

be noted that religious believers are more likely to wish to emigrate to West Germany than other Soviet Germans since they remain closer to their German heritage, and have religious reasons for wanting to leave the Soviet Union.) The number of Mennonites is high, and many of those declaring themselves to be Baptists come from a Mennonite background. Those emigrating include a number of Mennonite pastors. Due to the emigration of most of their membership, some Mennonite communities (mainly in Central Asia) are likely to die out in the next few years.

The Soviet authorities have also allowed a number of religious activists and former prisoners to emigrate. After many years of campaigning Vladimir Khailo, a leading member of an unregistered Baptist congregation in the Ukrainian town of Krasny Luch, was released in March after more than six years in psychiatric hospital. In August he left the Soviet Union with some of his family for Holland. Ukrainian Catholic activist Iosyp Terelya, who spent more than twenty years in labour camps and psychiatric hospitals for campaigning for the relegalisation of the banned Ukrainian Catholic Church, was

released from labour camp in February and emigrated to Holland in September. The Baptist former prisoner and Latvian nationalist Janis Rožkalns arrived in Vienna with his family on 15 October. With the release in 1987 under amnesty of many religious prisoners of conscience from labour camps, the Soviet authorities may have decided that it is better to allow them to emigrate — or to exile them forcibly if necessary — than to allow them to continue the unauthorised religious activity for which they were originally imprisoned. The return of many religious activists from camps has already resulted in an upsurge of unofficial religious activity: the Ukrainian Catholic Church, illegal since 1946, is gradually coming into the open; the Lutheran Church in Latvia has stood up strongly to state pressure to remove active pastors; and the number of unofficial religious and human rights journals has increased. While not all of this may be attributed to the return home of former imprisoned activists, the authorities have probably decided that they will have a quieter time without them.

*Compiled by members of  
Keston College staff*

## The Catholic Church in Vietnam

1987 has been a significant year for the fortunes of the Catholic Church in communist Vietnam. There are signs that the turning point in church-state relations may have been reached: the state finally seems to recognise that the church will not be destroyed by persecution, and the church, for its part, has come to realise that it must learn to exist in a communist society, with all the

restrictions that this entails. The severe restraints on the church, which have existed in the north of the country since 1954 and in the south since the communist victory and reunification in 1975, curtailed the church's activity, but did not succeed in reducing the allegiance of the Catholic population in Vietnam to the church. Indeed, since 1975 the number of Catholics in the country is

estimated to have increased to at least five million out of a population of nearly sixty million.

In the aftermath of the communist takeover the government took a number of repressive measures against the church: many priests and nuns were imprisoned in "re-education camps"; bishops were held under house arrest and most of the seminaries were closed; the hierarchy was restricted in its contacts with the Vatican; masses were confined to inconvenient times on a Sunday, so as not to interfere with the long hours of compulsory work; the only publications permitted were government sponsored; moreover Catholics — who have their religion marked on their identity cards — were prevented from holding influential jobs. However, the main challenge to the church's authority came in 1983, when the Solidarity Committee of Patriotic Catholics was formed in Hanoi. The aim of this government-sponsored body — taking as its model the Czechoslovak peace priests' movement *Pacem in Terris* and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association — was to divorce the church from the Vatican and to mould it in the government's image. The Catholics for their part were among the least enthusiastic citizens of the communist state. Many Catholics fled from North Vietnam after 1954, and following the collapse of the South Vietnamese regime in 1975 — a regime that had openly favoured Catholics — they were over-represented among the refugees that fled the country. Even today the "boat people" are more likely to be Catholic than their representation in the country would suggest.

The battle between the church and the state reached a critical stage in 1983 when the government intensified pressure on the church in an attempt to split it, hoping thereby to isolate the more "troublesome" ele-

ments within the church and to create a catholic church subservient to the state. In spite of the restrictions and government pressure, the Catholics have effectively seen off the state's challenge and have come out on top. Since then, the situation has been gradually improving, although the church is far from satisfied with the control that the state still exerts. In view of the worsening economic situation in the country and the threat of social unrest, the government has been forced to give ground. However, the church, which undoubtedly hoped that the communist regime would not survive, has come to realise that it has to exist in a communist system and co-exist with it, but can be satisfied that it has not suffered the same division and demoralisation as its counterparts in Czechoslovakia and China.

A key development in church-state relations was the rise of Nguyen Van Linh to become the General Secretary of the Communist Party. While still the local party chief in Ho Chi Minh City, shortly before his election to the top job, he gave an important speech at the provincial party conference, which took place in the city in October 1986. He declared that Catholics and intellectuals of the old regime should no longer be excluded from society and treated as outsiders. Since Nguyen Van Linh singled out the Catholics in such a prominent way, many people hoped that his speech would herald a new approach towards the church. However, he did warn that the authorities should remain "vigilant" towards those who "try to draw Catholics into reactionary activities". In May 1987, following a meeting of the bishops' conference in Hanoi, Linh received the bishops, and admitted that "errors had been committed" by certain cadres in their treatment of religious believers. He called on party organisations to correct these errors, and

noted the loyalty with which, he said, Catholics had served in the Vietnamese armed forces. His remarks were even published in the Hanoi party daily *Nhan Dan* (The People). Such well-publicised efforts at reconciliation on the part of the state, although the state has not given up its anti-religious stance, do represent an attempt at compromise and co-existence.

Church representatives, while noting the continued difficulties, have commented on improvements in everyday church life. In February 1987 the Catholic seminary in Ho Chi Minh City was reopened, and agreement was reached in principle to allow a further five seminaries to reopen, two in the north of the country, two in the centre and one in the south. A concession has recently been won from the state by pressure from the church: at the Ho Chi Minh City seminary it was initially agreed that only when the first group of seminarians had graduated could the next group begin studies. Now the state has allowed admissions every year. It is not known when the other seminaries will be allowed to reopen, but it is hoped that it will be soon. The government also gave permission for 16 new priests to be ordained during the year; five of them were ordained on 29 June in Ho Chi Minh City cathedral by Archbishop Nguyen Van Binh, the first time he had been allowed to ordain any new priests since October 1985. The difficulties of training and ordaining priests have long been of concern to the hierarchy. The restrictions on training and ordaining priests, as well as the number of priests who have fled from the communists, have created a shortage which the church has been finding it difficult to overcome. The episcopal conference made a forceful declaration on this point at its meeting in May 1986.

The number of priests imprisoned

in "re-education camps" is gradually being reduced from a high point several years ago of more than three hundred (out of a total of approximately 2,000 priests in Vietnam). In July 1987 Archbishop Binh of Ho Chi Minh City stated to French journalists that there were just over one hundred priests remaining in "re-education camps", the most reliable estimate that there has been recently. It has since been reported that about sixty of these — many of them imprisoned since 1975 as former chaplains of the South Vietnamese Army — were released before the end of October. Information about those remaining in camps is still difficult to obtain.

The hierarchy has been allowed more contact with the Vatican and with foreign countries. In 1987 a number of bishops were able to visit countries abroad. The most remarked visit was the attendance by two bishops at the October Synod of Bishops. At first it was announced that the Vietnamese authorities had refused them permission to attend, but they finally arrived two weeks after the synod had started, and were received in private audience by the Pope.

The current relatively harmonious picture has been disturbed by several major trials and an incipient row which is developing about the forthcoming canonisation of 117 Vietnamese martyrs. In May 1987 the mother house of the Congregation of the Coredemptrix near Ho Chi Minh City was raided by the security police, a raid which was followed by a serious riot. In October 23 members of the community, including the 81-year-old leader of the congregation Fr Tran Din Thu, were sentenced in a mass trial in the city. Together with another priest, Fr Tran Din Thu received a life sentence, while their 21 followers received sentences of between four

and twenty years' imprisonment. The allegations levelled against the community in numerous articles in the local press, that they had been planning an armed uprising against the regime, have been impossible to verify, although the community and the priests have vigorously denied them. What is significant, though, is that the hierarchy of the church has publicly — in the strange form of an anonymous communiqué from the Saigon Archdiocese — distanced itself from the congregation, perhaps wanting to emphasise the differences between these "extremists" and the main body of the church which, while not communist, can work within a communist society. There have also been a number of other well-publicised trials of dissidents, including the trial of a Catholic nun for allegedly helping "boat people" to leave the country illegally. Here, too, the church has done little to support those sentenced.

The other dispute over the canonisation ceremony is different, however. It is an issue which has suddenly blown up in the past few months, and one which both sides have taken up with great vigour. The row began soon after the Vatican announced on 22 June 1987 that it would be canonising 117 Vietnamese martyrs of the 18th and 19th centuries. The ceremony is due to take place in Rome in the summer of 1988. At a meeting between the government and members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference held in September, the government representatives put strong pressure on the bishops to persuade the Vatican to halt the canonisation process. They presented two arguments: that it would increase the possibility for Vietnamese exiles to spread their anti-government propaganda both within Vietnam and abroad, and secondly — rather a strange argument — that it would

shock the Vietnamese people to hear the accusation of religious persecution made against an earlier Vietnamese government. The meeting took place in a strained atmosphere, with the government side angrily rejecting a document from Rome, which stated that the canonisation was welcomed within Vietnam and abroad. What is interesting about this meeting is that frank opinions were expressed on both sides. However, the church side were adamant in not giving in to state pressure, fending off all attempts to make them bow to the government's demands. They declared that if the state wanted to put pressure on the Vatican to halt the canonisation process the state could take the matter up directly itself. When the state representatives voiced their fears that the ceremony could be used by Vietnamese exiles as an opportunity for anti-state protest — a fear that is quite likely to be realised — the bishops declared that the Vietnamese authorities could instead invite the Pope to hold the ceremony in Hanoi, where the occasion could be supervised by the Vietnamese government. This suggestion was ignored by the authorities.

The dispute over the forthcoming canonisations — an unexpected cause of church-state conflict — and the recent trials of Catholic activists are, however, an unlikely source of further deterioration in church-state relations. Both sides know where the other stands, and it is to be hoped that the state will now give up its attempts to divide the church and will loosen the restrictions which, in spite of recent improvements, still remain an obstacle to the free functioning of the Catholic Church in Vietnamese society.

*Compiled by members of  
Keston College staff*