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The Congregation of the Mission in Vietnam

By Gérard Tran Cong Du, C.M.
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1. History

a. Origins. At the start, seventy years ago, the presence of Vincentians in Vietnam was brought about by the arrival of the first three French Daughters of Charity in 1928. They came to work as nurses in Saigon Hospital, at the request of the Vicar Apostolic of Saigon. From 1928 to 1952, though, there was only one confrere permanently resident in Vietnam, as Director of the Daughters of Charity. In 1952 some confreres who had been expelled from China took up residence in Dalat, 300 km. north of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh Ville). They numbered six, five priests and a lay brother. Their ministry was the direction of the Daughters of Charity and chaplaincy to their works, the chaplaincy at the French secondary school in Dalat, and a student centre (from which Vincentian vocations came later).

b. Expansion. In 1955 the house in Dalat was canonically erected. The community there ministered to the Catholics in the neighbourhood of the house and to the Chinese Catholics. Later on a Chinese parish was set up by a Chinese confrere who came from Italy.

In 1959 a French confrere arrived, and his arrival, together with the ordination of Vietnamese confreres in the following years, allowed further expansion. Two missionary sectors were established among the Montagnards 50 and 60 km. from Dalat. These are one of the fifty-three ethnic minorities in Vietnam. They are rather poor and are of a completely different origin to the Vietnamese. Around the same time an apostolic school was opened in Dalat to foster indigenous vocations.

1966 was significant for the opening of an internal seminary in Dalat. The apostolic school was moved from Dalat to Tam-Hiêp, 32 km. north of Saigon. The school could cater for about a hundred boys in the minor seminary and about a thousand others.

In 1969 there were fifteen confreres, thirteen priests and two brothers, working in the two regions of Vietnam:

- *The DALAT Region:* This was the main house of the confreres, with five priests and one brother. It included the internal seminary, the residence of the students who attended lectures in the Jesuit Pontifical College (where the cream of the Vietnamese clergy was formed). There was also a group of aspirants in the house. A Vietnamese confrere was in charge of a small Vietnamese parish, and a Chinese confrere was in charge of a Chinese parish and also looked after a Chinese primary school and a dispensary 23 km. from Dalat. Finally there were two missionary sectors in Montagnard territory, 50 and 65 km. from Dalat, where four confreres worked.

- *The SAIGON Region*: There was the Apostolic School in Tam-Hiêp, 32 km. from Saigon, with about a hundred boys in the minor seminary, and a secondary school. There was also the chaplaincy to the “Centre Caritas” run by the Daughters of Charity in Saigon. As well as this there was a confrere of the Eastern Province of the United States who looked after the spiritual welfare of the Americans in Saigon.

c. *Vietnamisation*. From 1969 to 1975 the Vietnamisation of the Congregation of the Mission in Vietnam got under way. In future, foreign confreres would be working full-time in the mission “ad gentes” among the Montagnards, and one of them would be the Director of the Daughters of Charity.

The Vietnamese confreres would become the superiors of the houses throughout the Congregation’s network in Vietnam. They would take full control of the formation of seminarists and students, and the Vincentian seed-bed in the Apostolic School.

In 1973-74 the seeds produced the first harvest. Four Vincentian students were ordained priests in their homeland, bringing to fifteen the number of confreres available for ministry. The community was able to start a third house. There was the house of the confreres working among the Montagnard and the house comprising the internal seminary and scholasticate in Dalat, with forty philosophy and theology students. The third house was that of the confreres in charge of the Apostolic School in the Saigon Region.

d. 1975: *The Great Turnabout*. The day of the “liberation,” 30 April 1975, marked the final victory of North Vietnam and the withdrawal of the Americans. The two Vietnams, separate since the Geneva Accords of 1954, were re-united and governed by the Community Party. The uncertainty and fears, foreseen by the veterans from China, became reality.

It goes without saying that under the Communist regime foreign priests and men and women members of religious communities had to leave the country. The Apostolic School was suppressed and the three priests and the brother were removed to a re-education camp, where the superior remained for almost twelve years.

e. 1975-79. The political line of the re-united Vietnam, whose official title is The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, adopted inevitably an attitude of isolating itself from the universal Church and of interference in the local Church.

For the Church as a whole in Vietnam, and for the hierarchy and religious congregations in particular, this was a period of waiting and of apparent or real stagnation. It was impossible to continue with the mission in the way our foreign confreres operated. All contact with ethnic minorities was suspected of being a subversive tactic. A large number of our seminarists, discouraged by the situation, left the Congregation; this happened with others as well. Those who stayed on until the end of their studies wait, *sine die*, for ordination to the priesthood.

f. 1989. Perestroika in the USSR, which was the prelude to a change of regime there and, as a consequence, to the bursting asunder of the communist bloc in the countries of Eastern Europe, had inevitable repercussions in Vietnam, which was a satellite country of the

USSR. As a result, a certain easing was experienced in the relationship between the regime and the Church.

g. 1990: A modest re-awakening of missionary work and recruitment. The region where foreign confreres had their mission before 1975 had become a new economic zone, and the local authorities gave permission to two confreres, one priest and a deacon, to establish a missionary parish. In 1991 the parish of Kadeune was set up, the parishioners being 50% Vietnamese and 50% Montagnards. In 1995 a second missionary parish was established 4 km. from the first one. This was under the care of the deacon mentioned above, who meanwhile had been ordained a priest. Most of the parishioners of this second parish are Montagnards. This is the parish of Próh, and its church was solemnly dedicated by the bishop of Dalat in 1997 with eighty concelebrants in the presence of a congregation of more than five thousand Catholics from everywhere.

At the same time young aspirants from different places are asking to be admitted to the Congregation. They are recommended by either their parish priest or the Daughters of Charity. After a probationary period they are admitted as postulants and learn something about the Congregation. At the end of a one year postulancy they begin the first cycle of studies (philosophy) which lasts three years. They then start the important stage of the internal seminary. Needless to say all this formation programme takes place in secret, even though everyone knows what is going on! For the present the authorities seem to close their eyes and let it go on.

2. The Present Situation.

Between 1992 and 1997 we have had four ordinations to the priesthood, bringing the total number of confreres who are priests up to ten. As well as this there are two deacons waiting, and one incorporated confrere.

The confreres are divided between three houses:

Dalat: This is the central house, with eight confreres, one of whom is a deacon. This is where the twenty-one students of the first cycle are studying, helped by professors who come in from outside. The confreres are in charge of three small parishes in the city.

Kadeune-Próh: This is a missionary sector with two rural parishes 50 km. from Dalat, with two priests and a deacon.

Tuc Trung: This is 90 km. north of Saigon in a region where the majority are Catholic, former refugees from the North. There are many vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The postulancy and internal seminary are here, with one priest, one incorporated confrere, and one brother.

Saigon: A hostel for twenty theology students of the second cycle was recently opened. They attend lectures in an inter-congregational institute which caters for about two hundred students from different congregations. Among our students we should mention a doctor aged forty-two, a dermatologist, recently converted from Buddhism.

3. Looking Ahead for the Vincentians in Vietnam.

It is obvious that for us looking ahead means aspirations. Whether these ever become realities depends mainly on a softening of the present political situation in the country. It is officially defined as socialist but is strongly tainted with communism, at least with regard to religious matters. As long as the regime sticks to the principle of the right to oversee and regulate everything concerning politics, culture and religion, a long-term specific programme is impossible.

Two complementary perspectives

a. Formation: We can prepare our young confreres for the evangelization of the poor even if the question of ordination to the priesthood is uncertain. Our young members have always to remember and accept the fact that their receiving holy orders does not depend on decisions of the Congregations, but mainly on those of the government if they are to carry on priestly ministry in public. Secret ordination carries too many risks and reduces pastoral activity to a minimum. A ray of light is emerging, though. The committees for religious matters in many provinces have recently recognised some of our students as Vincentian religious.

After the opening up of Vietnam which took place in 1989 religious and priestly vocations are flourishing, but we are afraid that there will be a falling off in the near future because of the effects of capitalism and the market economy on Christian living. This is what happened in Eastern Europe.

It must also be noted that the lack of trained formators is a worrying problem. Most of our confreres were ordained under the present regime and did not receive a complete formation which would enable them, in their turn, to “accompany” others and take on the important task of forming our young members in spiritual and Vincentian matters. The Paris Province is trying to fill this need by bringing confreres to Paris to take part to CIF sessions of Vincentian formation. But the difference of language is no small handicap, and getting an exit visa is still very difficult.

b. Mission: Following the spirit of the Vincentian vocation we want to carry out the aim of the Congregation of the Mission, namely to follow Christ the evangeliser of the poor, which is the fundamental statement of our Congregation. We accept for ourselves what is stated in art. 1, § 2 of our Constitutions and Statutes: “[the members] Work at evangelizing the poor, especially the most abandoned.” There is no doubt that now, as in the past, the poorest and most abandoned people in Vietnam are the ethnic minorities, and this is true at all levels. Our priority therefore is the evangelization of the Montagnards, fulfilling art. 16 of our Constitutions. This is continuing the work of those who went before us but who had to leave the mission field fallow when they left in 1975.

In giving priority to this choice we are strongly supported and encouraged by our excellent bishop. He has great missionary zeal, directed towards the Montagnards and he urges young priests to study their language and culture, and to evangelise them. He himself speaks one of the Montagnard dialects.

We appreciate, though, that what we want to do is limited by “the circumstances of time and place,” even if we are “attentive to the signs of the times and the more urgent calls” of the Church in Vietnam (C.S. 2)

We await in faith and hope the moment when Providence will allow us to put our choice into practise in accordance with our Vincentian charism, namely to be, in so far as it is possible, “nearest to the furthest off.” Who knows whether in the new millennium the sons of St. Vincent in Vietnam will be numerous enough to swarm, and move into other parts of the high plateaus where there are other ethnic minorities even more needy and abandoned, in order to bring them the charity of the Good News of Jesus Christ, sole saviour of the human race.

We are united to our confreres by the same Vincentian spirit and the same faith in Christ, and we commend our plans to their prayers, and also to our dear readers spread all over the world.

(Thomas Davitt, C.M., Translator)