

# Catholics in Vietnam

## Tran Van Dinh

Somewhere in the National Archives of the United States lies one of the very first, if not *the* first, diplomatic correspondence between this country and Vietnam. On August 16, 1849, President Zachary Taylor wrote to "His Majesty the Magnificent King of Anam." The letter reads in part:

Great and Good Friend!

To you, my Brother, the Great and Mighty King of Anam, I send love and goodwill, in this letter, by the hands of Mr. Joseph Balestier, my faithful and trusty Envoy and Minister to South Eastern Asia, to whom I give express orders to deliver it into your own Royal hands in order that you may understand how greatly I have been grieved to hear it said, that the Captain of one of my warships had misbehaved himself, four years ago, (which I have only heard of lately, for the first time, because your country is so far from mine) by landing men from his ship in Toorong Bay and firing on your people, and killing and wounding some of them. . . .

The letter was not all apologies. It contains threats as well:

. . . America, my Country, is very large—very great. I have a great many warships, fireships and trading ships. . . . I must let you know that if you or your officers seek to revenge yourselves upon any Amer-

icans, for what ought to be forgotten and forgiven after my letter has come to your hands, that, then, you will force me to send my warships, fireships and soldiers to Annam. . . .

The letter concludes:

May your God and my God prevent the shedding of any more blood between my people and your people, My Brother.

President Taylor chose not to mention the details of the "misbehavior" of the "Captain of one of my warships." On May 10, 1845, Captain John ("Mad Jack") Percival of the USS Constitution, which was in Asian waters, received information that the Vietnamese emperor was about to execute the French bishop Dominique Lefebvre in Hue, then the capital of Vietnam. He put in at Toorong—now Da Nang—the nearest port, marched a detachment of Marines ashore, captured several high Vietnamese officials and held them hostage until four days later when Hue assured him that the bishop would not be harmed. The U.S. armed intervention to protect a Catholic bishop and the ensuing mini-Mylai were preludes to the present barbarous war.

This is but one incident in the generally misrepresented and misunderstood history of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. This misunderstanding is increased, unhealed wounds are reopened and new conflicts created when, for example, President Nixon affirms, as he did on November 3, 1969, that "with the sudden collapse of our support, these atrocities of Hue<sup>o</sup> would become the nightmare of the entire nation—and particularly for the million and a half

---

TRAN VAN DINH's last post in the South Vietnamese diplomatic service was that of chargé d'affaires in Washington in 1963. In 1960 he was a member of the South Vietnamese Cabinet, holding the portfolio of Director General of Information and Member of the National Security Council. He was representative in North America of the Overseas Vietnamese Buddhist Association and is now Professor of Humanities at Dag Hammarskjöld College, Columbia, Md.

---

<sup>o</sup> In the "bloodbath" at Hue in 1968, my own brother and nephew, listed officially as Viet Cong victims, were actually killed by U.S. bombs. For details, refer to my article, "Fear of a Bloodbath," in *The New Republic* (December 6, 1969).

Zachary Taylor,  
President of the United States of America,

To His Majesty the Magnificent King of Siam.

Great and Good Friend!  
To you, my Brother, the Great and Mighty  
King of Siam, I send love and goodwill, in this letter  
by the hands of Mr. Jos. Balesier, my faithful  
and trusty Envoy and Minister to South Eastern  
Asia to whom I have express orders to deliver it into  
your own Royal hands, in case that you may  
understand him exactly. I have also ordered to  
hear it read, that the Captain of one of my war-

Catholic refugees who fled to South Vietnam when the Communists took over the North in 1954."

The President's statistics are inflated. According to *Vietnam Past and Present*, written by Mr. Thai Van Kiem, a Vietnamese diplomat and scholar and published in Saigon in 1956 under the patronage of the South Vietnam Department of Information and the National Commission for UNESCO, the total number of refugees was 887,895, of whom 85 per cent, or 754,710, were Catholics. And of the approximately 100,000 Vietnamese who left the South for the North in 1954, several thousand of them were Catholics. In order to discuss seriously the situation of Catholics in Vietnam, one must have some knowledge of their history.

The evangelization of Vietnam started in a climate of good will and tolerance on the part of the Vietnamese who, in their history, had received and absorbed Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism from both China and India, refining them to fit their original beliefs and customs. When the Spanish and Portuguese missionaries arrived in Vietnam in the sixteenth century, they were received with courtesy and friendliness. An Italian Jesuit, Cristoforo Borro, who landed in Vietnam in 1618, wrote the first account of the country to be published in Europe, praising the Vietnamese as the friendliest of all Asian peoples. By 1658 there were 300,000 Christians, mostly among the poor and uneducated.

Vietnam was then under the political rule of two rival families: the Lê in the North and the Nguyễn in the South. Missionary work was carried on by the Society of Foreign Missions in the South (from 1615) and by the Society of Foreign Missions in the North (from 1626). Both missions answered to the French Catholic hierarchy.

The most impressive missionary at the time was Father Alexandre de Rhodes (born in Avignon,

France, in 1591). He was a scholar and perfected the Quoc Ngu (Vietnamese written phonetically in the Latin alphabet devised by early Portuguese evangelists), but he was totally ignorant of, and completely prejudiced against, established Vietnamese religions. In his "Catéchisme pour ceux qui veulent reussir le baptême divisé en huit jours"—"Catechism in Eight Days"—he described Buddhism this way:

Let us begin with Buddhism which originated from India. Its falsehood and untruthful character stem directly from its very source. About 3,000 years after the world was created, there was an Indian king by the name of Tinphan who had a very intelligent but arrogant son. At first, this young man married the first daughter of the king in the next kingdom and then left his home for the ascetic life without her consent. He practiced magical powers either to gain the admiration of the people or to be able to debate with other demons—nobody knew for sure. He learned from Alala and Calala and his doctrine stood half-way between these two old demons. These two old demons taught him the atheist religion and gave him the name of Thich Ca (or Sakya). . . . This religion [Buddhism] has two sides. The outer consists in the impious worship of the images, and, in many fables, chants that lead the people to worship of superstitious idols and to committing of countless sins. The second and inner side is much worse because it is atheism and lets loose all kinds of sins. This is poison . . . [cited in *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, by Thich Nhat Han].

The "Catechism in Eight Days" not only branded Buddha "a black liar" but also attacked Confucianism and Taoism, the two other pillars of Vietnamese civilization and culture. No wonder Vietnamese emperors and Vietnamese scholars, all Buddhists and Confucians, reacted strongly against the "Catholic

blasphemy." But no repressions were ordered by the Vietnamese court until the insurrection of 1833, in which the Catholics were implicated. Emperor Minh Mang, whose father, Gia Long, was helped by French missionaries to accede to the throne, issued two edicts of persecution. The second edict, in 1833 (the first one was in 1825), reads in part: "For many years, men from the Occident have been preaching the religion of Dato [Catholicism] and deceiving the public, teaching them that there is a mansion of supreme bliss and a dungeon of dreadful misery. They have no respect for Buddha and no reverence for ancestors."

Between 1833 and 1838 seven missionaries were put to death. The Vietnamese courts which decreed these persecutions were not unaware of the consequences of such actions. Nor were they ignorant of rising European imperialism. France, in the nineteenth century, was competing with Britain for the conquest of an empire in the Far East and considered Vietnam a strategic piece of real estate. But to conquer Vietnam the French government needed information which could then be supplied only by the missionaries. The French already had a pretext, of course: the persecution of the Catholics. Thus the alliance between the Church and imperialist France, though an uneasy one, was forged under the rosy label of *mission civilisatrice*.

In 1847, upon the report that a French missionary had been sentenced to death, French warships entered Da Nang and opened fire on Vietnamese junks. (The report proved false.) In 1858, French gunboats again attacked Da Nang and this time occupied it. The French military conquest of Vietnam began, with the missionaries often acting as fifth columnists. Inferior in armaments, unprepared, yet with a long tradition of refusing foreign dominations, the Vietnamese resisted the French domination. That resistance, under different forms and different leaderships, continued for a century and ended with the French military disaster at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. During this period, defying their own foreign hierarchy, many Vietnamese Catholics fought with their compatriots. But to many Vietnamese the Catholics were to blame for having "brought the foreign snakes to bite the home chickens."

Under the French colonial regime, the Catholic Church in Vietnam, which aimed at the total evangelization of the country, was not always in full agreement with the French government, which was primarily interested in the economic exploitation of the territory. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church made full use of privileges granted to its hierarchy. Catholic churches and missionaries were not restricted by law in their work, although "native" religionists were. As late as 1950, traces of religious discrimination persisted in Royal Decree No. 10, issued on August 6, 1950, fixing the status of all associations except the Christian missions, which were beyond the reach of

the decree. Oddly enough, but not surprisingly, the more favors the Catholics received from the French the more they were discredited in the eyes of the Vietnamese, who hated the French domination. This dilemma was best expressed in a statement by a French bishop, Monsignor Eloy (of Vinh, now part of North Vietnam), in 1925: "If France were to get out of Indochina to-morrow, all the Christians would be exterminated." Similar statements came from the White House in the 1960's, and more so during the Nixon Administration, using this not as solid reason to end the war but to prolong it. The Vatican itself in the late 1920's saw the eventual collapse of the French colonial regime. As one bishop, writing in *Les Missions Catholiques de Lyon* in 1929, put it:

While the conquered country was being exploited, the Church, for her part, had not renounced her doctrine but the political circumstances and the mentality of the period partly tied her hands. . . . At the present time, it is certain that the foreigners—to be precise the Europeans—have a bad image in all the countries of the Orient. They asked for it. The day was bound to come when they would be detested as invaders and tyrants. That day has come. . . . What an advantage, what security for Catholicism if, at the table of new-born national representatives could be seated, with an equal authority, prelates, sons of the native soil with the mandate of their parishoners. . . .

The prelates-sons of the native soil of Vietnam were late to be named, and it was not until 1933 that a Vietnamese bishop was appointed, and only in 1960 that the Vietnamese Church was Vietnamese—thanks to Pope John XXIII.

But the liberation and the Vietnamization of the Church was not so easy. In 1930 the Missions detected a new danger: communism. The Indochinese Communist Party was formed that year in Hong Kong by Ho Chi Minh. The Catholic hierarchy in Vietnam seized that opportunity to remind the colonial government that Catholicism represented the best bulwark of continuing French order against communism. Among the Catholics, the Jesuits were more subtle: They usually did not associate themselves with the French administrators but with the Vietnamese nationalists, hoping to use Vietnamese nationalism against communism. However, they overlooked the fact that, in the Vietnamese historical context, communism was an outgrowth of nationalism, a new tool against Western imperialism. To many Vietnamese Catholics the problem of expelling the foreigners was more urgent than the doctrinal struggle against the Communists.

In September, 1945, when Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the independence of Vietnam, he was acclaimed by the Vietnamese masses, including the Catholics. To Vietnamese Catholics the end

of the colonial regime promised the end of their humiliating dilemma: that of being treated as inferiors by the Christian French and as unpatriotic by their compatriots. But in the villages the old misunderstanding did not die out quickly and there were instances of harassment of Catholics by local revolutionary committees. On September 20, 1945, President Ho Chi Minh issued a decree which threatened severe penalties against those who damaged churches and disturbed church functions.

The patriotism of Catholics was also a concern of the paternalistic foreign hierarchy, which warned Vietnamese Catholics of a new danger, communism—more dangerous, they said, than the French colonial regime. Catholic enclaves in North Vietnam (in particular Phat Diem and Bui Chu) were gradually converted into armed centers of resistance, not against the French but against the Vietnamese resistance, and received military aid from the French colonial troops. But not all Catholics, and certainly not all Catholics in the South, cooperated with the French. A recent (1972) book, *Cong Giao Khang Chien Nam Bo (The Catholic Resistance in South Vietnam)*, written by Mr. Le Tien Giang, an old Catholic resistance fighter, tells in vivid detail the dedication of the Catholics in the South during the war against the French.

The most tragic event for patriotic Catholics took place in 1951, when the Church fired its ultimate weapon: the threat of excommunication—forcing the Vietnamese, whose bishops were still mostly French, to sever any remaining ties with the Resistance. Vietnamese Catholics had to choose between their Church and their nation. The climate of that period is best described in an article published in the magazine *Doi Dien (Face to Face)* in Saigon in March, 1971. The writer was Father Nguyen Viet Khai, a refugee from the North, a father confessor of the late President Ngo Dinh Diem:

My parish [Thuan Nghia, in the province of Nghe An] was an important one where anti-communism was violent. We fought against the Communists in a blind fashion. . . . What was our understanding of communism in those days? To tell the truth, it was simplistic indeed. In a very naive way we reduced it to the slogan of the "three withouts" and the "two everybodys." "Three withouts" meant that the Communists professed a doctrine in which neither God nor the Fatherland nor Family had a place. "Two everybodys" meant that everybody had to work according to his capacity and consume according to his needs. Beyond that, we were obligated to follow indoctrination courses where we were taught the Encyclical of Pope Pius XI published in 1934 on communism, and the position of the Catholic Church on communism. We took Communists for veritable "red devils," extremely dangerous, that we had to hate and condemn with

all our strength, just as we should hate and condemn mortal sins. . . . Everywhere that the presence of Communists was pointed out to us we rushed to the spot, determined to defeat and exterminate them if necessary. That was our clear intention.

That was also the political and religious climate which prevailed in some Catholic areas in North Vietnam at the defeat of the French and the accession to power of President Ngo Dinh Diem, and the exodus of over 750,000 Catholics to the South.

President Diem, who was born into an aristocratic Catholic family in Hue, was the "Jesuit solution." He was a nationalist, he hated the French (in his later years, he also hated the Americans), but he was anti-Communist. At its beginning his regime was based on three slogans: Bai Phong (repeal feudalism), Diet Thuc (exterminate colonialism) and Chong Cong (opposition to communism). These looked like rational principles to start with, but in the Vietnamese historical context they were not. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to be antifeudal and anticolonial and at the same time anti-Communist, for the reason that the Communists in Vietnam, by their deeds, have shown



themselves to be successful fighters against feudalism and colonialism.

This is the major contradiction which caused the failures of Diem's administration (despite its initial accomplishments) and all the anti-Communist administrations in South Vietnam ever since. The massive military intervention by the U.S. from 1965 on, the presence on Vietnamese territory of over 500,000 foreigners who looked like the French of the past, the bombings of North Vietnam—all confirmed to many Vietnamese the "just cause" of those who were fighting against the "aggressors." The most barbarous war in its history, the social degradation which followed the presence of foreign soldiers, the increasing dictatorial regime of General Nguyen Van Thieu (a converted Catholic of these latter days) created a feeling of revulsion if not of despair among those who were not fighting with "the other side" (except, of course, a small minority who profited from the war).

The Catholics were not insensitive to this agony. A Catholic movement of opposition against the war and against the Saigon regime (and, naturally, against the Americans who supported both) emerged, led by intellectuals such as Professors Nguyen Van Trung and Ly Chanh Trung, and priests. In August, 1970, the magazine *Doi Dien* published a long study of the political, economic and defense efforts in North Vietnam written by Father Truong Ba Can, the national chaplain of the Catholic Labor Youth Organization. The first objective look at North Vietnam cost the author and the publisher of the magazine, also a Catholic priest, nine months in prison. And Father Nguyen Viet Khai, in the article I quoted earlier, undertook to reexamine the old slogan of the "three withouts." If it is true, Father Khai wrote, "that the Communists are without God," the other two withouts (Family, Fatherland) do not accurately describe them. He asked who, *in fact*, is "without Family," and he pointed to numerous examples in South Vietnamese society: army officers abandon their families to live with other women; and, on the other hand, "since more than 500,000 foreigners invaded our country," there are countless families torn apart by wives and daughters who sell themselves. In contrast, it is North Vietnam that preserves traditional simplicity and virtue.

Father Khai found the question of who is "without Fatherland" even more embarrassing:

It has to be admitted that we citizens of South Vietnam are the ones "without a Fatherland." Who is it who sold to the Americans for 99 years the bases of Chu Lai, of Cam Ranh, of Da Nang, of Bien Hoa, of Vung Tau? Those sales were more or less secret between the two governments involved, passing over the heads of the population. Furthermore, one may well ask if there exists in South Vietnam even a modicum of freedom in the

running of the affairs of the country. From the central government down to the modest administrator of a hamlet, the South Vietnamese are unable to solve a single one of their problems without foreign interference! One has every right to ask if the governor of the district or the province is named to administer the people's affairs or simply to serve the interest of the Americans. We are the ones without a Fatherland, for we have let it be taken away from us.

Drawing a parallel with the North, Father Khai concludes that "in all honesty, it is the North Vietnamese who are fighting for the Fatherland, whereas we, the South Vietnamese, we are fighting for the dollar, for our selfish interests."

Father Khai and Father Can are not the only ones who speak in this way against the war. Others, such as Fathers Bui Thong Giao, Vu Xuan Hieu, Tran The, Nguyen Ngoc Lan, Huynh Cong Ming, Nguyen Nghi, Nguyen Van Phan, Phan Khac Tu, Chan Tin (to mention only those widely known) are now in the front line of the peace movement. Together, on July 4, 1972, they signed a manifesto to denounce "the central and provincial authorities of South Vietnam which have profited from the war conditions to conduct illegal arrests and imprisonments." They called on world opinion and "especially on the conscience of the Catholics" to understand the tragic conditions in their homeland.

The most celebrated demonstration of the growing Catholic opposition, in which many young Catholic students and laborers have joined and for which they have been arrested, was the press conference held in Paris on September 21, 1970, given by Ngo Cong Duc, a Catholic deputy from the province of Vinh Binh. Duc, who was also secretary-general of the socialist opposition bloc in the National Assembly, edited the largest and most frequently seized newspaper in South Vietnam, the *Tin Sang* (*Morning News*). Duc particularly assailed the moral and cultural degradation brought by the Americans:

American political and economic aims have completely altered the nature of Vietnamese society. With their money the Americans are setting communities against one another, and are destroying all their traditional spiritual and moral values. The number of prostitutes increases daily. More than 400,000 Vietnamese women are currently engaged in this wretched and humiliating profession. The Americans also try to promote corruption so as to use their accomplices in pursuing their imperialist aims in South Vietnam. On the cultural level, the U.S. seeks to transform South Vietnam into an American type society by sweeping away all the positive aspects of the Vietnamese heritage. Millions of young people are deprived of education, nine and ten-year-olds do not go to schools but

tend buffaloes, work in rice fields, shine shoes, and sell newspapers. American policy in Vietnam aims at Americanizing the Vietnamese people, transforming the Vietnamese into foreigners in their own country, into increasingly ignorant creatures stripped of all dignity.

Duc was later barred from reelection and is now in exile in Europe where other prominent Vietnamese Catholics have formed themselves into patriotic and peace organizations.

The most recently persecuted Catholic Vietnamese community overseas is made up of residents of Cambodia. On March 18, 1970, General Lon Nol overthrew the neutralist government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk. At that time, 62,000 Catholics lived in Cambodia, of which only 3,000 were Khmer (ethnic Cambodians), the vast majority being ethnic Vietnamese long resident in Cambodia. The Lon Nol regime sought to gain popular support by appealing to the worst anti-Vietnamese racism, and a systematic slaughter of the Vietnamese population took place. On the strange assumption that to be Catholic is to be Vietnamese and to be Vietnamese is to be "Viet Cong," Catholics who were not Vietnamese were massacred as well, and among these were French priests.

The antiwar Catholic movement in South Vietnam developed in intensity almost at the same time as the antiwar Catholic movement in the United States. And if the Berrigans, for example, did not inspire the Vietnamese Catholics, they certainly have given them distant encouragement and are certainly most loved and admired in both North and South Vietnam. Father Dan Berrigan's books were circulated clandestinely among young Vietnamese Catholics in the South, and some are translated in the underground press in Saigon. There remain few contacts between American and Vietnamese Catholics. The first and most successful attempt was the meeting in Paris on May 21-23 of last year between members of the Catholic Commission of Inquiry based in Minne-

apolis and the Catholic representatives of North Vietnam (South Vietnam did not allow a delegation of Catholics to attend the conference). The occasion was the International Assembly of Christians in Solidarity With the Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian Peoples. A second and larger International Assembly was held in early October of this year in Quebec, Canada.

Eighty-seven years ago Father Louvet, an historian of foreign missions, wrote:

By nature, they [the Vietnamese] are not at all fanatical, and they would have no propensity to persecute the Christian religion, if the latter, as Buddhism did, could adapt itself to the rites of the country and the local superstitions [*La Cochinchine Religieuse*, Vol. 1 (Paris, 1885), cited by Father Piero Gheddo in *The Cross and the Bo Tree*].

The situation is still true today. Ironically enough, the spiritual integration of the 1,200,000 Catholics in the South and 800,000 Catholics in the North into a true community of Vietnamese is being accelerated by the bombings of the Catholic churches in the North and the devastation of the Vietnamese villages in the South by the U.S. Air Force. In the midst of the horrors of the war, this is indeed a great hope. Therefore it is with great sadness that I and other Vietnamese read on August 24, 1972, the editorial in *L'Osservatore* written by Federico Allessandrini, the Vatican press spokesman. The key passage reads:

An electoral campaign like that of the new candidate for the White House certainly helps the Government of Hanoi and the Viet Cong, but not the attempts of Nixon who, above all, must disengage himself from Southeast Asia without the American prestige having to suffer too much. . . .

But regardless of what Federico Allessandrini thinks of American prestige, I am convinced that the Cross, misrepresented and misunderstood for centuries in Vietnam, is now being better represented and better understood by the Vietnamese.