

About the Priest Who “Respects God, Loves the Country”

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ABSTRACT: The paper introduces biography of Priest Phero Phạm Bá Trực who enthusiastically and successfully combined his respect to the God and the love for the country. His attitude represented for great effort in the historical context of Vietnam before it regained the national independence. After the success of the August Revolution in 1945 in Vietnam, Priest Phạm Bá Trực proactively participated in Revolutionary movements by explaining the Hồ Chí Minh government’s policy on the unity of all religions and freedom of religion and belief for the Catholics. During difficult years of fighting against the French, the Priest had tried all his best to help the people, the nation, to unify religions for the national resistance.

About 50 years ago, in an article, doctor Nguyễn Tấn Gi Trọng, a famous scholar at that time, wrote about the priest Phạm Bá Trực as follow: “Father Pedro Phạm Bá Trực, a faithful Catholic soldier to the country, the Revolution, is a guiding star for us. The soldier has strongly integrated his respect for God and his love for the country. The August Revolution evoked patriotism of the Catholics in Vietnam with a typical example of Father Phạm Bá Trực. Having made no concession to the enemies of the country, of the religion, and consistence to fight against the invasion of the enemies and protect the religion and God¹.”

The above compliment does not exaggerate the fact about a typical figure of the Catholicism in Vietnam during the year after the August Revolution and resistance against the French of the Vietnamese people, including the Vietnamese Catholics. The following analysis of the context, speeches, and typical confrontation of Priest Phạm Bá Trực towards Catholicism and the Revolution in this writing aims at helping readers to understand more about him.

Being born and brought up during the evolving time in the history, when the French occupied Vietnam and changed Vietnam into their colony, Phạm Bá Trực had

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understood that the Vietnamese, being religious or non religious, was losing their country, which was the common embarrassment.

He was born in a Catholic-originated family on 21 November 1898 in Bạch Liên village, Yên Mô district, Ninh Bình province. Right from the young age, Phạm Bá Trục was already famous for his learning abilities. When grown up, he received a scholarship to study abroad in Rome. After 9 years in Rome, Phạm Bá Trục received three doctorate degrees in Philosophy, Law, and Theology. Having ordained to be a catholic priest, Priest Phạm Bá Trục received confidence from the Church and was appointed to take care of many churches around the world. However, it is important to note that this priest always shown his positive and patriotic attitude strongly against the French colonials².

The Priest's attitude was a “strong effort” in the historical condition at the time. That was because the Vietnamese Catholic Church at that time was under the management of foreign priests as well as under the control of the French colonials. At that time, patriotism and nationality were “forbidden” topics in the Church and everyone had to secretly discuss about it whereas anti-communist policies by the Pope Pio XI and XII had strong influence on many countries where the national movement led by the Communist Party was thriving, including Vietnam. On the other hand, when the Second World War (1939 – 1945) finished, the world experienced the Cold War with the two poles of the Soviet Union, representing the Communism, and the United States of America, representing the Capitalism. In Vietnam, the resistance to the French colony continued to expand and the French was in a confronting position after 1950. In this political situation, the Catholic Church had more actual grounds to strengthen their “strict” viewpoint of the Communism³.

When the August Revolution was successful, priest Phạm Bá Trục enthusiastically joint the Revolution and frequently visited the Catholic followers to explain about the policies on religious and non-religious followers' solidarity and on idea of religious freedom by President Hồ Chí Minh. In the first National Assembly's election of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on 6 January 1946, many priests and religious followers respected and voted him as their representative. At the time, priest Phạm Bá Trục was honorably elected as the National Assembly representative of Hà Nam Ninh province. His prestige was more confirmed when he was promoted in the Standing Committee by the National Assembly in November 1946. In the same year, the priest was one of the founders of the Hội Liên Việt (Vietnam United Association) and the commissioner of its central committee.

However, the victory atmosphere of the August Revolution was quickly abrupt and the country is turned to another challenging history. Catholicism had just integrated into the national revolution then the eventful history suddenly disrupted. The French colonial re-invaded Sài Gòn (23 September 1945) and started provoking the North of Vietnam at the end of November 1946. Since 19 December 1946, all people in Vietnam had to carry out a new struggle against the French who intendedly invaded the country once again.

For the Catholics in Vietnam, this was a very challenging war. This is because France that was called “motherland” cunningly appointed D’Argenlie, a Camelo priest, as a full power high commissioner to re-invade Vietnam. The High Commissioner as a Catholic embraced a huge ambition of the “motherland” to attract religious followers in Vietnam to his side and used them as a weapon for the purpose of Vietnam invasion⁴. However, with a “*sensitive sense*”, priest Phạm Bá Trục soon discovered intentions of the French. The priest wrote that: “It has been long time ago that politics always takes advantage of religion as their dangerous weapon during wars. The way the French treating Vietnam showed that France is a country that has made most used of religion for their purposes, then when they did not achieve what they set for, they turn to repress religion in the way they want, etc.”⁵

In fact, the French colonial tried to take advantage of the Catholic by separating them with the Revolution of the Vietnamese people. Because at the beginning of the Revolution, the Northern Delta was a *strategically significant area* which the French wanted to hold on to and change it to a military base and a place to supply provision to the invasion. In terms of religion, this was a *sensitive area with Catholic issues*, where a lot of Catholic followers lived⁶. The French tried to make use of the Catholics to oppose the Hồ Chí Minh’s government. Furthermore, due to the fact that the Northern was an invaded area so the Catholics had to face a fact that either they confronted the issue of patriotism or being exploited by the French. To the Catholics, it was spiritually torturous to choose between the two because some facts happened at that time were the punishment of the Church as well as the French⁷.

At the end, the disappointment rested with the French. The ambition to exploit Catholicism did not happen as the “motherland” wished for. As far as the French went, the Vietnamese people who were religious or non-religious followers fought toughly against them. Many religious areas armed to fight the French or hid the Party’s officers. At the end, the image of the High Commissioner was damaged right under the Catholic Institute in Sài Gòn⁸.

During the difficult time of the nation, especially of the Catholics, Priest Phạm Bá Trục had brought effort and ability to help the people and the nation. In all actions, the priest always harmonized God’s ethnics with the moral tradition of the nation. He always emphasized the meaning of national solidarity, including religious solidarity in his participation in the resistance. Phạm Bá Trục’s thought was that all Vietnamese Catholics would stand together with people in the country to fight against the invasion and gain national independence. “Jesus Christ was born to save human beings from exploitation and victimization each other, from revenge, from racial discrimination among the white, yellow, or black peoples, etc. So because of Jesus Christ, we should solidify to fight and expel the enemy out of our country. That is the desire Jesus Christ would like us to do, etc.”⁹ The priest was assigned by the President Hồ Chí Minh the important job of solving Catholic problem. For example, in 7 February 1947, the priest went to Kim Sơn district, Ninh Bình province on behalf of the Government to explain to the Catholic the Government’s religious policies towards reactionaries who took advantage of Catholicism; or on 24 September 1947, as the government special envoy, the priest went to Kim Sơn to have a meeting with resistance government and Catholic and Buddhist representatives to discuss some agreements such as roads control, residential management, and the imprisonment of some staffs who were working for Bishop Lê Hữu Từ.¹⁰

Due to the conspiracy of the French colonial, Catholic condition in the Northern Delta during the period of 1946 and 1954 was very complicated. In this period, some priests and bishops persuaded religious followers to lean against the Revolution. However, the majority of the priests and Catholics still believed in the Government and the President Hồ Chí Minh. Priest Phạm Bá Trục himself had some proper comments on this as “all the Vietnamese, disregarding of classes and religions, followed Uncle Hồ. Everyone thinks and model themselves on him everyday. When I was on my business trips, people in every place I went to all were as one to be with the national resistance and with Uncle Hồ”¹¹. The positive viewpoint of Phạm Bá Trục at the sensitive time was very necessary and meaningful for the solidarity between Catholicism and the country.

Apart from Priest Phạm Bá Trục, it is necessary to mention the other priests such as Nguyễn Thế Vịnh, Hoàng Quang Tự, Nguyễn Duy Trinh (Phát Diệm Catholic area), Vũ Xuân Kỳ, Nguyễn Tất Tiến (Hanoi Catholic parish), Phạm Quang Phước (Hải Phòng Catholic parish), etc. who actively participated in the Revolution and solidarity policies of the Government.

Phạm Bá Trục thought that any Vietnamese Catholic should not only show their faithful belief to be next to God but also devote their strength to the country, or in another way it was *respect God and love the country*. In the letter sent to Catholic people after his visit to China and North Korea in May 1951, the Priest wrote "... We should show we are authentic Catholics, faithful and equitable and always with God and the country; we should show that we are a religious person as well as a good citizen to the country. This is revealed in our activities such as participating in the nation liberation and construction. We would willingly do what the resistance Government assigned. We should faithfully cooperate so as to forward the Revolution to its final victory"¹² .

The Priest had been in many places and many countries, but in Vietnam, whenever he went to, he always introduced the policies of religious freedom of the Government and the President Hồ Chí Minh to Catholic communities¹³. In the speech to call for the Catholics in 1 June 1951, the priest indicated clearly that "We should remember that the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam indicates properly the issues of religious respect and religious freedom, the regulations of the Nationwide Committee stipulates the issues of religious freedom and religious practices. This is to prove that the Government and the Fatherland Front do not advocate against any religions but respect and protect all religions"¹⁴.

In whatever position in the National Assembly, the Government, or the Fatherland Front, Priest Phạm Bá Trục always contributed his opinions to help people and the country. Whenever, the enemy plotted a conspiracy to make use of religion in order to separate religious followers, he always pointed it out and asked for support from religious communities. According to Priest Phạm Bá Trục, being a Catholic who believes in Jesus Christ, one cannot follow the invader. If anyone follows the enemy, they are not much different from the Pharidian who lost their country, their religion, their soul and body. The French colonial used the propaganda of "anti-communism", "Communism against religions" to separate religious and non-religious people."¹⁵

At this point, it is necessary to emphasize that Priest Phạm Bá Trục had *overcome* "thoughts" of the Catholic Church to provide his accurate opinion about the enemy's propaganda that communism was trying to erase religions¹⁶. In reality, harmonizing between beliefs in God and patriotism of the country for religious people was not always an easy job. Along with the development of the country, religious followers have always been targets for the enemies to aim at and take advantage. Anti-Vietnamese revolution forces always propagandize that the

communism was against religions and the religious theology and the communist theology are seriously conflicted¹⁷. These forces also called upon religious followers not to involve in the Resistance, only involve in religious practices and avoid social issues, or fight against the Government. These were dangerous to the national solidarity policy of the Communist Party and the Government of Vietnam.

In 1951, at the Nationwide Meeting of the Việt Minh’s Vietnam United Association, he was promoted to be the Vice Chairman of the Association. Besides, the priest Phạm Bá Trục was also promoted as a central member of the Friendship Vietnam – China Committee and was sent to visit China and North Korea with Vietnamese delegates. This is to confirm more about his role and prestige in the national unification process. Phạm Bá Trục’s reputation has a certain influence to the patriotic Catholic movement in the South during the French resistance period¹⁸.

During the French resistance years, Priest Phạm Bá Trục always represented as a symbol in participating in constructing policies for the Government and called upon people to implement the policies. For the issue of religious policy, at the end of 1952, the priest participated in the Religious Policy Drafting Sub-Committee and actively contributed in the 3rd meeting of the National Assembly to pass the Law on Land Reform. In 19 May 1953, the Priest wrote a letter to all religious followers so that the Catholics could understand the policy to mobilize people for land reform of the President Hồ Chí Minh and of the Government, which includes “mobilization of the people, brings good to Catholicism, benefits the country, benefits people. Thus, we, religious followers, should enthusiastically support it... It means to follow the regulations and laws of the Government and the opinion of the mass.”¹⁹

In the middle of 1952, the Priest’s heart condition became serious. President Hồ Chí Minh and the Government assigned skillful doctors to take care of him. During his serious illness, Hồ Chí Minh visited him quite often and the Priest always expressed his will that: “I wish the Resistance would end and we would win the battle and therefore I would be satisfactory when I die.”

Despite of serious illness, the Priest did not stay in the hospital until the early 1954. During that time, he stayed in bed all the time, but still watched closely what was going on and contributed opinions about policies to the Government, and wrote guidelines to implement those. After the Geneva conference finished, the Priest kept calling upon the Catholics and other religious followers to protect and build peace and unification in Vietnam. The Priest sent letters to the Catholic exposing the conspiracies of Ngô Đình Diệm, the interference of the American, and the French

colonials' followers.²⁰ They intendedly broke cease-fire agreement as agreed in the Geneva convention. The Priest told people to cooperatively fight against the enemies to win complete victory.

Priest Phạm Bá Trục died on 15 October 1954 at the age of 56. His legend lives on with the Vietnamese people, especially to the Vietnamese Catholics who think of him as a priest who devoted himself to the national independence and religious freedom. That was why in his eulogy, Hồ Chí Minh said: "With all our due respect to a patriotic scholar and to a dear friend, we all promise to finish your whole life wish that is to gain national independence, unify the country, build a democratic, republic society in Vietnam"²¹ ./.

Reference:

¹. Refer to the writing of Nguyễn Tấn Gi Trọng in *Chính Nghĩa newspaper*, No. 51, dated 26 August 1956, p. 2.

². *Chính Nghĩa newspaper*, No. 56 dated 30 September 1962, p. 2.

³. The "Strict" viewpoint of the Communism was most extracted in the message "*Divini Redemptoris*" in 1939 by the Pope Pio XI about the atheistic Communism.

⁴. D'Argenlie made use of Catholicism to force some Vietnamese priests to threaten religious followers participating in the invasion. The Commissioner used an anti-communist policy and threatened to withdraw their spiritual communion, besides he seduced and forced religious followers to participate in the anti-patriotic activities fighting against the revolution's organizations led by the Commissioner. Refer to Nguyễn Văn Đông in *Introduction about the Southern Catholics*, *Chính Nghĩa newspaper*, No. 10, dated from 1 to 15 August 1955, p. 3. "The Play" was repeated in 1952 when the French colonial was stuck in the Vietnam War and wanted support from Vatican so they had to appoint De Lattre de Tassigni to come to Vietnam. De Lattre is a diploma. Before coming to the Indochina, De Lattre went to America to ask for their aid and to Vatican for "back-up" of the Pope Pio XII.

⁵. Words of the Priest Phạm Bá Trục dated 9 December 1949 was cited in *Drafts of Hồ Chí Minh's writings about Catholicism* (archive documentation, not yet published), written in about 1950 in Việt Bắc in the section *Catholics and the resistance government of Hồ Chí Minh*, last page. In the same draft, in the section about *The French invaders killed the Vietnamese Catholics*, Hồ Chí Minh once again cited words of the priest Phạm Bá Trục when the priest reported the French's behavior to the Catholics in Vietnam as follows "*The invaders verbally love the Catholics but intendedly tried to kill the Catholics. The elderly, the youth, all were killed and tortured by them, etc.*" This reference is of Professor Đỗ Quang Hưng.

⁶. According to the book *Les Missions Catholiques en Indochine*, in 1939 there were 1,151,653 Catholics, including 633 priests, 700 process server priests, 923 indigenous priests in the North of

Vietnam. While in the Middle, the South and the Central Highlands, there were 170,573; 222,539 people, respectively – Refer to *Catholic Directory*, published in Sai Gon in 1964, page 199. Up to 1945, five bishops in Vietnam were promoted, of which four were in the North. This shows that the North of Vietnam was a large Catholic center important to the Roman Catholic Church and the French bishops. This was the area where the French made use of the Catholic to separate the solidarity of the Vietnamese during the resistance period of 1946 and 1954.

⁷. Refer to *Common letter in 1951* written by the Indochina priests and some *correspondences* written by the priest Lê Hữu Từ.

⁸. *Chính Nghĩa newspaper*, No. 10, dated from 1 to 15 August 1955, p. 3.

⁹. Phạm Bá Trục. *Because of the Jesus Christ, of ourselves to fight this tough resistance*, published in *The Truth newspaper*, No. 105, dated 25 December 1948. This version of the newspaper is stored in the Military library.

¹⁰. Nguyễn Hồng Dương. *Catholic and Nation during the period of 1946 and 1954*, discussion in the Conference on Catholicism and the Nation: Yesterday and Today, on 27 and 28 April 2006 in Hanoi, p. 6; Refer more in the article *The Priest Lê Hữu Từ and Phát Diệm*, written by Đoàn Độc Thư and Xuân Huy, in Saigon in 1973.

¹¹. Extracted from *Drafts of Hồ Chí Minh’s writings about Catholicism*, in the section The Catholic and the Hồ Chí Minh Government, previously cited.

¹². Phạm Bá Trục. *Respects God and loves the country, Religious and non religious Solidarity*, Vietnam United Association Publishing house, 1954, pp. 24, 25.

¹³. Why was the policy of religious freedom seemingly to be an obvious right for people emphasized during this period? We have to consider the historical condition at that time. At the end of the 1920s and especially in the 1930s, the Catholic Church in Vietnam considered the spread of Communism in Vietnam as a danger for the development of the society. Some writings of the Church considered Communism as an enemy for many religions. In Vietnam, religious organizations started promoting anti-communism in the year of 1930 and 1931. After the Soviet Nghe Tinh movement, especially after the Divini Redemptoris message of the Pope Pius XI about Atheistic Communism in 1937. The Bishop Eloy– Northern Representative of the Catholic Church in Vinh, wrote in a letter dated 6 June 1932 that “... It is clearly that the Vietnamese Communism does not respect religion as much as the Soviet Union Communism. The future is so fearful”. This is extracted in the article of Priest Trương Bá Cần, a Catholic in Vinh Catholic Church during the resistance period against the French and the American (1945 – 1975) in the monthly *Catholic and Nation Magazine*, No. 17 in May 1996, page 77 -78. So it is important to explain the meaning of the religious freedom policy to the Catholics.

¹⁴. Phạm Bá Trục. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁵. Phạm Bá Trục. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁶. Obviously, the practices towards religions of the Soviet Unions and China at that time affected the viewpoint of the Roman Church toward Communism.

¹⁷. At present, the propaganda “Communism tried to kill religions” of anti-communist forces has become “old” and “boring”. Having proved in reality that interact between the two is very positive, which disclaims all of the negative propaganda. But in 60 years ago, the propaganda did create a “puzzling” and “uncertain” condition among the Catholics in Vietnam, especially when it was promoted by thousands of attractive speeches made by religious foreigners and the use of Catholicism for politic purposes cunningly of the French.

¹⁸ Nguyễn Văn Đông. *Introduction of the Southern Catholics*, *Chính Nghĩa newspaper*, No. 10, dated from 1 to 15 August 1955, p. 3.

¹⁹. The letter of the Priest Phạm Bá Trục was published in the *Chính Nghĩa newspaper*, No. 7, in 16 June 1955, p. 1 and 4.

²⁰. This can be seen through letters of the Priest Phạm Bá Trục such as *Ngô Đình Diệm, a deserter to the country*, written in July 1954, and *Letter to Catholicise* regarding to conspiracies to break peace of the American, the French, and Ngô Đình Diệm’s gang, written in September 1953. Both letters were written when the Priest was seriously ill.

²¹. Refer to *Eulogy to Phạm Bá Trục, Vice Chairman of the National Assembly’s Standing Committee*, written by Hồ Chí Minh, in *People newspaper*, in 11, 12 October 1954. The funeral of the Priest Phạm Bá Trục was held in Đại Từ, Thái Nguyên province in the morning of 7 October 1954. In the funeral, Mr. Phan Anh, on behalf of the President Hồ Chí Minh read the eulogy. The eulogy was reprinted in *Hồ Chí Minh and Religious beliefs*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi 1996, p. 237.