

A History of Vietnamese Christianity

Encounters and Emerging Horizons

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BRILL

Postcolonial Catholicism in South Vietnam, 1954–1975

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The site was the Notre Dame Cathedral in Saigon; the date, June 20, 1974; the occasion, the funeral mass of Lê Văn Ấn, the founding bishop of the Diocese of Xuân Lộc. Bishop Ấn had died three days earlier at the age of fifty-seven after an illness. Another bishop, Phạm Ngọc Chi, gave the eulogy in the presence of the apostolic nuncio to Vietnam, the president of the Senate of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), the representative of the RVN president, and other dignitaries. The eulogist noted that the deceased cleric hailed from a parish in central Vietnam well known for martyrdom during nineteenth-century waves of anti-Catholic persecutions. Born into a large Catholic family that included an older brother who became a priest, Ấn graduated from a regional minor seminary in 1938 and then studied at the Urbaniana in Rome, where he obtained a theology licentiate in 1944. World War II kept him from returning to Indochina and led him to earn a bachelor's degree in political economy from the Catholic University of Paris. He also spent some time in England and Ireland studying English. Father Ấn eventually returned to Vietnam in 1949, when the country was in the middle of the First Indochina War, and worked at several parishes in central Vietnam.

After the partition of Vietnam, he founded a Catholic school that later enrolled 5000 students and served as its principal. In 1963, three years after Vietnam moved from missionary status to be a national church, he became the vicar general of the newly established Diocese of Đà Nẵng. Two years later, the Vatican appointed Ấn to be the first bishop of the Diocese of Xuân Lộc, which encompassed an area with a large number of northern Catholic emigrés. To the surprise of many, including the papal nuncio, the new bishop chose his episcopal motto to be *Hãy giết và ăn*: Kill and eat. Taken from the Acts of the Apostles (10:13), it sounded unusual, even macabre in the context of brutal warfare, but reflected Ấn's hope for further human resettlement in the new diocese. By the time of his death, Xuân Lộc grew to be the second largest diocese in the RVN, behind only the Archdiocese of Saigon, with over 360,000 Catholics, including “many converts,” out of a total population of 920,000. It included a dozen deaneries, 151 parishes, 249 priests, 94 major seminarians,

216 minor seminarians, and 920 men and women religious. There were also 157 Catholic schools with 81,000 students; 55 charity organizations such as dormitories, orphanages, and retirement homes; and one major hospital and 29 pharmacies. At the national level, Ẩn served for seven years as the church's appointed head of Catholic chaplaincy for the RVN's armed forces. The chaplaincy included nearly 100 priests who served over 300,000 Catholic soldiers and officers. For two days before the funeral, Ẩn's corpse was not placed in his diocese but at the church of the military center in Saigon, where many chaplains, officers, soldiers, and disabled veterans came to mourn. The RVN president, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, showed up in person to posthumously bestow a national medal on the late bishop. Other religious leaders who came to pay respect included members of the United Buddhist Church, the Hòa Hảo Buddhists, and the Cao Đài Church.¹

1 An Era of Consolidation and Expansion

Eulogies tell only portions of a person's life, mostly highlights of measurable achievements. Even a long eulogy like Bishop Chi's is no exception, yet it illustrates some of the most significant trajectories about Catholicism in southern Vietnam in the era of national division (1954–1975). It was an era of ecclesial consolidation as well as expansion, as suggested by statistics about the Diocese of Xuân Lộc noted in the eulogy. Statistics about the entire southern church led to the same point. Thanks to the migration of northerners when Vietnam was divided in 1954, the southern church grew almost overnight from some 520,000 Catholics to about 1.17 million: i.e., from 27.4% of all Vietnamese Catholics to 61.6%.² It continued to grow to 1.45 million Catholics among the RVN's population of over 14 million. By the end of 1973, it had risen to over 1.8 million Catholics among 19.3 million people. During the same period, the number of diocesan priests rose from 1302 to 1605 and religious priests from 383 to 425, leading to a ratio of 10.8 priests for every 10,000 Catholics. Among the professed religious, there was a growth from 4714 women and 973 in 1963, to 6571 women

1 The information and statistics in this paragraph are drawn primarily from speeches, reports, and photographs of the funeral events published in *Tinh Thần* [Spirit] (July 1974): 6–64. The motto was erroneously reported as *Hãy giết mà ăn* [Kill in order to eat] rather than *Hãy giết và ăn* [Kill and eat!].

2 Peter Hansen, "The Virgin Heads South: Northern Catholic Refugees and their Clergy in South Vietnam, 1954–1964," in *Casting Faiths: Imperialism and the Transformation of Religions in East and Southeast Asia*, edited by Thomas David DuBois (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 131.

and 1309 men in 1973. For a comparative perspective, there were 40.2 million Catholics and 4428 priests in the Philippines at the end of 1973, averaging 1.3 priests for every 10,000 Catholics. Among the professed religious in the Philippines were 6961 women and 477 men. Put it another way, the much smaller church in South Vietnam had only 400 fewer nuns than the Filipino church, but nearly *tripled* the number of Filipino men religious. Among seminarians, the number of Filipinos studying philosophy and theology was considerably higher at 2887 in comparison to 1533 in Vietnam. On the other hand, there were 3296 Filipino seminarians in secondary schools (junior seminaries) in comparison to 5611 in South Vietnam, suggesting the probability of many more new Vietnamese ordinations in the future.³ Turning to educational institutions in 1973, the southern church ran 1130 primary schools that enrolled nearly 427,000 students and 270 secondary schools with over 205,000 students. The majority of 87,851 baptisms were children under seven years old. Nonetheless, the baptisms of those over seven years old, which indicate the level of new converts, were not inconsiderable at 11,400.⁴

The era of consolidation and expansion also reflected the completion of the indigenization of Vietnamese Catholicism. When the Vatican established its national church in 1960, the Vietnamese had nearly completely taken over institutional leadership from the missionaries. Until 1975, and with partial support from the global church, they kept building new schools, hospitals, and other institutions whose influence reached beyond the confines of Catholicism. Although relations between church and state were not free of tension, Catholic leaders and institutions, as illustrated by Ấn's close relationship with the military, shared the state's anticommunist and nationalist ideology and enjoyed broad support from the government. The presence of Buddhist and Cao Đài representatives at the funeral symbolized better relations between Catholics and other religions since the interregnum period in the mid-1960s. It was an outcome of several factors, including the influence of the Second Vatican Council on interreligious relations. Last but not least, Ấn's educational background exemplified a better-educated Vietnamese clergy, including a growing number that went abroad for higher and postgraduate studies, especially at Catholic institutions in Western Europe and North America.

3 These numbers come from *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae* / *Statistical Yearbook of the Church* / *Annuaire Statistique de L'Eglise* 1973 (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1975), 38, 100, 101, and 151; and *Việt Nam Công Giáo Niên Giám* 1964 [Catholic Vietnam Yearbook 1964] (Saigon: Sacerdos, 1963), 505.

4 *Annuario Statisticum Ecclesiae*, 167.

In virtually all respects, the southern church was the opposite to the church in the north under the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). The migration of northern Catholics to the south during 1954–1955 led to the loss of a critical mass among the clergy, religious orders, and church-run institutions. This situation was exacerbated by the DRV's restrictions on seminary training and priestly ordinations. Catholic Action, a lynchpin of lay activism in many northern vicariates during late colonialism, became non-existent by the late 1950s. Cold War dynamics further restricted communication between the northern church and the wider world of Catholicism, and northern bishops were not allowed to travel to Rome for any session of the Second Vatican Council. It is not to say that there was no life in the northern church. But available historical evidence has overwhelmingly indicated that the relative political and religious freedoms in the RVN formed a foundation for many Catholic developments even amidst brutal warfare.

The Vietnam War, indeed, has been the focal point of the scholarship on Catholics in the RVN. Post-Geneva Catholic migration, which was celebrated by the RVN and denounced by the DRV in equal measures, remains an important topic of research while conflicts between Catholics and Protestants still appear in general histories, if in passing. Historians have also explored topics as different as Catholic intellectuals, associations, and devotionism. On the whole, recent scholarship continues to stress the Catholic reaction to problems and issues that stemmed from warfare, especially during the period of Americanization. The emphasis on the disruption of warfare and the Catholic reaction to war has obscured significant continuities between the church in South Vietnam and Vietnamese Catholicism from earlier eras. To be sure, the northern church experienced a profound disruption that would take decades after the war to recover. But it was a different situation in the south, where the church carried on the developments from earlier times to create the indigenization of Vietnamese Catholicism. In particular, the late colonial era bore monumental developments in organization, devotion, ideology, and activism among Vietnamese Catholics. In the words of the historian Charles Keith, the developments marked “arguably the most critical question in the modern history of Vietnamese Catholicism: the transition from missionary authority to an independent national church.”⁵ Keith answers this question by marshaling a massive amount of evidence from French and Vietnamese sources. The narrative of Keith's monograph stops in 1954, albeit with a short epilogue on Ngô Đình Diệm, the Catholic founding president of the RVN. In the end, Keith

5 Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 10.

provides a workable framework to understand and evaluate the trajectories and achievements of the church in South Vietnam.

It is, of course, impossible to gainsay or downplay the impact of the Vietnam War on the southern church, and research is needed to account more fully for Catholic activism regarding the subject of war and peace, among other topics.⁶ All the same, it is equally important, if not more, to view Catholicism in South Vietnam as a realization of postcolonial and post-missionary ideals envisioned by many Catholics before 1945. The realization might be partial and not total, but it was much more than a reaction to warfare. The First Indochina War disrupted some of the momentum towards the national church, but it merely delayed the inevitable that occurred in 1960. Although the Second Indochina War was longer and much more devastating to the southern Vietnamese, it too could not entirely stop southern Catholics from following through on some of the momentum towards a fully indigenized church. In other words, a long view beyond the Vietnam War should show that Catholicism in South Vietnam experienced as much continuity from the late colonial church as it saw disruption caused by decolonization, national division, and warfare. The remainder of this chapter seeks to flesh out this continuity between the pre-1954 Vietnamese church and the southern church after 1954.

2 Indigenous Control within a Global Framework

Organizationally, Pope John XXIII's decree to establish the Vietnamese national church in 1960 was the most significant event in the southern church. Decades in the making, the establishment was not merely an institutional restructuring but an outcome of nativization that began in the 1930s, if not earlier. At the turn of the twentieth century, there were already two Vietnamese priests to every European missionary. The ratio grew to six to one by 1945.⁷ There were no Vietnamese bishops prior to November 1933, but five were consecrated by 1945 and five more by 1953. The number grew speedily during the national division. Between 1954 and 1975, the Vatican gave permission to the consecration of another thirty native bishops: eleven in the north and nineteen in the south.⁸

6 Van Nguyen-Marshall, *Between War and the State: Civil Society in South Vietnam, 1954–1975* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2023).

7 Keith, *Catholic Vietnam*, 88.

8 The last of these bishops, Bùi Tuần, was consecrated in the Diocese of Long Xuyên on April 30, 1975. In a remarkable coincidence, the consecration mass occurred at the same time that North Vietnamese tanks entered the presidential palace in Saigon.

Several missionary bishops continued to head southern dioceses after 1960, but it was only a matter of time before those dioceses would be led exclusively by Vietnamese bishops. When the Vietnam War ended in 1975, only the Diocese of Kon Tum, the smallest diocese in the south, was headed by a former missionary.⁹

In a similar fashion, the leadership of religious orders was still dominated by missionaries during late colonialism, but it quickly shifted to Vietnamese by the time of national division. The Christian Brothers, known among Vietnamese as LaSallians, provide an example. In the mid-1920s, Vietnamese made up about two-thirds of the Christian Brothers. Their number was high enough that it raised concern in some quarters that the youngest members might not be “mature” enough for training. In 1951, not only were all members in the District of Saigon Vietnamese, but Trần Văn Thiên also became the first native to be Brother Visitor (Provincial) in Vietnam.¹⁰ Besides taking over the control of well-established congregations, the Vietnamese also began the momentum of founding new religious orders. In the northern vicariate of Bùi Chu, Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, who became the second Vietnamese bishop in 1935, petitioned for a new congregation of women religious in 1941 and, five years later, received permission from the Vatican. This order would grow to about seventy members by the time they moved to the south.¹¹ The same bishop also allowed the formation of a local congregation of men religious led by the diocesan priest Trần Đình Thủ. Dedicated to Our Lady of Fatima with the intention to evangelize among the Vietnamese, this organization grew to about 125 members when it headed south in 1954.¹²

These developments during late colonialism and decolonization had a direct effect on the southern church during 1954–1975. Aided by the migration of northerners, membership in the southern church rose to 10% of the overall population: 1.49 million Catholics among the general population of 14.85 million in 1965. With 1726 priests, the ratio was over one priest for 1000 Catholics. About half of these priests were appointed to 819 parishes, yet some 2000 other sites, including missions, did not have a regular priest. Most parish

9 All missionary priests and bishops in the north were expelled by 1959.

10 Valéry Nguyễn Văn An, FSC, “Some Main Points Relative to the History of the District of Lasan Saigon – Vietnam, 1866–2016,” (no date): <http://www.lasan.org/lasan-vietnam/tdvn-1866-2016/dvn-eng/dvn-eng-menu.htm>.

11 *Kỷ Yếu 70 Năm Thành Lập Hội Dòng Chị Em Con Đức Mẹ Mân Côi – Chí Hòa, 1946–2016* [Seventh Anniversary Commemoration of the Founding of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Rosary, 1946–2016] (Ho Chi Minh City, 2016), 37–41.

12 “Lược Sử Dòng” [Historical Sketch of the Congregation]: <https://dongcong.us/luoc-su-dong/>.

priests, therefore, served multiple sites. Also in 1965, there were 5799 men and women religious in the RVN. Many of them led and helped to staff some 1000 Catholic elementary schools, 145 junior high and high schools, 495 hospitals and clinics, and other institutions such as orphanages, student dormitories, and the Catholic media.¹³

In particular, Catholic educational institutions and leaders were quite impactful in the culture and society of South Vietnam. During and even before colonialism, missionary religious orders like the De La Salle Christian Brothers had established a number of schools, including one in Saigon in 1874. Over time, they were attended by Catholics and non-Catholics alike and gained a reputation for academic and disciplinary rigor. By the end of colonialism, Catholic schools formed a crucial mediator between the church and the rest of Vietnamese society. They provided perhaps the most visible illustration of a minority organized religion exerting an outsized influence on the non-Catholic society at large. As indicated by the numbers above, the growth of elementary and secondary Catholic schools continued unabated in South Vietnam. Catholics also contributed significantly to tertiary education in the postcolonial society. Although the University of Hue was public and not Catholic, its founding in 1957 was spearheaded by a Catholic priest, Cao Văn Luận. Having been educated in Europe, Luận resorted to a global network of Catholic and secular supporters to raise funds and recruit staff for the university, where he served as the founding rector. One year after its establishment, he persuaded President Ngô Đình Diệm to permit the opening of a medical school in the same city.¹⁴

It is not to say that Western clergy were no longer present in the southern church. To be sure, there were fewer of them in comparison, even to the 1940s. But some remained in the country, and some arrived for specialized roles. Most notable, perhaps, were five European Jesuits who served as rectors of the pontifical college in Đà Lạt, which was formed in 1958. Petitioned by the Vietnamese bishops and named after Pope Pius X, the college helped meet the growth of Vietnamese candidates for the priesthood and religious life. There were 24 students in the first year; by 1977, when it was shut down by the postwar government, the college had trained over 560 students, mostly Vietnamese, plus a small number from Cambodia and Laos. About twenty of the students later became bishops. Besides the rectors, the majority of the

13 These numbers and statistics come from *Tinh Thần* (August 1965): 11.

14 See Cao Văn Luận, *Bên Giòng Lịch Sử, 1940–1965* [Along the Stream of History, 1940–1965] (Saigon: Trí Dũng, 1972; reprint, Glendale, California, 1982).

teaching staff, permanent and visiting, were Jesuits from foreign countries.¹⁵ The founding rector was also involved in the founding of a Jesuit center in Saigon. Named after Alexander de Rhodes, the center would become one of the most important hubs of Catholic media in South Vietnam, especially in television production.

The Pius X Pontifical College brought Jesuits from the West back to Vietnam after over a century of absence. It also reflected the modernization of training for the Vietnamese clergy. In a way, it lessened organizational expenses and the desire to send the most promising seminarians abroad. Yet the rising numbers of seminarians and religious members translated to studies abroad for more and more Vietnamese in Western Europe and, increasingly, North America. Taken as a whole, the intentions among Vietnamese bishops and religious superiors were indigenous control yet tightly within the global framework of Catholicism. Indigenization and global engagement were not mutually exclusive but interdependent on each other.

3 Catholic Action and Lay Apostolates

The dynamism of the southern church cannot be understood without examining the expansion and centralization of the Catholic Action movement. Serving as an umbrella for a host of organizations, Catholic Action sought to empower the laity to live the faith and engage in society more actively. The movement began in the colonial era and fully became nationalized and indigenized in South Vietnam. It was as such a prime example of Catholic continuity over the disruption of warfare and national division.

An outcome of ultramontanist, Catholic Action originated in nineteenth-century Europe as a response to anti-clericalism. By the early twentieth century, it had shifted towards advocacy for laborers in response to new economic and political issues stemming from the Second Industrial Revolution. The movement came to Indochina in the 1930s in the form of several organizations geared at youths and young adults. It was initially strongest in Tonkin but spread to other regions by the 1940s.¹⁶ The weekly *Nam Kỳ Địa Phận*, probably the most read Catholic periodical in Cochinchina, heavily promoted the

15 *Kỷ Yếu Giáo Hoàng Học Viện Thánh Piô X Đà Lạt: 50 Năm Nhìn Lại, 1958–2008* [Fiftieth Anniversary Commemoration of the Pius X Pontifical College in Da Lat, 1958–2008] (n.p., 2008).

16 Claire Thị Liên Trần, “Thanh Lao Công [Young Christian Workers] in Tonkin, 1935–1945: From Social to Political Activism,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 17.2–3 (2022): 93–125.

movement to the point of having a supplementary section on Catholic Action in each issue. Missionary and Vietnamese bishops alike joined the weekly in calling for more membership in Catholic Action organizations. During World War II, for example, Bishop Ngô Đình Thục issued a letter to the faithful in the southern vicariate Vĩnh Long. Playing along with papal devotion among the Vietnamese, the letter begins by appealing to papal authority, continues the appeal to almost the end, and insists that all of the faithful must engage in the movement in one way or another.¹⁷

The First Indochina War put a pause to ecclesial plans to turn Catholic Action into a national organization, but no more than a temporary setback. Soon after the resettlement of northerners in the south, the movement returned with enormous energy. The national office of Catholic Action was not established until 1957, but discussion of nationalization began as early as 1951, when the Holy See's apostolic delegate had a conference with Vietnamese and missionary leaders. In 1953, the bishops tasked Gérard Gagnon, a Canadian Redemptorist, to begin forming a central office. Gagnon had lived in Vietnam since 1935 and was ordained a priest in Hanoi five years later. He advocated for Vietnamese independence and worked closely with Vietnamese seminarians. In 1954, he purchased a property in Đà Lạt and converted it into a retreat center for Catholic Action. It was an act of significant foresight. Between 1955 and 1968, the center, commonly called the Sacred Heart Villa, hosted 30,000 lay Catholics and 1000 priests at retreats and training sessions on Catholic Action. Reflecting indigenization, a Vietnamese priest and Gagnon took turns directing the center. In 1957, the year that the national office was formally established, the first national leader, Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi, purchased a four-floor building in Saigon to be the central offices of the movement.¹⁸

Both the Vatican and the Vietnamese bishops intended the umbrella of Catholic Action to be inclusive of many groups among the faithful. The main organizations usually focused on a particular group of Catholics. Students were the main target, and students at the Universities of Saigon, Huế, and Đà Lạt were encouraged to join the local chapter of the Catholic Student Association. Another organization, Young Christian Students (*Jeunesse Étudiante Chrétienne*) was designed for high school and university students. By 1975, its

17 Ngô Đình Thục, *Thư Chung Đức Thầy Phêrô về Công Giáo Tiến Hành* [Episcopal Letter of Bishop Peter about Catholic Action] (Vĩnh Long: 1943).

18 *Việt Nam Công Giáo Niên Giám 1964* [Vietnamese Catholicism Yearbook 1964] (Saigon: Sacerdos, 1963), 489–493; and Nguyễn Ngọc Nam Phong, CSSR, “Hồn Việt’ của một thừa sai Dòng Chúa Cứu Thế Canada” [The “Vietnamese soul” of a Canadian Redemptorist missionary] (no date): <https://nhathothaiha.net/hon-viet-cua-mot-thua-sai-dong-chua-cuu-the-canada/>.

membership had come to about 4500 members spread over twelve regional groups and about one hundred local chapters.¹⁹ Pax Romana was an outlet for academics and intellectuals, and the Alliance of Catholic Teachers (Hiệp Hội Giáo chức Công Giáo) for K-12 teachers. The best-known association for children and teenagers was the Eucharistic Youths. In the mid-1960s, the Cursillo movement, whose members tended to be married Catholics, reached South Vietnam through Filipino Catholics and became integrated into Catholic Action.²⁰ Some Catholic Action organizations were gender-specific. The Confraternity of Christian Mothers and the Children of Our Lady, both with origins in nineteenth-century France, drew the participation of many married women and young women, respectively. Men were encouraged to join the League of the Sacred Heart (Liên Minh Thánh Tâm), another ultramontane sodality founded in the nineteenth century by a Jesuit in Quebec. Although there were no organizations designed specifically for soldiers and officers in the armed forces of the RVN, they were highly encouraged to participate in Catholic Action through the League or another organization.

Vietnamese adoption of Catholic Action was partially a response to growing urbanization. In the colonial north, its loosely affiliated organizations were strongest in urban areas: Hanoi, Hải Phòng, and Nam Định.²¹ After 1954, many Catholic emigrés from villages and small towns in the north resided in urban centers and peripheries in the south. For the laity, both southerners and northern émigrés, Catholic Action was a new and attractive form of engagement within the urban parish and the diocesan boundaries. As a result, the largest growth of Catholic Action organizations occurred in towns and cities. The clergy typically headed each diocesan office of Catholic Action. On the other hand, the leadership council, which included a president and two or more vice presidents, consisted of lay Catholics. The same applied to the structure of leadership within specific organizations. Not all lay Catholic organizations were formal members of Catholic Action, but several important ones were considered to be “affiliated” to the national office. They included “assisting associations” such as the Catholic Boy Scouts, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and members of Third Orders such as the Dominicans.

19 *Việt Nam Công Giáo Niên Giám* 1964, 493–496; Trần Bá Nguyệt, “Nguồn gốc Phong Trào Thanh Sinh Công Việt Nam” [Origins of the Young Christian Students Movement in Vietnam] (October 8, 2013): <http://thanhsinhcongbinhthai.blogspot.com/2013/10/nguon-goc-phong-trao-thanh-sinh-cong.html>.

20 Purificacion G. Bautista, R.C., “The Cursillo Movement: Its Impact on Philippine Society,” *Asian Studies* 10.2 (1972): 232–244.

21 Trần, “Thanh Lao Công [Young Christian Workers] in Tonkin, 1935–1945”: 99–112.

4 Devotionalism, Nationalism and Anticommunism

Traditional devotionalism went hand-in-hand with engagement in Catholic Action. The overlap was sizable, and it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between them. This overlap reflects ultramontane roots of devotionalism as well as the Vietnamese adaptation of devotionalism for their own purposes. Most significant was Marian devotionalism. Most significant was Marian devotion. “The work of Catholic action,” as described by a Marian periodical during World War II, “is made by Our Lady.”²² As it was common in the history of Marianism, the figure of Mary was multiple in origin and meaning among Vietnamese Catholics.

Most significant among Vietnamese Marianism was the devotion to Our Lady of La Vang, whose figure was associated with the history of anti-Catholic persecution. This devotion began in the late eighteenth century and grew throughout the nineteenth century. By the turn of the twentieth century, Our Lady of La Vang had become not only an object of veneration but also a symbol of national Catholicism. Although there was no Vietnamese visual representation, she was taken to be the most indigenous symbol of Marian devotionalism: a figure intertwined with the history of Vietnamese martyrdom, suffering, endurance, and hope. Starting in 1901, a festival at the site of La Vang was held in her honor approximately every three years. The first festival drew tens of thousands of devotees and set the stage for mass participation and mass pilgrimage from a regional scale to a national capacity. Although the triennial festival was interrupted by warfare, it resumed after 1954 and quickly became the most popular pilgrimage in the southern church. Most notable was the festival in 1961. Spearheaded by Ngô Đình Thục, who had been appointed leader of the newly created Archdiocese of Huế, the festival ran for nearly a week and drew an estimated 200,000 attendants.²³

Besides festivals, La Vang hosted many smaller pilgrimages and gatherings, including events for Catholic Action organizations. In 1959, for example, leaders of eighteen chapters of Children of Mary gathered there for five days for training. Overlapping with this gathering was a two-day retreat of 120 executive council members of Catholic Action from forty parishes in the vicariate of Huế.²⁴ Catholic Action organizations were omnipresent at the

22 *Đức Bà Hằng Cứu Giúp* [Our Lady of Perpetual Help] (May–June 1944): 80.

23 Tuan Hoang, “‘Our Lady’s Immaculate Heart Will Prevail’: Vietnamese Marianism and Anticommunism, 1940–1975,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 17.2–3 (2022): 140–145.

24 Trần Quang Chu, *Hành Hương Đức Mẹ La Vang* [Pilgrimages to Our Lady of La Vang] (2020): https://tonggiaophanhue.net/la-vang/luoc-su/tap-sach-hanh-huong-duc-me-la-vang-tap-2-chuong-13-phan-ii-2/#_ftnrefio.

1961 festival, and a full day of activities was thematized to Catholic Action.²⁵ La Vang was very different from the Sacred Heart Villa in Đà Lạt and the national offices in Saigon. Yet it was just as central to Catholic Action, and more inspirational.

The inspiration and reverence are no doubt owed to the identification of Our Lady of La Vang with the Vietnamese nation. Many prayers, poems, and songs were written in praise of Our Lady of La Vang, not infrequently asking for protection over the country and a blessing for its future. At the triennial festival and other major processions, the RVN flag was highly visible while many soldiers and military officers attended in uniform. Her image was further associated with the Vietnamese martyrs, including 117 martyrs (96 Vietnamese and 21 missionaries) who had been beatified between 1900 and 1951. (All were eventually canonized in 1988.) Together, Our Lady of La Vang and the martyrs formed the foundation of devotional nationalism among Catholics. When Ngô Đình Thục called Our Lady of La Vang the “patroness of Vietnam,” he merely articulated a sentiment shared by Vietnamese Catholics. In a similar fashion, the selection of the martyrs to be patrons of the RVN armed forces echoed the common belief that the identity of the national church came from the suffering and persecution, including the ongoing suffering of Catholics in the northern church.

Besides Our Lady of La Vang, the Vietnamese encountered Our Lady of Lourdes and Our Lady of Perpetual Help through missionary and ultramontane evangelization. Lourdes was a prime example of global Catholicism. Its apparitions and miracles, and the life of St. Bernadette, were among the most publicized phenomena in Catholic circles in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. French missionaries in Indochina preached, promoted, and published about Lourdes, emphasizing the lowly status of St. Bernadette as much as the miraculous in believing the Immaculate Conception. Vietnamese participated in this global devotion with prayers, songs, plays, garden grottos, and, for the fortunate few who could travel to Europe, pilgrimages. The devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help came by way of Canadian Redemptorists. Having arrived in Vietnam in 1925, they quickly popularized this devotion through preaching, retreats, an aggressive promotion of a nine-day novena, and publications, especially a devotional monthly that began in 1935. Like most magazines, the monthly paused publication at times during the 1940s and early 1950s. Unlike them, however, the Redemptorists, now nearly all Vietnamese, persisted in resuming publication. It had

25 Hoang, “Our Lady’s Immaculate Heart Will Prevail”: 143.

a successful run in the post-1954 southern church and reached a peak of 26,000 subscribers.²⁶

Yet it was another Marian devotion that best captured the nationalist and anticommunist flavor of Catholicism in South Vietnam. Begun in 1917, the devotion to Our Lady of Fatima was largely a regional and national affair for more than twenty years. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, it quickly became a European, then a global devotion, thanks partially to the Vatican's promotion of an anticommunist interpretation. The rising power of the Vietnamese Communist Party and the belief in an apocalyptic worldview quickly drew a number of Vietnamese Catholics to this devotion. The Catholic press churned out many articles and several books about Our Lady of Fatima. Even the Redemptorist monthly publicized this devotion. Its issues included a column on "Festival of Our Lady of Perpetual and St. Alphonsus." In 1944, however, several issues spent this column instead on the Fatima apparitions and the request by Our Lady of Fatima. It included attending mass; saying the rosary and a special prayer for the reparation of the Immaculate Heart; and engaging in an act of sacrifice by choice, such as fasting or giving money to the poor.²⁷ The movement for reparation was compelling enough in Hanoi that several Vietnamese approached a missionary Dominican and requested that he organize an association for that purpose. One outcome was the publication of a devotional monthly called *Our Lady's Immaculate Heart*. At the same time, the aforementioned priest Trần Đình Thủ, then in provincial Bùi Chu, actively promoted the same devotion among minor seminarians and parishioners in his charge. He eventually succeeded in starting a religious order of men, the Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix (CMC). After resettlement in the south, the CMC restarted the movement for reparation and received the Dominicans' permission to resume the publication of the devotional monthly.

The positive reception of Our Lady of Fatima by the CMC and other Vietnamese, before but especially after 1954, suggests that their anticommunism should be bracketed within the long history of Vietnamese anti-Catholicism. The threat of Vietnamese communism was undoubtedly real and substantial to them: all the more so after Hồ Chí Minh's declaration of independence on September 2, 1945. But it also expressed their desire for a postcolonial society

26 "Nguyệt san Đức Mẹ Hằng Cứu Giúp" (no date): https://www.academia.edu/32390110/Nguy%E1%BB%87t_san_%C4%90%E1%BB%A9c_M%E1%BA%B9_H%E1%BA%Bing_C%E1%BB%Agu_gi%C3%BAp.

27 *Đức Bà Hằng Cứu Giúp* (May 1944): 79.

that ensures or at least tolerates the practice of organized religion, especially Christianity. The last major violent anti-Catholic persecution took place in the 1880s, which was still within the living memory of some Catholics in the 1940s. The beatifications of 117 martyrs made up a point of pride about Vietnamese-ness, but they—and, more generally, the frequent commemoration of Vietnamese martyrdom—also functioned as a reminder that anti-Catholicism was a fact of life before and even during colonialism. A tract about Our Lady of Fatima published in the 1940s, for example, includes a petition for “people who have left the Church out of deception or by their own will, especially those who had venerated Our Lady (yet were forced to hide pictures and statues of Our Lady during persecution).”²⁸ After 1954, the clergy preached against the “red devils from the north” and that “Our Lady’s Immaculate Heart will prevail” over atheistic communism. This rhetoric was not merely echoing the anti-Soviet universality of the Fatima messages. It should also be taken as a real and enormous fear of anti-Catholic persecution rooted in past violent confrontations between church and state.

If the fear of communism fueled the beginning of the Fatima devotion in the 1940s, it was the devastation of warfare and, conversely, the desire for peace during the 1960s that heightened the enormous popularity of Our Lady of Fatima in the southern church. From all appearances, the apex of the devotion was the first tour of the International Pilgrim Virgin Statue in South Vietnam. Placed under the auspices of the international organization Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima, the statue traveled to many noncommunist countries as an object of prayer and adoration. Initiated by Vietnamese members of the Blue Army and with crucial assistance from the Blue Army in Australia, the statue came to South Vietnam in September 1965. Its arrival in Saigon was greeted with great fanfare, starting with a procession of over sixty automobiles from the airport to Notre Dame Cathedral, where mass was held before tens of thousands of the faithful. The Blue Army had planned for a three-month tour of the statue, but the Vietnamese demands were so high that it did not leave the country until 1967. A second tour took place in 1974. Organized in the eleventh hour, it took place over only a few days, but the statue was, again, well received by devotees wherever it went.²⁹

To be sure, anticommunism was a majority view, but it was hardly the only one in the southern church. It was loudest and most uniform in the 1950s and early 1960s. As the war raged on into the late 1960s and early 1970s, however,

28 *Tôn Kính Đức Bà Mối Khôi Fatima* [Devotion to Our Lady of Fatima] (Saigon, 1944), 25.

29 Hoang, “Our Lady’s Immaculate Heart Will Prevail”: 147–149.

more Catholics voiced a multitude of opinions, ranging from unease about the American military presence to outright opposition. In the hope of ending the war, some Catholic progressives supported peace negotiations with the National Liberation Front (NLF), partially in the belief that it was independent from the communist party in Hanoi. Vietnamese anticommunism was further complicated by Pope Paul VI's more conciliatory approach to communist countries, especially in Eastern Europe, alongside a growing critique of social and economic injustice in capitalist countries. The combination of war-weariness and changes in the global church gave way to a more vocal critique of the RVN and American intervention among some Catholic intellectuals and activist clergy in the southern church.³⁰

All the same, the variations within the spectrum of Catholic opinions did not substantially alter the foundational anticommunist nationalism among the majority of Catholics in the southern church. Dozens, probably hundreds, of priests served in the armed forces as chaplains and officers. Tens of thousands of Catholic laymen were enlisted to fight for the RVN. For every voice suggesting negotiation with the NLF, there were more, usually Catholics originally from the north but also others, who were against negotiation. Anticommunist Catholics still had to wrestle with the ongoing consequences of the Americanization of the war. Many were not pleased that American intervention contributed crucially to an individualistic lifestyle even after US troops had left the country. "What must Vietnamese Catholicism do," asked an op-ed in a journal for the laity, "while living in war and sin?"³¹ But they took warfare and Americanization as a preferred option over a communist takeover. Their fear was fully realized when North Vietnamese tanks rolled into Saigon on April 30, 1975. The republican nation that allowed a flourishing of Catholicism was forever lost. Their postcolonial and anticommunist nationalism, however, lived on and even hardened in the years of the postwar diaspora.

5 The Golden Age of Vietnamese Sacred Music

A history of the southern church is not complete without noting the development of church music. The indigenization of Catholicism was visible and certainly audible in the growth of Vietnamese hymns and choirs to perform

30 For an overview of antiwar and neutralist developments, including those of several antiwar Catholics, see Sophie Quinn-Judge, *The Third Force in the Vietnam War: The Elusive Search for Peace 1954–1975* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 137–163.

31 *Tổng Đồ Giáo Dân* [Lay Apostolate] (September–November, 1974): inside front cover.

them at the liturgy. Building upon the wave of indigenous music in the 1940s, musicians and choral directors in the southern church created a firm foundation for the postcolonial liturgy. Along with the period 1945–1954, indeed, the era of South Vietnam ushered in the golden age of modern Vietnamese church music: a peak that has yet to be equalled.

In certain respects, the development of indigenous church music ran parallel to the broader growth of Vietnamese modern popular music. French popular music from the 1920s and 1930s heavily influenced Vietnamese popular music, leading more Vietnamese to play Western instruments such as the piano, violin, mandolin, and guitar. (Brass instrumentation was already important for official events involving the colonial regime.) By the late 1930s, many young and educated Vietnamese had begun to compose popular songs, especially for consumption in urban areas. Before the 1940s, much of Vietnamese creative energy went into Catholic architecture and literature, especially poetry, not music. Vietnamese Catholics were long familiar with Western-style music thanks to the dominance of Gregorian chants and Latin and French hymns in the liturgy. Between 1910 and 1940, some priests wrote short and original devotional compositions with Western notation. They were easy for the faithful to memorize and contributed directly to the growth of communal singing in the Vietnamese language at masses and processions. More often, Vietnamese lyrics were written to European tunes.³²

This situation changed drastically during the tumultuous year of 1945, when many new hymns were composed and several were quickly circulated among Catholics. Most notable was *Hang Bêlem* [The Cave of Bethlehem], written by the former seminarian Hải Linh at twenty-five years old. First performed at the Phát Diệm Cathedral on Christmas Eve—the composer also served as choral conductor—it became so entrenched in the Vietnamese consciousness about the incarnation that no midnight mass was complete without it being sung. The timing of composition and performance might have coincided with profound political changes, but it was not a coincidence that the Vietnamese wanted to articulate their belief, musically speaking, in their own language. Hải Linh's hymn was merely the most popular composition from this period. There were dozens of other hymns that quickly formed a staple of choral and communal singing at mass and other liturgical functions. Among them were highly emotive Marian songs, including *Lời Mẹ nhắn nhủ* written about Our

32 Trần Thanh Khâm, “Những vị tiền phong khởi xướng phong trào hát tiếng Việt tại các địa phận miền Nam” [Pioneers of the movement to sing Vietnamese at vicariates in the South], *Phụng Vụ* [Liturgy] (April 1971): 126–128.

Lady of Fatima.³³ The seemingly out-of-the-blue phenomenon took place during the decolonization of Indochina, as if it were unleashing the longing for indigenization. For sure, it tapped into an enormous reserve from musicians at seminaries and parishes who jumped into the creative fray with aspiration and inspiration even higher than their secular counterparts in popular music. The youthful composers usually organized themselves into one of several regional groups called *nhạc đoàn*: musical association. There was one each in the south and the center of Vietnam. Most activities, however, took place in the north, which had at least eight geographically based associations, including one founded by Hải Linh.

The church in South Vietnam picked up this musical momentum and ran with it. Many new hymns and masses were published during 1954–1975, especially by northerners who migrated south. Besides Hải Linh, any list of notable composers should include Hùng Lân, another former seminarian, and the priests Ngô Duy Linh, Tiến Dũng, Kim Long, and Thành Tâm. Like Hải Linh, Hùng Lân, and Ngô Duy Linh also worked as choral directors in some capacity before the national division. During 1950–1956, Hải Linh traveled to Europe and studied at the César Franck Music College and the Institut Grégorien de Paris, where he wrote a thesis on “Vietnamese color” in Gregorian chant. Overlapping with him was Ngô Duy Linh, who studied at the César Franck, the Catholic Institute of Paris, and the Conservatoire International de Paris. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Tiến Dũng studied at St. Cecilia Music College in Rome and researched Western music in West Germany. Kim Long, the youngest among the major figures, studied at the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music in Rome in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their experiences again illustrate the global character of indigenization of the postcolonial church. They viewed independence and indigenous leadership in terms of interconnectivity. Post-coloniality meant cooperating with the global church and engaging in the mobility of education for the purposes of constructing the national church in the new nation.

Upon returning to Vietnam, Hải Linh and others engaged in a number of activities. They taught music at Catholic and non-Catholic institutions. They worked in ecclesial committees on music and the liturgy. They edited and organized publications of church music. Some were further involved in founding or running choral groups. The best known was the National Essence [*Hồn Nước*] that Hải Linh began in 1957, the year after returning from studies abroad. It

33 Paul Van Chi, *Catholic Choral Music in Vietnam 1945–1975* (Portland: Pastoral Press, 2002), 66–76.

was the closest there was to a national Catholic choir. It performed at secular events as well as masses; true to its name, it sang many folk-infused nationalist songs in addition to religious songs. Its quality was high enough that in the early 1970s, it became the first choir to record several albums for public distribution.³⁴

National Essence was the best-known and most elite Catholic choir, but it was not representative of dozens and, later, hundreds of small choirs at the parish level that marked a gradual but distinctive turn in Vietnamese liturgical life. The main parish in Đà Lạt, provides an instructive illustration of lay involvement in music at the parish and diocesan levels. At this parish, singing at masses before decolonization was led by a choir of students, mostly of French origin, at the boarding school run by the missionary Sisters of St. Paul. World War II and its aftermath led to the departure of those students, while the Vietnamese took over the leadership and management of the parish. Over time, Catholic Action members, especially youth organizations with educated members, took turns to lead singing during Mass. This participation evolved to the formal founding of the choir Seraphim in 1958. Two years later, when the Vatican established the national church, this parish became the cathedral of the new Diocese of Đà Lạt. The choir was initially led by a priest and a layman. Several years later, another layman, who had participated in the Hồn Nước, moved to the city and helped the choir improve its harmony “in leaps and bounds.” In 1963, the parish welcomed Nguyễn Văn Hòa as associate pastor. The young priest had previously graduated with a bachelor’s degree in music at the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music, in addition to a doctorate in theology from another university. Later, a bishop of the diocese, Hòa injected further energy and quality into the choir. He also composed a new mass and named it after the choir, which was the first one to perform it. The Seraphim mass quickly became one of the most popular mass sets, and is still widely used today in Vietnam and the diaspora.³⁵

For several reasons, especially the recitation of prayers through memorization, Vietnamese Catholics had been used to hearing and speaking their own language at mass and the liturgy. The writing and singing of hymns and masses

34 Nguyễn Bách, “Hồn Nước – Chuyên nghiệp cả trong đạo, ngoài đời” [National Essence: Professional in and out of the faith], *Những ca đoàn vang bóng một thời* [Famous choirs in the past] (2020): <https://donghanh.vn/nhung-ca-doan-vang-bong-mot-thoi-bai-4-hon-nuoc-chuyen-nghiep-ca-trong-dao-ngoai-doi/>.

35 Nguyễn Bách, “Ca đoàn trở thành tên bộ lễ Seraphim” [The choir whose name became the name of the mass Seraphim], *Những ca đoàn*: <https://donghanh.vn/nhung-ca-doan-vang-bong-mot-thoi-bai-3-ca-doan-tro-thanh-ten-bo-le-seraphim/>.

in their own language were steps further in this oral tradition. The emergence of choirs, which became widespread by the fall of Saigon, helped to consolidate the foundation for the church since its independence. The postwar regime heavily curtailed Catholic Action organizations until the 1990s, but it could not suppress liturgical music that had gone largely native. Church music was an important reason, if underrated, for the communal survival of the church during 1975–1990.

6 Vatican II and the Postcolonial Church

The Seraphim Mass received the imprimatur in the summer of 1965, only one month before the commencement of the fourth and last session of the Second Vatican Council. The timing was most opportune. Conciliar documents on the liturgy struck a chord with Catholics in the southern church, enhancing their vision for a postcolonial church controlled and managed by the Vietnamese. They even led to a proposal that Vietnamese should incorporate the pentatonic scale from Vietnamese traditional music to write new masses and devotional hymns.³⁶ This proposal was not adopted, as composers continued to write music in the Western style. But it illustrates the postcolonial spirit of indigenization that accounted for the warm welcome of both ecclesial documents and the broader conciliar spirit for a greater confidence in the making of their postcolonial church.

The conciliar spirit was perhaps most compelling in Vietnamese discussions of evangelization. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Vietnamese Catholics already played crucial roles, especially as catechists, in helping missionaries spread the faith. The growth of native priests naturally contributed to evangelization in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even if their works were often overshadowed by missionaries. As missionaries kept coming to Indochina in the early twentieth century, if in smaller numbers, the Vietnamese were well aware that the responsibilities for evangelization would fall to them rather than Westerners. In the 1930s, the consecration of the first native bishops gave Vietnamese Catholics a newfound confidence about spreading the faith to other Vietnamese and even non-Vietnamese in other

36 Nguyễn Văn Minh, “Thử tìm một hướng đi cho cung điệu phụng vụ Việt Nam” [An attempt to find a direction regarding musical scale in Vietnamese liturgy] *Phụng Vụ* (December 1970): 152–168. This essay had been orally recorded and distributed to the clergy in the Diocese of Nha Trang five years before this publication.

Asian countries. The founding and aspiration of the CMC in the 1950s illustrated this spirit. Further motivation came from the creation of the national church in 1960. This postcolonial context accounted for the generally positive reception of conciliar documents and related directives on the part of the clergy, religious, and the laity in South Vietnam. In some respects, evangelization (*truyền giáo*) became a catchword for lay activism within and without the church, including the expansion of Catholic influence in the Vietnamese society, even when the intention was not necessarily the conversion of non-Catholics. The phrase “lay apostolate” (*tông đồ giáo dân*), already a part of ecclesial vocabulary since the 1930s, became acutely central to the southern church’s mission in the years following the council.

Calls for lay involvement notwithstanding, an outcome of the crossover between Vietnamese post-colonialism and Vatican II was the southern church’s incessant calls for more seminarians, more priests, and more religious. The historic and influential roles of Western missionaries had left a lasting impression on the Vietnamese about supporting the clergy. Southern Catholics viewed priests and religious to be not only indispensable but also, hierarchically speaking, paramount to their future. Decision-making, therefore, continued to be delegated to the clergy. It is difficult to predict the future of the laity if there had not been a communist victory in 1975. In statistics, however, there was little doubt that the numbers of seminarians, priests, and religious continued to grow, reflecting a further consolidation of indigenization following independence.

7 Conclusion

This chapter seeks to show continuities between the late colonial era and the era of South Vietnam. This perspective is further complemented by a larger perspective: the shift of global Christianity since the era of decolonization. This era marked the beginning of two concurrent trajectories: a steep decline among Catholicism and Protestantism in Western countries, especially Europe, and enormous gains of Christians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.³⁷ The church in South Vietnam reflected the momentum of growth following decolonization. The communist victory in 1975, however, disrupted this momentum and led to a lengthy period of restrictions and repression. Today, Catholics

37 See, for example, Elizabeth E. Foster and Udi Greenberg, eds., *Decolonization and the Remaking of Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023).

constitute only about 7% of the country's population: a lower percentage than the Catholics of the RVN's overall population.

Still, the impressive growth in South Vietnam proved instrumental in helping the church survive postwar repression. Never free of tension, church–state relations nonetheless turned towards the better since the 1990s. Catholics rebuilt a number of former Catholic Action organizations while governmental relaxation allowed a gradual growth of seminarians, ordinations, and consecration to religious life. Studies abroad, especially in Europe and the U.S., resumed in some circles. By the 2010s, a small but noticeable number of seminarians, priests, and religious came to Europe and North America at the invitation of local authorities.

The most immediate postwar impact of the southern church took place in the diaspora, especially in the US. An outsized number of Catholic refugees, including hundreds of priests and religious, resettled across fifty states after April 1975 and quickly relied on their ultramontane and nationalist experiences to deal with the sudden loss of nation and family separation. As they attended to economic survival, the refugees duplicated, recreated, and improvised the faith practices that they had built in South Vietnam. Their construction of an exilic faith community during the 1970s and 1980s gave way to a more transnational faith identity from the 1990s onward. For this reason, it is not possible to understand Vietnamese Catholics in the diaspora without an understanding of the history of Catholics in South Vietnam.

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