

Religious Life in Vietnam: Opportunity and Challenge



by Sr. Bui Thi Nhu Kha

During the months preceding the socialist revolution in South Vietnam, a number of Christians, lay and religious, left the country. The majority, however, remained. Some groups, such as one known as the "Renewal-Reconciliation Team" wrote an open letter to their fellow Catholics in the Saigon Diocese entreating them to stay to serve the country and witness to the Good News in the new regime.

Although they were aware of the changes that lay ahead, they were convinced that the Church's mission was to announce the Good News there among their non-believing and atheistic countrymen. They also believed that with a patriotism based on gospel inspired charity, they too could share in the national struggles of those who could neither understand nor invest credibility in them, and, thereby testify to the indiscriminating love of God for all peoples. Armed with this faith they were prepared to face the approaching Marxist social revolution with confidence.

After the 30th of April in 1975, in spite of the general state of uneasiness among Catholics, the Renewal-Reconciliation Team, along with other priests and religious living in Ho Chi Minh City, continued their correspondence with the local clergy and religious through the mediation of the Archbishop. The following are excerpted from some letters of that time:

"Men and women religious, just as laymen, have their contribution to make in the re-construction of the nation, and sharing in the destiny of their fellow citizens. They must impregnate society with

gospel values by engaging in every social activity, working in favour of truth, justice and charity." (Letter to the Religious of Ho Chi Minh City and South Vietnam, 1975)

"In imitation of Christ, the Second Vatican Council has urged us to be present to today's world through an attitude of openness, humility, and kindheartedness, to be ready to cooperate with all persons of goodwill in our common search for happiness for all." (Letter of the Bishops of Archdiocese of Hue and Ho Chi Minh City)

"The Good News is not limited to any particular country. The Kingdom of God must grow in the midst of this socialist society, as well as in other lands. Our presence here is a choice in favour of the Good News." (Letter of Religious in Ho Chi Minh City to the International Association of Higher Superiors, July, 1979)

In 1980 the Conference of Bishops issued a pastoral letter, some of the phrases of which have since become directives for the Vietnamese Church.

"To live the Gospel in the midst of one's nation."

"This, our homeland, is where we are called to live as His children."

"This country is the maternal womb that conceived us and is part of the process of becoming children of God."

These and similar sentiments have been put into songs which are sung by Vietnamese Catholics, who have become familiar with and cherish them. Such sentiments have also been well-received by the government administration as well as members of the Communist Party.

One might ask what the reactions of religious men and women are towards the socialist government in their country. There are four general attitudes: Some do not believe it is possible to cooperate with the communists; some are doubtful, preferring to adopt a wait-and-see attitude; some are willing for the present to cooperate and work together with the communists to serve the country, making the necessary and proper decisions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; finally some are confident, giving themselves wholeheartedly to the new system, radically supporting and defending the new regime. This group was originally quite small but continues to grow in number as time goes by and the reality of the situation is lived out.

With regard to women religious, there are about 2,500 belonging to 40 different congregations in Vietnam. Most of the communities of

religious women which emigrated to the South in 1954, have adopted the first attitude. After 1975, they discontinued their work in social institutions, particularly in schools that were nationalized. What has become of them? Some returned to the rural areas where they engaged in farming and raising livestock. Some who did not wish to return to the countryside remained in their convents in Ho Chi Minh City, supporting themselves through gardening and raising a few animals. While these nuns also tried to enter many other fields, they usually failed to find employment because they did not possess the necessary marketable skills. It was the rare religious community that did make a go of it by growing rice and raising pigs. Out of fear of persecution or of being contaminated by atheism, they maintained little formal contact with the general society, especially with the government. These communities have recently become more open and less isolated.

Of the second group, those willing but somewhat reluctant to be more open to the changes, these nuns continued in their social and education activities, but were lacking in any firm commitment. When in 1976, the government issued a directive requiring men and women religious who continued to serve in institutions which had previously belonged to their congregations and were now run by the state, to abandon their convents and return to their families, over half withdrew from the schools and hospitals, choosing rather to continue their communal religious life.

The few communities that did remain consulted with both governmental and ecclesial authorities about their desire to continue to serve the country without having to give up their religious life in common. They sent a request to the Party Secretary in Ho Chi Minh City that states in part: We wish to devote our lives to God and to the service of people. These two objectives are not mutually contradictory. On the contrary they are most compatible." The letter met with a favourable reaction, and, two years later many religious women were employed as government personnel in these institutions. Since then many changes have taken place which seem to justify a more reciprocal relationship between the government and religious.

1975 to 1980 was a testing period for the religious, challenging their capacity to cope with the new situation and to meet changes with courage. In the end, nuns proved their competency in their work in many areas, such as in schools, hospitals, factories and cooperatives. Nuns served in such posts as assistant director of a malnourishment centre, assistant director of a rehabilitation centre for paralyzed children, as assistant department head of a TV station, developing children's

programming. Many nuns went to teach in maternity health centres, many more became members of cooperatives specializing in handicrafts, sewing, embroidery, knitting and weaving. Most of the nuns received government commendations as 'progressive workers' and 'outstanding workers'.

From 1980 to 1985, nuns tended to take the party more seriously and their work attained higher standards of excellence, thus having a favourable influence on their colleagues. During the annual evaluation conferences held among Catholics, nuns were singled out for praise in 'personnel merit' reports, which has also been greatly appreciated by the government authorities of Ho Chi Minh City.

Nevertheless, there still remain many restrictions regarding religious life:

- no authorization has been given to date to recruit new candidates,
- government permissions must be obtained by religious to attend annual spiritual retreats,
- priests who preach retreats must have the approval of the local authorities,
- in convents where many of the laity attend worship services, it is forbidden to celebrate liturgies when a large number of young people are in attendance.
- while nuns may teach catechism in the parishes, they must register in advance.

Since 1976, after the Sixth Communist Party Congress, there has been improvement in some areas. More freedom of personal movement is allowed and there are now more possibilities for the teaching of children, and to open kindergartens and nurseries in the convents. On such civil holidays as the Commemoration of the City or the Nation, the nuns are allowed to organize meetings among themselves which are carried out in a joyful and peaceful atmosphere.

I must also add here that for the past nine years the nuns have been encouraged in engaging in other social activities that were not known before 1975. They organize and perform in cultural and artistic programmes such as choral singing, folk dancing and dramatics. It is the beginning of a tradition much praised by the public authorities. Nuns also take an active part in such public holidays as International Women's Day, Teachers' Constitution Day and The Good Physician Day, where they meet with others to talk and, openly and freely, make their wishes and needs known. In some districts the nuns have also been invited to help out in local dispensaries and hospitals.

What is to be said of the future? Through the private disclosures of municipal authorities, we know that in the near future it will be possible for convents to admit young postulants. Actually, for the past two years, some city authorities have permitted convents to recruit new members and have allowed them to be listed in the 'official family register' (ho khau) as permanent residents of the convent. This offers great hope for the future of religious life in Ho Chi Minh City.

As for the present situation of women religious in other cities, towns and provinces, it varies from place to place. In Can Tho City, the centre of the Mekong Delta, nuns of the Divine Providence congregation continue to work in hospitals, old-age homes, and maternity health centres. They have also been invited to serve in the city bank, owing to the fact of their high credibility among the people. The nuns, indeed, fit in well with the government model for civil servants, who are expected to be: 'Industrious, Thrifty, Honest and Just'.

In Da Nang, the nuns are not accepted by the government to work in state institutions. The nuns of St. Vincent de Paul, however, founded a 'bamboo-curtain' cooperative early in 1975, which is still flourishing and continues to be praised as 'of the first rank'.

In Quy Nhon, a town in the South of Central Vietnam, the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary continue to serve in Quy Hoa leprosarium which is nearly 100 years old now and quite well-known. These sisters were featured in a film in 1988, which has been shown in many areas of the country as well as in many places abroad.

In other cities and towns, nuns are not found in state institutions or services partly because they are not accepted, but also because they themselves fear to be ruled over by the laws and regulations of the socialist government.

Since 1975 the religious in Ho Chi Minh City have been accustomed to come together informally to up-date themselves on what is happening and to discuss matters pertaining to religious life in the new society. Afterwards these meetings were organized on a more regular basis around specific topics, such as reports on the national and universal church, seminars on subjects relating to religious life, informative sessions to broaden one's knowledge, reviews of new books received from abroad and discussions of certain theological, cultural or social problems relating to christian life. There has never been any need to get a permit to hold these meetings, and no trouble has ever occurred. The archbishop and his assistant sometimes attend these meetings.

With regard to men religious, according to recent statistics of the archdiocesan office in Ho Chi Minh City, there are presently 341 men religious in the city, 119 of these being priests. The number is not great and the possibilities for pastoral ministry are limited. There are, however, men religious presently serving in the army, in the Volunteer Youth Association, in factories, cooperatives, schools, and various organizations of the government.

In a suburban district of Ho Chi Minh City there is a commune where members of four different congregations live and work together. Just outside the city in Ho Nai, the monks of St. John of God have continued to work together with state cadres in the hospital originally founded by the monks. They have been praised many times for their outstanding contribution.

During the uncertain period just prior to April 30th, 1975, there were predictions that the Organizations of Major Religious Superiors of Men and Women would both collapse. Some male religious then consulted with their superiors about a new way of serving, adopting new models for activity that would be both useful and realistic for the religious. They received strong support from the ecclesiastical authorities of the diocese. This new way continues to work well today.

From such meetings, after much prayer and discussion, there has emerged a new way of thinking, a new spirituality, and a specific theology which constitutes the motives and sources of energy for men and women religious who choose to engage in active ministry. There is good reason to believe that such popular axioms as 'To live the Good news in the midst of the nation, for the welfare of one's countrymen' had been well thought out and already put into practice well before they were given a written formulation.

In conclusion, I would like now to enumerate some of the convictions we have arrived at after 13 years of experience in living under a socialist regime in Vietnam.

1. We now have an opportunity to 'live out' the spirit of reconciliation spoken of in Vatican II: 'The one who loves, makes the first step.' We make known to those who do not yet believe, and to atheists as well, the love of Jesus Christ, Who embraces in His gentle human and generous heart every people without exception. We are convinced that we continue the mystery of His Incarnation in Vietnam, sharing the joys and sufferings of all of our countrymen.

2. We are also convinced that the redemption is realized in the unfolding of human history. Each historical period carries a special grace of the Lord. The redemption of Israel takes place in Israel's history, not elsewhere. The Lord speaks through the history of a person and of a nation. It is for us to discover His words, changing our destiny into mission.
3. It is for us to 'live out' in our lives the mystery of God's compassion. Each society bears its own hopes and its cross. The cross is multiform: poverty, oppression, despotism, injustice, loneliness, sickness, conflict...generally speaking, all that flows from man's egoism and sin. It is the mission of the Church of Christ to confront sufferings with compassion for those who suffer, to follow in the steps of Mary who walked along the Way of the Cross with faith that the road would lead to the Resurrection.
4. It is a time for us to live as a poor and servant church. Now devoid of the material structures and properties we held in the past, all of which have been transferred to the state, religious have become servants, and are no longer the masters or directors of institutions. This offers us an opportunity to live more humbly, and at the same time act more freely.
5. In facing the challenge of atheism, religious found within themselves an eagerness to live the Good News more decisively, to prove beyond doubt the power of love, the creativity of the Holy Spirit, and the richness of spiritual 'communism' taught by the Gospels.
6. We want to broaden and deepen our understanding by seeking to find in a Vietnamese socialist regime authentic human values which are in accord with the Gospel; such as the dignity of manual work (did not Jesus promote this by His own life as a common labourer?), the value of community or collectivity, of a national culture, as we work to construct a just society and a prosperous homeland. We follow the footsteps of those who succeeded in gaining our independence and unifying our nation, imitating their courage in enduring so many difficulties to rebuild our country.

As religious, as Catholics, we have a great responsibility to help in the formation of a human, just and fraternal society, where the slogan of Vietnamese socialism 'to live for the sake of all' echoes the words of St. Paul 'To be all things to all men' for the sake of Christ Jesus.