modern America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992). This book gives a particularly thorough understanding about Vietnamese-Americans in the United States.

²⁹ Nguyen, Nguyen, and Doan, Group Interview with English Ministry leaders of the Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church, December 13, 2020.

crisis is compounded by the fact that their parents generally do not understand them and try to impose old ways on them.”³⁰

In fact, Ken Carlson, a long time English Ministry pastor of a Chinese Christian church, points out that “members of the second generation resolve this identity crisis in one of four ways: (1) by denying the new culture, (2) by denying the old culture, (3) by compartmentalizing their two worlds, or more rarely, (4) by integrating the best of both cultures. Those who reject the culture of their parents may also reject the Christian faith if they see Christianity as closely tied to their parents’ culture, as is often the case in ethnic churches.”³¹ It is no surprise to recognize that “those who reject the culture of their parents may also reject the Christian faith if they see Christianity as closely tied to their parents’ culture, as is often the case in ethnic churches.”³² Consequently, many second-generation Vietnamese-Americans are struggling both to be part of a Vietnamese-American family and all that implies and to be honest about who they are and what they can do with integrity to support the church's ministry.³³ Clearly, the Vietnamese Christian church has its work of reaching out to this group of second-generation Vietnamese-Americans cut out for it. Perhaps a melding of traditions is the answer.

In my research into how other communities celebrate the Lunar New Year, I discovered that Eric Wang paints an excellent picture of the struggle of being Asian/Asian-American in the American context in his article, “Celebrating Lunar New Year at Candler.”³⁴ As a Chinese-American Christian, Wang feels comfortable with his “hyphenated identity” of being Chinese-

³⁰ Paul G Hiebert and Young Lee Hertig, “Asian Immigrants in American Cities,” *Urban Mission* 10 (March 1993), 17.

³¹ Ken Carlson, *Effective English Ministry: Reaching the Next Generation in Ethnic Immigrant Churches*, Kindle Edition, 2015, 41.

³² Carlson, *Effective English Ministry*, 42.

³³ B. Ho, Interview, December 18, 2020.

³⁴ Eric Wang, “Celebrating Lunar New Year at Candler | Emory University | Atlanta, GA,” accessed August 12, 2020, <http://candler.emory.edu/news/blog/2020/02/celebrating-lunar-new-year-at-candler.html>.

American in the American culture. I must admit that I also utilize the identity of having a “hyphenated cultural identity” of a Vietnamese-Chinese as a mixed-race Vietnamese-Chinese, due to my mother being Chinese-Vietnamese and my father being Vietnamese. In fact, in the article, a student named Chulyu acknowledged that once one decided to embrace one’s identity as a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, there are many cultural customs and other specific practices such as ancestor worship that one must “give up and believed should be given up.”³⁵ Thus, I think a “hyphenated cultural identity” is not the most authentic way of being Vietnamese-American Christians.

Throughout the year, several Vietnamese cultural events prompt requests for appropriate liturgical worship studies to provide a harmonious voice representing Vietnamese communities' first and second generations. Notably, Vietnamese Christians adopt westernized cultural events such as Father’s Day or Mother’s Day. However, Vietnamese-American Christians do not know how to connect their celebration at Tết, the most important event of the year, with their Christian identity. I checked the *Mục Sư Chi Nam* (the go-to Pastor’s Manual written by a Norwegian missionary for all C&MA Vietnamese speaking pastors), but I could not find a liturgical text which is appropriate for the Tết celebration or that has any connection to the Eucharist.

I agree with my interviewees that the Vietnamese Christian churches must find a way to bring these two identities of being Vietnamese-Americans and being Christians together in the church context, as Acts 15 indicates. If we cannot solve this problem, I think we will not be able to build a healthy English-speaking ministry. Peter Phan suggests, “living betwixt and between two cultures, though the result of a national tragedy, is in hindsight a providential blessing for Vietnam since the possibility has now arisen for the first time in its history, to create, through the

³⁵ Wang, “Celebrating Lunar New Year at Candler | Emory University | Atlanta, GA.”

agency of Vietnamese-Americans, a culture that is a marriage of the best elements of East and West.”³⁶

The church needs to train those who are “aware of the positive and negative features of both Vietnamese and American cultures and attempt to synthesize a new Vietnamese-American culture, not only for themselves in the United States but also for a model to guide the rebuilding of Vietnam.”³⁷ The lack of explanation of the significant cultural events could lead to the second-generation's frustration about how the church does not know how to bring together the two identities of being Christian and Vietnamese-American to represent Vietnamese-American Christian values.³⁸

TẾT AND ITS CONTEXT

What is Tết?

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines Tết as follows, “Tết (tết) n. The Lunar New Year as celebrated in Vietnam.” *Tết Nguyên Đán* (abbreviated as *Tết*), is the most important popular festival in Vietnam and for Vietnamese around the world. It is an altered pronunciation of *tiết* (season), *nguyên* (beginning), and *đán* (morning), and is commonly known only as Tết (Lunar New Year).³⁹ *Tết* is a transition time, the beginning of a new period imbued with the hope that sad and dark things will pass away and the new blessings will come.⁴⁰ For those who have been raised and live in the United States, *Tết Nguyên Đán*, the complete name

³⁶ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 83.

³⁷ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 81.

³⁸ B. Nguyen, Interview, December 22, 2020.

³⁹ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 57.

⁴⁰ Phuoc Nguyen, “Truyền Thống Thờ Trời Của Người Việt,” *Thư Viện Tin Lành* (blog), December 2007, <https://www.thuvientinlanh.org/truyen-thong-tho-troi-cua-nguoi-viet/>.

of the festival, means “the feast of the first dawn of the New Year.” It typically lasts “at least three days.”⁴¹ *Tết* can be described as follows:

“Imagine a celebration that combines the emotion of family members returning home, similar to the family gathering of the Thanksgiving holiday, plus the general frenzy of New Year’s Eve. Add to these two celebrations the hubbub and hype of Super Bowl Sunday. Imagine the stores and media promoting merchandise weeks and weeks before the celebration, as one sees with Christmas displays weeks before December 25. Set aside a full one-week holiday from school and work, perhaps several weeks, and toss in everyone’s birthday. Layer all of these celebrations together, and a Westerner gets a glimpse of the importance of *Tết* in Vietnamese culture.”⁴²

During the celebration of *Tết*, non-Christian Vietnamese usually practice an array of customs, such as cleaning and decorating the home with new paint, hanging red paper banners, expressing their good wishes for the New Year, buying new clothes, decorating their house with yellow apricot flowers or pink cherry blossom flowers, making offerings to their ancestors, and giving away red envelopes (filled with lucky money) to the children. A typical non-Christian Vietnamese observes the rituals of Farewell ceremony of the Kitchen Gods (*Ông Táo*), New Year’s Eve (*Giao thừa*), The Aura of the Earth (*Xông Đất*). It is interesting to note that although the Asian Three Religions (*Tam Giáo*), namely Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, are “foreign imports,” and directly influence the Vietnamese people religious practice, Vietnamese people have “absorbed” these religions to become more Vietnamese-like, and “in the process transformed

⁴¹ Minh and Zaragoza, “Vietnamese Lunar New Year: Ancestor Worship and Liturgical Inculturation within a Cultural Holiday,” 105.

⁴² Minh and Zaragoza, “Vietnamese Lunar New Year,” 105.

them, just as they too transformed it.”⁴³ At Tết, the Vietnamese people have practiced their religion by the veneration of ancestors, or filial piety, and through participating in the ancient ritual of the sacrifice at the South Gate offered by the emperor (*Tế Nam Giao*) for the faithful execution of God’s will by all, especially by the emperor or king, the Son of God (*thiên tử*).⁴⁴

As Paul James Rutledge points out, it is vital to note that Vietnamese-Americans have continued observing their ancient Vietnamese holidays and celebrations to do with birth, marriage, ancestor worship, and Tết in the US. Tết is “both a traditional and religious holiday” and “a family-centered celebration” that “draws together the old and the new worlds of the refugees” and is “a time of patriotic expression and community.”⁴⁵ Tết for second-generation Vietnamese-Americans is a time for “friends, food, and parties.”⁴⁶ Tết is also a time of remembrance; Vietnamese believe that remembering the past’s success as “a bridge to the future” should “effectively help the people bridge their past and their present and establish a clear vision for the future.”⁴⁷

As for food, one of the most traditional foods for Tết is *bánh chưng* (a mixture of sticky rice, yellow mung, beans, and fatty pork, wrapped in green leaves) and *bánh giày* (a glutinous rice cake). Moreover, the Vietnamese also tend to choose a pair of *dưa hấu* or watermelon to put on the altar inside their house. The myth is recounted of *dưa hấu* and *bánh chưng*,⁴⁸ which represents Heaven, Earth, and Humanity, which is the hallmark of Vietnamese culture.⁴⁹

⁴³ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 35.

⁴⁴ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 35.

⁴⁵ Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*, 136–37.

⁴⁶ Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*, 137.

⁴⁷ Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*, 138.

⁴⁸ Thế Pháp Tran, *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái* 嶺南摭怪 lit. “Selection of Strange Tales in Lĩnh Nam,” trans. Hữu Mục Le, First Edition (Saigon, Vietnam: Nhà Sách Khai Trí, 1961).

⁴⁹ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 58.

Vietnam, Vietnamese Culture, and its Religions

To understand the Vietnamese people, “one needs to know not only their land and history,” but also “Vietnamese culture and religion.”⁵⁰ Vietnam, or the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, covers 127,889 square miles, “occupying the eastern portion of mainland Southeast Asia,” “extends about 1,025 miles (1,650 km) from north to south and is about 30 miles (50 km) wide east to west at its narrowest part,” and is “bordered by China to the North, the South China Sea to the east and south, the Gulf of Thailand (Gulf of Siam) to the southwest, and Cambodia and Laos to the West.”⁵¹ Historically speaking, from ancient times to the present, the Vietnamese language keeps carrying its particular characteristics. The history of Vietnam could be summarized by a famous Vietnamese songwriter, Trịnh Công Sơn, in a single verse: “A thousand years of Chinese domination, a hundred years of French rule, twenty years of daily civil war (between North and South).”⁵²

In addition, to understand how Vietnamese think, live, and worship, it helps to know that “culture is the outward manifestation of religion, and religion is the depth dimension of culture.”⁵³ The Vietnamese culture has been influenced by Chinese and Indian cultures for over two thousand years. In the south of Vietnam, Indian traders and priests have “contributed to the development of Indochinese civilization,” while in the North, the Chinese moral philosophers, conquerors, political administrators as well as “religions, philosophy, art, and political organization” are dominant.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 20.

⁵¹ Joseph Buttinger, “Vietnam | History, Population, Map, & Facts,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed January 19, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Vietnam>.

⁵² Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 9.

⁵³ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 21.

⁵⁴ Phu Hoang Le, *A Short History of the Evangelical Church of Viet Nam (1911-1965)* (New York University: New York, NY, 1981), 21.

No wonder the French called Vietnam “Indochina” because the name is formed from two words, “India” and “China.”

Besides that, “Vietnamese culture” generally refers to the culture of the Viet ethnic group (also known as *người Kinh*), which makes up over 85 percent of the population, and the other fifty-three other ethnic groups, each with a distinct culture, would make up the other 15 percent of the current population of Vietnam.⁵⁵ Interestingly, the traditional Vietnamese worldview is “expressed not in philosophical works” but primarily in “folk oral literature consisting of myths and legends, proverbs and folksongs; in works of literature, especially poetry; and in ethical and religious practices.”⁵⁶ To understand the central Vietnamese worldview is to understand “*hòa hợp*” or “harmony” or the so-called, *triết lý tam tài* or *tam tài* philosophy, which speaks of “Heaven (*thiên or trời*), Earth (*địa or đất*), and Humanity (*nhân or người*)” being in harmony.⁵⁷ To achieve harmony, Vietnamese people see human persons “must perform faithfully the duties of one’s relationships with others”⁵⁸ as constituted by relationships among themselves and between themselves, Heaven and Earth.⁵⁹ Also, harmony (*hòa hợp*) will be achieved when one practices the five virtues of *nhân* (compassion, benevolence, love for one’s fellow human beings), *ngĩa* (justice, righteousness, sense of moral duty), *lễ* (propriety, social appropriateness), *trí* (knowledge, wisdom), and *tín* (sincerity, truthfulness).⁶⁰ Thus, harmony (*hòa hợp*) will be achieved “in oneself, with one’s superiors, with one’s family, with one’s fellows, with Earth and Heaven,”⁶¹ only if one

⁵⁵ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 23.

⁵⁶ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 24.

⁵⁷ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 25.

⁵⁸ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 30.

⁵⁹ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 30–31.

⁶⁰ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 31–32.

⁶¹ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 32.

“performs thoroughly “one’s obligations and duties flowing from one’s social and family position and practices the five virtues mentioned above.”⁶²

Trống đồng Đông Sơn (Đông Sơn drum) is one of the most critical archaeological relics in the Vietnamese culture from the Bronze Age to the present day. This sacred symbol not only represents “the cultural characteristics of the ancient Viet people” that describes “the various aspects of the life of the ancient agrarian Viet culture,” but also points us to the relationship between God and the Vietnamese, as the sun has been the center of the drum since the Bronze Age to the present day.⁶³ Moreover, the first declaration of Vietnam, Nam Quốc Sơn Hà (The Southern emperor who ruled the Southern land), a poem written in 1077 by one of the greatest generals Lý Thường Kiệt of the Lý Dynasty, declares that Vietnam is an independent country. It emphasizes 截然定分在天書 (*Tiệt nhiên định phận tại thiên thư*), which Huỳnh Sanh Thông translates as, “our [Vietnam] destiny is writ in Heaven’s Book.”⁶⁴ For the Vietnamese, “Heaven is the personal, transcendent yet immanent, benevolent yet just God, the creator of the universe, source of all life, and supreme judge.”⁶⁵ Thus, the relationship between God and the Vietnamese people is an ongoing one and is directly connected to Vietnamese life.

From the evidence of culture and history, we observe that worship reflects the body, soul, and mind of the Vietnamese and is daily directed towards God.⁶⁶ Vietnamese people respect and

⁶² Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 32.

⁶³ Xiaorong Han, “The Present Echoes of the Ancient Bronze Drum: Nationalism and Archeology in Modern Vietnam and China,” *Explorations in Southeast Asian Studies - A Journal of the Southeast Asian Studies Student Association* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1998), <https://web.archive.org/web/20090610060320/http://www.hawaii.edu/cseas/pubs/explore/han.html>.

⁶⁴ Trung Pháp Đàm, “Nam Quốc Sơn Hà, Vietnamese Poetry Translated and Annotated by Dr. Đàm Trung Pháp, Professor Emeritus at Texas Woman’s University,” Viện Việt-Học Institute of Vietnamese Studies, accessed January 21, 2021, <http://www.viethoc.com/Ban-Ging-Hun/dham-trung-phap/vietnamese-poetry-translated-and-annotated/nam-quoc-son-ha>.

⁶⁵ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 38.

⁶⁶ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 35–36. Dr. Phan notes that there are two sets of Vietnamese words that Vietnamese people word use for “God.” The one composed of Sino-Vietnamese words is Thượng Đế (Ruler on high, supreme ruler), Thiên (Heaven), Thiên Chúa or Thiên Chủ (Lord of Heaven), or simply Chúa (Lord). The

value their origins and the natural environment that surrounds them. They recall their origins in every aspect of life, and this makes ancestor worship distinctive in the Vietnamese community among other religions. Of course, the Vietnamese ancestor worship is also common throughout East Asia and Indochina among other religions. Throughout the four-thousand-year history of Vietnam with its various periods of war, peace, and development, in their attitude of worshipping God they emphasize recognizing God as their ultimate source of life. It is universal for Vietnamese people to call upon God when they are alone, in pain, or face difficulties. As the Psalmists remember God and cry out to the so-called *Ông Trời* (Mr. Heaven), so too God is the first one to whom Vietnamese go to ask for help. In summary, for the Vietnamese, God is “the personal, transcendent yet immanent, benevolent yet just God, the creator of the universe, source of all life, and supreme judge.”⁶⁷

Traditionally, the Vietnamese believe that God created the world, and each year God sends an executive deity to rule over the world. Besides that, during the normal time of the year (or what in the church we might call Ordinary Time), many Vietnamese families in the countryside express their gratitude to God (Mr. Heaven) by setting up *Bàn Thờ Ông Thiên* (the altar for God) in the middle of their home’s courtyard. An altar in this context is simply a pillar higher than a human head. At the bottom of the pillar is a circular or rectangular wooden plaque with a censer on top. At midnight (*Giao thừa*), the head of the family presents the gift and kneels in front of this altar and asks God to bless the family. Devoted families often light incense, pray, and make petitions

other set of words consists of pure Vietnamese words: *Trời* (Heaven), *Ông Trời* (Mr. Heaven), or *Ông Thanh* (Mr. Blue Heaven). Today, Vietnamese Christians use *Chúa*, *Thiên Chúa*, and *Đức Chúa Trời* (*Đức* is an honorific title meaning “Noble” or “Venerable”).⁶⁶

⁶⁷ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 38.

every morning and evening. Others only offer their incense or offerings on the day of the full moon day or the first day of the month to express gratitude to the Creator.⁶⁸

In sum, it is vital to note that the core of Vietnamese indigenous religious beliefs constitutes in *đạo hiếu* (the way or religion of filial piety) and *đạo thờ trời* or *thiên đạo* (religion of worshipping heaven or the way of Heaven).⁶⁹ These Vietnamese indigenous religious beliefs and its duties which are considered sacred are fundamental to Vietnamese moral and religious life. It shows the relationship between God and Vietnamese people and the relationship between parent and child. Piety toward one's parents requires reverence and obedience to them; taking care of them when they still alive, including in sickness and old age; providing them with grandchildren; and after their deaths, offering veneration and sacrifices to them, especially on specific occasions like Tết.⁷⁰

CONSTRUCTING A EUCHARISTIC CELEBRATION FOR

TẾT,

THE VIETNAMESE LUNAR NEW YEAR (VLNY)

In this project, my sole focus is on constructing a Eucharistic celebration for Tết (VLNY) in the Protestant church context, without further discussion on Ancestor Worship and Filial Piety in Vietnam or the United States. For many Vietnamese-Americans, Tết (VLNY) has everything to do with filial piety and ancestor worship. It is important to recognize that the Vietnamese Protestant church firmly follows the scripture in Exodus 20:12 (NRSV), the fifth commandment which commands us to, “¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in

⁶⁸ Nguyen, “Truyền Thống Thờ Trời Của Người Việt.”

⁶⁹ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 35.

⁷⁰ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 33.

the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” It means that adherents of this faith should fulfill our parents' wishes, be obedient to them, behave with care and tender love, carry out their wishes, and see to their well-being. However, Vietnamese-American Protestant Christians do not worship their parents after they die as that would directly contravene to the first commandment in Exodus 20:2-6. They strictly forbid their members to bow, kneel, or worship before any gods or images of other gods as instructed in Exodus 20:2-6. Thus, the worship of ancestors is forbidden in Vietnamese-American Protestant churches.

And yet the movement of liturgical inculturation in the Vietnamese Catholic Church has made continuing efforts to “integrat[e] this cultural practice into liturgical life.”⁷¹ According to Anscar J. Chupungco, an expert on liturgical studies, “Liturgical inculturation refers to the process of inserting the texts and rites of the liturgy into the framework of the local culture as a result of which the texts and rites assimilate the people’s thought, language, values, ritual, symbolic, and artistic pattern.”⁷² For the Vietnamese Catholic church, “the climax of ancestor veneration and the appreciation of the general public (non-Christian) for Catholicism came in 1992 with the formation of the five Mass formularies for the first three days of Tết, during which ancestor veneration plays a significant role.”⁷³ The Five Mass formularies for the first three days of Tết, published in the 1992 Vietnamese Sacramentary, are a great step toward providing a solution for worshipping God at Tết.

I agree with Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng that at the heart of people’s fear of syncretism is the issue between “the customs and traditions of minority cultural and ethnic groups on this continent,

⁷¹ Minh and Zaragoza, “Vietnamese Lunar New Year: Ancestor Worship and Liturgical Inculturation within a Cultural Holiday,” 108.

⁷² Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 661.

⁷³ Minh and Zaragoza, “Vietnamese Lunar New Year: Ancestor Worship and Liturgical Inculturation within a Cultural Holiday,” 107.

not the customs of traditions of the dominant culture”⁷⁴ and insist that minority persons accommodate themselves to the majority culture. Otherwise, they can feel threatened. It is vital to remind ourselves again that the Chinese Rites Controversy (1603-1742) and the ecclesial ban on ancestor worship in Vietnam and other parts of Asia continue to play a significant role in the efforts to bring the Gospel to Vietnamese who live in Vietnam, the United States, and around the world. It is no surprise in my context that these differences of customs and traditions of Christian worship are labeled or seen as “non-Christian if not outright ‘pagan.’”⁷⁵ In fact, Vietnamese generally would call those who follow the way of the Good News (*Đạo Tin Lành*) those who give up *đạo hiếu* (the way or religion of filial piety or *Đạo bỏ ông bỏ bà* (*The religion of not worshipping the ancestors*) due to early Western missionaries’ teachings. Thinking about the intersection of the cultural and secular, sacred and holy, in the Asian American context, Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng asks: “Can we not claim the freedom to celebrate in our culture-specific customs and life-cycle milestones with integrity?”⁷⁶ As Arun W. Jones, Associate Professor of World Evangelism at Emory University, points out, problems would arise if worship did not respond to context.⁷⁷ He notes, “Worship and Faith need to respond to the context, critique the context, observe the context” to address the problems of the context.⁷⁸ Therefore, “the relationship between Christianity and culture is such an important one that assemblies worldwide are compelled to grapple with how their worship challenges, adopts and adapts both local and distant cultural elements.”⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, “The Asian North American Community at Worship: Issues of Indigenization and Contextualization,” in *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering Christ, Culture, and Community*, ed. David Ng (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1996), 162.

⁷⁵ Ng, “The Asian North American Community at Worship,” 163.

⁷⁶ Ng, “The Asian North American Community at Worship,” 162.

⁷⁷ Arun W. Jones, conversation and consultation with Dr. Arun Jones, August 19, 2020.

⁷⁸ Jones, conversation and consultation with Dr. Arun Jones.

⁷⁹ Farhadian, *Christian Worship Worldwide*, 5.

It is the issue of ancestor worship that affects how the Vietnamese view the Vietnamese Protestant Christians as *Đạo bỏ ông bỏ bà* (*The religion of not worshiping the ancestors*). In my opinion, Vietnamese Protestant Christians can learn from Peter C. Phan, a well-respected Vietnamese Catholic theologian, who points out that Jesus is the best example of filial piety as the Firstborn Son and Eldest Brother who was always fulfilling his earthly mother's wishes, was obedient to them, behaved with tender love, carried out her wishes, and looked after her well-being. Significantly, Jesus is the model of filial piety for expressing his obedience to his father's will (Luke 2:7; Matthew 1:25; Luke 8:21; John 19:26-27; and John 4:34; 5:30).⁸⁰ Furthermore, Jesus is also the Ancestor, in addition to being the Firstborn Son and the Eldest Brother. For Jesus is the "new Adam, the ancestor of the new human race," marked by "filial piety (obedience), not brought death and condemnation but restored life and justification," and "by his death and resurrection, Jesus became the ancestor and [yet was] alive among his family, just as a parent, though dead, [is] present among their children" as 1 Corinthians 15:45–49 and Romans 5:12-21 point out.⁸¹ I think this way of thinking could help Vietnamese Protestant Christians deal with these stated issues because it seems Vietnamese Protestant Christians cannot avoid the issues of filial piety and ancestor worship in Vietnamese culture due to elements of conflict in the relationship between gospel and culture. Thus, I would like to suggest that it is equally important to study the relationship between God and Vietnamese people in their daily lives and during the Vietnamese Lunar New Year celebration. Hence, during the celebration of Tết, it would be sufficient for anyone who identifies themselves as a second-generation Vietnamese-American Christian to worship the Triune God: God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit, mainly

⁸⁰ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 106.

⁸¹ Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 107.

to worship Jesus our First Ancestor, who is the best example of filial piety and the new Adam, the ancestor of the new human race.

In constructing a Eucharistic Celebration of Tết, I think it is important to note that what Vietnamese Protestant Christians do on the first Sunday of the Vietnamese Lunar calendar would be much more acceptable if what they did was restricted to wearing our traditional dress, áo dài, singing happy praise songs, giving testimonies of blessings, distributing blessing money to our children, listening to a sermon about God, and enjoying traditional Vietnamese food for the Tết celebration. However, suppose Tết is “both a traditional and religious holiday” that “draws together the old and the new worlds of the refugees,” as Paul James Rutledge points out.⁸² In that case, I wonder where the spiritual connection between God the Creator, Christ my Savior, and my identity as a Vietnamese-American Christian is on the most critical day of the Vietnamese calendar. I suggest that in reality, we are currently living out our hyphenated identities as Vietnamese-Americans and Christians separately, that they rarely overlap or are integrated. I suggest that it is critical to learn how to connect Christian teaching with the Vietnamese culture's beauty for the sake of the second generation of Vietnamese-Americans in particular.

The Issues of Indigenization, Contextualization, and Inculturation

With regard to the tension between Christianity and Asian culture in worship, I would like to discuss the significant problems of contextualization in Christian worship. Understanding this is vital as is imagining how it could be adapted and applied in our context. So, “What is contextualization?” As Coe states:

⁸² Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*, 136–37.

“It means all that is implied in the familiar term ‘indigenization’ and yet seeks to press beyond. Contextualization has to do with how we assess the peculiarity of Third World contexts. Indigenization tends to be used in the sense of responding to the Gospel in terms of traditional culture. It takes into account the process of secularity, technology, and the struggle of human justice, which characterize the historical moment of the nations in the Third World.”⁸³

Contextualization is “a missiological necessity” that, in our following in God’s steps as an ongoing process of the pilgrim people, is “at most and at best a provisional and fragmentary witness of that divine contextualization of the incarnation.”⁸⁴ Hence, in addition to our current global Covid-19 pandemic situation, it is critical to state that our Christian worship needs to continue to be “contextual amid a globalized culture.”⁸⁵ In looking forward to the future of Christian worship to re-contextualized forms of Christianity that emerge from non-Western cultures, first we have to affirm that “the Gospel transforms personal and corporate lives, and worship is the proper response to God’s grace.”⁸⁶ Second, Christian worship should “glorify God, encourage one another, and remember the acts and promises of God”⁸⁷ because these actions and practices of Christian worship have been present from the early church to the present in church history. Although Christian worship “must be meaningful to worshipers” and should direct our attention to God, Christian worship worldwide is “never complete,” and “entails a quality of mystery and knowability.”⁸⁸ Therefore, it is critical to be warned of the danger of no longer seeing

⁸³ Simon S M Kwan, “From Indigenization to Contextualization: A Change in Discursive Practice Rather than a Shift in Paradigm,” *Studies in World Christianity* 11, no. 2 (2005): 237.

⁸⁴ Shoki Coe, “In Search of Renewal in Theological Education,” *Theological Education* 9, no. 4 (1973): 242–43.

⁸⁵ Farhadian, *Christian Worship Worldwide*, 5.

⁸⁶ Farhadian, *Christian Worship Worldwide*, 2.

⁸⁷ Farhadian, *Christian Worship Worldwide*, 2.

⁸⁸ Farhadian, *Christian Worship Worldwide*, 3–4.

“the sacraments serve as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace,” and if we fail “to recognize this element of mystery [, it] can easily lull the assembly into self-worship, where a community’s own culture and lifeway become the focus and end of worship.”⁸⁹

Some Guidelines for Constructing a Eucharistic Celebration at Tét

In the face of current challenges on worship and culture, many scholars worldwide have worked together on the biblical and historical foundations of the relationship between Christian worship and culture. There were three meetings organized by the Lutheran World Federation’s Study Team on Worship and Culture, in Cartigny, Switzerland (October 1993), in Hong Kong (March 1994), and in Nairobi, Kenya (January 1996). The Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture in January 1996 presents four central principles for the relationship between worship and culture that are worth considering for our Vietnamese-American context: the transcultural, contextual, counter-cultural, and cross-cultural.⁹⁰ I think it is essential to use these four principles to guide Vietnamese-American Christians in constructing their *Eucharist celebration of Tét* by affirming:

“Worship is the heart and pulse of the Christian Church. In worship, we celebrate together God’s gracious gifts of creation and salvation and are strengthened to live in response to God’s grace. Worship always involves actions, not merely words. To consider worship is to consider music, art, and architecture, as well as liturgy and preaching.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Farhadian, *Christian Worship Worldwide*, 3.

⁹⁰ “Calvin University,” accessed January 20, 2021, <https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/nairobi-statement-on-worship-and-culture-full-text>.

⁹¹ “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture Full Text,” sec. (1.1), accessed January 20, 2021, <https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/nairobi-statement-on-worship-and-culture-full-text>.

Therefore, it is “the reality that Christian worship is always celebrated” in Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American cultural settings that “draws our attention to the dynamics between worship and the Vietnamese culture.”⁹² Thus, I intend that *the Eucharistic celebration for Tết* is Christian worship, and “relates dynamically to culture in at least four ways.”⁹³

First, “worship is transcultural,” as section 2 states. The Eucharistic celebration for Tết therefore acknowledges that “the sacrament of Christ’s death and resurrection were given by God for all the world” (2.1). There is “one Bible, translated into many tongues, and biblical preaching of Christ’s death and resurrection has been sent into all the world” (2.1). Furthermore, because “there is one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one Eucharist” (2.1), the *Eucharistic celebration for Tết* will follow the fundamental shape of the Eucharist, which is: “the people gather, the Word of God is proclaimed, the people intercede for the needs of the Church and the world, the eucharistic meal is shared, and the people are sent out into the world for mission” (2.1). Lastly, the use of a shared “core liturgical structure, elements, the act of people assembling, provision of diverse leadership, and the manner of the leadership” are “expression[s] of Christian unity across time, space, culture, and confession” (2.3).⁹⁴

Second, because “worship is contextual” and “Jesus whom we worship was born into a specific culture of the world,” as section 3 states, it is crucial to recognize that the *Eucharist celebration of Tết* should carry “the model and the mandate for the contextualization of Christian worship” (3.1). Further, that celebration should include elements of Vietnamese culture and its patterns, as they are in agreement with the Gospel’s values, and can be used to show the meaning and purpose of Christian worship during the celebration of Tết. Moreover, contextualization is a

⁹² “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture Full Text,” sec. (1.2).

⁹³ “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture Full Text,” sec. (1.3).

⁹⁴ “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture Full Text,” sec. 2.

needed task to display that Gospel can be rooted in the second-generation Vietnamese-American culture (3.1). In addition to the “method of creative assimilation” which consists of “adding pertinent components of local liturgical ordo in order to enrich its original core”⁹⁵ (3.4), it is recommended that the *Eucharist celebration at Tết* should apply the method of “dynamic equivalence” (3.5), which entails the following:

“First, the liturgical ordo (basic shape) should be examined with regard to its theology, history, basic elements, and cultural backgrounds. Second, those elements of the ordo that can be subjected to dynamic equivalence without prejudice to their meaning should be determined. Third, those components of culture that are able to re-express the Gospel and the liturgical ordo in an adequate manner should be studied. Fourth, the spiritual and pastoral benefits our people will derive from the changes should be considered.”⁹⁶

In addition, “the fundamental values and meanings of both Christianity and local cultures must be respected” in contextualization (3.5). The Nairobi Statement also warns that “not everything can be integrated with Christian worship,” and “elements borrowed from local culture should always undergo critique and purification, which can be achieved through the use of biblical typology” (3.6).⁹⁷

Third, because “worship is counter-cultural,” as section 4 states, the *Eucharistic celebration for Tết* “resists the idolatries” in Vietnamese culture, especially the practice of ancestor worship. As Romans 12:2 teaches us, Jesus Christ, the center of our faith, “came to transform all people and all cultures, and calls us not to conform to the world, but to be transformed with it.”

⁹⁵ Farhadian, *Christian Worship Worldwide*, 288.

⁹⁶ “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture Full Text,” sec. 3.

⁹⁷ “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture Full Text,” sec. 3.

Therefore, some components of Tết celebration, such as ancestor and idol worship, are “sinful, dehumanizing, and contradictory to the values of the Gospel.” (4.1)⁹⁸

Lastly, because “worship is cross-cultural,” the *Eucharist celebration for Tết* reflects the fact that Jesus came to be the Savior of Vietnamese people and welcomes the treasures of Vietnamese culture “into the city of God” (5.1). Hymns, arts, and other elements of worship across cultural barriers could be shared to enrich the whole Church and strengthen the sense of the *communio* of the Church, ecumenical as well as cross-cultural, and “as a witness to the unity of the Church and the oneness of Baptism”(5.1). I hope that the *Eucharist celebration for Tết* and its “music, art, architecture, gestures, and postures, and other elements of different cultures” are understood and respected when they are used by churches elsewhere in the world (5.2).⁹⁹

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

First of all, as a pastor of the Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church, a Vietnamese-American church in the United States, and as a member of the Catholic Church of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, I want to re-emphasize the Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture’s challenge to the churches:

“We call on all churches to “undertake more efforts related to the transcultural, contextual, counter-cultural, and cross-cultural nature of Christian worship. We call on all member churches to recover the centrality of Baptism, Scripture with preaching, and the every-Sunday celebration of the Lord’s Supper—the principal transcultural elements of Christian worship and the signs of Christian unity—as the strong center of all congregational life and

⁹⁸ “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture Full Text,” sec. 4.

⁹⁹ “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture Full Text,” sec. 5.

mission, and as the authentic basis for contextualization. We call on all churches to give serious attention to exploring the local or contextual elements of liturgy, language, posture and gesture, hymnody and other music and musical instruments, and art and architecture for Christian worship—so that their worship may be more truly rooted in the local culture. We call those churches now carrying out missionary efforts to encourage such contextual awareness among themselves and also among the partners and recipients of their ministries. We call on all member churches to give serious attention to the transcultural nature of worship and the possibilities for cross-cultural sharing. And we call on all churches to consider the training and ordination of ministers of Word and Sacrament because each local community has the right to receive weekly the means of grace.”¹⁰⁰

Second, it is recommended to contextualize other special occasions in Vietnamese-American Christians' life cycle, especially for the sake of the second generation. The Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church could help our church members and their families do celebrations, such as of seventieth, eightieth, and ninetieth birthdays, of wedding anniversaries, of Vietnamese Christian wedding traditions, of Vietnamese Christian funerals and memorial services, and likewise new house or new car blessings services, business blessing services, and other special occasions.¹⁰¹ Moreover, Tết Trung Thu “Mid-Autumn” or the Mooncake festival and Lễ Vu Lan – Lễ Hiếu Kính Cha Mẹ (Rite of Filial Piety - *Đạo Hiếu*) are two important cultural events in the Vietnamese-American religious life that are ripe for an appropriate contextualized liturgy and understanding.

¹⁰⁰ “Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture Full Text.”

¹⁰¹ Ng, “The Asian North American Community at Worship: Issues of Indigenization and Contextualization,” 166.

All in all, it is sad to see that the above-listed celebrations may already be in place in individual lives and families but that the church has not yet recognized them in its community life. I pray that God will help us carefully do our part to contextualize Vietnamese-American Christian worship and in so doing to provide worship resources to celebrate our love for Jesus the Christ, and for Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American culture. Maybe a *Worship Handbook for Vietnamese-American Christian Lay Leaders and Ministers* is needed in the near future

Kyrie Eleison! Christe Eleison! Lord have mercy! Christ, have mercy!

Chúa ơi, xin thương xót! Đấng Christ ơi, xin thương xót chúng con!

CONCLUSION

Faced with the struggles of second-generation Vietnamese-American Christians, as the pastor of the Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church, I felt a need to respond to our younger members by bridging Vietnamese values and Christians values and heritage, and in so doing enabling those second-generation members to bring their whole being to church and be able to worship God in a compassionate, thoughtful, and loving way. Paul James Rutledge states that Tết “with food, large numbers of old friends, and a religious foundation serves for many Vietnamese as a means of continuity from ancient customs to newly adopted and adapted patterns. It combines the old and the new and reflects the changes within the refugee community; changes which are forming the foundation for contemporary Vietnamese-American society.”¹⁰² The role of the Vietnamese-American churches in creating a welcoming, integrated home for second-generation Vietnamese-American Christians in the United States, a new homeland, not only needs to be recognized but to be the witness of “the presence of God in people’s lives” and Vietnamese-

¹⁰² Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*, 138.

American people will have an opportunity to enhance and deepen their relationship with the “ground of their being.”¹⁰³

In my conversations with the English Ministry leaders, they pointed out their frustration in the way of representing Vietnamese-American Christian identities right now.¹⁰⁴ When I reflect on their expression of their faith and their hope as Vietnamese-Americans Christians, I wholeheartedly agree with Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng that Asian North American churches, or in my case, Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church, should do some hard thinking about how to be the church for second-generation Vietnamese-American Christians on these issues.¹⁰⁵ In these aspects of being the community of faith, it is crucial to recognize that the church has the responsibility to stand with individuals and families in their life crises and milestones events. We need to affirm “the incarnational nature and universality of this one Holy One” and to provide resources to strengthen their spiritual life and faith journey.¹⁰⁶ “The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it” (Psalm 24:1, NRSV) as the psalmist declares. We need to convey to them our confidence that “the LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore” (Psalm 121:8, NRSV).

Let us walk toward the future that God shows us in Revelation 7:9-17 (NRSV), keeping in mind a grand and colorful picture in which Vietnamese people, specifically of second-generation Vietnamese-Americans, who we hope will “be part of that great multitude” “standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.” They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹⁰³ Ng, “The Asian North American Community at Worship,” 164.

¹⁰⁴ Nguyen, Nguyen, and Doan, Group Interview with English Ministry leaders of the Morrow Vietnamese Alliance Church.

¹⁰⁵ Ng, “The Asian North American Community at Worship,” 163.

¹⁰⁶ Ng, “The Asian North American Community at Worship,” 147–75. I think this chapter provides an excellent resource for Asian American church leaders for many years to come.

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APPENDIX

A EUCHARISTIC CELEBRATION OF TẾT, THE VIETNAMESE LUNAR NEW YEAR AT MORROW VIETNAMESE ALLIANCE CHURCH

*(This order of worship follows the suggestions of "A Celebration of Word & Table,"
from Upper Room Worshipbook, Music and Liturgies for Spiritual Formation, pages 34-42).*

MUSIC FOR GATHERING

* GREETING (people standing as able)

Leader: *This is the day that the Lord has made;*

All: Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Leader: *This is the beginning of the springtime that the Lord has made;*

All: Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Leader: *This is the beginning of the Lunar New Year, the time that the old year is fading away and another one is renewed.*

All: Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Leader: *This is the day that we remember our ancestors who risked their life, left their homes to bring us here to this new land to find hope for a better life with freedom.*

All: Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Leader: *God made beautiful flowers & provide fresh fruits for us to enjoy.*

All: Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Leader: *This is the time that we clean our houses, and God cleanses our hearts. We decorate our homes beautifully and meditate on God's word, cook our traditional food for Tết and enjoy God's beautiful creation.*

All: Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Leader: *God brought our church and our family together.*

All: Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Leader: *God made you, and God made me.*

All: Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Leader & All: **Come, let us praise God for making all things good!**¹⁰⁷

OPENING HYMN

*"Nguồn On Phước - Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing"
Words by Robert Robinson, 1758, and Music by Asahael Nettleton, 1825*

1. Phước nguyên từ trời xin chảy vào
lòng bật lên khúc ca chúc ơn Ngài
Suối nhân từ hằng tuôn chảy ngập dòng,

1. Come, Thou Fount of ev-'ry bless-ing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mer-cy, nev-er ceas-ing,

¹⁰⁷ Calvin Institute of Christian Worship and Faith Alive Christian Resources, *The Worship Sourcebook*. (Grand Rapids, MI.: Calvin Institute of Christian Worship: Faith Alive: Baker Books, 2004), 373–374. *With the italic texts inserted by Joseph Dai Nguyen*)

giục tôi thỏa vui hát một bài
 Nguyên chỉ giáo tôi thi ca bổng trầm,
 mà lưỡi lửa cõi thiên thượng hát
 Để tôi ngời Ngọn ân điển ngàn tầm,
 là Non cứu ân, Non cực lạc.

2. Đến đây là nhờ Chân Chúa phò trì,
 nguyện xây cất Ê-bên-ê-xe
 Nếu Cha đẹp lòng tôi dám nguyện kỳ,
 miền thiên quốc tôi sớm quay về
 Giê-xu kiếm tôi khi đang thất lạc,
 từng vơ vẩn cách xa đường thánh
 Suối huyết từ Ngài tuôn chảy rào rạt,
 vực tôi khỏi nanh sói hại hành.

3. Chính tôi đây nợ ơn Chúa nặng dày,
 Nợ kia cứ vẩn vương mãi hoài
 Khẩn xin Ngài dùng dây ái từ rày,
 buộc tâm vẩn vơ vào Ngài
 Tự nghiệm tánh tôi ưa xa thánh phụ,
 thường hay cách ly Cha từ ái
 Kính dâng lòng này cho Chúa Giê-xu,
 nguyện nay đóng niêm ân thiên đài.

Call for songs of loud-est praise.
 Teach me some me-lo-dious son-net,
 Sung by flam-ing tongues a-bove,
 Praise the mount, I'm fixed up-on it,
 Mount of Thy re-deem-ing love.

2. Hith-er-to Thy love has blest me;
 Thou hast brought me to this place;
 And I know Thy hand will bring me
 Safe-ly home by Thy good grace.
 Je-sus sought me when a strang-er,
 Wan-dering from the fold of God;
 He, to res-cue me from dang-er
 Bought me with His pre-cious blood.

3. Oh, to grace how great a debtor,
 Daily I'm constrained to be!
 Let Thy goodness as a fetter,
 Bind my wandering heart to Thee;
 Prone to wander, Lord i feel it,
 Prone to leave the God I love;
 Here's my heart, oh, take and seal it,
 Seal it for Thy courts above

OPENING PRAYER

Let us pray together:

O God,

You have created the universe with such splendor

That all of it rises up to praise you.

We, the people you have called to be your own,

Join with sun and moon, stars and mountains,

In singing hymns of glory to your wonderful name.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord,

who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,

one God for ever and ever. Amen.¹⁰⁸

MUSICAL RESPONSE

“Xuân Ngợi Ca – New Year, the season of singing.”

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Leader: Prepare our hearts, O Lord, to accept your word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that, we may also obey your will, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All: **Amen.**¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Saliers, *Upper Room Worshipbook*, 35.

¹⁰⁹ Saliers, *Upper Room Worshipbook*, 35.

FIRST READING*Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9 (NRSV)*

So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2 You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you. 6 You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" 7 For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? 8 And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? 9 But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

After the reading:

Leader: The Word of Life.

All: **Thanks be to God.**¹¹⁰

PSALM READING*Psalm Of Lament For Immigrants Of The Land*¹¹¹

Leader: O Lord, God of my salvation, when at night, I cry out in your presence, let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.
How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long must I bear suffering in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long, O God of provider, will you hide your face from me?

All: **Hear our prayer.**

Leader: O Lord, I cry out to you in the morning my prayer comes before you.
I left my home country because of injustice, war, and destruction. I came to this land, not familiar with its language and customs, to find hope for a better life.
Though I have eyes, I felt like I am blind.
Though I have ears and able to talk, I felt like I am deaf and dumb
Though I have a healthy physical body, I thought I am a disabled, useless person in the room.
Though I am capable and excellent in everything I do, no one offers me a promotion because of my disabilities.

All: **Hear our prayer.**

Leader: O Lord, I cry out to you in the evening, and my tears wet my bed.

¹¹⁰ Saliers, *Upper Room Worshipbook*, 35.

¹¹¹ "Psalm of for Immigrants of the Land" (based on Psalm 13, 88, and other psalms) existed because of the requirements for my DM722 Class Fall 2019. As a pastor of Vietnamese Alliance Church in the South Atlanta, here is my thought: "We are an immigrant community. We experienced life and death, war and destruction, able and disability. Many people in my church are currently suffering, both physically and psychologically, in their new lives in the States. Many people chose to live in the States, and they are willing to risk everything to be here. Others as political refugees who are forced by the Vietnamese government to leave their friends and families in Vietnam. I pray that this psalm of lament might help a faith community and its members to be able to negotiate with their issues at hand, such as poverty, immigration, family issues, etc. Thus, I hope their song of praise will sound because of their trust in the Almighty God's steadfast love who loves us unceasingly."

Though I am trying to be a good parent, my children cause me a great deal of stress. My children do not want to talk to me because I do not have time for them, and they feel shameful of my inabilities to speak the language of the land.

All: Hear our prayer.

Leader: O Lord, I am a stranger in the land, I suffer, and I am desperate.
O God, for my soul, is full of troubles, and my life draws near to death.
I am walking among those who go down to the pit,
I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.

All: Hear our prayer.

Leader: Hear my cry, O God; consider and answer my prayers!
Save me from my pit, and my time of troubles, O God the Provider!
Do not let my enemy rejoice because I am fearful and distressed
But I will sing my song of praise, my God of salvation.
Because I trust in you, you are my God Almighty.
And I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever.

All: Hear our prayer. Amen.

GOSPEL READING

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 (NRSV)

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3 (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) 5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” 6 He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ 8 You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” 14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15 there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” 21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, 22 adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

After the reading:

Leader: The Word of Life.

All: Thanks be to God.¹¹²

HOMILY

“The Tale of the Watermelon: Every Perfect Gift, is from God”

“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” (James 1:17, NRSV)

¹¹² Saliers, *Upper Room Worshipbook*, 35.

Long, long ago, during the time of the Hùng kings, there was an official named Mai An Tiêm. He was originally from a foreign kingdom. When he was just about seven or eight, the king purchased him from a merchant ship as a slave. When he grew up, he was upright in appearance and could remember and understand many kinds of matters. The king granted him the name Mai Yên and called him An Tiêm. The king also granted him a wife who gave birth to a boy. The king was very trusting and assigned him to many important projects in the kingdom.

Gradually he became rich. Everyone was terrified of him, especially the ruling elite who wanted to do business with him. An Tiêm became prideful. He often said: "All of the blessings and the possessions I got, I acquired on my own."

The king heard about it and got very angry and said: "He is working along my side, but he is arrogant, not grateful to his owner! Now I will bring his family to a place where there are no people in the middle of nowhere, and see if he can still acquire wealth or not?"

The king exiled Mai An Tiêm to the island of the Nga Sơn region. The four sides were covered with sand and water and bore no traces of human footsteps. The king in his mercy also left sufficient food and water for An Tiêm and his family to survive for three or four months.

An Tiêm's wife lamented that she would die in this place because there would be no food left after four months. Nevertheless, An Tiêm said: "God gives birth to me, and He will feed me too. To live and die is by God's will. Do not worry!"

A couple of days later, suddenly, An Tiêm saw a white bird flying back from the West, sitting at the top of the mountain, shouting for three words, spit seven black seeds of melon falling into the sand. Then the seeds bloomed into strings, growing and spreading dense like a vine along the ground. Eventually, many enormous dark green fruits started to sprout under the leaves.

An Tiêm happily said: "This is not an unusual fruit, but a godsend to feed me." Then he opened one of them, ate it, and felt the delicious taste of its refreshing. An Tiêm planted more of this fruit to eat. If he could not finish it, he exchanged it for rice or other food to feed his wife and children. However, he did not know what to call the fruit. Because a bird had brought the seeds from the West, he called them Tây Qua, or watermelon from the West.

The fishermen and the merchants who came by loved this kind of watermelon and considered it delicious. They wanted to buy and exchange their products for watermelon. Ultimately, the people living in the villages far away heard and want to buy seeds and grow them everywhere. People started calling An Tiêm the "parent of watermelon."

One day, when Mai An Tiêm was sitting on the beach, thinking about the way his life had turned out, he thought about the king, and he repented of what he had done. He carved his name on many watermelons and threw them into the waves, hoping they would carry the watermelons back to the Kingdom of Vietnam.

A fisherman found one of these watermelons on the beach and decided to take it to the palace as a gift to the king during Tết, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year. When the king saw the name of An Tiêm that was carved on the fruit, he remembered his long-exiled son. The king opened the dark green skin of the watermelon, tasted the red flesh of the fruit inside, and found it wonderfully refreshing. He thought this fruit was the best possible gift that could be bestowed on a king, better than all the many precious presents he had ever received.

The king thought about his love for Mai An Tiêm, and he forgave him. Two weeks after that, a ship sent by the king came to the desert island to bring Mai An Tiêm and his family back to the mainland. Then the king restored An Tiêm to his former position and returned all his possessions to him.

My Reflection

I retell this story of how the watermelon came to Vietnam many centuries ago because watermelon is the fruit that is always chosen to be put on the altar or to be used for decoration on Tết. Many people think watermelon brings good luck because of its red color. Others think of watermelon because of how the freshness of its juice quenches the thirst of those seated around the dinner table. Some think that watermelon will bring well-being throughout the year. This story is about Mai An Tiêm, whom the king of Vietnam adopted. He became successful, but he also became prideful. However, the watermelon's seed brought by a white bird and his repentance toward the king brought him back to the palace. The king restored him to his position alongside of him because of this red-colored fruit, the watermelon.

I think this story should be retold every Tết to remind our second-generation Vietnamese-American Christians of our Vietnamese culture and its association to Tết (VLNY). I hope that this story can be a bridge that connects Christian principles embedded in the Vietnamese culture and the understanding of how God (Mr. Heaven or Ông Trời) is the one who gives "every perfect gift, from above" to all Vietnamese.

Further, although the tradition of adorning our homes with red decorations symbolizes our belief that red brings blessings in the new year, I firmly believe that the watermelon, the red color of the refreshing juice, and how the Vietnamese tell the story, remind us of the blood of Jesus Christ, which he "shed for us" to clean us from our sins and restore us to our position as children of God at the Lord's Table of the Eucharistic celebration.

RESPONSE

Leader: Let us pray together.

All: I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary, Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell; The third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; The Holy catholic Church, the Communion of Saints; The Forgiveness of sins; The Resurrection of the body, And the Life everlasting. Amen.

CONFESSION

Leader: Let us confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another.

Silent confession

Leader: Let us pray together.

All: Gracious God, have mercy on us. In your compassion forgive us our sins, known and unknown, those things done and left undone. Uphold us by your Spirit so that we may live and serve you in newness of life, to the honor and glory of your holy name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹¹³

¹¹³ Saliers, *Upper Room Worshipbook*, 36.

DECLARATION OF PARDON

Leader: In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven people. Glory to God!

All: Alleluia! Amen.

THE PEACE

Leader: Let us offer one another signs of reconciliation and love.

OFFERING

Leader: As forgiven and reconciled children of God, let us now offer ourselves and our gifts.

A celebration song may be sung or played as the gifts of Tết (Vietnamese Lunar New Year) are brought to the Lord's table.

TAKING THE BREAD AND THE CUP

The minister receives the bread and wine and prepares the table.

*** THE GREAT THANKSGIVING**

Based on the "Great Prayer of Thanksgiving from a Multicultural Perspective" by Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, excerpted from *A Book of Reformed Prayers*, edited by Howard L. Rice & Lamar Williams, Jr. & A Celebration of Word & Table by Don E. Saliers, excerpted from Upper Room Worshipbook, Music and Liturgies for Spiritual Formation).

The people stand.

Minister: The Lord be with you.

All: And also with you.

Minister: Lift up your hearts.

All: We lift them up to the Lord.

Minister: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

All: It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Minister: "It is indeed good and right to give you thanks and praise, God of many names. You made a covenant with Noah, and caused nations, in their amazing diversity of culture, ethnicity and language, to spread over the face of the earth. As of old you led your people out of a land of enslavement to a land of promise, so too you led our ancestors and some of us into new lands of possibility, there to find you anew."¹¹⁴

**All: And so,
With your people on earth
and all the company of heaven
we praise your name and join their unending hymn
Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might**

¹¹⁴ Howard L. Rice and Lamar Williamson, Jr., eds., "Great Prayer of Thanksgiving from a Multicultural Perspective," in *A Book of Reformed Prayers*, 1st edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 170–171.

**Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.**

Minister: “In the fullness of time you sent Jesus,
in every aspect human as we are,
to grow up in a small town in Galilee
speaking with a distinct accent,
far from the seat of religious and civil power.
In his ministry he was challenged by a gentile mother
to rethink his stance into inclusivity,
beside Jacob’s well he was moved
by an encounter with a minority woman
to disclose his messianic identity.
On the last night he spent with his friends,
Jesus took an age-old tradition from his people
and transformed it into something new.
He took bread, the staple food of his land,
blessed and broke it, and gave it to those around him,
saying, “take, eat, this is my body, broken for you.
Whenever you do this, remember me.”
After supper he took a cup of wine,
the common drink of his people, and gave it to them,
saying, “Drink this, all of you,
This is the new covenant in my blood;
each time you do this, remember me.”¹¹⁵

All: Amen.

LORD’S PRAYER

Minister: And now, with the confidence of the children of God. Let us pray:

**All: Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours.
Now and for ever. Amen**

¹¹⁵ Rice and Williamson, Jr., *A Book of Reformed Prayers*, 170–171.

*** BREAKING OF THE BREAD**

The minister breaks the bread in silence:

Minister: Because there is one loaf, we who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. The bread which we break is a sharing in the body of Christ.

The minister lifts the cup in silence:

Minister: The cup over which we give thanks is a sharing in the blood of Christ

GIVING THE BREAD AND THE CUP

Vietnamese-style instrumental music may be offered as the gifts are shared and prayer continues.

*** PRAYER AFTER RECEIVING**

Minister: Let us pray:
We thank you, God, for inviting us to this table
where we have known the presence of Christ
and have received all Christ's gifts.
Strengthen our faith,
Increase our love for one another,
and let us show forth your praise in our lives,
through Jesus Christ our Savior.

All: Amen.¹¹⁶

*** DOXOLOGY** *“Tôn Vinh Chân Thần – Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow”*
Words by Thomas Ken, 1692, and music by Louis Bourgeois, 1551.

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him, all creatures here below;
Praise Him above, ye heav'nly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!

*** DISMISSAL WITH BLESSING**

Minister: God's blessing be with you,
Christ's peace be with you,
the Spirit's outpouring be with you,
now and always.

All: Amen.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Saliers, *Upper Room Worshipbook*, 41.

¹¹⁷ Saliers, *Upper Room Worshipbook*, 42.