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Catholicism in Vietnam

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Catholicism, in general, was developed in about the year 30 AD originating from the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. It has a very long history of entering many different countries with a variety of outcomes. The French colonialists in their scheme to seize Vietnam exploited the religion. As a result, many missionaries played a crucial role in its implementation. In addition, the Catholic army assisted French colonial forces in order to oppose national liberation movements. Many Catholics also joined resistance forces against French colonialism (Fox, "Vietnam's 400-year Catholic History").

The very first missionaries were Portuguese, followed very quickly by the French. The Portuguese missionaries entered Vietnam in the latter half of the sixteenth century (Nardi, 95). Roman Catholicism is the oldest form of Christianity in Vietnam, supported intellectually in the 1950s by cardinal Spellman of the archdiocese of New York (Nardi, 98).

Catholicism was a major religion introduced from abroad through foreign powers like France and the United States many years ago (Pelzer, 75).

However, it was recently used in history as a lever for influence in Vietnam (Pelzer, 76). It was in the beginning of the 16th century that the first catholic missionaries visited Vietnam from Portugal. However, it was only after the arrival of the Jesuits in the first decades of the 17th century that Christianity really began to establish its position within the local population ("Roman Catholicism in Vietnam").

The work of evangelization started out in the 16th century then settled in the first apostolic vicariates of the north (Dáng-Ngoai) and in the south (Dáng-Trong) in 1659. John XXIII established Vietnamese catholic hierarchy on November 4th 1960. This was a result because from the beginning of outset the seed of faith in Vietnamese soil was mixed with the abundant blood of martyrs, belonging to the missionary clergy as much as to the local clergy and the Christian people of Vietnam. All together they endured the labor of the apostolic work just as they stood together in their death bearing witness to the truth of the gospel. There were approximately 130,000 victims to these persecutions, spread all over the country (Welcome to The Vietcatholic Charity").

Roman Catholicism established a solid position in Vietnamese society under French rule. By the mid 1950s Catholicism declined in the north where the communists regarded it as a reactionary force opposed to national

liberation and social progress. In the south Catholicism expanded under the presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem, who promoted it as an important bulwark against North Vietnam (Largo, 166).

In the south under Diem who was also a devoted catholic, the people of the religion enjoyed an advantage over non-Catholics in commerce, the professions, education and the government. In 1955 approximately 600,000 Catholics remained in the north after an estimated 650,000 fled to the south (Largo, 166).

Its involvement in the liberation history of Vietnam was more often than not one of the non-communist sides, something perhaps best expressed by the 1951 Vatican decree that forbade Roman Catholics to be communists (Matthews, 69). Ho Chi Minh gained religious liberty in 1954 and it is estimated around 80% of Northern Vietnams Roman Catholic population fled to Southern Vietnam (Matthews, 69).

It was not until 1975 when the country was united that many Catholics were treated with suspicion by the new government. Slowly since both Catholics and the communist-led government have been working out a rapprochement (Fox, "Vietnam's 400-year Catholic History").

Today, Vietnam ranks fifth of the largest catholic populations in Asia, right after the Philippines, India, China and Indonesia. According to the

catholic hierarchy catalog there are around 5,658,000 Catholics in Vietnam. This means Catholics are representing about 6.87% of the total population. In Vietnam there are 26 dioceses with 2228 parishes and 2668 priests. There are three archdiocese located in Vietnams major cities of Hanoi, Hue and Ho Chi Minh City ("Roman Catholicism in Vietnam").

In Vietnam, Roman Catholicism is the second largest institutionalized religion in Vietnam. In the last 5 years the Catholic Church in Vietnam has grown by around 14.39% (Welcome to The Vietcatholic Charity"). Vietnam is organized into twenty-five dioceses with twice as many adherents in the south than in the north (Matthews, 69). An important note is that even today Roman Catholicism is still considered by many as being foreign and antinational, historically directly responsible for colonization and its aftereffects (Matthews, 69).

There are many locations in Vietnam that have very beautifully build Churches just like everywhere else in the world. For example, in Phat Diem Town, Ninh Binh Province, there is an extraordinary Phat Diem Church that was built completely by stone and wood. In addition, in the middle of the country, Hue City, Phu Cam Cathedral is the most famous and oldest which possesses the exquisiteness of modern architecture. Finally if one heads south to Ho Chi Minh City, the Notre Damn cathedral of Saigon is the

largest and most impressive church with two 60-meter bell towers ("Roman Catholicism in Vietnam").

Overall, the history of Catholicism in Vietnam is linked to the shaping of Vietnam today. It is interesting to see which ways were successful in gaining followers and which were not. In addition, the ways certain people will use religion in order to gain power. Clearly because of the vast majority were communist there was conflict with Catholicism but today that is all being worked out.

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