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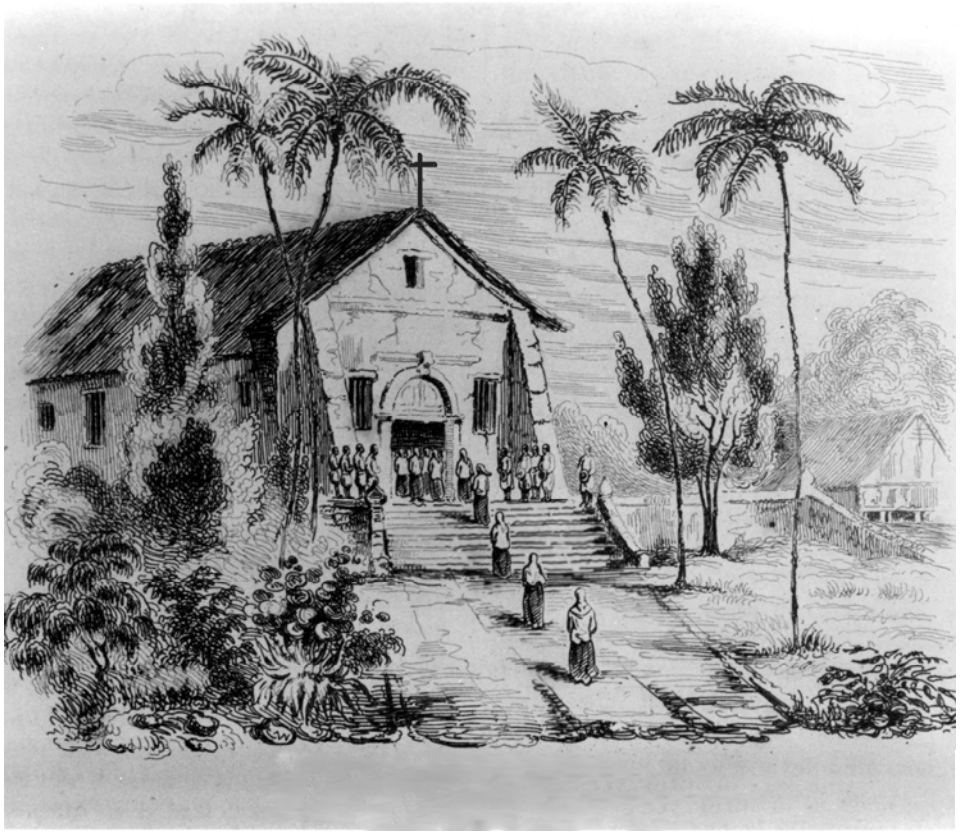
THE CHURCH IN MICRONESIA



Francis X. Hezel, SJ

A Fine Pedigree

The church has a long pedigree in Micronesia. Import it may be, but it is surely one of the very oldest–older than the store, the government office, the pool table, the baseball diamond and the bar. It is even older than the school, an institution that the church itself introduced to the islands. Today, more than 300 years after the first church was established in Micronesia, Christianity has found a lasting place in the social landscape and is woven into the life of people everywhere in the region. You can't drive any road for more than a few minutes without passing a church; you won't be able to visit any outer island, no matter how remote or sparsely populated, that doesn't have a church. The church, once brought by Westerners, has been digested by the local cultures everywhere and is now a standard part of these island societies.

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When we use the word "church" here, we mean Christianity in all of its variety–from the mainline Congregational or United Church of Christ, to the Catholic Church, to the evangelical churches founded by Liebenzell, to the later evangelical churches such as the Baptists and the Assemblies of God, including also the Seventh Day Adventists and Latter Day Saints. Denominational differences are of little concern here; they will be blurred to keep our focus on the institution of the Christian church itself. This article offers a backward look at how the church began, how it has impacted on the islands and been shaped in turn by local cultures, and what challenges it faces today.

for God's people. At one time these people may have needed schools, at another time medicine, at still another time a working credit union. Whatever other needs they may have today should help shape the agenda of any Christian church, even if the church itself is only able to provide token assistance in meeting the need. In doing at least this much, it is echoing Christ's message of love–for the sick and lame, for the troubled, and for the hungry as well as for those who gather to hear the words of life.

It is tempting for the church to bask in its pride of place in the community rather than risk walking the alleyways of Babylon.

Finally, the church is called on to respond generously to the new religious groups that have begun work in the islands in the last twenty or thirty years. Many of these new groups may be mistrusted and even feared for their aggressive evangelism. Indeed, some of them appear reluctant to have anything to do with the older, more established churches. The new climate of understanding and collaboration among older church denominations, the fruit of the last few decades of ecumenism, represents a hard-won achievement after a century or more of suspicion. The challenge for the Micronesian church is not only to preserve the ecumenism that has been achieved but to extend it to embrace the new groups as well. After all, as we church people preach, we are all brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Challenges of the Church Today

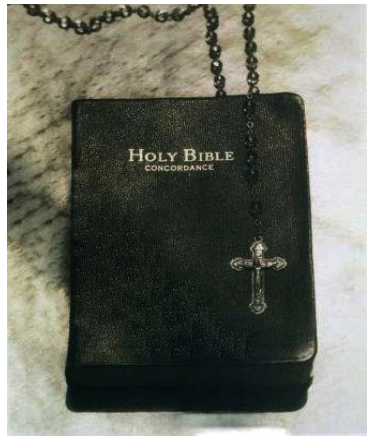
The church in Micronesia has made great progress in meeting the challenge of inculturation; today it is tightly woven into the fabric of society. The danger, however, is that the church may have become too domesticated. Fitting comfortably into the large niche that has been carved for it, the church might be a little too accommodating to society. If the risk of the past was that the church might overlook the value of island culture, the danger in our own time is that the church might become a prisoner to culture. The church is called to be a prophetic voice calling whole peoples, not just individuals, to the service of the Lord. It is tempting for local churches to abandon their prophetic role on the grounds that the Micronesian way is non-confrontational.

The church in Micronesia is tightly woven into the fabric of society. The danger, however, is that the church may have become too domesticated.

The church in Micronesia also faces the danger of becoming too inward-looking. It can easily become so preoccupied with its membership, prestige and wealth that it loses sight of its broader evangelizing mission. Just as fund-raising is competitive in the Pacific, so is the design and construction of churches, with each local community eager to outdo the others. Someone once stated, with some justice, that competitive church-building is the national sport in Micronesia. It is tempting for the church to bask in its pride of place in the community rather than risk walking the alleyways of Babylon. It is safer to tend its flock exclusively instead of offering outreach to the broader community, to restrict its message to narrowly defined religious topics rather than attempt its larger task of providing healing service to the world.

If the church is to be faithful to the message of God's love that it is called to proclaim, it must continually embody this in loving service

The Origins



In June 1668, six Jesuit priests, together with lay mission helpers and a force of Spanish troops, landed on Guam to begin evangelizing the people of the Mariana Islands. This event signaled the arrival of the church in the area that we know as Micronesia. As a matter of fact, it also marked the earliest sustained church work anywhere in the entire Pacific.

The arrival of Catholic priests was followed by a period of intermittent hostilities between the Spanish and local people and a disastrous loss of life resulting from diseases that the Europeans introduced. By the turn of the century, in 1700, both the flag and the faith were planted; Catholicism was established as the major religion in the island group, which remained a Spanish colony for next two hundred years. Two Jesuit attempts to introduce Catholicism to the neighboring western Carolines–in Sonsorol in 1696 and in Ulithi in 1731–were unsuccessful, however. Missionary casualties were high: 15 Jesuits, two or three dozen mission helpers, and many of the troops assigned to protect them lost their lives in this pioneering attempt to establish the church in the area. But they were the last missionaries to be killed by local people. Henceforth, the way would be clear to found the church in other parts of the region without fear of harm.

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It was only in the mid-19th century that Christianity was first introduced to the rest of Micronesia. Not long after American

whalers discovered the attractions of Pohnpei and Kosrae as refreshment ports, reportedly "deepening the shadows of heathenism" with the corrupting influence of their own conduct, American Board missionaries and their Hawaiian coworkers founded a mission in the eastern Carolines in 1852. Over the course of the next two or three decades, they established growing congregational churches on Pohnpei, Kosrae and the Marshalls. By the early 1870s, the American Board missionaries had trained a group of Pohnpeian mission teachers, some of whom were deployed to Chuuk to the west to bring the church to the Mortlocks. Not long afterwards a few of these men and their wives had made their way from these atolls to the high islands of Chuuk where, aided by American missionaries, they quickly established the faith throughout the entire island group. By the end of the 19th century, the Congregational Church was solidly established throughout the eastern part of Micronesia: Pohnpei, Kosrae, Chuuk and the Marshalls.

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When Spain pressed its claim for title to the Caroline Islands and assumed control in 1886, Spanish Capuchin missionaries were landed on most major island groups to establish Catholicism there. In Yap and Palau, this was the initial contact of islanders with Christianity; while in the east, Catholic missionaries would contest the fields in which American Protestant missionaries had already labored for twenty or thirty years. In 1899, when Germany acquired the islands that the Spanish had once ruled, the German Capuchin priests and brothers who replaced the Spanish Capuchins continued to extend Catholicism throughout the region. Priests were soon sent to Chuuk, where they rapidly gained adherents. Meanwhile, Missionaries of the Sacred Heart took up work in the Marshalls, focusing chiefly on the islands of Jaluit and Likiep.

By this time, Congregational churches were operating largely on their own under local pastors. The number of American and

instructing people on how to improve the quality of their drinking water. In more recent times, Pastor Edmund Kalau has provided medical assistance to the people of the more remote atolls through his airline and the mission vessel *Seahaven*.

Long before dispensaries were opened in the villages, church pastors dispensed medicines, bandaged wounds, administered shots, and sometimes transported the sick to the nearest hospital. Medical supplies were routed to the churches from charitable organizations as well as from the government itself. The pastor, after all, was the best educated and often the best provisioned individual in the village, and so was expected to care for the bodily needs of his parishioners in the fashion of the Good Shepherd. Generations of pastors did so during all those years when the sick had no one else, other than the local herbalist or healer, to whom they might turn.

Neither missionaries nor the local pastors who followed them have ever been exclusively taken up with the care of souls, for they have recognized from the outset the link that exists between the body and soul–the material and spiritual dimensions in humans. Just as they taught people to read and write, and dispensed medicine when they were sick, the churches have instructed people in new techniques of building and farming, improved sanitation, and even defended their people from the depredations of foreigners. Protestants and Catholics alike were a vital force in producing radio programs on development themes, with some of the smaller Protestant groups eventually starting their own FM radio stations. Churches of all denominations have had a large stake in youth work; most have sponsored youth groups that met regularly for religious instruction and recreational activities. What we might call human development has always been an integral part of church work in Micronesia, whatever the theology it has used to justify such efforts.

In Micronesia, as in many other places throughout the world, Christianity introduced education where there had been none. Because of the value the church placed on Scripture, it played a pioneering role in the development of literacy. Even when public school systems were finally established, church-run schools, generally known for their superior quality, lifted educational standards. Today, private church-run schools enroll only about ten percent of all schoolchildren in the region, perhaps half of the percentage that they educated during the early 1960s, the heyday of mission schooling. Nonetheless, the private schools have preserved their reputation for academic excellence up to the present.

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Christian missions at times have also made an important contribution in providing health care to island people. A little-known Jesuit brother, Jacopo Chavarri, assigned to the Marianas in 1693, served for 50 years as the pharmacist for a people afflicted with a host of Western illnesses that claimed the lives of most of the population. Luther Gulick, the Congregational pastor-physician serving on Pohnpei during the dreadful smallpox epidemic in 1854 that wiped out nearly half the population, inoculated hundreds on the island, thus saving their lives. Fr. Gebhard Rüdell, the German Capuchin who began the Catholic mission in the Mortlocks in 1911, found the people reeling from the shock of a major typhoon that had devastated their islands four years earlier and suffering from a virulent typhus epidemic that had taken many lives. Summoning medical supplies and a physician from Pohnpei, the priest began

Hawaiian missionaries had dropped sharply over the years and would fall off even more in the early 20th century. Meanwhile, German evangelical Liebenzell missionaries entered the scene in 1907. They began their efforts in the eastern Carolines, but by 1929 Liebenzell missionaries expanded their work to include the western Carolines, soon spreading throughout the area from Palau to the outer islands of Chuuk to serve as a counterbalance to Catholic efforts.

Catholic missionary efforts continued throughout the 20th century, since the replacement of foreign missionaries with local church leaders has always lagged behind the Protestant churches.

Catholic missionary efforts continued throughout the 20th century, since the replacement of foreign missionaries with local church leaders has always lagged behind the Protestant churches, in good part because of the demands of priestly celibacy and the long seminary training requirements. Throughout the Japanese period, Spanish Jesuits provided the manpower needed to staff the churches in the Northern Marianas and Carolines and Marshalls. After World War II, American Jesuits assumed responsibility for the Catholic Church in the region until very recently when a local bishop was appointed in the Carolines (1995) and the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart were asked to resume the work they had begun in the Marshalls a century earlier (2008). Meanwhile, American Capuchins worked with diocesan priests in the Northern Marianas before turning over the full responsibility for pastoral work to the latter in the early 1990s.

New religious groups began to arrive in the 1960s. The Assemblies of God flourished in the Marshalls and eastern Carolines, Baptists began work on many islands, and other evangelical churches were introduced. Seventh Day Adventists, Latter Day Saints, and Jehovah Witnesses all began their mission during this period.

Drawing the Line on Culture

In the early stages of their work, missionaries established markers to distinguish their converts from the general population. These markers, which served to offer Christian followers a public identity, were more often than not determined in opposition to features of the traditional culture that the missionaries regarded as pagan. On Pohnpei and Kosrae, for instance, those seeking admission into the Protestant Church were expected to abstain from sakau, a drink that was used in the ancient religious rites and taken as preparation for communicating with the spirits. Sakau, with its ceremonial uses, symbolized adherence to the old ways. Rejection of the drink, on the other hand, signified that a person was ready to make a definitive break with everything in the culture that the missionaries judged to be idolatrous or superstitious. In the Marshalls, where tattooing was invested with religious significance, those who wished to become members of the Congregational Church were enjoined to refuse to submit to tattooing when they came of age.

Local dances were judged to be licentious, not just because of suggestive bodily movements, but because of the context in which they were held.

In Chuuk and the central Carolines, as in many other parts of the Pacific, participation in local dances often became the shibboleth. Local dances were judged to be licentious, not just because of suggestive bodily movements, but because of the context in which they were held. Even into the early 20th century local dances were a carnival-style event, often lasting several days and accompanied by feasting, all of which created a setting that encouraged a sense of abandon among the island population. Sexual excesses were an expected outcome of such events. The German colonial authorities in Chuuk, who at first encouraged a revival of traditional dancing, were forced to impose strict limits on the duration of island dances following the turn of the twentieth century after one of the atolls hosted its neighbors for a dancing display that lasted two and a half months. At the end of it all, the atoll's food supplies had been depleted, and the exhausted population faced near starvation for the

for girls. The schools, which operated throughout the next century, were the beginning of a long tradition of Christian involvement in education. The Congregational missionaries in the Carolines operated small schools throughout the region in the mid-19th century long before a public school system existed. A printing press was standard mission equipment in those years, when pastors were heavily involved in translating scripture into the local languages for their flock. Edward Doane, an American Board missionary in the Marshalls, wrote in 1861 that eager school children milled around the handpress and snatched the broadsheets to read even before the ink was dry. Reading was all the rage in the islands the missionaries served, Doane happily noted, and yearly mission summaries of the day tallied "readers" as well as converts.

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As their flocks grew, American Protestant missionaries founded training schools, roughly the equivalent of high schools, where they could prepare the local men who would replace them as pastors and teachers and the women who would become their wives and supervise lessons for village children. The two most famous of these were the training school in Ohwa, Pohnpei, and an even larger one in Mwot, Kosrae. From these schools would issue the first local missionaries to be sent to other islands in the region.

Catholics, especially during the 20th century, opened some excellent schools of their own. The German Missionaries of the Sacred Heart operated a full elementary school on Jaluit, in the Marshalls, that soon became the premiere school in all of Micronesia. After World War II, American Jesuits set up parish elementary schools and later high schools throughout the Caroline and Marshall Islands. The best known and most highly regarded, of course, were Xavier High School and PATS, both of which accepted students from every part of the region.

to place, but everywhere the day is special. When an international group recently scheduled the groundbreaking of a new building on a Sunday morning, they were roundly derided for the timing of the event and very few showed up for the ceremony.

The church has worked its way into the soul and heart of the society so that island society and the church are closely intertwined today, for better or for worse.

Meetings of any sort in the islands today begin with a prayer even before the formal welcome. As secular-minded as they might otherwise be, international organizations and foreign groups are always advised to select a pastor from one of the local churches to handle this obligatory formality. It would be tempting to suggest that Christianity has had some influence on the agenda of many of these meetings, particularly those that deal in the currency of human rights. Let's just say that the impact of the church has gone well beyond insuring that society makes time for religious activity, whether at the start of meetings or on the first day of the week. The church has worked its way into the soul and heart of the society in a variety of other ways so that island society and the church are closely intertwined today, for better or for worse.

The Church's Contributions

High on the list of church contributions to island society is education. The first formal educational institution anywhere in the Pacific was San Juan de Letran on Guam, opened in 1669, the year after the missionaries arrived in the Marianas. A few years later another mission school was opened

next several months. In Ulithi, as in some of the other atolls, the sexual abandon associated with dances continued periodically until well into the 20th century. It is not surprising, then, that dancing was near the top of most missionaries' prohibition list.

In islands where women traditionally went bare-breasted and men often wore little more than a loincloth, Western clothing soon came to be a distinguishing feature of Protestant converts. Islanders everywhere happily donned trousers and shirts or calico dresses at the missionaries' injunction, if only because they considered foreign clothing a stylish advance rather than an imposition. Marshallese chiefs, who had the money to do so, outfitted themselves in suits and vests and beamed from under top hats, despite the heat and humidity.

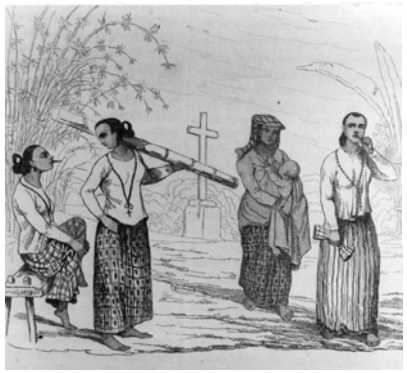
In its initial phase at least, Christianity in all its denominational forms tended to define itself in opposition to the culture.

Even Catholic missionaries, generally more tolerant of cultural differences, insisted on conformity at times. A Franciscan nun who had just arrived in Yap in 1905 described, in an unintended but striking allegory of deculturation, how the young school girls would gather on Sunday afternoon preparing to begin the new school week, discard the grass skirts they customarily wore in their own villages and don the dresses required of them in the classroom. In Catholic schools of that day as well as Protestant, what was acceptable in the village did not meet dress standards in the mission school. The same nun noted that at meal times the nuns would watch to make sure that the girls were using their knives and forks rather than their fingers.

In its initial phase at least, Christianity in all its denominational forms tended to define itself in opposition to the culture. Even today some of the newer religious groups seem to adopt the same strategy as they rail against certain cultural practices, denouncing them as the deceits of darkness. Older denominations, on the other hand, have had to come to terms with the culture and its practices. In doing so, they tend to eschew the simple dichotomies that once served to distinguish the light of the gospel from the darkness of the traditional culture.

Reflecting the Features of the Culture

If the church initially defined itself in contrast to the culture, it soon was forced to come to terms with that culture. As this happened, it would absorb some of the cultural forms and begin to reflect the values of the society that surrounded it. This slow process, which varied in manner and degree from place to place as the gospel was digested by local congregations, may be called inculturation.



Changes in church leadership may provide one example. As long as Congregational churches remained under the general supervision of American overseers until the early 1960s or so, the number of island pastors remained limited. In 1965, for instance, two pastors served the entire population of Kosrae, while Pohnpei had no more than a handful of pastors, with church teachers leading the weekly services in most of the churches. After the American supervisors were withdrawn, the number of pastors, teachers and deacons multiplied. Today Kosrae has 14 full pastors and Pohnpei has more than 160. The number of pastors in Chuuk and the Marshalls increased in much the same way, so that a single

theological basis for regarding even the stranger with sympathy. Denominational differences within Christianity led to wariness and even recriminations at times, but there were no violent eruptions among Christians of different denominations.

The church had a strong hand in abolishing the clubhouse prostitution that was a traditional feature of village life in the Marianas, Palau and Yap. Christianity took a strong ethical stand, and a decidedly counter-cultural one, when it asserted that extramarital sexual relationships were wrong. As difficult as this teaching must have been for their converts, the early Jesuit priests in the Marianas recounted one story after another of women who were prepared to surrender everything, even their lives, to avoid transgressing this law. Even if the church did not put an end to youthful sexual escapades as such, it did engender a sense that such adventures were not as harmless as they were once thought to be. To engage in activity that could shatter marriages and break hearts can not simply be written off as natural self-expression. In a day in which sexually transmitted diseases, high teenage pregnancy rates, sexual assault and incest have become serious problems, the church's message could be seen as prophetic.

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Observance of the Sabbath by abstaining from work and by attending church services was another gift from the church to society. So successfully was this practice grafted onto society at large that up to the present day the common word for Saturday can be literally translated as "Day of Preparation" in the Chuukese, Pohnpeian and Marshallese languages since food was prepared on this day for the entire weekend. On those islands where Catholics, who were never as rigorous as Protestants in enforcing the Sabbath ban on work, arrived first, Saturday is simply called *Sabado*, the Spanish loanword for that day of the week. The strictness with which Sunday rest is observed today varies considerably from place

Imprint of the Church on the Islands

If the evolving church was clearly stamped with marks of the culture into which it had been introduced, the reverse was also true. In time, the island cultures began to exhibit the imprint of the church.

The church made perhaps an even greater contribution through the gospel ethic of forgiveness that it preached

As Christianity came to be accepted, the islands on which the new religion had taken root were pacified; the hostilities that had periodically broken out between rival villages were terminated. It is true that the colonial authorities encouraged, even demanded, the cessation of warfare. Still, the churches contributed immeasurably to maintaining the peace simply through the presence of a local pastor who could serve as something of an ombudsman and mediate in intra-village tensions. The church made perhaps an even greater contribution through the gospel ethic of forgiveness that it preached. Missionary letters abound in stories of individuals who showed a heroic readiness to turn the other cheek even after suffering an injury that would have been a *causa belli* just a few years before. Some 30 years ago, a Chuukese man holding the office of teacher in his church, gathered his family together after one of his children had been killed in a sexual assault and admonished his sons not to revenge themselves on the offender and his kin. Such heroic forbearance may not be the normal response even today, but it would have been unthinkable in the prechristian past.

Even beyond this, the church offered a large banner under which smaller social and political units could unite. This was especially important on those islands in which there was no paramount chief. Belief in Christ provided a bond between people of different locales just as membership in the same clan had in the traditional times and continues to do today in many places. But a shared faith embraced a far larger portion of the population than clan ties, while providing a

congregation may well have three or four ordained pastors at its head.

Church titles–deacons and teachers as well as pastors–have proliferated not just because they are needed for the church's smooth functioning, but so that they can be passed out to distinguished members of the congregation to recognize their contribution in much the same way that titles were once bestowed in the old chiefly systems of these islands. The Catholic Church, as it has inculturated, has shown the same tendency in recent years. In Chuuk, for instance, there are now more than 40 ordained deacons, with as many as four or five on a small island in the lagoon. Today church titles, besides being a call to service, also serve as a path to prestige for those who hold them.

As long as Congregational churches remained under the general supervision of American overseers , the number of island pastors remained limited.

Even the way island churches support themselves is distinctive. At fund-raising events in Congregational churches individuals may file up to a table in the front of the church and put down their contributions while the congregation sings lively hymns. More often than not, these events reflect the island love of song and display. Kava plants and pigs may be raffled off at Catholic church fundraising events on Pohnpei. A Catholic gathering to raise funds for a new church in Palau featured bands, take-out food, and other sales–all in a party atmosphere. In Chuuk, an old cultural form known as the *tëëchap* is frequently used, with each clan presenting in turn an envelope containing the money it has raised in advance, as the amount is marked on a board. Those who wish to add to their own clan's tally are encouraged to do so publicly. The competitive gift-giving contributes to the festivity while also encouraging more lavish generosity on the part of the congregation

Church worship, too, eventually has taken on a distinctive island flavor. For decades after the arrival of the church, religious services

in the islands were almost indistinguishable from those held in other parts of the world. Then, following the Second Vatican Council, Catholics consciously began to make liturgical adaptations aimed at making use of cultural symbols. Flower leis were placed on the heads of the newly baptized to signify the title they were receiving with the sacrament, and they were presented to the one presiding at the liturgy along with the gifts of bread and wine. In some churches large feasting bowls were carried up, in time with traditional dance steps, at the presentation of gifts during special liturgies. Dances and chants have been incorporated into various parts of the Catholic services. In a ritual evocative of the Pohnpeian ceremony conducted when forgiveness was being asked of a chief, sakau was symbolically offered to the Lord in communal reconciliation services held on Pohnpei. In Yap, famous for its dignified dances, distinctive island wailing and stately women's dances were introduced into the Holy Week services.

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Church music, in the meantime, had undergone changes of its own. At first it was a cappella congregational singing of numbers translated from the standard European or American hymnals. It was not long, however, before islanders themselves began composing hymns with a distinctive island sound. Instrumental music, absent at first, was eventually supplied by organs, guitars, and often enough today by keyboards. In churches around the region one can recognize everything from the old American church favorites like "Bringing in the Sheaves" to songs done by Abba or Elton John, not

to mention innumerable songs of a distinctive island composition arranged in three or four voices. The richness and variety of religious music today represents church inculturation at its best.

Celebrations of major church feast days have taken on the exuberance of island life. Congregational churches in eastern Micronesia–Pohnpei, Kosrae, Chuuk and the Marshalls–have adopted the custom of rotating pastors once or twice a year. The visiting pastors are feted during the week and sent off at its end with household furnishings, food and other gifts from the community they visited. Christmas celebrations are distinctive in each island group. In Kosrae, the congregation practices months ahead of time for a glittering marching display that is offered in the main church by various sub-groups, all performed in beautifully tailored uniforms and dresses. In the Marshalls, uniformed youth groups perform line dancing routines known as jeptas (originally from the word "chapter," suggesting its biblical origins), with the whole performance sometimes lasting as long as an entire day and night. Catholics in Chuuk are more likely to celebrate feasts like Christmas and Easter with a long gathering, or *mwiich*, in the parish meeting house following church services. There young people will present dramatizations of the events of these feasts, which are interspersed with short talks and hymns, many composed especially for the celebration.

Celebrations of major church feast days have taken on the exuberance of island life.

In the Marianas, islands that remains strongly Catholic, villages celebrate the feast day of their patron saint with a fiesta even to the present day. The fiesta, with its mass, procession behind the statue of their patron, and the feast afterwards, bears all the outward signs of Spanish influence during the long period of that country's colonial rule. Yet, these fiestas reflect in equal measure something much older–the Micronesian partiality to a party, especially one that celebrates their locality and offers them the opportunity to show off their capacity to host guests in great number.