

Samoan Lenten and Easter Celebration

by Jerry Ah Koui



The Archdiocese of Samoa-Apia is located in the South Pacific with a population of about 189,000 people, of which about 50,000 claim to be Roman Catholic. The Archdiocese' main center and offices are in Mulivai, Apia, the capital of Samoa. The Archdiocese is led by Archbishop Alapati Mataeliga, who was chosen to succeed Cardinal Pio Taofinuu upon his death.

In terms of the Archdiocese' observance of Lent and Easter, the Archdiocese generally follows the same traditions that other Catholic Churches around the world observe which include the Triduum, the Way of the Cross, fasting and giving alms. Samoans always abstain from eating

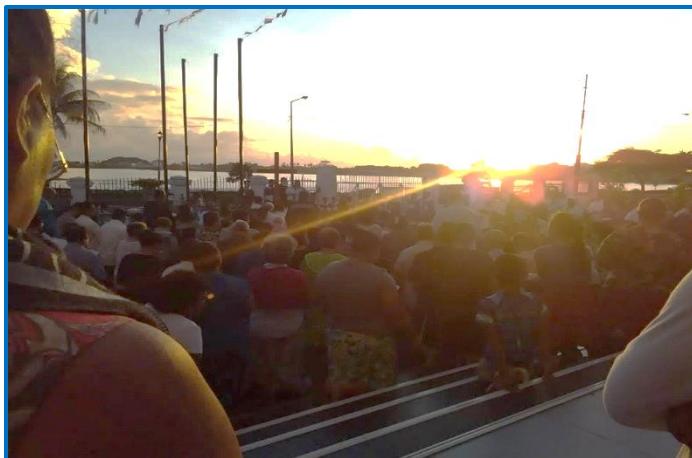
meat during the Lenten season, opting instead to eat fish.

Parishes around the islands of Samoa also plan and prepare activities during Holy Week. These activities may include plays about the suffering, death and rising of the Lord during Holy Week and Easter Sunday. There may also be retreats and evangelizing moments which focus on the Lord and his suffering that especially target the youth. It brings about a sense of fellowship and a move to involve more youth in the Church.



In terms of Samoan cultural aspects which have been infused into the traditions of the Catholic Church, there are some which are visible and some that are not so visible but are more ingrained because of the way the institutional Church was accepted by the people.

One of the prime and more visible examples of this combination of Samoan culture and Church tradition is displayed by the archbishop himself, giving his homily using the Tulaafale's (*Samoan chief*) staff and whisk. The fusion of two traditional symbols conveys to the people a sense of importance and reverence to both the speaker and the message being presented.



Another aspect of Samoan culture that is evident during the Lenten season is the Way of the Cross. Samoans conduct the Way of the Cross using the natural environment and its surroundings. As shown in the pictures, the Way of the Cross was conducted outside of the church with volunteers taking turns carrying the Jesus' cross around the church or from church to church, stopping at various designated stations.



A cultural element introduced into the Church's tradition in Samoa is observed during the offertory at Mass where a *Taupou* and *Aiulis* lead the offertory procession.

Another example of the intersection of Samoan culture and Catholic tradition is expressed again during Mass. In this tradition one or two people representing the community articulate what is called an *Ifoga*, (a public atonement of a wrongdoing), by kneeling in front of the altar while draped with a fine mat. The sign of acceptance is shown when this fine mat is removed, as this is the Samoan cultural expression of an apology for any major wrong done by one family against another family. In the religious and spiritual sense, the *Ifoga* is used to signify our formal request for forgiveness from our community to our Heavenly Father.



For Samoans who are dispersed around the world, they are inclined to observe religious-cultural traditions from the homeland but this is difficult due to liturgical norms and rubrics in various dioceses around the world.

For us Samoans who come from the Islands, the dioceses/parishes we belong to recognize cultural diversity and try to accommodate our culture and religious traditions but are also mindful of the fact to not alienate other cultures represented within these dioceses and parishes. We therefore celebrate the Lent and Easter seasons with a mixture or hybrid form of both the Samoan and American religious traditions and in our efforts to adapt and try to integrate, it works wherein our cultural traditions are infused with other cultures represented within the parishes that we serve here in the United States, giving us a sense of appreciation of the diversity of the Catholic Church in the United States.