

An Assessment of Church Life in Vietnam

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Vietnam was a French colony before the 1939-45 war. The Japanese who replaced the French encouraged the Vietnamese to set up their own government, so that when the French returned they were faced with a nationalist movement which, under the Communists, took up arms and finally in 1954 forced the division of the country into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north and an independent non-Communist state in the south. Under Communist leadership the National Liberation Front (NLF) continued the struggle against the régime in the south which appealed to the USA for support, and until 1975 an increasingly destructive war was carried on until finally the Americans withdrew leaving the Communists in charge of the whole country. The position of the church in Vietnam today has to be seen in the light of those years of bitter conflict.

There are in effect only two churches in Vietnam. The Roman Catholic Church is by far the largest. Its members are variously numbered between 3 and 5 million.¹ When Vietnam was divided in 1954 large numbers of Catholics (600,000 including 800 priests is one estimate) including all foreign priests and members of religious orders fled south. Nevertheless an estimated one million remained in the North. The majority of those who fled south came to Saigon and other cities where, with the indigenous Catholics, they provided strong backing for the fight against the NLF. Culturally identified with the West, the Catholics were taught to regard Communism as totally opposed to the church and to Christianity.

The other church, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam,² grew out of the work of the theologically conservative Christian and Missionary Alliance based in the USA. In 1974 they reckoned their membership at 100,000. Taught to believe in a rigid separation of Church and State, they nevertheless were strong supporters of the American war against the Communists.

There were, even before 1975, Catholics who questioned the total opposition to Communism in the current teaching of the Church and who spoke out against the increasingly oppressive way successive governments of South Vietnam dealt with their political opponents. Some of

these Catholics were actively involved with Buddhists in a search for a Third Force between the extreme right-wing government of South Vietnam and the Communism of the NLF. The Evangelical Church of Vietnam was barely involved in this movement.

During these war years the church continued to exist in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. When I visited Hanoi in 1973 I asked to meet leaders of the churches, and although the request clearly took my hosts by surprise, it was granted. Speaking to Pastor Thu Bui Hoanh who was then the General Secretary of the Evangelical Church of North Vietnam, I was told that all normal church activities were permitted, except that there were no facilities for training new pastors "because of the bombing". "At the time of the division of the country, when the missionaries fled, we felt betrayed", Pastor Thu told me. "We suddenly found ourselves alone and we had to work for our living as did everyone else". However, in 1973 pastors were once again being supported by their congregations and were not required to "do productive work", which is a communist phrase and means that they were not compelled to work on the land or in a factory or an office as was the rest of the population. Normal Sunday services took place, with a time before them for the instruction of the children of Christian parents. Baptisms were performed and even evangelical campaigns were permitted.

Pastor Thu had for some time been a member of the National Assembly—also known as the Fatherland Front—which is an official organization representing different sectors of social life, partly elected and partly appointed and advisory to the Government. Leaders of the Catholic Church were also members of the Assembly. Groups which visited the north of Vietnam during succeeding years worshipped with and talked to members of a congregation of the Evangelical Church in Hanoi. When the war was over, the government provided help in the rebuilding of churches which had been damaged by the bombing. I found the Evangelical Church eager to establish links with the Protestant Churches in Europe and not afraid to receive theological publications from the West.

A similar picture of the Catholic Church was given by Western Catholic visitors to Hanoi about the same time. In particular, and this was confirmed to me by members of the staff of the French Embassy, the Cathedral in Hanoi was thronged with worshippers of all ages on Sunday; and the many Catholic villages between Hanoi and Haiphong were easily identifiable by the spires of the Gothic church buildings which towered above the palm trees, a reminder of their origins in the work of French priests who came with the first colonists.

Although the impression gained by Western visitors of the church in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam may have been a superficial one because they were restricted in their contacts, yet it was clear at least that, unlike in China, both Protestant and Catholic churches had been allowed

to maintain their traditional structures and that there had been no rift between the Catholic Church and the Vatican.

The capture of Saigon by the communists in 1975 was a traumatic event for Christians in the South. Many of them had accepted the commonly-proclaimed view that a communist victory would be followed by a blood-bath; they expected to be among its first victims. Among those who left with the first flow of refugees were many Christians including the General Secretary of the Evangelical Church of South Vietnam and members of his family, and also about a hundred Catholic priests and three hundred members of religious orders.

The worst fears of Christians were not realised. Not only was there no blood-bath, but the new government of South Vietnam included in its very first decree a statement guaranteeing freedom to practise their religion to members of all confessions. Within twelve days Archbishop Nguyen Van Binh of Saigon had said "Together with our compatriots we rejoice that there is peace and we share in the common life of the people under the direction of the Provisional Revolutionary Government."^{3,4} What is more, the first three journals to obtain licenses to publish from the new government were a monthly Catholic review *Doi Dien* which took the new name *Dung Day*, the weekly Catholic paper *Cong Giao Va Dan Toc* and the daily paper *Tin Sang* published by the Catholics.⁵

For an account of what has happened since the end of the war and of the present time this article relies on five written accounts of visitors to Vietnam and also on conversations with firstly, a member of a Catholic religious order who worked in Vietnam prior to 1975 and has visited several times since, and secondly, with a member of a Protestant Church in Indonesia who has visited several times on behalf of the Christian Conference of Asia, an ecumenical group of Protestant Churches in Asia.

The five published accounts are:

1. An account written by Tran Tam Tinh entitled "Église Catholique au Vietnam" published in *foi et développement* No. 31, November 1975.⁶

2. An account written by Francois Houtart of the Catholic University of Louvain entitled "Les Catholiques au Sud-Vietnam" after a visit he paid to the country. It was published in *foi et développement* No. 51, November 1977.

3. A booklet entitled *Report of visit to Vietnam 1978* by Yap Kim Hao, General Secretary, Christian Conference of Asia, published by the Christian Conference of Asia.

4. An account written by Paul Quinn-Judge after a visit to Vietnam, entitled "Vietnam's Catholics and the New Régime" and published in the *American Christian Century*, 28 February 1979; pp. 220-224.

5. An article entitled "Pour la première fois, quarante évêques vietnamiens à Rome" by Huong Khe, correspondent of the magazine *Sudestasie* and published in the May 1980 edition, pp. 17-18.

To a very considerable extent these various accounts, together with those in the documents published on pp, 61-8, present a coherent picture of the situation in Vietnam as it affects the Church. It is difficult to doubt the general veracity of that picture in spite of the fact that there are other reports which present a very different one. It may, however, be in order at this point to comment on the different picture, especially as given by those who have become refugees from Vietnam. Firstly, the situation probably varies in different parts of the country. There are probably places where local communist officials use their power to take it out on the Church and Christians in ways that would not be approved of officially. Secondly, the reader in the West needs to remember that Vietnam is not Eastern Europe. In Vietnam from its beginning the Christian Church was associated with the colonial power and western culture. For the fifteen years preceding the communist takeover of the south the church was almost totally identified with America, the great anti-communist power. In the eyes of the new rulers of South Vietnam Christians may well be regarded with suspicion not because they are Christian but because they are suspected of being pro-American, and even agents of the hated CIA. Stories that Catholic priests have been sent to re-education centres are true. The evidence suggests that they are there because of their political views or even acts. There is political persecution in Vietnam, and these stories are part of the evidence of such political persecution. The question this article looks at is whether Christians are persecuted because they are Christians—whether, in other words, there is religious persecution.

Vietnam today is a very poor country and for people in the south this fact has meant tremendous upheavals and changes in life-styles. Prior to 1975 the economy of the south was maintained by massive inputs of aid from the USA, including vast quantities of rice and other food. Saigon was the centre of American activity and also provided for the material and recreational needs of the US troops. With the end of the war, the aid was cut off and there were few resources to take its place since the countryside had been devastated by the combined effects of bombs and defoliants; the population of the cities had been swollen as villagers had left the countryside to avoid the worst effects of the war and agriculture had suffered.

One of the first tasks of the new government was to get agriculture back on its feet. It undertook, therefore, a programme to bring under cultivation large new tracts of land designated New Economic Zones and to create on them productive agricultural communities. The opening up of the new land had to be undertaken by hand, and the people of Saigon and other cities had to be persuaded to exchange the familiarity and relative comfort of Saigon for the harsh conditions of the countryside. Pressure was gentle at first, but gradually increased as the economic situation worsened, exacerbated by a series of droughts and floods generally reckoned to be the worst this century. Today those for whom there is no

approved work in Saigon do not get a ration card unless they are prepared to accept work in the countryside. Many of the jobs which used to sustain the population have disappeared. Most of the entertainment industry together with its related criminal activities have been suppressed. Private business has been closed down with the virtual disappearance of entrepreneurial jobs.

All this has affected Christians along with everybody else. Scattered in the New Economic Zones where there are no facilities even for normal family and social life let alone church activities, for many the only time they can attend a church service is at one of the major festivals of the church year. The Catholic Church used to run large numbers of institutions—schools, hospitals, orphanages etc. These have been given back to the State: in the Saigon region this was done on the initiative of the Church⁸ (*see document on p. 66—Ed.*) The Church once owned land and ran businesses. As a landlord it shared the fate of all landlords under measures of reform, and of many business men as their businesses were closed down. It finds itself financially dependent now on the giving of its members. Many priests and members of religious orders have voluntarily undertaken to share in agricultural work with their fellow-countrymen. According to Francois Houtart, the Catholic Archbishop of Saigon himself took part with a number of priests in irrigation work, though he adds that this was no doubt a symbolic act born out of the desire of the archbishop that Catholics should “collaborate sincerely in all that is done in (rebuilding the country and solving the problem of poverty)”.⁹

The church in South Vietnam no longer has the right to engage in activities that are not germane to its own life as a religious institution. From all reports I have seen its right to carry on with normal parish activities is not challenged. In the Saigon area at least (and I have no reason to doubt that the same is true elsewhere) the theological seminary is open, though half the time of the 110 students is given to agricultural work, thus bringing it into line with other educational institutions. It no longer has the right to run schools, hospitals, orphanages, etc., which, in a communist society, is regarded as the prerogative of the State. However, according to Huong Khe, the Catholic teachers and lay members of religious orders continue to work in, and in some cases to run, institutions that had previously been under the control of the Church. “Today”, he writes, “the government does not merely tolerate their presence, it encourages them to take initiatives. They are considered to be sincere, devoted servants of the people”.¹⁰

While activities at the parish level are unhindered, there are no longer national Catholic organizations other than the clergy and religious orders. There is, for example, no Catholic Youth movement. The clergy within the diocese of Saigon (there were 2,500 in 1977), however, meet regularly for retreats, training sessions and so on.

Francois Houtart¹¹ distinguished four groups of Catholics by the way they had reacted to the new situation.

1. The majority, he reports, are cautious or even suspicious of the new government and apprehensive about the future. The avowedly communist nature of the regime and the fact that it had expelled foreign missionaries who had been such an integral part of the church has provoked hostility. They have been pleasantly surprised that the blood-bath has not happened. On the other hand their situation of poverty and material hardship and the unfamiliarity of the new socialist goals being put before the nation have been difficult to adjust to.

2. There is a small group, among them some priests, which has remained totally opposed to the new government. Both Francois Houtart and Paul Quinn-Judge in the reports mentioned above allege that some of them have taken part in armed uprisings against the new government. According to Paul Quinn-Judge one of these was based on the Vinh Son Church in Saigon in 1976 and a second was organized by a Redemptorist priest, Father Nguyen Van Vang, who tried to set up a "Nationalist Liberation Front" and planned to rise against the government in 1977.¹²

3. There is a third group which had been critical of the previous government and which had given a cautious welcome to the Communists. But for them the changed role of the Catholic Church in society is a stumbling block. They have found it difficult to accept that the church has lost its wealth and its political power and that Catholics no longer have, as Catholics, any special place in society. They are willing to support socialist goals for the country but criticized the government for not giving the Church the special role which, as Catholics, they believe it should have.

4. There are those who call themselves socialist and who want to help create a society within which the Church works quietly without asking privileges. They see the role of Catholics as helping to provide a spiritual depth and power in a country dedicated to achieving socialist goals. They care more about the way God works within society than about claiming for the Church a power over against that of the State.

Among the representatives of this last group is Father Huynh Cong Minh. Speaking of his role in the National Assembly in the south—he is one of two Catholic representatives in the Assembly—he told Paul Quinn-Judge,¹³ "When I stood for the National Assembly I suspected I would be used as a 'puppè't'. Now I sensed that my views are genuinely heeded by the country's leaders because I voice the feelings and worries of the Catholics. The National Assembly needs to hear this voice because the party cannot know all the desires of the people when it comes to implementing party policy; everybody has to implement it—the party cannot do it on its own".¹⁴

Surprisingly, the churches in Vietnam have been allowed to visit outside the country. This is not a privilege available to most of the citizens of

Vietnam. In 1974 a delegation of three each from the Evangelical Church of North Vietnam and the Catholic Church in North Vietnam attended an international conference in Italy, and were then allowed to spend three weeks visiting churches in Europe. The Protestants visited the World Council of Churches, but the Catholics were not able to visit the Vatican. (I was told at the time that it was the Vatican that was unwilling.)

In March 1980 a Protestant delegation consisting of Pastor Thu Bui Hoanh and two laymen who both work for the church visited the DDR and then churches in Western Europe and the World Council of Churches in Geneva. At the WCC they requested 20,000 Vietnamese Bibles and hymnbooks for the use of their church. These were printed in and shipped from Hong Kong. This group appeared to have considerable independence in planning their itinerary, and were not even in touch with the Vietnamese Mission in Geneva during their stay there.

Visits by Bishops of the Catholic Church to the Vatican and of the Vietnamese heads of Catholic Orders in Vietnam to their Chapters in Europe are said to have become fairly normal in the past year or so. In 1981 there were two visits to Rome by groups of Roman Catholic Bishops from Vietnam. The first was led jointly by the Archbishop of Hanoi and Hue and the second by the Archbishop of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). The encouragement given by the Vietnamese government to the development of relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Vatican is, to say the least, unusual for a communist régime. The visits, interestingly, followed the first Bishop's congress held in Vietnam since Catholicism was introduced to the country. That meeting took place in Hanoi between 24 April and 1 May 1980 and was attended by almost all the bishops of Vietnam. The bishops were received by Premier Pham Van Dong, who praised them for their part in the long struggle for independence and looked forward to the contributions that the Catholic community would make to the development and defence of the country.

The reports available seem to point to the conclusion that, while Catholics no longer have control of schools, hospitals and other institutions nor ownership of property, they are not hindered from worship. The same appears to be true of the Evangelical Church. We should note here that for many Christians the right to run schools and so forth and to have a special place in society is an important part of the life of the church, and to be deprived of that right is taken by them to be a beginning of persecution. However, these restrictions on the former manner of church life seem to derive either from the conditions that they share with all Vietnamese, whether they are those of poverty and physical hardship or those of living in a State which does not allow the kind of freedom we expect in the West, or from the fact that in a socialist state the Church is regarded simply as one social institution among many others.

Positively, the present situation is seen by some Vietnamese Catholics

as one which gives the church a new opportunity in Vietnam. It provides an opportunity for Christians to show that they have not been denationalized, that they are true citizens of Vietnam. It provides also an opportunity for the church to share the sufferings of the poor, and to show that they are on the side of the poor in their struggle for a better life. As Nguyen Van Binh, Catholic Archbishop of the diocese of Ho Chi Minh City said, "We must recognize that in some ways the Church has been on the side of the rich. The way of the Gospel is one of solidarity with the poor".¹⁵

¹ *The Far Eastern Economic Review Asia 1980 Yearbook* gives Vietnam's population as 52.1 million and the number of Catholics as 3 million.

² Its proper name is the 'Tin Lanh Evangelical Church'.

³ Provisional Revolutionary Government was the name later adopted by the National Liberation Front; it initially governed South Vietnam after April 1975.

⁴ Quoted by Tran Tam Tinh in *foi et développement* No. 31, November 1975.

⁵ *Op. cit.*

⁶ *foi et développement* is a periodical published by Centre Lebret, 9 rue guenegaud, 75006 Paris.

⁷ *Sudestasie* is published from 17 rue de Cardinal Lemoine, 75006 Paris.

⁸ *foi et développement* No. 51, November 1977, p. 3

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Sudestasie*, May 1980, p. 17

¹¹ What follows summarizes part of the article "Les Catholiques au Sud-Vietnam" already referred to.

¹² See *Christian Century*, 28 February 1978, p. 222.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 220.

¹⁴ For a fuller and more moving account of the situation in Vietnam written by a Catholic priest of this persuasion see *CCA News*, 15 August 1977, pp. 7-11; also *IDOC International Bulletin* No. 5, 5 May 1977.

¹⁵ *foi et développement* No. 51, November 1977, p. 2.

Appendix

Full Religious Freedom Has Not Been Achieved

This statement by the Archbishop of Hué was made on 15 April 1977 at a meeting organized by the Patriotic Front of the Province of Binh Tri Thien and of the city of Hué, following the arrest of six bonzes belonging to the An Quang sect of Unified Buddhism of Vietnam. It is translated from Chrétiens de l'est: faits et témoignages, No. 15, 3e trimestre 1977, pp. 30-34.

I have only been informed of this affair through the communiqué issued by the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City and

through the statement made by the member of the Patriotic Front which we have just heard. I have also heard Mr Tran Yan Long's speech proposing that stern measures should be taken and that the matter should be brought to public attention. For his part, the Rev. Thich Than Tri asks that the government should treat the guilty parties with leniency and considers that the publicity given to this affair in the meeting today, at which representatives of numerous groups are assembled, is amply sufficient. I myself have no opinion; it is up to the government to make a judgement and to accept its responsibilities.

I share the sorrow of our Buddhist friends and sympathize with them because, at the time of the affair of St Vincent's Church, I found myself in the same situation. Certainly no-one among those present here today approves of the facts as set out in the communiqué. However, I cannot help being moved in a matter which affects persons who, like myself, belong to a religion. What can I say? . . . "Only he who has suffered can know what suffering is! But we are concerned here with one incident, and others may follow if the fundamental cause is not eradicated. In my humble opinion, if we go on using religion as a pretext for provoking fresh trouble, it is because there is no freedom. It must be said, that, as far as the whole matter of freedom of belief is concerned, I am not satisfied.

On numerous occasions, the government has expressed its wish that those who are not satisfied should say so immediately to the responsible bodies, instead of spreading their discontent among the crowd or whispering it from ear to ear. That is why today, in a spirit of complete loyalty, I wish to report this matter to the Patriotic Front of the province and of the town. I hope that no-one will think that I am adopting a reactionary stance. In fact, I hate this word "reactionary" and do not at all think that I can have deserved such an epithet. I wish to speak on two points only: freedom of belief and the equality of rights of all citizens. President Ho has declared: "Union, union, great union; success, success, great success". This phrase is very true and enlightening.

But union on what basis . . . (silence), composed of what elements . . . (silence)? In my view, union must be built on the basis of the national spirit, made up of the following elements: mutual knowledge and mutual understanding, so that we may have mutual sympathy; it is only thus that union will come about.

There are several forms of knowledge—objective knowledge, subjective knowledge . . . Subjective knowledge is not scientific and does not lead to mutual sympathy. I should certainly not permit myself to speak about a friendly religion and its doctrine because I should not do so correctly. Even less should I allow myself to speak about the Party; only a member of the Party can speak correctly about the Party—and even then . . . ! The proof of this is that, at meetings and in study sessions, I hear falsehoods

being stated about Catholicism; opinions and objectives are attributed to Catholicism which I have never heard taught in the Catholic Church. We must therefore have correct, objective knowledge, and only those who are actual participants can speak correctly about that which concerns them. That is why I insist on expressing the Catholic view regarding the two points mentioned above.

1. Freedom of belief

I must admit that after the liberation, when I became aware of the government's political line concerning freedom of belief, I was filled with joy and enthusiasm; I said so in my first statements. But two years have elapsed and I am not satisfied because there is not yet any real freedom of belief.

Religious ceremonies are limited; priests are unable to hold services for their Catholic compatriots, for example, in the "New Economic Zones". A certain number of churches are closed for religious services or have been requisitioned. We are very pleased with the vision shown by the government when it advocates freedom of belief. This has been clearly affirmed in five decrees and directives. But these are documents . . . Instructions (transmitted orally), however, often contradict the contents of the documents concerned. Faced with these alternatives, I allow myself to ask where our obedience lies: to the official documents or to the instructions? I am convinced that the official political line is right—but the instructions also emanate from government officials!

With regard to the churches, the places of worship, I should like to make the following comparison: What more precious things are there today in our country? The museums and the mausoleum of Ho Chi Minh, apparently; delegations from friendly countries, even if they do not have time to visit the museums must at least visit the mausoleum. Let us suppose that this building were occupied or used for other purposes; would one single Vietnamese tolerate such a thing? I myself would not tolerate it and would enlist as a volunteer to go and liberate it. It is the same where our churches are concerned. Small or large, beautiful or ugly, they are all consecrated to God. The Patriotic Front, at its National Congress held in Ho Chi Minh City at the beginning of February, declared: "We must protect the pagodas, the churches, the holy buildings and the places of worship of all the religions".

Over the last two years, we have organized our ceremonies in such a way that they do not interfere with the work of production. Some people think, perhaps, that participating in religious services instead of resting is harmful to health and leads to dissipation of strength. Such reasoning is perhaps valid for countries abroad, but not for ours. The proof of this is that the American soldiers and the soldiers of the former régime ate and slept as much as they liked, enjoyed every convenience and had many facilities and yet in spite of this we see that they were defeated. Just now I was listening to Vice-President Tong Nguyen (who is presiding over our meeting) recount the ordeals and the lack of resources experienced by our troops at Truong Son (I wept as I listened to him). The troops were victorious, not because they had eaten their fill, but thanks to their morale and their ideal. It is the same for us Catholics; our spiritual needs must be satisfied so that we may serve effectively.

2. Equality of civic rights

Over the last two years, we Catholics have noticed that, wherever we were and whatever we were doing we were suspected and abused in all circumstances.

In the schools the pupils are constantly listening to lectures attacking and calumniating the Catholic Church. In previous generations there have certainly been errors; but if we take into account the 2000 years' history of Christianity, what weight do they carry compared with all the good and just things which are never spoken of? Furthermore, each age has to be judged according to its own criteria. To judge events of a distant period by adopting a modern view of things does not constitute a scientific approach.

In the world of workers, hospital personnel and teachers, Catholics are usually considered as being in the forefront, but in spite of this they are unable to do anything because they are Catholics. When they seek

work and wish to know why they are rejected, people whisper in their ear that if they abandoned religion and refrained from going to church, all would be well for them.

As a member of the Central Committee of the Patriotic Front, meeting in Ho Chi Minh City, declared, Catholics have the impression of being second-class citizens.

The government states that all citizens are equal, that all ethnic groups are equal. Vietnam has a population of 50 million. There are 45 million Vietnamese and nearly 60 ethnic minorities, made up of more than 5 million people. There are 3 million Catholics, but they do not enjoy equality of rights with the other citizens. Over the last two years, the Catholics have made a great effort; the government itself has recognized this. From the point of view of work no reproach can be made. From the electoral point of view, I think that they are regarded as being disciplined. All we wish to enjoy are equal rights with other citizens.

The communiqué on the affair under discussion issued by the People's Committee of Ho Chi Minh City, which has just been distributed, states in its final passage: "The People's Committee of the City and all governmental bodies at all levels must apply the policy of freedom of belief as decided by the government. Nobody is permitted to violate it; nobody is permitted to utilize it for his own profit". We are resolved not to utilize it for our own profit.

This is my humble opinion; I submit it to the Patriotic Front in a spirit of union. I think that, if freedom of religion really exists, nobody will be able to use religious persecution as a pretext for indulging in misguided activities and causing trouble with the aim of protecting religion. The people would not believe it, knowing that religious freedom exists.

Gentlemen, I thank you.

Philippe Nguyen Kim Dien
Archbishop of Hué
Hué. 15 April 1977

Catholics Work Loyal within Vietnamese Society

This is the text of a statement made on 22 April 1977 by the Archbishop of Hué during a discussion of the formulation of a draft declaration by the executive committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party (Province of

Binh Tri Thien) in the presence of delegates representing the religions, intellectuals and leading city personalities. It is translated from L'homme nouveau, 18 September 1977, pp. 8-9.

Mr President,
Delegates,

The President has just asked us to dispense with words of introduction in order to save time. So I hasten to thank the organizing committee for giving me the honour of taking part in this meeting and of giving my opinion regarding the draft declaration that is being formulated by the Communist Party of the province. This is a new and promising development; the Party and the Religions are not accustomed to travelling together along the same path.

(Spontaneous applause from the audience.)

In the first place, I am delighted with the "spirit" of the draft. I speak of its "spirit" because we are dealing with a group effort which entails the enlightened participation of a great many people, since this draft is concerned with every milieu, every tendency, every sector and, above all, because it is able to recognize, frankly, modestly and courageously, the deficiencies which exist as well as the positive points. Having been hammered out in this spirit, I have firm hopes that the declaration will be interesting. Its formulation will be more complete and richer, thanks to the participation of every social stratum of the province.

As for myself, who am a servant of religion, I should like to give my opinion in respect of the religious policy which is mentioned in the second part, under item "C" ("Consolidating national defence, assuring political security and social order"—page 6 in the newspaper *Dan* [*The People*].) Unless I am mistaken, the term "religion" occurs only twice in this draft: once in connection with the work of the Front during the new revolutionary period . . . "which aims at uniting all sectors of the people" among which the religions are quoted (under item "B" which speaks of the intensification of the strength of the collective authority of the people); and, a second time, under item "C", which deals with the consolidation of national defence and the protection of political security and public order; it mentions "religion" after setting out the list of crimes and attempts at subversion. . . .

Perhaps some will think that the draft speaks too little of religion. Personally, I think that the Party has to concern itself with very many matters and that it does not consider religion worthy of much attention; furthermore, the Party declares itself to be atheist and without religion and so the mere

mention of religion does in fact seem very satisfactory to me.

Some will react with irony, finding it disagreeable and worrying to hear religion mentioned in the context of a chapter devoted to political security and public order. But, on careful examination, I notice that the following is stated: "In the work which consists in safeguarding political security and public order, the *political line of the Party must be firmly adhered to, particularly in respect of its religious policy. It must be applied correctly*".*

I feel reassured because the Party advocates freedom of belief and because, whenever an executive adheres firmly to the political line of the Party and applies it correctly, this freedom will be guaranteed.

However, since it is not certain that all will interpret the passage in that way, I propose that, in order to avoid the fear or resentment that fellow-countrymen who are believers might feel vis-à-vis the Party, if possible the passage which refers to religious policy be inserted under item "B" which speaks of "the intensification of the strength of the collective authority of the people". I think that, among the decisions made by the Party at the 4th Congress, freedom of belief is mentioned under this heading.

Mr Tong Hoang Nguyen, at the beginning of this meeting, encouraged us to state our opinions on the work of production and on the economy in a more direct way. In my view, if freedom of belief is safeguarded, the level of production attained by our Catholic compatriots will rise. Freedom of belief is certainly affirmed in the texts (there are five decrees and directives concerning religion); but instructions are issued in contravention of these texts.

I wish to quote just one incident which occurred on 10 April 1977 in the hamlet of Tri Buu in the commune of Hai Tri, new district of Triau Hai (formerly Quang Tri). That Sunday was Easter Day, the most important feast in our religion; preparations for it had been made throughout the previous week. The canton of Hai Tri was due to carry out irrigation work in the Quang Tri area. The district had set a limit of ten days—which the canton reduced to five, in a spirit of friendly rivalry. Each hamlet was expected to make its contribution and work was due to start on the Sunday morning.

On the Saturday, the hamlet of Tri Buu

*underlined in the text.

(whose population is mainly Catholic) asked, in writing, that the matter be re-examined for the Catholics and that they be allowed time to perform their religious duties; they would work at night. But the canton did not grant this permission, alleging that the order had already been given and that everyone must work. Some people asked the canton to re-examine the matter, for if the compatriots did not obey the local authorities would lose some of their prestige. At Christmas 1976, the hamlet of Tri Buu had not gone to work either, in order to be able to attend Mass. But the canton would not yield and refused to change its decision. Consequently, the population of Tri Buu used the power of the people's collective authority in order not to go and do the irrigation work but to go, as a body, to Mass. The next day, the whole hamlet joined together to carry out the irrigation work and, instead of taking five days, the job was completed in two and a half. At this news, the canton resolved to offer them public congratulations, but the inhabitants of Tru Buu would not accept this because of their disobedience—namely, that they had not agreed to work on Easter Day.

When Catholics are satisfied as far as their belief is concerned, they serve their country with vigour and contribute well to the economy. I am convinced that the Party and the government understand this very well indeed. That indeed is why a policy of freedom of belief exists.

[. . .]

I think that the necessary condition for believers to live satisfied and happy under a specialist régime is the existence of real freedom of belief. The Party and the government certainly advocate a policy of freedom of belief in the decrees, in the official texts. But, in reality, instructions exist which contradict this policy. This situation will no doubt persist, but I hope that the question will be resolved in each individual case.

The Party advocates freedom of belief and the freedom not to believe. In my view, this does not give it the right to slander religion.

The other day, Mr Tong Hoang Nguyen stated:

Our party does not prohibit religion for it considers it to be a social and psychological necessity. For as long as the people need it, it must be allowed to remain. That is also my view. When our compatriots no longer wish to have religion—

well, it will be finished. It will disappear quite naturally, but it is impossible to prohibit it.

It is impossible to prohibit or to destroy religion. The whole of history bears witness to this. At the time when the Catholic religion was still only being practised by a small group, it was persecuted for 300 years in the Roman Empire. Today, the Roman Empire has disappeared, yet the Catholics are still there—and in force. Ancient Greece no longer exists, but the Catholic religion survives. Japan tried to destroy Catholicism; a carved column bore this inscription: "The Christians no longer exist on Japanese territory". But in 1865, it was discovered that, after 250 years of official absence, the Catholics were still in existence. In Vietnam, Catholicism has existed since the year 1533—and not merely since the arrival of the French. Unfortunately, the presence of the French missionaries coincided with the time when Vietnam lost its independence and its freedom. Vietnamese Catholics have been persecuted, to a greater or lesser extent in different periods, for 260 years, particularly during the reigns of Ming Mang, Thieu Tri and Tu Duc. These kings have died, but the Catholic religion has continued and today numbers some three million believers. I have read a certain number of documents regarding the oppression of the Catholics in the USSR and in certain countries of Eastern Europe. Despite the efforts made and the plans drawn up, they have not succeeded in destroying religion. The proof of this is that, sixty years later, religions survive in the USSR and in the other nations.

Religion cannot be destroyed because it belongs to a different realm, that of the spirit and the soul; no technique exists for injuring or harming it. If it cannot be destroyed, only one solution remains: the granting of freedom of belief so that, together, all our compatriots may build up their country on the material level.

Last year, in Ho Chi Minh City, I met a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Party who said to me:

We Communists find it easy to sympathize with the Catholics; we too are internationalists, we too have been persecuted. Over the last thirty years, the communists did not have the right to live on Vietnamese soil; they were constantly pursued and, if captured, they died. But ideas cannot be persecuted. That is why

we have a policy of freedom of belief.

Catholics do not consider it important whether they exist in large numbers or as a minority. They believe that each one of them is part of the mystical Body, that spiritual community. That is why, if only a single Catholic were to remain, he would be the Church—just as the communists are linked with the whole of international communism.

The following incident took place somewhere: the population was in full flight. Just one little girl, aged eight, remained running here and there in search of her parents. Those in charge of re-establishing order questioned her and learned that she had lost her parents. They tried to console her, saying, "Don't be sad; this proves that your parents didn't love you. If they had loved you, how could they have abandoned you? But you are a Catholic, aren't you? Well, from now onwards, you know, there won't be any religion here". The little girl stopped crying and declared gravely: "That's not true. As long as I'm here, religion will exist."

Our religion is a matter of the heart. Even if, judging by appearances, no trace of it remains, it will continue to live in our hearts where no-one can reach it. Our bodies can be killed, but our hearts will not be destroyed. This is the Catholic view.

Yesterday a delegate related a recommendation made by Ho Chi Minh when he was addressing members of the intellectual sector: a person who works with his intellect and not his hands, or a person who works with his hands without involving his spirit, is semi-paralysed. These are judicious and enlightening words. Similarly, a person who is merely materially sated, but whose needs as a believer remain unsatisfied, is semi-paralysed. He is no longer of any use to his country.

Some think that Catholicism survives by depending on material resources or on

force. That is not true. In fact, just the opposite is the case. The founder of Christianity said, "The foxes have holes, and the birds have nests; but I have no stone whereon to rest my head". It was He too who advocated something which few people in this world accept: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Yes, it is when Catholics enjoy honours and riches that they are weakest. On the contrary, the more poor and deprived they are, the stronger they grow. As far as charitable and social works are concerned, our understanding is as follows: if the government is unable to cope with all these tasks, we will co-operate with it in the same way that children in their home help their parents. On the day when the government is able to undertake these tasks, we shall joyfully transfer our responsibilities to it. The proof of this is that, after liberation, we handed over sixty educational establishments to the government, including "Providence" College, which is very near here.

As for the churches, be they small or large, beautiful or ugly, they are all consecrated to the Lord and cannot be touched, in the same way that the mausoleum of President Ho cannot be touched.

Recently, in Ho Chi Minh City, there was an unpleasant affair concerning Quach Thi Trang Orphanage. We also have a Kim Long Orphanage, which has existed for more than eighty years and is under the direction of a small group of nuns. At the present time, it is caring for more than 200 people, including very young children as well as blind or paralysed old people. Today, the Sisters are struggling on their own to feed all these folk. If the day comes when the authorities of Binh Tri Thien province decide to take over the management of the orphanage, we shall hand it over to them with joy.

These then, are the remarks which I wished to share with you.

The Socio-Cultural Environment of Vietnamese Catholics and the Problems of Catechetical Instruction

This document by Monsignor Nguyen van Binh, Archbishop of Ho Chi Minh City is addressed to his fellow-bishops. The following extract is taken from La Documentation Catholique, 6 November 1977.

I.-Vietnamese Catholics live in a socialist republic ruled by the Vietnamese Communist Party

An analysis of the above statement will serve to define the socio-cultural environ-

ment of Vietnamese Catholics by enabling us to identify its constituent elements. Reflection on this will permit us to identify the problems relating to catechetical instruction.

1. Under the direction of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Vietnam is in the process of taking the socialist path.

This fact with which you are all familiar is composed of three elements:

a) The Vietnam which is in the process of being constructed is a Vietnam modelled on the communist ideal.

b) The road towards it, the course to be followed, the policy to be adopted, must all conform to Marxist-Leninist doctrine, applied in an intelligent way, through the Vietnamese creative spirit.

c) It is above all necessary to remodel the social structure and produce a man in conformity with the new pattern: the Marxist-Leninist man.

Catholic Vietnamese, then act within a Marxist environment.

2. In this Marxist environment, the Marxist Vietnamese approach religions in general and Christianity in particular from the Marxist point of view. This is clear from the evidence contained both in their courses of instruction and in the lectures published in the official press.

The Vietnamese communists view the Vietnamese Catholic Church through the history of the evangelization of Vietnam from the beginning until the present day. The whole of the historic, political, economic and social conditioning exerted through evangelization and by the Church in Vietnam is analysed and evaluated in the light of Marxism-Leninism. The consequence is that the picture of Vietnamese Christianity as painted by the Vietnamese Marxists is one which leaves much to be desired. According to them, the case of Vietnam shows the theory of Christianity as conceived by Marx to be true, the most salient feature being the collisions between the Church and imperialism. We state this fact, not through any complex of guilt, but in order to demonstrate its seriousness as far as the Church is concerned. The communists want only concrete facts, not theoretical arguments. Christians must therefore project a fresh image—an authentic image of Christ and the Church.

3. The attitude of the Vietnamese Catholics is co-operation in the spirit of the encyclical *Gaudium et Spes*.

In a country where the established régime makes the unification of all its citizens an essential objective in order to build up the state, Catholics refuse to live in a "ghetto" and to remain on the fringes of society.

In July 1976, at the Episcopal Conference of the two ecclesiastical provinces of Huế and Saigon, we bishops unanimously and unambiguously launched an appeal to all Catholics, inviting them to follow a life of commitment—in other words, to contribute towards the construction of society. We do not consider that we have made a revolution in the Church by adopting this attitude; we are merely conforming to the encyclical *Gaudium et Spes* of Vatican II. Indeed for us, co-operation with the atheists in the spirit of this encyclical means, in concrete terms, living in the environment created by the communists and building a new society with them.

We have adapted a definite position, but the fundamental problem remains: how do we co-exist with the communists, how do we co-operate with them in the construction of the country whilst at the same time remaining Catholic and thereby making our specific contribution to the common task? On the pastoral level, solutions to the problems arising out of this new situation are really beyond the scope of our human strength. At the present time in Vietnam the faithful, like those responsible for pastoral work, have had no preparation for life in a Marxist society. The Holy Spirit is still at work, but we, for our part, must work together with Him.

II.-Problems concerning catechetical instruction

In order to give emphasis to the fundamental points, we formulate the four following questions:

1. Who is listening to me?
2. What must I say?
3. What objective must I aim at?
4. How shall I express myself?

1. Who is listening to me? Those who listen to me are members of the Marxist-Leninist society; they were born into it and are growing up in it; they were initiated into Marxist-Leninist doctrine from their earliest school days. (It is well known that, in our socialist republic, all the schools are administered by the state and the educational curriculum is designed to produce

socialists). Thus, in the very near future, we shall have to give catechetical instruction to Catholics imbued with Marxism-Leninism. This brings us to the second question.

2. What must I say? The answer will be determined by two elements: what I must say and what I am expected to say.

What I must say I must speak of the Gospel of the kingdom of heaven: God, the universe and man within the framework of creation and redemption. I must say everything and omit nothing.

What I am expected to say To succeed in my task, I must start with what is expected, what people desire me to say. That means that the content of my teaching must take into account the questioning and the worries of the young people of tomorrow. Thus, and only thus, shall I be able to help them to overcome these difficulties so that they may progress further. In the Marxist environment, the young will be perplexed by the human condition, by the question of the presence of God in the universe and in their own existence. Is this presence a cause of conflict? Is it an obstacle in the path of human progress? Do Christ and salvation, the Holy Spirit and the Church add something to the faith and the hope of the Marxists? Does Christian eschatological hope ignore Marxist hope? Does it greatly exceed it? All these questions oblige me to give special emphasis to certain features in the contents of the catechesis in order to satisfy my listeners—without flattering them by distorting the Word of God.

3. What objective should I aim at? To be consistent with the position adopted and explained above, I must help my listeners to understand and live out their faith in this Marxist environment. This means that I must lead them to a view of a faith in which they can place God, the universe and mankind. Not only shall I seek to dispel transitory objections and difficulties, but I shall also help the young to face up themselves to the fresh problems which will arise.

Thus, it will not be permissible for me to hide the differences between Marxism and Christianity. On the contrary, I shall have to set these out honestly—not in any spirit of antagonism but in one of openness and dialogue. I shall have to help the young to live

and converse with the Marxists. We believe that this exchange of views must begin and that we must produce a new generation equipped to pursue a dialogue with the Marxists. But the key to the solution of the problem lies under the fourth heading, which follows.

4. How am I going to express myself? In order that my listeners may understand me, I must use their language. God Himself respected this necessity. To address mankind, He spoke through the prophets and, ultimately, He spoke to us “in His Beloved son”: “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us”. The young who were born and who have been brought up in the Marxist environment will speak the Marxist language. Can the position of St Paul, “to be a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks” be applied to Christians living in a Marxist environment?

To present the Catholic faith today through the medium of Marxist language certainly does not signify the “Marxification” of Christianity. Indeed, when Aristotelian or existentialist language was used to present the Catholic faith, one did not thereby “Aristotelianize” or “existentialize” it—if I may be allowed to express myself thus. For God, who had spoken to Israel, did not consent to being identified with any other divinity, and neither did Jesus allow Himself to be confused with any image of the Messiah conceived by the Jews of his time

Conclusion

Such are the fundamental problems which we face. We still have to answer more concrete questions, such as: Who is going to give catechetical instruction? Where, when and how is it to be given? It must be added that all future activities of a religious character may take place only on church premises and also that priority is given to work and production.

Finally, allow me, my dear brothers in the episcopacy, to ask for the assistance of those among you who have some experience of these problems, and specially of those who are proficient in the use of Marxist language.

Thank you.

Translated from French by R. G. Hoare