

# The Legacy and Limits of Vatican II in an Age of Crisis

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## Conciliar, Postconciliar, and Postcolonial

### *Vatican II, Paul VI, and the Church in South Vietnam*

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Tuan Hoang

The intersections of the Second Vatican Council and the Vietnamese church have been a curious lacuna in the historical scholarship about both modern Vietnam and the council itself. One reason has been the focus on the Vietnam War in the scholarship about Catholics in the Republic of Vietnam. The council (1962–65) coincided with two turning points in the Vietnam War: the assassination of President Ngô Đình Diệm in 1963 and direct US military intervention in 1965. In historical accounts, political events have completely overshadowed ecclesial matters. An additional reason is the long-standing focus on the impact of Vatican II on Europe, North America, and, to a lesser extent, Latin America. Conciliar and postconciliar impact on Catholics in Asia and Africa has received much less attention.<sup>1</sup>

1. Reflecting the paucity of scholarship, Vatican II appears in none of major histories of Vietnam: e.g., Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (Basic Books, 2016). Important accounts of global Catholicism or global Christianity may include small portions about Vietnamese Catholics during colonialism or postwar Catholics in the diaspora, but they have virtually nothing on Catholics in South Vietnam: e.g., John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism: A Global Revolution from the French Revolution to Pope Francis* (Norton,

This lacuna is regrettable because studies of Vatican II's impact on a postcolonial country like Vietnam, where Catholics have been in the minority, may reveal important and surprising insights about the multiplicity of conciliar outcomes and the plurality of Catholic voices shaping those outcomes. More importantly, such an exploration might help illuminate the postcolonial foundation that has contributed to the rise of the global South as the center of Catholicism. European missionaries first arrived in Vietnam in the sixteenth century, and the church grew in spurts while suffering periodic waves of persecution over the next three centuries. After the last persecution in the 1880s, the church entered an era of consolidation and expansion. The first Vietnamese bishop was consecrated in 1933, marking the beginning of the end of Vietnam as a missionary church. After a successful anticolonial war against France, Vietnam was divided in 1954 into a communist north and an anticommunist south. The partition was intended to last for two years, but it went on for another nineteen years. In 1960, the Vatican established a national church in Vietnam. The northern church, however, lost a critical mass of laity and clergy moving south in 1954 as it endured severe restrictions imposed by the government. Its bishops were not allowed to travel outside of the country and could not attend any sessions of Vatican II.

In contrast, not only were the bishops from the south able to participate in the council, but the southern church as a whole rapidly became indigenized while remaining tightly connected to the global networks of Catholicism. A result was a steady growth of membership and institutions even during brutal warfare in the 1960s. Warfare usually hinders growth; in this case, however, the Catholic population grew from 1.45 million in 1963 to 1.8 million by the end of 1973. In the same period, the numbers of diocesan priests grew from 1,302 to 1,605 and religious priests from 383 to 425. Among professed religious, the numbers grew from 4,714 to 6,571 women and 973 to 1,309 men. In the sphere of education, the southern church ran 1,130 primary schools in 1973 that enrolled nearly 427,000 students and 270 secondary schools with over 205,000 students.<sup>2</sup>

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2022); Thomas P. Rausch, SJ, *Global Catholicism: Profiles and Polarities* (Orbis Books, 2021); and Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

2. These numbers come from *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae/Statistical Yearbook of the Church/Annuaire Statistique de L'Eglise 1973* (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1975), 38,

Though incomplete, statistics indicate there was a steady growth in membership and institutions. The growth was generated by the enthusiasm among Vietnamese Catholics who sought to control their own destiny while partaking in the activities and institutions of the global church.

It is in this postcolonial context, disrupted by national division and warfare, that I interpret the reception of Vatican II among Catholics in South Vietnam. A short chapter cannot do justice to this topic. Therefore, I modestly seek to illustrate the positive reception of the conciliar and postconciliar spirit by examining two very different Catholic magazines in South Vietnam: a devotional monthly with a more conservative bent and a weekly with a more progressive outlook. I choose these magazines because their differences represent the diversity of the Catholic experience in South Vietnam but also because many more Catholics read them than, say, periodicals published specifically for the clergy or religious. Below, I provide the background about these magazines and their contributors, and explain their political orientation and their reception of the council. Lastly, I explain their interpretations of documents and statements issued by Pope Paul VI regarding war and peace on the one hand and, on the other hand, regarding justice and economic development in the third world.

This comparison shows that the magazines were considerably different in orientation and emphasis. Nonetheless, both warmly welcomed Vatican II and embraced its postconciliar call for renewal through a postcolonial and post-missionary prism. The comparison illustrates that Vatican II provided another venue for Vietnamese Catholics to engage in the construction of their postcolonial destiny, even when they disagreed among themselves about the specifics of that destiny. It shows, too, the closeness that Vietnamese Catholics felt toward the council and the pope, especially his pronouncements on war and peace. This is not to say that Vatican II and Paul VI gave answers to all their concerns and struggles. There were many areas where the council did not speak to the needs of the community, including a lack of statements about colonialism and racism. Yet these limits did not deter Catholics in South Vietnam from interpreting the conciliar spirit to match their postcolonial aspirations toward growth and expansion. Already empowered by the creation of the national church

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100, 101, 167, and 151; and *Việt Nam Công Giáo Niên Giám 1964* [Catholic Vietnam Yearbook 1964] (Sacerdos, 1963), 505.

in 1960, they felt further empowered by the conciliar and postconciliar calls for ecclesial renewal. With added vigor, they kept doing the work they had already begun before Vatican II and expanded the national church while dealing with warfare.

### **The Monthly *Our Lady's Immaculate Heart***

No periodical in the Catholic press of South Vietnam was more dedicated to promoting beliefs about Marian apparitions and miracles than the monthly *Our Lady's Immaculate Heart* (*Trái Tim Đức Mẹ*). The journal was initially published in the late 1940s in Hanoi by a Dominican missionary who, at the invitation of lay Vietnamese, began the Movement for the Reparation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Publication ceased during the First Indochina War but resumed as a monthly in 1960 under the auspices of the Congregation of Mother Co-Redemptrix (CMC). The CMC was one of few religious orders of men, and certainly the largest, founded by Vietnamese. Originating in a northern vicariate, the order's mission was to spread the devotion to Our Lady of Fatima. It received the local bishop's approval in 1948 and the Vatican's approval in 1953. It moved south the following year and resettled in suburban Saigon. Several years later, it received permission from the Dominican missionary to restart both the journal and the movement. Unlike established congregations with resources like the Dominicans and the Lasallians, the CMC was modest in institutions, activities, and education of its members. By promoting the Movement for the Reparation, however, it carved out a well-timed position in the southern church, which had already seen a vibrant associational culture mainly organized around Catholic Action and that included many Marian sodalities.<sup>3</sup>

For its entire run, *Our Lady's Immaculate Heart* was edited by a CMC priest who also headed the Movement for the Reparation. True to its mission, a typical issue included articles related to the Fatima apparitions and, more generally, Marian devotionism in the history of the church. It serialized the testimonies of Sr. Lucia and reflections by others about the appari-

3. On Vietnamese Marianism, see Tuan Hoang, "'Our Lady's Immaculate Heart Will Prevail': Vietnamese Marianism and Anticommunism, 1940–1975," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 17, nos. 2–3 (2022): 126–57.

tions. There were features on Marian sites such as Fatima and Lourdes and news about pilgrimages and Marian associations in Vietnam and across the globe. Some issues included poems, songs, and short stories with Marian themes. The magazine published many petitions, thanksgivings, and testimonies of miracles attributed to the Blessed Virgin's intervening power. The focus on the miraculous, indeed, helped to draw mass appeal to the magazine and sustained its longevity from 1960 until the fall of Saigon fifteen years later. Responding to the growing popularity of Sacred Heart and eucharistic devotionalism at the time, the magazine also published articles about the history and practices of the Sacred Heart and the Eucharist, as well as news and features about national and global eucharistic congresses. Another dimension of its mission was to publish or summarize ecclesial documents, especially those with Marian content. There were articles, sometimes serialized, of more complex doctrinal and theological content, Marian and otherwise. Since the CMC was smaller than other major men's orders and did not have the financial resources to send its members to Europe or North America, the monthly invited clergy from outside of the order, especially Dominicans such as Hoàng Văn Đoàn, bishop of the Diocese of Qui Nhơn, who had been educated in Hong Kong and Paris, to write articles on church doctrines and ecclesial documents.

Given this background, it was entirely expected that the monthly seized upon conciliar statements about the Virgin Mary to support its belief and mission. It went so far as to call Vatican II a "Council of Our Lady."<sup>4</sup> All the same, the magazine proudly announced John XXIII's formal invitation to the Vietnamese bishops in 1962 to attend the first session of the council. Pope John was a hero to Vietnamese Catholics because he had formally established their national church two years before, a point

4. *Trái Tim Đức Mẹ* [Our Lady's Immaculate Heart], October 1965, 68. Like other South Vietnamese Catholic periodicals aimed primarily at the laity, *Our Lady's Immaculate Heart* published many articles in each issue but did not always show the names of the authors. This issue, for example, includes fourteen articles but only eight with an author's name. The other six articles, including one starting on p. 68, are unsigned. They were presumably written by the editors and staff. Authorial names appeared even less frequently on the pages of *Living the Faith*. The first issue (August 14, 1966), for instance, includes five articles with an author's name, three short articles and editorials with an indication of the journal's collective authorship, and eight unsigned articles. For this reason, citations of these periodicals include only the page number(s).

reinforced by the fact that the article about this invitation included a half-page portrait of the pope.<sup>5</sup> For the Vietnamese, the invitation was merely the latest manifestation of the Vatican's support for their national church, which went back to the turn of the century. The staff and readers were pleased by the fact that their native bishops were going to attend a global event while carrying the same status as bishops from ancestral lands of Catholicism. They celebrated their participation by providing coverage of their participation. For example, in the journal's initial report of the council's first session, the magazine highlighted the names of three bishops from South Vietnam who rose to speak at three different meetings. While readers likely did not know that bishops from Europe and North America did most of the speaking at the council, it probably would not have mattered, because what was important to them was that their own leaders now had the right to speak like other bishops.<sup>6</sup>

Over the next several years, *Our Lady's Immaculate Heart* frequently reported and commented on the council's preparation and proceedings regarding Mary. Before the first session, an article quoted a French bishop who rhetorically asked, "Will Our Lady be absent at the council?" It offered the bishop's proactive response that invoked both the doctrines of the immaculate conception and Mary's ascension to heaven, as well as miracles at Lourdes, Fatima, and other modern sites of apparitions. More than once, it pointed out that the opening date of the council was the Feast of the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin. The journal argued that there could be no doubt about Mary's importance at the council. This claim was supported by a letter from Rome written by Bishop Hoàng Văn Đoàn, who reported that John XXIII announced Mary as protector of the council as well as supporter of the bishops and laity.<sup>7</sup>

Most notable was the monthly's coverage of the third session, which culminated in the promulgation of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. The magazine expressed relief that Paul VI signaled a pro-Marian position after pre-session rumors about a potential contentious debate on Mary. Following the promulgation of *Lumen Gentium*, it published a summary of the pontiff's homily at the closing Mass

5. *Trái Tim Đức Mẹ*, April 1962, 258–59.

6. *Trái Tim Đức Mẹ*, December 1962/January 1963, 187–90. Generally, many bishops from Latin America were also quiet in the general congregations at Vatican II.

7. *Trái Tim Đức Mẹ*, July 1962, 354–56; and December 1962/January 1963, 161.

and praised him for having ensured that the document devoted a full chapter about Mary's place in the church. Six months after the promulgation, it published a translation of the entire chapter.<sup>8</sup> The following year, it began a series called "Learning about Chapter Eight of *Lumen gentium*." Interestingly, the magazine only occasionally referenced this conciliar document outside of this feature. It was already heavily publishing on Marianism, and it took *Lumen Gentium* to be another piece of armor, albeit a significant piece, in the landscape of devotionism. It conveniently ignored, for example, the fact that the theologically ambiguous concept "co-redemptrix," which served as part of the CMC's name, received no mention whatsoever in conciliar documents.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the magazine focused on Pope Paul's postconciliar homilies and speeches about the Virgin Mary and cited them in many places.

*Our Lady's Immaculate Heart* showed its esteem for the conciliar leader as much as it did the council. As it had honored John XXIII, it called Paul VI the "Pope of *caritas*" upon his ascension to the papacy. Reflecting the experience of being a minority religion in a non-Christian country, the monthly was highly positive about his ecumenical outlook. Consistent with its belief in reparation, the monthly went out of its way to invite its readers to follow Paul's "urgent call" to pray, fast, and do "acts of reparation" for the success of the council.<sup>10</sup> Notably, the magazine widely reported on Paul VI's statements and prayers for peace in Vietnam. When it introduced a papal letter to the Vietnamese bishops about peace, the magazine prefaced it with another papal message from two days earlier about world peace. Even when Paul VI did not specifically name Vietnam, the magazine often took his statements about peace, such as one made upon papal blessing of yellow roses to be sent to Fatima, to have "implied the painful situation of the Vietnamese people" at the time.<sup>11</sup> Shortly after the pope issued the encyclical *Christi Matri*, calling the faithful to pray the rosary for peace, especially in Vietnam, the monthly and its Movement for the

8. *Trái Tim Đức Mẹ*, November 1964, 112; January–February 1965, 162–64; and May 1965, 296–306.

9. The concept grew further from mainstream theological discourse following the end of the council. In 2017, the Vatican successfully requested that the CMC change its name to the Congregation of the Mother of the Redeemer (CMR).

10. *Trái Tim Đức Mẹ*, August 1963, 6–8; August 1963, 21–24; and December 1963, 131.

11. *Trái Tim Đức Mẹ*, April 1965, 259–61; and May 1965, 289.

Reparation joined six other Marian organizations, including the Legion of Mary and the Blue Army of Fatima, in a retreat about the encyclical. The retreat was led by an auxiliary bishop of Saigon and the national director of Catholic Action. It resulted in a resolution of five parts, including “a complete appreciation for the Holy Father Paul VI” and a determination to “sanctify individuals, families, and society according to the Gospels and the directions of the Second Vatican Council.”<sup>12</sup> Not all of *Our Lady’s Immaculate Heart’s* publications about Paul VI had to do with Mary, but it customarily referenced the Blessed Mother to papal documents on peace in order to reinforce its core mission.

The postconciliar emphasis on war and peace, however, should not be seen apart from the postcolonial vision of *Our Lady’s Immaculate Heart*, the Movement for the Reparation, the CMC, and similar organizations. For them, the Virgin Mary as patroness of Vietnam symbolized the belief that one could be both Catholic *and* Vietnamese, which was a counter-proposition to allegations by anti-Catholic Vietnamese that their only allegiance was to the Roman pontiff. Equally important, they believed that a truly independent Vietnam must be free of Vietnamese communists because communism was the real antithesis to nationalism. Although they were not undisturbed by aspects of the American military presence, they considered it to be a temporary measure in the fight against Vietnamese communism, which was against organized religion and, specifically, Christianity. Some of this postcolonial conviction was rooted in the long history of anti-Christian persecution by Vietnamese authorities, and some was grounded in the recent history of the communist revolution following World War II that led to brutal warfare. Although their affection for the papacy and, especially, Paul VI was strong and consistent, they never took ecclesial documents and papal speeches or homilies about peace to mean yielding to the communists. If anything, they saw Pope Paul’s documents about peace and documents about Mary to be of one piece. They engaged in selective reading of those documents and statements, including his blessings on the Movement for the Reparation, as reinforcements of their Fatima-inspired belief about Russia and interna-

12. *Trái Tim Đức Mẹ*, November 1966, 105. This encyclical was issued on September 15, 1966, in anticipation of the traditional practice of praying the rosary during October. Its references to “parts of eastern Asia where a bloody and hard-fought war is raging” left no doubt that Paul VI meant the Vietnam War.

tional communism.<sup>13</sup> For the most part, they might report on Paul VI's friendly gestures toward accommodation, but they never stopped interpreting his pronouncements on the Virgin Mary as being in opposition to atheism and communism. For the CMC and their popular monthly, the Pope's desire for peace in Vietnam reflected the desire of Vietnamese Catholics. But the magazine's consistent advocacy against communism also meant that peace could only come after North Vietnam and the communist insurgents in the south stopped waging war.

### **The Weekly *Living the Faith***

In the fall of 1966, *Our Lady's Immaculate Heart* published a brief notice that the weekly *Living the Faith* (*Sống Đạo*) had recently resumed publication. The devotional magazine called the staff and writers at the weekly a group of Catholics "knowledgeable of important issues of the Church and the present" and having "the aspiration of *living the faith in society*." The notice ended by wishing the staff at the weekly to "be LIVING well in the FAITH."<sup>14</sup>

The good wish sounds remarkable in retrospect, because the orientation of *Living the Faith* was on the opposite side of the ecclesial/theological spectrum from *Our Lady's Immaculate Heart*. The weekly was not critical of devotionalism, but its contents were decidedly short on promoting devotions, Our Lady of Fatima or otherwise. It opposed communism, but it also opposed capitalism while being open to dialogue between Catholics and communists. The more accommodating orientation was among the reasons that the weekly, which had first published between June 1962 and January 1964 and then resumed publication in August 1966, encountered censorship by the government. Its second run continued until early 1968, when it permanently closed after the Tet Offensive. *Living the Faith* had carefully avoided confrontational tones and contents during its first run by sticking closely to theological matters. But its second run, which is examined here, was sharp in tone and diverse in content, especially regarding political issues. It was quickly deemed controversial by government authorities as well as the national Catholic community.

13. *Trái Tim Đức Mẹ*, July 1965, 374.

14. *Trái Tim Đức Mẹ*, October 1966, 95. Both emphases are in the original.

The weekly was not unfriendly to *Our Lady's Immaculate Heart*. In an article about Vietnamese Catholics, *Living the Faith* singled out the devotional monthly as one of two popular Catholic journals that promoted Marian devotionism while “raising contemporary issues.”<sup>15</sup> The weekly, however, was primarily focused on contemporary issues. It frequently criticized US military intervention that kept South Vietnam dependent on a foreign power. It wanted to shift from the discourse regarding communism supported by northern Catholics who had moved south in 1954, including the CMC. By the weekly's second run, Vatican II had been completed and its documents were already translated and studied by contributors. As a result, writers of the second run of *Living the Faith* made many references to the council. “We were formed,” declared the journal, “by laborers of body and laborers of intellect . . . to help usher in the strong wind of the Pentecost and the reforming spirit of Vatican II.”<sup>16</sup>

The staff and contributors to *Living the Faith*, both clergy and laity, came from educated segments of the Vietnamese church. Many had studied abroad and received degrees in economics, engineering, law, medicine, political science, philosophy, and theology.<sup>17</sup> Many directly participated in a second wave of Catholics traveling to Europe for university and graduate education. The first wave began in 1919 with a small number of priests and seminarians. It had the support of the Vatican's policies of turning missionary lands into national churches. The second wave took place during the 1940s and 1950s, when a growing number of the clergy and laity, including contributors to *Living the Faith*, studied at Rome, Paris, Louvain, and institutions in the United States and Canada.<sup>18</sup> In addition, some contributors were also members of the Vietnamese chapter of Pax Romana, an international lay organization consisting of two movements

15. *Sống Đạo* [Living the Faith], November 15, 1966, 7. The other journal, Đức Mẹ Hằng Cứu Giúp [Our Lady of Perpetual Help], was published by the Redemptorists.

16. *Sống Đạo*, September 3, 1966, 7.

17. Ngô Quốc Đông, “Hoạt Động Chính Trị của Nhóm Trí Thức Công Giáo Cấp Tiến tại Miền Nam trước Năm 1975” [Political Activities of Progressive Catholic Intellectuals in South Vietnam before 1975], *Nghiên Cứu Tôn Giáo* [Religious Studies] 8, no. 224 (2022): 33–35.

18. Clare Thi Liên Trần, “The Role of Education Mobilities and Transnational Networks in the Building of a Modern Vietnamese Catholic Elite (1920s–1950s),” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 35, no. 2 (2020): 243–70.

of university and graduate students. As part of Catholic Action, the Pax Romana chapter in South Vietnam was small but energetic. In 1962 and 1963, for example, it organized two week-long retreats among Catholic intellectuals with the Archdiocese of Saigon's blessing. The first retreat took the theme of Catholics and their faith; the second, Catholic conscience and social justice.<sup>19</sup> It also sent delegations to international gatherings such as the Pax Romana conference in 1966 in Belfast on the theme of "freedom and responsibility of the laity after the council." Upon returning to South Vietnam, the lead delegate met with Catholic student groups for Mass and sharing the experience and ideas of the conference.<sup>20</sup>

This background helps to explain *Living the Faith's* orientation. The weekly, however, was neither a Pax Romana mouthpiece nor an intellectual periodical. Its physical format of an eight-page (later four-page) newspaper-size spread resembled a daily newspaper, and it addressed political, economic, and social issues rather than theology. Yet it insisted on a theological perspective or motivation for its coverage rooted in the conciliar spirit of change and openness. The last two sessions of Vatican II took place when the weekly was out of circulation, and its resumption of publication was emboldened by an official call at the highest level for engagement with the world as was advocated by the council. Signaling this spirit, the front page of the first issue in 1966 shows the globe with faces from different continents above three large headlines: "Catholicism and Communism in Yugoslavia," "A Catholic Church in a Buddhist Neighborhood," and "Divorce from Madame Censor." If the last line poked fun at governmental censorship, the others reflected conciliar concerns on atheism and interreligious relations.<sup>21</sup>

The topic of Catholic-communist relations was indeed among the periodical's priorities. On the one hand, *Living the Faith* published a number of reports, usually pulled from longer publications elsewhere,

19. Selected presentations at those retreats were published in *Người Công Giáo trước Vấn Đề Đức Tin* [Catholics in Regard to the Issue of Faith] (Đạo và Đời, 1962); and *Lương Tâm Công Giáo và Công Bằng Xã Hội* [Catholic Conscience and Social Justice] (Nam Sơn, 1963).

20. *Sống Đạo*, August 14, 1966, 4.

21. *Sống Đạo*, August 14, 1966, 1; August 21, 1966, 4; and August 28, 1966, 5. Although Vatican II decided to leave out the term *communism* in conciliar documents, *Gaudium et Spes* includes three chapters on atheism, with chapter 20 the closest in naming communism.

about discrimination and oppression directed at “the silent church” in North Vietnam. In some localities, for example, lay Catholics, were forced to attend “reeducation” sessions and encouraged to denounce priests for having committed counterrevolutionary crimes or even for having come from families of landlords. While the faithful suffered the most in rural areas, urban Catholics also faced discrimination as the government confiscated many church properties. The weekly also published articles about the persecution of Catholics outside of Vietnam, in places like China and Eastern Europe. It offered favorable pieces about new diplomatic agreements reached between Tito and the Holy See. It argued that the Soviet Union had been “oppressive” against religion after the Bolshevik Revolution but had sought better relations with the church since John XXIII’s pontificate.<sup>22</sup> The weekly endorsed the Vatican’s *ostpolitik* as an appropriate strategy in the postconciliar era.

Related to Catholic-communist relations were the issues of war and peace. Like *Our Lady’s Immaculate Heart*, the weekly found support in Paul VI’s letters, speeches, and other statements about the Vietnam War. Its interpretation, however, diverged from the Marian monthly’s. *Living the Faith* believed that the destructiveness of warfare absolutely demanded the need for peace talks. At the end of 1966, the weekly reprinted a declaration by eleven progressive priests, including several of its contributors, that began by evoking Pope Paul’s urgent call for peace. The authors declared their “dissatisfaction” with the conflict that pitched Vietnamese against one another while “deepening dependence on foreign countries.” They called on “the superpowers to respect the self-determination of Vietnamese” and for “the governments of the North and the South to shake hands and talk about peace.” The following year, *Living the Faith* commented on Francis Spellman, archbishop of New York and apostolic vicar of the US military, who had stated during a visit to South Vietnam that a victory over the communists would be the “only resolution” of the war. The weekly argued that Spellman’s position was “not on par with the Holy See” and “contrary to the Pope’s directives on peace.” Two months later, it adopted the position of the eleven priests in a “declaration of the *Living the Faith* group.”<sup>23</sup>

22. *Sống Đạo*, September 18, 1966, 5; October 15, 1967, 1; and August 21, 1966, 7.

23. *Sống Đạo*, December 4, 1966, 3; January 4, 1967, 1; and March 3, 1967, 1, 4.

The weekly's declaration came out of its conviction that a postcolonial Vietnam could not depend on American military presence in South Vietnam, or armed support to North Vietnam from China and the Soviet Union. This conviction led it to counter the dominant anticommunist view of Our Lady of Fatima with a rare article "written by a priest" without revealing his name. The article argued that the "Mother of the Savior not only denounces sin but also loves sinners" and accused pro-war devotees of Fatima of an inability to make a distinction about sin and sinners. The article agreed with the dominant interpretation that the Fatima message required the faithful to pray for Russia and the communists. But it argued that the message was also a call for conversion of "immoralities" among individuals and within society, especially economic and social injustice that had led to the appeal of communism in the first place.<sup>24</sup> This reasoning was unlikely to persuade devotees of Our Lady of Fatima, but it was an articulation of *Living the Faith's* view on social justice. A similar point could be made about the weekly's perspective on war. The weekly typically evoked Paul VI rather than conciliar documents for theological justification. At the same time, it frequently called upon the conciliar "spirit" when arguing about economic, political, and social matters. This orientation could be spotted even in a report about the encyclical *Christi Matris*. Even though both encyclical and report focused on the Vietnam War, the report noted that the pope also wrote about "developing countries and difficulties among oppressed and divided nations."<sup>25</sup>

The weekly took Latin America as an inspiration, maybe even a model, for the Vietnamese church. It was "not communism but Christianity" declares a headline, that served as "the hope of Latin America."<sup>26</sup> The spark for *Living the Faith's* interest in Latin America was the bishops who spoke up for the poor and marginalized. It reported, for example, on the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Conference's advocacy for land reform. It singled out the Brazilian clergy, especially bishops in the impoverished northeast and Dominican friars, for having openly opposed the ruling military dictatorship's economic and political policies that harmed poor people. It quoted a Dominican superior in São Paulo for declaring that "we are not in politics but until death we oppose the injustices of the

24. *Sống Đạo*, February 5, 1967, 4.

25. *Sống Đạo*, September 25, 1966, 5.

26. *Sống Đạo*, November 6, 1966, 7.

Brazilian government.”<sup>27</sup> The weekly was notably enthralled by Hélder Câmara, archbishop of Olinda and Recife, praising him for protesting economic policies on behalf of laborers and peasants. It quoted him arguing that the church must “awaken” the consciousness of the poor toward learning and action.<sup>28</sup> *Living the Faith* also went beyond Latin Americans, citing, for example, Stefan Wyszyński, the primate of Poland known for his confrontational attitude toward communist authorities, that communism continued to exist because of endemic poverty.<sup>29</sup>

The advocacy for economic justice grew deeper after the promulgation of Paul VI’s encyclical *Populorum Progressio* in March 1967.<sup>30</sup> The magazine published articles on the document in almost all its weekly issues between April and July. The issues in April, for instance, introduced the encyclical, published excerpts, provided a two-part commentary on the front page, and reported on its reception among major Western media.<sup>31</sup> A two-day conference on the encyclical took place in Saigon during the first week of June, and the weekly reported that about three hundred people attended, mostly Catholics but also some Buddhist monks, intellectuals, and university students.<sup>32</sup> It later serialized the opening lecture given by Fr. Chân Tín, a leading progressive Redemptorist in the southern church. The speaker fleshed out different sections in the encyclical, pointed out its continuity with earlier social teachings of the church, and argued that the document shifted from an emphasis on the individual to an emphasis on the national. Its conclusion included a quotation from Archbishop Câmara attacking “capitalist groups” that perpetuated the accumulation of wealth and materialism.<sup>33</sup> Such an emphasis prioritized anticapitalist critique over anticommunism—at least, the aggressive anticommunism of more conservative voices such as *Our Lady’s Immaculate Heart*.

27. *Sống Đạo*, August 2, 1967, 4; August 21, 1966, 4.

28. *Sống Đạo*, September 18, 1966, 7; and December 4, 1966, 3.

29. *Sống Đạo*, August 21, 1966, 5.

30. An analysis of the encyclical’s background and initial reception is Mari Rapela Heidt, “Development, Nations, and ‘The Signs of the Times’: The Historical Context of *Populorum Progressio*,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 6, no. 1 (2017): 1–20.

31. *Sống Đạo*, April 16, 1967, 1; and April 23, 1967, 1. Most were liberal periodicals expressing a positive opinion. The report singled out the “capitalist” *Wall Street Journal* for an expected judgment of the encyclical to be “Marxist in a religious form.”

32. *Sống Đạo*, June 11, 1967, 1, 4.

33. *Sống Đạo*, July 16, 1967, 3.

## Conclusion

The comparison above focuses on several differences between two popular magazines because I seek to demonstrate the diversity of perspectives among Vietnamese Catholics. The differences, however, should not obscure important affinities between them. The fact that Christianity remained a minority religion in Vietnam led different Catholic groups to voice support for one another and maintain a relatively civil tone. On conciliar and postconciliar matters, both magazines seized upon Vatican II's emphatic call for an integral involvement of the laity in the daily life of the church. This common response came out of their energetic experience of Catholic Action that flourished since its beginning in the 1930s. Still, another example is the universal appreciation for conciliar documents regarding the use of the vernacular in the liturgy. In particular, Vatican II took place during the golden age of Vietnamese liturgical music that saw a proliferation of new hymns and masses. The laity and the clergy, including staff and writers at both magazines, welcomed the employment of their native language in all major aspects of ecclesial life. Such commonalities could be discerned in many other Catholic periodicals in the southern church, both popular and specialized.

The most significant commonality, perhaps, was the fact that different groups *positively* responded to the council and its aftermath. *Very* positively at that. This development diverged from the responses in western Europe and North America, where Catholics were divided over conciliar and postconciliar outcomes. It was not only a division between traditionalists, conservatives, and liberals, but there was further division within each group.<sup>34</sup> In comparison, the postcolonial Vietnamese church was far less contentious, even if it was not always free of internal complications and disagreements. It was also united in pursuing strategies of growth. Vietnamese bishops and superiors, for example, took advantage of ecclesial global educational networks and sent a number of seminarians and religious to study in Belgium, France, Switzerland, Canada, and the US. A further example is the way Catholic Action organizations worked closely with priests and bishops and organized pilgrimages in order to further internal cohesion. To these ongoing postcolonial dynamics, Vatican II became a major window for Vietnamese Catholics to integrate

34. See McGreevy, *Catholicism*, 327–51; and Stephen Bullivant, *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America Since Vatican II* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

themselves further into the global church. They might have emphasized different matters, but their reactions to the council were highly and consistently positive. They found the conciliar spirit to be a powerful justification for growing their church during a new era of their history.

From this perspective, two related points may emerge from the analysis of *Our Lady's Immaculate Heart* and *Living the Faith*. First, the comparison should alert us to the importance of studying internal debates among postcolonial churches, even among those with a relatively small population of Catholics like South Vietnam. A close reading of these magazines confirms that postcolonial Catholics often diverged on political priorities, especially when politics involved the intervention of a superpower like the United States. One group's sense of what the church should do might very well differ from the sense of another group. Such divergences, however, did not hinder or preclude institutional growth. Indeed, they might have been necessary for overall institutional growth, because these divergences motivated different groups of Catholics to pursue a multiplicity of goals rather than the same ones. An emphasis on social justice was certainly different from an emphasis on anticommunist devotionism. Yet for the postcolonial church in South Vietnam, both could coexist—and did. It may be too far to assume that the coexistence of different agendas and programs led directly to the growth of schools, priests, religious, and seminarians as noted at the beginning of this chapter. But the growth was real, and it might very well have benefitted from a diversity of opinions and orientations among Catholics in South Vietnam.

Secondly, while the African and Asian bishops were quiet at Vatican II, as I have suggested above, it was the engagement of their flocks following the council that played a central role in the *longue durée* of demographic shift and the explosive growth of Catholics at the same time that the church in Europe and North America went into a decline. Nonetheless, lay engagement might have happened differently had it not been for the presence of native African and Asian bishops, quiet though they were, at the council. As seen from the reports published in *Our Lady's Immaculate Heart*, the fact that the bishops sat among European and American ones lent substantial encouragement and support to different Catholic groups partaking in the construction of a postcolonial church. Postcolonial Vietnamese Catholics might have had disagreements about the priorities that their national church should take at a given moment, but they were united in appreciating the presence of their native bishops at the

council. Representation mattered—and it mattered most at a postcolonial moment that empowered Vietnamese Catholics into further action regarding evangelization and institutional expansion. Keenly aware that they had a lot to do to “catch up” with the larger and older European church, postcolonial Vietnamese used all the motivation that they could find. The participation of many of their bishops at Vatican II provided massive motivation for further action, not only during the Vietnam War but also among Vietnamese refugees in the diaspora since 1975.

In the end, it behooves scholars to be more attentive to the historical relationship between Vatican II and the making of modern Catholicism in the global South. Decolonization has been cited and studied as a major reason for this shift.<sup>35</sup> Less conceptualized are the intersections between Vatican II and newly independent countries, and how the intersections might have contributed to the growth in subsequent decades.<sup>36</sup> The evidence presented in this chapter indicates a similar trajectory about the Vietnamese bishops and their flocks, who took Vatican II as the central landmark on their postcolonial roadmap and as the justification for the expansion of their church. Ten years after the council, of course, the Vietnam War itself ended and led to a long period of severe restriction and discrimination under a totalitarian regime. So strong, however, was their postconciliar engagement that during the last twenty years, the church, now under an authoritarian government, has entered a new phase of growth. In addition, tens of thousands of Catholics became refugees after the war and resettled in the United States. They have since integrated into ecclesial life in their new country while supporting the church in Vietnam, which, in turn, has begun to send its seminarians, priests, and religious to study and work in the US.<sup>37</sup> The limits of Vatican II were many, including an absence of pronouncements on racism and colonialism. Yet the

35. A recent example is Elizabeth A. Foster and Udi Greenberg, eds., *Decolonization and the Remaking of Christianity* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023).

36. For a recent example about such a connection, see Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, SJ, “The Impact, Reception, and Implementation of Vatican II in Africa,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, ed. Catherine E. Clifford and Massimo Faggioli (Oxford University Press, 2023), 657–75. See also Elizabeth A. Foster, *African Catholic: Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church* (Harvard University Press, 2019), 257–72.

37. See Tuan Hoang, “Ultramontanism, Nationalism, and the Fall of Saigon: Historicizing the Vietnamese American Catholic Experience,” *American Catholic Studies* 130, no. 1 (2019): 1–36.

council also offered an enormous opportunity for Catholics in South Vietnam to engage themselves and the global church and fueled a momentum toward considerable growth and expansion even during brutal warfare.