

Influences of Catholic Values on Vietnamese Catholics

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Received: 20 June 2017.

Accepted: 5 July 2017.

Abstract: Religions in Vietnam, be they exogenous or endogenous, have all created religious values in their processes of existence and development. Catholic values have great influence on Catholic followers, which has resulted in their attachment of great importance to labour and the marriage and family relations, living in solidarity and mutual assistance not only among the followers themselves, but also between them and non-Catholic people in Vietnam.

Keywords: Catholicism, values, Vietnam.

Subject classification: Religious studies

1. Introduction

Catholic values exert a strong influence on the life of Vietnamese Catholics. How those influences are is an extensive issue. This paper contributes in analysing the influences of Catholic values on Vietnamese Catholics.

2. Influences of Catholic values on Vietnamese Catholics' conception of working

That people have the right and duty to work is a Catholic value. According to the New Testament, Jesus is a working man. As God became man and dwelt among us,

he spent his years on earth to work. Working demonstrates a fundamental dimension of human living, as the participation not only in creation but also in salvation.

Since time immemorial, Vietnamese Catholics have designated the third day of the Lunar New Year as the "Day of the Sanctification of Works". That holds working in high regard, and requires the faithful to perceive working as a right and a duty, being temporal but also spiritual in transforming the self.

Vietnamese Catholics, through many General Letters, recognise the value of working. One of the General Letters to mention is General Letter 1976², in which section 8 (The value of labour) read: "We

pledge you brothers and sisters to specially perceive the value of working. Truly, through working, man as usual earns themselves and their family a living, interconnects with and serves his brothers, can perform genuine charity and contribute to the fulfillment of God's creation. Furthermore, we suppose that by their works, men contribute to the very work of Jesus Christ, who had elevated the value of working when he worked in Nazareth. In the current circumstance, working and producing are also the policy to build a self-sufficient economy and to ensure the independence and freedom of the nation" [4, p.327].

Instilled with the Bible and with the documents of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the Catholic Church of Vietnam (an example being the General Letters 1976 mentioned above), Vietnamese Catholics regard working as among their earthly duties. To them (Christians), "to neglect earthly duties is to neglect duties to others and, moreover, to God himself, hence risking eternal salvation."

After the reunification of the country, the devastation left by the war was extremely heavy. Those are the years when Vietnamese people, including Catholic believers, had to survive the "subsidy" period with innumerable difficulties. During that period, Paul Nguyen Van Binh, the Archbishop of Ho Chi Minh City, was seen participating in production in worksites and in the countryside. Religious orders, both male and female, all "set forth", taking part in the "front of production" in various forms, including agriculture, cultivation, farming, husbandry, handicrafts, for self-support.

Catholic believers nationwide all worked and produced fervently, raising working

productivity. In addition to fulfilling a collective member's responsibilities in the fields, they also conducted supplementary economic activities, increased production, raised livestock, took additional jobs, implemented the "orchard-pond-pigsty" economy, in order to improve the lives for the individual and the family, and to generate more wealth for the society.

In the current course of renovation and international integration, there appear more and more examples of thriving Catholics whose farms employ dozens of workers each. In sectors of industrial production, handicrafts, and services, there appear more and more Catholic entrepreneurs. With talent, intelligence, and a can-do spirit, they rose up to become company directors and chairmen of the boards. Their companies and businesses attract from tens to hundreds of workers, creating jobs and stabilise workers' lives. It is also the rise with the spirit of "poverty reduction" of tens of thousands of farmers in all regions of the country.

In order to escape poverty, to get rich, and especially to become business owners and entrepreneurs, Vietnamese Catholics unceasingly elevate their education. While pre-Second Vatican Council Catholics, especially those in the countryside, had the mindset not to pursue higher education for fear of failing religious duties, there has emerged a huge contingent of young Catholic intellectuals, including many bachelors, engineers, doctors, masters, Ph.Ds of various disciplines.

Thus, the influence of Catholic values upon believers is comprehensive. The course that the Vietnam Episcopal Council set out in General Letter 1980 is "Living

the Gospel in the midst of nation to serve the welfare of the people.” To live the Gospel requires believers to fulfill their duties to God and to the communion of saints. Catholicism teaches that men are God’s body members, bound, created, loved and saved by God. Catholics understand that “God is love”, and love God wholeheartedly. To live the Gospel is not only to fulfill religious duties by regularly attending mass or by visiting church after church for favours, but also to witness the religion amidst the society, and to bring good things (the Gospel) into life. Believers to earthly life must be like yeast to flour. Vietnamese Catholics must love their homeland, their country, and must commit to their nation. General Letter 1980, Section 10, reads: “We want to affirm that to love our country and our countrymen is, to Catholics, not only a naturally inevitable sentiment, but also a requirement of the Gospel.” “Our patriotism must be practical, that is, we must be aware of the country’s current issues, must understand the direction, policies and laws of the state, and must, along with the compatriots in the whole country, actively contribute towards defending and building a strong, prosperous, free and happy Vietnam.” “In the service of the homeland, the Gospel gives us the light and strength to overcome the difficulties and the tendencies of individualism and selfishness, to uphold the universal charity’s spirit of serving, towards the scene of “New heaven and new earth”, in which everyone is happy. And, when we strive to eradicate negatives, we have the grace of the risen Christ to put on a new person, just and holy.”

To lead “a good life temporally and religiously” means to fulfill a believer's and simultaneously a citizen's responsibilities. On this point, Pope Benedict XVI, spoke to the episcopal delegation of Vietnam on their ad limina visit in June 2009: “It is to be hoped that every Catholic family, by teaching their children to live in accordance with an upright conscience, in loyalty and truth, may become a home of values and human virtues, a school of faith and love for God. Lay Catholics for their part must show by their life, which is based on charity, honesty and love for the common good, that a good Catholic is also a good citizen.”

Since receiving the above address by Pope Benedict XVI, the Catholic Church of Vietnam has raised the movement of “A good Catholic is a good citizen”. Vietnamese Catholics are becoming increasingly aware of and are exercising more effectively their responsibilities as believers and citizens.

3. Influences of Catholic values on Vietnamese Catholics’ perception of marriage and family

Firstly, Vietnamese Catholics live faithfully and monogamously. Marriage is considered by Vietnamese Catholics a serious matter, affecting their very life from wedded to dead. From a young age, through catechism classes, children are provided with knowledge of sexes and of the meaning of marriage by the priests, by the family and by catechists. As they reach adulthood, Catholics would take Marriage Preparation courses, thoroughly studying

the sacramentality of holy matrimony and the roles and responsibilities of wife and husband. Once finishing the course, they must pass the examination, and only when they are qualified, and be issued a certificate does the study complete. That is one compulsory prerequisite for any couple to get married.

Secondly, Vietnamese Catholics always consider marriage to be a good thing. To them, getting to know the life partner is to be done carefully. Once married, they do not have the right to divorce (except in a few exceptional cases). Catholics are only allowed a monogamous marriage, according to the notion: “what God has joined together, let no one separate”. That is the principle of inseparability, also called oneness (one wife, one husband). “Once married, a man cannot be the husband of any woman except his wife, and the woman cannot be the wife of any man except her husband.” For Catholics, there is no polygamous family.

The faithful life and the monogamous family accord with Vietnam's Law on Marriage and Family (2001), of which article 4 provides: “A married person is forbidden to marry or live with another person as husband or wife”.

Thirdly, Vietnamese Catholics view marriage as free, voluntary, and sacred. A Catholic marriage is considered valid when a man and a woman are free to love and to come to each other voluntarily. During the wedding mass in the Catholic church, the priest, being the celebrant as well as the presider of the mass, is invariably to enquire the man and the woman whether they are truly free to love, and to marry each other voluntarily. Only when the

answer is yes can the priest perform following steps.

Before being consecrated with a particular sacrament and receiving the Eucharist, the man (the bridegroom) hands the ring to the woman (the bride) and says the vow to the woman, then the woman also says the vow to the man. Together they sign the Matrimonial Book, formally becoming husband and wife. Through the marriage ceremony held in the church presided by the priest, Catholic marriage becomes sacred. That sacredness has its origin from the Bible, since God Himself has brought the man and the woman together so that they become husband and wife. That sacredness is validated through the solemn mass at the Catholic church presided by the priest, and under God's witness. And once becoming husband and wife, they “sanctify” each other and together glorify God.

Fourthly, Vietnamese Catholics does not accept same-sex marriage. The Catholic conception of marriage is the union of a man and a woman and the procreation. Catholicism does not recognise homosexual marriage, viewing it as degenerate, psychologically sick and, especially, against God's order. The Book of Leviticus (Old Testament), in the section concerning familial sins, harshly condemns homosexual relationships: “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination.”

Even though harshly reacting to and strongly condemning same-sex marriage, the Catholic Church still “fully respects homosexuals in their very own dignity”. Same-sex marriage is a “heated” controversy worldwide as well as in

Vietnam. For the time being, however, no documentation has yet recorded the existence of gay marriage in the Catholic community. As a result, Catholic families so far still can preserve the traditional family way of life.

Fifthly, Vietnamese Catholics in the Red River Delta materialised matrimonial values in village conventions. Catholic villages were formed during the course of evangelisation and development of Catholicism in Vietnam. The Northern Delta region is where Catholic villages manifest themselves most apparently. Catholic villages exhibit typical features of Vietnamese villages, yet they also contain distinctive Catholic particularities. Having stabilised at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, many Catholic villages issued village conventions (or at times village agreements) to maintain the village's political, economic, social and religious codes. The majority of Catholic villages' conventions set aside some provisions governing marriage, all of which are based on Biblical laws and ecclesiastical texts that were Vietnamised for believers to follow, and thenceforth turned into one of the contents of Vietnamese Catholics' way of life.

The principle of monogamous marriage, labelled "the rule of one husband - one wife" in village conventions brings to Vietnamese Catholics leading faithful conjugal life, preserving and cultivating the family ethics. Deeds that go against the faithful way of life or trample on the human morality are subject to heavy penalties. "Reaching the present from tradition", Vietnamese Catholics nowadays are still trying hard to maintain their faithful conjugal way of life in

changing social conditions. Records from the authorities show that fundamentally Vietnamese Catholics maintain stable marriage, with a much lower divorce rate than non-Catholics.

Conjugal fidelity creates a solid foundation for the family: Children do not suffer separation, receive love and responsibilities from both father and mother, and would be in a condition to study and advance. That is one of the important factors for the society to progress.

Sixthly, Vietnamese Catholic families constantly live in the imitation of Jesus Christ's family (the Holy Family), in which the values of filial piety and fraternity are highly regarded. Everyone's suppositum is to be respected in the family, where the children are raised into adulthood. Parents are the typical examples, sacrificing everything for their children. Catholics do not put too much emphasis on children's gender. They are always concerned with teaching their children to fulfill the law of God, and how to preserve themselves and avoid sins and evils.

Children honouring their parents (filial piety) is the practice of the fourth of the Ten Commandments: "Honour your father and your mother". Filial honour is based on the gratitude towards those who gave birth to and brought one up. Filial piety is manifested by docility, sincere obedience, and observance of parents' teachings. Catholics owe responsibilities to their parents, to support them physically and mentally, to take care of them when they are old, sick, lonely, or in need. Filial piety also manifests in siblings living in harmony, being humble, meek, exemplary, perseverant, and tolerant of one another in charity.

In addition to the theological and sacred values, however, for Catholics, families also have temporal values, firstly the morality of gratitude towards those who give birth to and brought them up, because “The family plays a unique and irreplaceable role in educating children.” Parental love gives rise to the best from them. It also provokes and guides all educational activities, enriching them with virtues such as graciousness, patience, kindness, service, selflessness and self-sacrifice, the most precious fruits of love [6, p.82].

To one’s parents, one of God’s Ten Commandments to Catholics is “To honour” (the Fourth Commandment).

The majority of Vietnamese Catholics are good-natured and rustic farmers. It might be difficult to them to absorb spiritual values presented in the Bible or in the pastor’s homily, since before the Second Vatican Council the priest still preached in Latin. Catholics are but used to living the religion: a way of life with God and the communion of saints inclining to popular piety [8, p.9]. As for the family, they live the religion in accordance with traditional morality. This piety is the intertwinement and fusion of religious lifestyle and the traditional culture and ethics of the Vietnamese nation. Catholics’ repaying their procreators for the birth and nourishment was shown in many dimensions. For instance, they try to become good children, to obey parents’ teaching, to observe Catholic commandments, to fulfill a believer’s duties, to meet the parents’ expectations. In Catholic families, that their children carrying on the faith is among parents’

highest satisfactions; it would be heartbreaking for them if their children become less devout, non-practicing, or especially convert from or leave the religion. In reality, many Catholic families, unable to bear the community’s unfavorable comments opinion when their children abandon the faith, have to leave their villages to relocate elsewhere.

The filial ethics toward the life-bearers and nurturers also emphasises “honouring your parents”, which is attending to parents, taking care of them during their lives, when they are ill, or aged. When parents pass away, their children must fulfill both religious and temporal aspects. Notwithstanding darkness, rain, storm, or piercing cold, at the parents’ hour of death, they must invite the parish priest to come by all means in order for their parents to say their last words, to have the priest’s support, and especially to receive viaticum from the priest. Only after that can they peacefully pass into eternity (or “return to Father’s home” as in Catholic sayings). The descendants would gather around the parents, saying prayers, providing support so that they may find peace and may depart calmly as if in a sleep. The children then would arrange for their parents’ bodies to be taken to the parish church for the absolution of the dead, and to be buried in the churchyard (which Catholics called “holy garden”). If there is no holy garden in the parish and the deceased is to be buried alongside with other deceased of other faiths, the descendants must invite a priest to consecrate the grave once it is dug.

The way Vietnamese Catholics commemorate the deceased basically

resembles the traditional Vietnamese way to commemorate the dead: The first three days for visiting the grave, the 49th or 100th day, the “first anniversary” (small commemoration), the “final anniversary”³ (grand commemoration). On death anniversaries, the descendants always ask the parish priest for mass offerings. At the end of the mass, the priest would announce the Christian names of the deceased so that the community would join in prayers for their soul. In addition to the ceremony in the church, there is also a ceremony at home, during which the descendants of the deceased gather to pray on their death anniversary. Neighbours often come to join in prayers. Since the Second Vatican Council, Vietnamese Catholics are allowed to venerate the ancestors. Ancestral altars can be permanent or temporary, and, as an unchangeable principle, must be placed below the altar for God. On the altar there are often incense burners or censers, flowers vases, lamps (or candles), and water bowls. On the death anniversaries, the relatives would burn incense and bow in front of the altar. Fruit and occasionally some of the favourite dishes of the deceased during their lifetime can also be presented on the altar.

Catholics designate the second of November each year for the commemoration of departed parents and ancestors. On that day, a mass is celebrated in the church, thereupon the priest and the community would visit the holy garden to recite prayers, light candles, and clean the graves of the deceased. So far, most Catholics have chosen one-time burial (in burial vaults) for their relatives. Customarily, Catholics usually visit their relatives' graves for the last time of the year before the Lunar New

Year. Catholics in the parish of Doc So, diocese of Hue, have a very humane practice: when they visit and tend their relatives' graves, they also spread out to do the same with secluded graves nearby.

In some pre-Second Vatican Council parishes, there was a form of post-observance donation, in which people without child or son to observe their death anniversary could donate properties (lands, money, materials, etc) to the church during their lives, so that when they pass away, on their anniversary, the priest would announce their Christian names at the mass' ending and the community would join in prayers. At times, it might be their descendants who donate to the parish so that the community would pray for them in their anniversaries.

For Catholics, the parish priest is their spiritual father. At the beginning of the New Year, after the mass at the church, Catholics have the custom of going to the parish house (the priest's residence) to give wishes. They would appoint carers when the priest is sick and arrange his funeral when he passes away. Many parishes used to bury their parish priests inside the parish yard given their affection towards them.

Catholics practice the custom of sponsoring their co-religionists' newborns. The godchildren are responsible for their godparents as if they are their own parents. That does not only create a connection between co-religionists but also manifest a characteristically Vietnamese Catholic form of the ethics of “when drinking water, think of its source”.

Since the Second Vatican Council, especially since the Vietnam Episcopal

Council's General Letter 1980, Catholics' forms of ancestor veneration have been increasingly diversified. Many clans, after having neglected their ancestries for hundreds of years due to Catholic affiliation, now tend to trace their origins back. Many clans compose genealogies. On the death anniversary of the ancestors, Catholics send representatives to offer incenses, flowers, *oản*⁴ and fruits, to bow in front of the altar, joining the commemoration of the anniversary. Some Catholic clans build shrines to venerate the parish's ancestors (for instance Pham Quang clan, at formerly Phu Tai village, now Giai Tay village, An Do commune, Binh Luc district, Ha Nam province).

In the last decades of the 20th century, as secularism flourishes and family life is in increasing danger of being disrupted, the Catholic Church was giving increasing attention to the family. For the Catholic Church year in 1994, Pope John Paul II proclaimed the Year of the Family, which started with the 1993 Feast of the Holy Family (26 December) and ended with the 1994 Feast of the Holy Family (30 December). Hence the family became the subject of many important documents and papal meetings: The message of World Day of Peace dated 1 January 1994 was named "The family creates the peace of the human family." The message for Lent 1994 was subtitled "The family is at the service of charity, charity is at the service of the family". The theme of the 110-page papal letter dated 2 February 1994 to worldwide families was "the family is the centre and the heart of the civilisation of love." That letter was Pope John Paul II's second most important document on the family, after the

apostolic exhortation "Familiaris consortio" promulgated in 1981.

The 7th paragraph, on the role of the family, of Vietnam Episcopal Council's Pastoral Letter issued on 17 October 1998, reads: "The family is a house church in the heart of the Christian community. The family is the first school and parents are the first educators. The first textbooks were family relationships, between parents, between parents and children, and between families." "The family is the home church, the basic unit of the church. The family is a community to worship and practice the faith, where faith, hope, and charity manifest and grow. The first lessons about praying, about loving God and people, are all taught and learnt under the family's roof." "Family prayers and the daily examen help the family to love and live as one. The very atmosphere of happy love in the family: faithful husband, pious children, harmonious siblings, is a school of charity. One learns to love through being loved." "We encourage solidarity among families, especially young families, to help each other overcome difficulties and to develop family life."

The Pastoral Letter dated 17 October 1998 is as a synopsis of Catholic values for Vietnamese Catholic families, guiding the practice of the faith Vietnamese Catholics' family life. To Vietnamese Catholics, the Vietnam Episcopal Council's General Letters and Pastoral Letters are all obligatory documents.

The 2013 Vietnam Episcopal Council's 12th Conference was held from 7 to 11 October 2013 at the Pastoral Centre of the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City. The Conference promulgated a General Letter:

The Catholic Church in Vietnam and New Evangelisation. A three-year (2014-2016) pastoral plan was developed with a theme for each year: the evangelisation of family life for 2014, the evangelisation of parish life and community for 2015, and the evangelisation of the life of the society for 2016. Concludingly, the General Letter reads: "Facing the current family crisis, the Church recognises the need to strengthen and renew the family ministry, to see the family ministry as a crucial activity, connecting pastoral plans and programmes of the parishes as well as of the dioceses." As how to carry out the evangelisation of family life, the General Letter states: "To develop one's family into a community of prayers, to live a love of unity in faithfulness, to serve life and to ardently proclaim the Gospel." Vietnamese Catholics, on the foundation of the teachings from the community, from the Pope and from the Episcopal Council, have been utilising the values of family life to achieve the goal set by the year of the evangelisation of family life.

4. Influences of Catholic values on the Vietnamese Catholics' living philosophy in community relations

Vietnam is a multi-faith country. Religions in the country exist and develop in intertwinement and harmony with one another. Vietnam's cultural, spiritual and geographical characteristics cause the formation of religion-concentrated areas, for instance, the southwestern region for Khmer Theravada Buddhism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Caodaism, Tu An Hieu Nghia

(Four Debts of Gratitude), Buu Son Ky Huong (Strange Fragrance from the Precious Mountain), the Central region for Brahmanism and the religion of Bani among the Chams, and the Northern Delta for Catholicism. Even in a religion-concentrated area however, different religions still exists and intermingle with one another.

Catholic proselytisation and development in Vietnam resulted in all-Catholic villages in typical Catholic-concentrating areas in the dioceses of Phat Diem, Bui Chu, Thai Binh, Nghe An, Thanh Hoa, etc. In such Catholic-concentrating areas there are dozens of all-Catholic or Catholic-majority villages and communes. In Catholic villages, Catholics have a distinct communal way of life; yet they are also children of the Vietnamese nation, living among other religious communities and non-believers. Ergo, Catholics live in communities comprised of people of the same faith and different faiths.

The parish is the community unit of Vietnamese Catholics. Catholic canon law considers it the nuclear unit in the ecclesiastical administrative organisation. The parish consists of a community of believers, residing in a certain territorial area, with a church, under the administration of a parish priest⁵. Catholics perceive that "Fundamentally the parish is not a structure, a territory or a building, but rather a "family of God"." There exists a relationship between laypeople and, especially, between laypeople with the clergy and the religious. Catholics, clerics, and religious are all members of the people of God, also members of the parish - the family of God.

Catholics' lives are attached to the church, i.e. with the parish priest. A few weeks after uttering a cry when leaving the mother's wombs, they were to be baptised by the parish priest, officially becoming believers. At 5-6 years old, they were to be brought to the church by their parents for the "first confession, and first communion". Since then their attachment to the church and the parish priest would grow more closely through weekday masses, Sunday masses as well as solemn masses. At about 9-11 years old, they would receive Confirmation to strengthen their faith. When they reach adulthood, they would attend Marriage Preparation courses, and when they get married, the parish priest on behalf of God would witness the sacrament of Matrimony. As they grow old and especially when they are about to die, the parish priest would anoint them. When they passed away, the priest would perform the absolution of the dead and the consecration of the grave (where Catholics do not have their own graveyard), and then offer a mass on their death anniversaries. According to the canon law, they are obliged to confess and to be absolved by the priest at least once a year. In each mass, they receive the Holy Body of Christ (the Holy Communion) from the hands of the pastor. Catholics address a priest "father", and call themselves "children" in a respectful, close and intimate manner, since the parish is the family of God, under the guidance of the (parish) priest on behalf of God. The socio-religious surveys of the Institute for Religious Studies in the late 1990s show that most Catholics always asks for their priests' opinions about important issues. When there are disagreements between

neighbours, spouses, or father and children, the parish priest would come to mediate and most Catholics would acquiesce.

For some bishops and priests with particular contributions to the parishes and dioceses, the parish would erect commemorating steles (such as "History of Old Father Diem" stele, Dai On parish, Chuong My district, Hanoi). The bishops and priests became the namesakes for community's public facilities, such as Tran Luc school, the pre-1945 cultural school for children of Catholic families in the area of Phat Diem Diocese Cathedral, owing to priest Tran Luc's contributions to the construction of the Cathedral Complexes in Phat Diem, Kim Son, and Ninh Binh as well as in the development of Catholicism there. Many martyrs' names are adopted as Christian names in place of apostles or the communion of saints. In Kim Son district, when subparishes were established, they were named after the bishops, for instance, the subparishes of Kim Tung, Tan Tung, Tong Phat, Tong Duc, after Bishop Nguyen Ba Tong, the first Vietnamese bishop of the diocese of Phat Diem; Lac Thanh, Kim Thanh after Bishop Alexandre JP Marcou (whose Vietnamese name is Thanh), etc. That gesture is a reminder for believers to remember the credits of the pastors of the diocese.

Religious are among the people of God present in the parish (Family of God). They may either serve parish or may be the parish's children (born or raised in the parish) serving another parish.

While a priest is called "*cha*" ("father"), a cleric is called "*thầy*" ("teacher") - (teacher sixth or teacher fifth) by laymen. They are seminarians who finished the fifth

(subdeacon) or sixth (deacon) of the seven ranks on the way to become a priest, but for different reasons cannot achieve the seventh rank to become “*thầy cả*” (“grand teachers”, “supreme teacher”, i.e. “priest”). For nuns, they are called “*dì*” (“aunt”), an intimate way of calling, meaning the younger sister of one’s mother.

As male and female religious lead celibate lives, devoting their whole lifetime for serving the parish community, the parishioners, on the one hand, are respectful to them and call them with affectionate honorifics, and, on the other hand, assign carers to take care of them when they are aged, and arrange the funeral when they die as if it is the community’s shared grief and responsibility. The holy garden is a dignified plot of land dedicated to the burial of priests and religious. This is also a manifestation of the parishioners’ appreciation towards priests and the religious.

Catholics in Vietnam during the Le, and especially the Nguyen dynasty under emperors Minh Menh, Thieu Tri and Tu Duc, were subjected to restriction, sometimes with harsh measures. In such circumstances, many of them were determined to resist and defend Christianity. They could be bishops, priests, deacons, or laymen; natives or foreigners, and among which the Church has canonised many based on merits as well as “miracles”. All those martyrs are venerated by the Catholic community, depicted in sculptures and paintings that are placed in solemn positions in churches. Occasionally, the parish community would construct a dedicated “shrine” to venerate a saint. The martyrs’ relics are preserved in reliquaries and stored with utmost care. On

the feast day of the martyrs, a solemn mass would be celebrated in the church, and the martyr’s relics are presented on the altar of God. The priest and the presider of the mass would kiss the relics while church members contemplate in prayers. While the feast day might not be present in the liturgical calendar, it is still a solemn feast for the parish. Believers even compose elegies about the hagiographies of some martyrs, for instance “Saint Peter Tuy, Martyr”. The elegies are to be hymned during the believers’ procession. Since that is the parish’s solemn feast, at the end of the mass, many families in some parishes would throw an elaborate dinner. On that day, their descendants who work or marry away from home often pour back for attendance. The parishioners from some neighbouring parishes would come to attend the mass (as communion) and priests in other parishes are invited to preside over the mass (as concelebration) on that day. Before the renovation period, despite the difficult economic life, every family had an abundant meal on the occasion. On the day, having many guests is considered fortunate and a source of pride towards the neighbours. Family members would then take part in the conversation, openly welcome guests, in harmony with their fellows.

In the parish - the family of God, the parish church is called the common house, and is cared for by everyone. More significantly however, this common house is the place laypeople would attach their life with. It was there that they are baptised, take first confession and first communion, and attend masses. When they die, they are brought to the church

before burial. The church is not only the place where they join one another in prayers, worship God, venerate saints in communion, but also the place where they meet, and share the joys and sadness of their life. In some parishes, parishioners bring rice to the church to help those in difficult circumstances, which is a manifestation of their willingness to help those in need with the spirit of “the haves help the have-nots” (lit. “whole leaves wrap torn leaves” or “torn leaves wrap tattered leaves”). Some parishes have facilities for raising orphans and children with physical and mental disabilities, and sheltering the elderly, helpless, who are treated by the parishioners as related beloved ones, perceiving that they all share the same faith, and all are God’s children.

The feast of the parish’s patron saint is considered to be solemn inside the parish. For Catholics, the patron saint is the saint who patronises the parish community. The patron saint could be Jesus, Virgin Mary, an apostle or a martyr. The feast day of the patron saint is not simply a mass; it is also the parish’s holiday. According to the fieldwork collected in the Northern Delta, the patron saints of the parish are called the village’s tutelary deity (Vietnamese: *thành hoàng làng*) by parishioners, who tried to seek, imitate and were influenced by the Vietnamese traditional spiritual values, then “Vietnamised” their religion on the basis of Vietnamese cultural foundation. That day would be a celebration for the community. People dress up, clean up the paths, decorate the church, and hold palanquin processions. Catholic villages would give parties, and, in some places, in the evening there would

be cultural performances, plays of the passions, or the scenes from the life of the parish’s patron saint. Today, there are also songs praising the homeland, the parish, conjugal love, with can be based on traditional tunes or new melodies.

In the pre-1945 Catholic villages in the Northern delta, there were village conventions or agreements, which were on the code of conduct in religious and secular affairs in the parish. Conventions in Catholic villages all contain sections on worship, personal, family, and community ways of life. These are primarily based on Catholic doctrines and canons, such as the monogamous marriage rule, regulations when attending mass, etc. On the other hand, there are also sections that are based on the traditional Vietnamese cultural values of funeral, filial and fraternal responsibilities. The violators of the convention are subject to penalties, either material (monetarily, or in kind: areca nuts and betel leaves, chicken, sticky rice, liquor, etc.), spiritual (demotion or even exclusion from the community). Some village conventions also stipulate additional punishments to violators.

At present, many Catholic villages, from North to South, from ethnic Kinh majority to minorities groups’ parishes, have conventions which revolve around personal way of life, family, community, church members’ roles and responsibility to the faith and to life, towards a “better life secularly and religiously”, fulfilling the duties of a believer and at the same time fulfilling the duties of a citizen.

The life of Vietnamese Catholics is not only with the parish, but also with smaller communities, including subparishes, and

below it communities with various names (*dâu*, *giáp*, *tích*, and *khu*, or area). The smallest community is the interfamily (*liên gia*, comprised of several families living close to one another). With close-knit communities, Catholics are in a position to draw closer to one another to share with and, to some extent, to help one another materially.

Vietnamese Catholics conceive that “better is a neighbour who is near than a brother far away.” The community residents in the parish rely on one another to live not only religiously but also temporally. They help one another when they build homes, when they are sick, or when there is a gathering. The community also often supports one another materially as well as spiritually. Each child born in a parish, apart from their natural parents, also has godparents. When someone passes away, the parishioners are usually the first to come to pray for them to “return to Father’s home” in peace. When hearing the church’s death knell announcing the death of someone in the parish, the parishioners would stop whatever they are doing to pray and mourn the death of a sheep of God’s flock.

In each family’s anniversaries to commemorate the deceased, neighbouring families always come to join in prayers. The mass in memory of the deceased would be solemnly celebrated in either the bereaved’s, the parish church or subparish’s (when the subparish is minor and far from the parish’s main church), with the presence of most parish or subparish members.

In addition to subparishes, believers also have other subcommunities of *dâu*, *giáp*, *tích*, *lân*, area. Each of those

subcommunities has a patron saint and approximately over a dozen of families living close to one another. The last one is the interfamily (*liên gia*) with 3-5 families in close proximity. In the interfamily, people can gather for prayer in rotation from family to family. The interfamily is responsible for looking after one another’s houses and for inviting one another to mass.

Due to the steady communality of subcommunities consisting of several families, bound by religious faith, venerating the same “patriarch” and sharing the same “tutelary god”, Catholics in the communities are less likely to have clashes or conflicts, and they, once occurred, are usually resolved smoothly through mediation.

In each parish and subparish, Catholics are also active with associations and societies. On average, in each parish or subparish there are from 10 to 20 societies, in which parishioners associate according to their age, gender, or occupation in order to serve the liturgy, to preserve and practice the religion, and to strengthen the faith on the one hand, and to reconcile and support one another in non-religious matters on the other hand.

The parish church or the subparish chapel is not only a place for mass for the parishioners, but also a meeting place for people who share the faith. Many Catholics have a habit of gathering for prayers every morning and evening in the parish church or the subparish chapel. On Sunday, the parishioners, “resting their bodies”, go to church for the mass. Religious activities bring them together during mass days (Sundays, feast days of parish’s or subparish’s patron saints, perpetual adoration, etc). Those are the opportunities

for them to share with and help one another in the spirit of the same faith.

In communal relationships, Vietnamese Catholics are guided by the Ten Commandments, which focus in two points: to love your god and to love your neighbour. “To love your neighbour” includes to love people of the same faith and different faiths. For Catholics, besides memorising and practicing the Prayer Against the Seven Deadly Sins (there are seven virtues for self-cultivation), they also memorise and practice the Prayer of the Fourteen Works of Mercy.

Thus, in the relationship with other people, with the communities of people of the same faith or different faith, Catholics open their hearts to help not only their bodies but also their souls. As a human comprises of both body and soul, it is insufficient to help only either one part or another.

Catholics maintain a relationship with the communities of different faiths in production and trades, spiritually as well as materially. In villages where Catholics are but a part of the population, they have to work together with the community for the defence of the village, for building dykes and irrigation, and for mutual assistance during agricultural seasons.

In not a few of rural villages, even before the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Catholics joined hands with non-Catholics to build worship facilities, and vice versa, non-Catholics also contributed labour and material with Catholics to build churches. Since the Second Vatican Council, and especially since the renovation process started, the relationship between Catholics and non-Catholics became more close-knit and cordial than ever. Catholic charities are

not only for their religious community but also for the poor outside the community.

Either in an exclusively Catholic village or a religiously mixed village, Catholics always have a good relationship with people of different faiths. In addition to working and manufacturing together, and trading with one another, they also share weal and woe. Catholics in many villages are imbued with the ethics of “when drinking water, think of its source”, and are grateful to those who have contributed to the community even if they do not share the faith. For example, parishioners of Giang Hen ward, Hue city, would attend the remembrance day of the founder of the trade. Catholics living in the central coastal region would attend the rituals and of worshipping the whale of praying for bumper catches before setting out for a new fishing season. In new areas of Kim Son district, Ninh Binh province, the original recruiters (*chiêu mộ, nguyên mộ*) and secondary recruiters (*thứ mộ*), who recruited settlers and, along with them, broke the new lands in the 19th century, are worshipped in shrines and temples by villagers, and there is Catholic presence in their annual remembrance (at Luu Phuong commune, for instance).

The conventions of many Catholic villages in the Northern Delta region read that: annually in the death anniversary, villagers attend the “Remembrance of predecessors” ceremony to commemorate the people who were given credit for breaking the ground and founding the villages, even if those predecessors were not Catholics.

With the Second Vatican Council’s reformatory and participatory spirit and the

Catholic Church's orientation manifested in General Letter 1980 and several other General Letters and Pastoral Letters by the Vietnam Episcopal Council, Catholics are increasingly and actively participating, along with people of other faiths, in ceremonies and services in memorial of meritorious figures. In villages and parishes of Kim Son district, Ninh Binh province, Catholics attend the commemorating ceremony of Nguyen Cong Tru, the founder of Kim Son. Catholics today attend the village festivals, take part in the remembrance of founders of trades, and commemorate heroes and martyrs who contributed to the villages and the country. There are also Catholics among the flow of people making pilgrimage to the ancestral land on Hung Kings' Anniversary to pay homage to the kings, because they are all Vietnam's sons and daughters, and one another's compatriots.

5. Conclusion

Catholic values exert important impacts on Vietnamese Catholic individuals, families and communities. Just as with other religions, Catholicism first and foremost cares about the people, the believers, and sets the standard for believers. There are "hard" standards, that believers are obliged to keep lest they fail their religious duties and risk their afterlives, and "soft" ones, that they are encouraged to follow. The Catholic values advise believers to live in holiness, to live responsibly to themselves, practice righteousness and avoid evil, to abstain from lust, to live with humility and dignity. These are permanent values that

every society in every age would ask of every person.

Vietnamese Catholics stick together not only religiously but also secularly, helping each other in times of difficulties and misfortunes. "Neighbours are close when lights are out", as a proverb goes. Conflicts, once occurring, are often resolved by reconciliation. They live responsibly with other religious communities, together working to build the country, and living in harmony and solidarity.

That way of life of Vietnamese Catholics was achieved for a greater part thanks to the significant influences of Catholic values, and, furthermore, thanks to the influences of traditional ethical values created by the Vietnamese nation's many-thousand-year-long history.

Notes

² The General Letter was promulgated by the Episcopal Council of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Hue and Saigon in 16 July 1976 in Ho Chi Minh City.

³ Usually the 2nd or 3rd anniversary of the death.

⁴ Truncated cone-shaped cake, made of roast glutinous rice flour, often used as votive offerings in Buddhism.

⁵ This form of parish is called "territorial parish"; the other form is "personal parish".

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