

# The Church in Vietnam: An Update



by Archbishop Paul Nguyen Van Binh

The following address was given by Archbishop Paul Nguyen Van Binh of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam during a recent seminar held in Hong Kong on local churches in political transition.

I have been invited to come here today to relate to you something of my experiences after living for more than 13 years under a socialist system, or more specifically, under the regime of a communist government that is both socialistic and atheistic. I wish to make clear from the start that what follows are my own personal reflections and I do not speak as a representative of the Vietnamese Bishops Conference. I merely wish to give voice to what the Church in Vietnam has gone through since 1975. Our bishops have in theory come to some basic agreement about Church-State relations with the government of the Republic of Vietnam. In practice, however, sometimes differences arise from various needs and from the concrete situations of different regions in our country.

The situation of the Roman Catholic Church in Vietnam differs from that found in China. In China, there are bishops and priests who have been separated from the Holy See of Rome. In Vietnam, we are fortunate in being able to maintain our association with the Vatican up to the present time. Our bishops are still appointed by Rome, after an

exchange of views with government authorities; communication with the Vatican is open; and, our bishops are permitted to go to Rome on their ad limina visits.

Perhaps it can be said that our nation and China differ in other areas as well. For many years Vietnam was under the complete control of foreign nations. The principal aim of the revolution was to liberate our country from the slave-like oppression of those foreign nations, and the leaders of our revolution, whom I believe to be patriots, were given extensive support in their struggle by another communist nation. There is yet another significant difference between us. The North of Vietnam was liberated in 1945, thirty years in advance of the South. This means that the initial policies of the Communist Party underwent thirty years of change, and that process of change continues. As a result, Catholics in the North and South have different things to say about living and working with the revolutionaries.

Because I do not know at first hand the religious situation of the North, especially during its initial 30 years, I shall limit my remarks here to my personal experiences in the South.

It was on April 30th of 1975 that the people of South Vietnam first began to live under the communist system. At the time, Catholics were left puzzled by the change. Before the communists took over, there was much propaganda about how they would persecute the faith, how the churches would be closed and bishops and priests put into prison, and the practice of religion would be outlawed. A number of priests and lay people, in this tense situation fled to countries abroad, seeking a place where they could practise their religion freely. Many others left the country for a variety of different reasons. Immediately prior to the date of liberation, some bishops called upon Catholics to remain, especially priests who were engaged in pastoral work among the faithful with whom they were living. In point of fact, when the communists did gain control, nothing of what they predicted materialized.

There were, however, some misunderstandings between the state and people in the Church. Certain limitations had to be faced. Priests who served as army chaplains in the old regime, for example, had to undergo re-education. And I recall with great pain the fate of Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, who had just been appointed bishop-coadjutor of Ho Chi Minh City. He was arrested and put in jail. (Recent information about the Bishop is that he has been set free and is now living at the Archbishop's residence in Hanoi.)

We all know the communist system is a proletarian dictatorship and actively atheistic. Religion is accepted only as a part of the social fabric of life. Cardinals, bishops, priests, etc. are seen as ordinary citizens, just like everyone else. If they are accorded some public respect, it is due solely to the kind-hearted auspices of the state. In this system, every religious activity must be submitted to the government for its approval. From the beginning, most Catholics sought a modus vivendi with the revolutionaries. They did not want to set themselves in opposition to them, especially in any form of violent confrontation. Some bishops spoke out strongly about Catholics also being Vietnamese citizens, and how they shared their fellow countrymen's love for their country.

While formerly the Catholic Church was not in a good position to join forces with the revolutionaries in their patriotic endeavours, today we are in a much better position to accomplish all that is expected of a nation's citizens in fulfilling our patriotic duties. As a body, we are resolved in our efforts to protect and rebuild our nation. We ask only to be allowed to practise our religion freely, hardly something that would jeopardize the welfare of the people or inhibit their aspirations for happiness. We also ask that we not be considered as second-class citizens. From the beginning our Catholics have taken an active and productive part in all the social, political and cultural programmes organized by the government. At this point, I wish to express my gratitude to the Provisional Government in the South. During the interim period, they went out of their way to welcome our cooperation, as truly patriotic leaders.

After a short period of time, the Provisional Government of the South asked the Church to hand over to the state the property and administration of all its public institutions, such as schools, hospitals, leper asylums, orphanages, old age homes, along with some monasteries and convents as well. It also asked us to turn over all revenue-earning properties that supported those institutions. This was a request we could not refuse, given the new socialistic form of government and the expectation that we too were to participate in serving the common welfare of all our country's citizens. It should be noted that religious men and women continue to work in these institutions of education, medical care and social services, although the Boards of Directors are now under the control of the government. The government has, however, on numerous occasions shown its appreciation for the self-sacrificing work of those religious still involved.

I would now like to make some further comments here on what I have related above:

In living together with our communist brothers and sisters, Catholics must show their sincerity through action. We, too, are patriotic Vietnamese; we demonstrate our patriotism by doing our duty as good citizens should.

It is a good and healthy situation when the Church is free of extensive property ownership and social privilege.

When we meet difficulties and conflicts, we should let them be known to the government in clear and understandable terms, that with patience and forbearance, we can enlist government help in resolving them reasonably and sensibly.

The Catholics of Vietnam are indeed fortunate in having episcopal guidelines in their efforts to live together with their communist brothers and sisters. If you have not already read the letter sent by the Vietnamese Bishops' National Congress in May of 1980 to all the faithful in Vietnam, I suggest you do so. The letter was written on the occasion of the National Congress of Bishops and Representatives representing 25 dioceses, which met in Hanoi in the Spring of 1980. It was promulgated on May 1st and signed by 3 archbishops, 30 bishops and 33 representatives to the Congress.

The letter consists of three parts. What follows is a summary of each part.

First, the Congress expresses its gratitude to God, and its appreciation to the government for allowing the first Vietnamese General Congress of Bishops to take place.

The second part is most important, for it affirms the Church in Vietnam's deep attachment to Christ, the Universal Church and the Holy Father as its head. It describes the faithful as a community closely bound to one another and loyal to the teachings of Vatican II. It also affirms its deep attachment to our country, with the church firmly rooted in the nation. The church in Vietnam is closely bound to the fate of our country, sharing in the life of our nation, and working with all as fellow-citizens to protect and build it up.

The third and final section of the letter offers guidelines for priests, religious and lay people. It calls them to a life of perfection within society, to live out Gospel values in the context of

their responsibilities in the world. The faithful must be loyal to the Church, and at the same time be good citizens of the nation. They are to be diligent in prayer, teaching catholic doctrine in their homes in the midst of the family, and always bearing witness to the Spirit of Christ in his church.

The tone of the letter was expressive of the good-will of the bishops and the church. The government was pleased by its efforts to increase a sympathetic understanding between religion and state. As for our Vietnamese Catholics, the majority responded warmly to the appeal of their bishops, and redoubled their efforts to prove themselves to be good and loyal citizens.

Up to now, the church in Vietnam continues to follow the directives laid down by the Bishop's Congress in 1980. The majority of Catholics, those who responded warmly to the letter, acknowledge that the way indicated by the bishops is the only path that can lead to better understanding between Church and state, with the proviso that no harm come to the Faith in the process. However, we must also acknowledge that there do exist some difficulties in living with the communist regime, although at present they are on the decrease. Part of the reason is that many Catholics in certain areas of the country do not believe in the sincerity of the state. On the part of the government, a number of cadres refuse to change their old ways. They still harbour deep prejudices against the Catholic Church and the Vatican. They seem to be in opposition to any development in the area of religion, and want religious influence if not reduced, then confined to the status quo. Fortunately, there are other cadres who are sympathetic and create favourable conditions within which Catholics can take part in the common cause of working for the nation.

As for my own personal opinion, I firmly believe that it was the sincere intention of President Ho Chi Minh and the communist leadership under him to unite all the people, no matter what their religion, into one country, and he welcomed Catholics to participate in the task of liberating and building up Vietnam.

In conclusion, I would like to state that I have tried to speak with frank sincerity about some of the hopes of the Catholics of Vietnam, and to share with you their patriotic aspirations, so that their voices may be heard also in other socialistic countries throughout the world.