

## SOME FACTORS INFLUENCED ACTIVITIES OF PATRIOTIC CATHOLICS DURING THE VIETNAMESE AUGUST REVOLUTION IN 1945

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Ngô Quốc Đông <sup>(\*)</sup>

**Abstract:** *Feeling a complex of a historical past, the Vietnamese Catholics always looked for an opportunity to express their attitude, opinion as well as standpoint toward the nation. The August Revolution in 1945 had created a real opportunity for them to show their wish to be a companion with the nation. The significance of the August Revolution was that it had wiped off the Vietnamese Catholics' feeling of complex toward the nation. It made a big change from ideology to action of the Catholics. From this milestone, the Vietnamese Catholics had their right to talk about the nation and to discuss on the national fate that they were not allowed to directly and openly discuss toward the Church before. Vietnamese Catholics' activities in favor of the Revolution contributed significantly to the Vietnam's revolutionary movements.*

### 1. Introduction

Over 400 years, especially 100 years before the August Revolution, Catholic Church and Vietnamese Catholics always had many worriments because Church sometimes had not a right to integrate in national interests. It was the reason why Nguyễn Tử Lộc had following remarks in 1970s: "In nation, Catholics seemed to be foreigners towards their compatriots"<sup>1</sup>.

The August Revolution broke out to wake up zeal of Vietnamese compatriots as well as Catholics. In history, Catholics were usually suspected to be involved with colonialism, but this moment they had opportunity to give a complete explanation about themselves. The explanations about the last history were worthless

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<sup>\*</sup> Researcher. Institute of Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

<sup>1</sup> *Some Historical Problems of Vietnamese Catholics*, Catholicism and Nation Issue, Paris, 1970, p. 6.

but Catholics' participations in revolution movement and their supports towards the independence of Vietnam have explained everything.

However, the changes of thought were expressed by Catholics gave supports to Revolution and Government of Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Nevertheless, these changes were not at random; in particular, Church was in complex international condition and originally depended upon foreign clergymen.

What did changes base? In the other words, what did Vietnamese Catholics base to support The August Revolution and Viet Minh Government by the leadership of Hồ Chí Minh? This question was answered by some writers<sup>2</sup>. We, however, find that it is necessary to analyze more clearly this problem. This article aims *to analyze some elementary factors influenced active participations of Vietnamese Catholics in the August Revolutionary movement in 1945*.

## **2. Some factors influenced patriotic activity of Vietnamese Catholics in the August Revolution in 1945**

2.1. *The leadership of Revolution had right guideline to unite all political forces regardless Catholics or non Catholics.*

*The first Vietnam Communist Party with the right revolutionary line had defined clearly that Catholic mass was also revolutionary force and they were not considered "revolutionary objects". This point was resolved completely by Nguyễn Ái Quốc - Hồ Chí Minh<sup>3</sup>.*

Hồ Chí Minh's view on religion was better than predecessors'. Hồ Chí Minh defined that Catholics were *"the force of revolution and the Resistance"*. We can see some original documents written by Hồ Chí Minh by then. In the appeal the whole nation to general uprising, Hồ Chí Minh wrote "... In Viet Minh, our compatriots join hands with each other regardless of boys, girls, the old, the young, the Catholics

<sup>2</sup> When studying Catholicism in the August Revolution we found some articles: *Vietnamese Catholics with the August Revolution in 1945* on *Catholicism and Nation* monthly review, vol. 57, September 1999; *Vietnamese Catholics in the first months of The August Revolution*, Religious Studies Review, vol. 2, 2002; *Religion and Revolution*, Religious Studies Review, vol. 4, 2003, and some articles on *Catholicism and Nation* weekly magazine.

<sup>3</sup> Before Hồ Chí Minh, Phan Bội Châu had explained Catholics to know that respect for God and love of Country. Nevertheless, Phan Bội Châu only considered Catholics "In Nguyễn dynasty, special Minh Mạng period Catholics was considered "objects of suspicious" During 21 years (1820-1840) Minh Mạng king had proclaimed 6 decrees on forbiddance of religions in 1825, 1826, 1833, 1836, 1838, 1839.

or non Catholics, the rich and the poor”<sup>4</sup>. In the appeal to national unity to anti-French colonialism, Hồ Chí Minh wrote: “Men and women, old and young, regardless of religious creed, political affiliations and nationality, all Vietnamese stood up to fight the French colonialists and save the Fatherland”<sup>5</sup>.

From above appeal, we can say that one of the great ideas of Hồ Chí Minh has been national unity.

*The definition of Catholic mass that was necessary political force* in the uprising as well as the anti-French colonial war in 1945-1954 was very new and especially in Vietnam by then. Because Pope Pío XI and Pío XII considered anti-communist part to be “creed” in Catholic Church at that time. This definition was more important when the young Democratic Republic of Vietnam was influenced on dealing with Catholicism by China and USSR<sup>6</sup>.

Because we did not *separate Catholics from revolutionary tide*, Catholics did not feel inferiority complex about their last history. They fervently participated in revolution and supported national resistance and Viet Minh government. Some documents were written down: “A night before revolution Tân Trào National Congress was opened in Viet Bac base. In the Congress there were also 60 delegates in all parts of our country from the North, the Centre to the South. They represented political affiliations, national salvation organizations, ethnic groups and religions”<sup>7</sup>.

Only Marxists realized that recognition and normalization of Catholic mass were the important issue. This recognition made Catholics free from inferiority complex. It was important for revolutionaries not to consider Catholics “national outsiders”. When the values of Catholics were accepted they fervently participated in revolutionary cause of nation. On this problem, Hồ Chí Minh’s vision transcended the contemporary patriots’.

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<sup>4</sup> Hồ Chí Minh on *Religious Belief Problem*, p. 149.

<sup>5</sup> Idem.

<sup>6</sup> In the encyclic in 1951, Pope Pío XII condemned Communism. The leftist tendency on religious problem of Stalin and International (1919-1943) influenced strongly Communist Party in the Orient. After Republic People of China came into the world in October 1949, Chinese Communists laid down as a policy that Chinese Catholic Church stopped association with Holy See. In China, there were two churches. These above views influenced some Vietnamese regions. See Do Quang Hung, *Revolution and Religion*, Religious Studies Review, vol. 4, 2003, p. 7-8 and *Catholicism in USSR* (translated by Le Cuong).

<sup>7</sup> *The History of Vietnamese National Assembly 1946-1960*, Chính trị Quốc gia Press, Hanoi, 1994, p. 19.

National spirit of Revolution inflamed national courage of Vietnamese people; among them, there were Catholic compatriots. *The attraction* of just revolution with *Hồ Chí Minh symbol* drew many bishops and Vietnamese followers to support our revolution and our independent state.

*The second:* the policy of Vietnam Communist Party early affirmed and respected just religious need of Catholics.

For Catholicism we had two sensitive problems to deal with. That was: *fixed views were erased and religious needs of Catholics were guaranteed*<sup>8</sup>.

In order to analyze just religious need of Catholics we have to know what was just religious need by then.

After 15 years of leading, Vietnam Communist Party could answer that the just religious need of Vietnamese Catholics was *freedom of belief*.

At present, the past distortion that Communist annihilated religions has become old and uninspired because historical reality denied all. However, this distortion could make Vietnamese Catholics puzzled 60 years ago. This distortion was propagated methodically by foreign clergymen and French colonialism took advantage of Catholics in their political aims<sup>9</sup>.

After coming into the world, Vietnam Communist Party affirmed the policy on respect for freedom of liberty. The first Political Program of Party put forth a policy on respect for freedom of liberty. In the Instruction of the Standing Committee of Central Party on establishment of “Hội phản đế đồng minh” there was a paragraph to write that “freedom of liberty of mass is ensured and reactionary distortions is demolished because they propagate that Communists have not family, government, family and religion”<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> *Catholicism and Nation* monthly review, vol. 150, June 2007, p. 113-137 and Religious Studies Review, vol. 9, 2007, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> We must exam this problem in historical background by then. From 1920s, especially 1930s Catholic Church considered propagation of Communism in Vietnam to be a danger for the development of Church. In Vietnam, the propagation of anti-Communism developed in 1930-1931, special after the Divini Redemptoris encyclic of Pope Pio XI on atheistic Communism 1937. See *Catholicism and Nation* monthly review, vol. 17, May 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Nguyễn Văn Đông. *The Policy of Party and State on Christianity*, Hồ Chí Minh city Press, 1988, p. 9.

When “religious need” became an important problem, Catholics carefully examined this need. When communist concentrated catholic force in fight for independence, they were always interested in question “Can Catholics have religious liberty”? In the policy of Viet Minh Front there was a paragraph “to promulgate the democratic freedoms to the people: Freedom of speech; freedom of publishing; freedom of organization; freedom of belief...”<sup>11</sup> Later, Nguyễn Đình Đầu recalled: “I remembered in summer 1942, when Thanh Lao Công Bắc Kỳ representatives had to go into retreat, Nguyễn Mạnh Hà and I studied “policy and program of Viet Minh”. We paid attention to articles on freedom of belief and the other freedoms and we did see any sentences or any words of “Communists annihilate religion like what people said”<sup>12</sup>.

After a long process of awareness the words “freedom of belief” of Communists had appeared. In Tự Đức period, Catholicism was recognized religion<sup>13</sup>, but Nguyễn dynasty lost the right of state management and Catholicism was prejudiced in Văn Thân movement with the slogan “Pacify the French, wipe off heresy”. Catholicism was recognized religion when Vietnamese Communist Party came into the world and led the revolutionary movement.

In session of Government Council on the 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1945, a proclamation on freedom of belief was promulgated. When speaking of the urgent tasks of Democratic Republic of Vietnam Hồ Chí Minh wrote that “... I propose Government to proclaim: Freedom of belief and union of Catholics and non Catholics”<sup>14</sup>.

Because of complex changes of history, not all of Catholics recognized and believed “freedom of belief” by then<sup>15</sup>.

How did freedom of belief carry out in the August Revolution and the in first independent days? We find that in provisional government there were many famous Catholics as Nguyễn Mạnh Hà, Vũ Đình Tụng, Nguyễn Thành Vinh, Ngô Tử Hạ, Thái Văn Lung, Phạm Bá Trục, Nguyễn Bá Luật,... Two bishops Lê Hữu Từ and Hồ Ngọc Cẩn were supreme advisers of government. Basing these events, we find that

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<sup>11</sup> *Hồ Chí Minh on Religious Belief problem*, p.130.

<sup>12</sup> *Đứng Dậy* review, vol. 71, 1975, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> Nguyễn Hồng Dương. *Our State with Catholicism*, Religious Studies Review, vol. 5, 2000, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> *Hồ Chí Minh on Religious Belief problem*, p. 134.

<sup>15</sup> Because Catholics were benefited and low standard.

all Vietnamese people sacrificed their lives to our independence and freedom so everybody regardless Catholics or non Catholics inherits independence, freedom, and freedom of belief.

The August Revolution drew many Vietnamese Catholics because the *communist leaders had united political forces in united front to seize political power*. For Catholics this line expressed in two aspects: *aware aspect*: Catholics were considered patriots, revolutionary force and Vietnamese citizens; *Legal aspect*: “the religious need” of Catholics were respected.

*2.2. The Catholics fought for our independence so Vietnamese Catholic Church came under Vietnamese control*

In “Cross and Sword” priest Trần Tam Tĩnh had spoken “feudalism in Catholicism”. This state lasted hundred years so Vietnamese Catholics always desire a church that comes under Vietnamese control. That is Vietnamese Catholic Church.

However, the process of catholic preaching in new area connected closely invasion of this area; mission territory was the same meaning with colonial region so native Catholics before and after took part in the struggle for independence. Vietnamese laities and clergymen warmly supported and welcomed the August Revolution because it related to their religious fate: *Nation has independence then religion has liberty*.

In the past, all relations between Vietnamese Church and Holy See was adopted by European missionaries; “it noted that in 1930 the number of European missionaries was about 20 per cent of clergymen in Vietnam but these missionaries held important functions in church as: bishop, vicar-general; archpriest, rector of a seminary, superior... In almost dioceses Vietnamese priests and West priests did not sit together”<sup>16</sup>.

One of the great problems in the process of catholic preaching in Vietnam was to train Vietnamese bishops for Vietnamese Church. When establishing the object Paris Foreign Mission Society (M.E.P in French) proposed to himself was to train native priests, bishops and rector of seminaries... they could preach in mission territories. The first article in the law of society written in 1700 spoke clearly: “The

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<sup>16</sup> Trần Tam Tĩnh. *The Sword and the Cross*. Young Press, Hồ Chí Minh city, 1988, p.52.

aim of Society is to appeal laities coming back not only by preaching gospel but also training priests, clergymen.” By then The Propagation of Faith Society also asked “Mission territories must have full and native bishops who can equal the apostolic vicar”<sup>17</sup>. Later, in a message to dioceses Pope Pio XII also insisted on training and using native priests and bishops. He thought that if there were not “native clergymen” Church would not be “firm”<sup>18</sup>.

However, ideal principles were not applied in Vietnam. Vietnamese Catholics were considered inability to hold offices in Church. According to the Western, priests’ view Vietnamese Catholics were very stupid they could not learn anything so they were only taught to observe ritual. Perhaps, Franciscan Order did not want to train Vietnamese clergymen so that Western priests could hold Vietnamese Church forever.

Under the prevention of Western priests, Vietnamese Catholics constantly struggled to foreign priests so that Vietnamese Church was of Vietnamese Catholics. Vietnamese Catholics conflicted with Western priests. Priest Nguyễn Trường Lưu killed priest Grandmaire in Bến Tre in 1925. Then priest Nguyễn Trường Lưu was sent into exile to Côn Đảo<sup>19</sup>.

In the 30 decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a review of mission society in America wrote the above situation as follows “If events become bad because in Indochina there are not enough 12 native bishops and French bishops did not want to withdraw from here”<sup>20</sup>. Nguyễn Hữu Bài was a teacher and a Minister of Ministry of Construction in Huế court in 1922, he did not consult missionaries to send directly petition with concrete propositions to Pope Pio XI: 1- Vietnamese Church is equal to the other churches in hierarchy; 2- The program of theological training for Vietnamese priests is the same as Western priests’ program; 3- Native priests have right to elect diocesan bishop<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> See *Catholicism in Hồ Chí Minh city after 10 years*, The Committee of Solidary Catholics publishes, vol. 1 and 2, 1986, p. 63.

<sup>18</sup> This encyclic was translated and published in *Bùi Chu* on the 26<sup>th</sup> September 1951.

<sup>19</sup> After the August Revolution, he was escaped from prison then he continuously took part in the resistance of Catholics in Trà Vinh. See *People newspaper* on the 27<sup>th</sup> August 1985.

<sup>20</sup> Jeau Raoul Clementin. The political content of the Christians in Viet nam

<sup>21</sup> See Nguyen Quang Hung *Vietnamese Catholics in the first days of the August Revolution*. Religious Studies Review, Vol. 2, 2002, p. 33.

In 1930 priest Nguyễn Văn Huân in Kê Non parish drew a picture of a meal in church: The Western priests were eating leg of chicken while Vietnamese priests were eating egg-plants in salt. Then the picture and application were sent to Pope Pio XI. In application priest Nguyễn Văn Huân asks Holy See to make ordination of Vietnamese bishop. Immediately the application was sent, Resident Superior met Bishop Gerdrean, then priest Nguyễn Văn Huân was arrested and confined to distant place far away from Hanoi 800 km<sup>22</sup>.

After many struggles, the first Vietnamese bishop was ordained in 1933. His name was Nguyễn Bá Tòng. Then Hồ Ngọc Cẩn, the second bishop was appointed to be Bùi Chu diocesan bishop. Three years later, bishop Ngô Đình Thục was appointed Vĩnh Long diocesan bishop. Lê Hữu Từ, the 5<sup>th</sup> bishop was ordained in 1945. Although Vietnamese bishops took hold of some powers, Vietnamese Church depended upon France<sup>23</sup>. Trần Tam Tĩnh wrote: “It is funnily, in the church there are 80 percent native clergymen but this church is managed by a handful of Western people<sup>24</sup>.

The August Revolution had created a real opportunity for Catholics to show their sentiment. Thanks to the August Revolution Catholics overcame psychological obstruction. Catholics enthusiastically took part in meeting and march; they chanted slogans “support Việt Minh”. Yellow starred red flags appeared in churches and seminaries.

Priest Trần Tam Tĩnh recalled “The revolutionary movement helped Catholics find injustice in church... Thanks to national liberation movement and father Lê Quang Oánh who has studied abroad, we realized that if our country is independent our diocese should have Vietnamese bishop like Bùi Chu, Phát Diêm; our seminary shall have Vietnamese rector and professors so we are heartened. The diocesan priests meet each other then they ask bishop Ubierna Ninh (Portuguese) to replace vicar general, vicar forane, professors of seminary by Vietnamese”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Catholicism and Nation* monthly review, vol. 48, 1976, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> The recognition of some Vietnamese bishops was supported by Holy See but French Colonialism obstructed this recognition. Holy See used missionaries to heighten his role toward Vietnamese Church. Holy See wanted Vietnamese Church to serve Holy See.

<sup>24</sup> Trần Tam Tĩnh. *The Sword and the Cross*, p. 64.

<sup>25</sup> See the document in Seminar *Catholicism and Nation in Present and Future*, organized on 27 -28 April 2006 by The Institute of Religious Studies.

Basing above documents we note that the supports of Catholics to Revolution and Independence have been the supports to the independence of Vietnamese Church that Vietnamese Church belongs to Vietnamese Catholics. Thanks to the August Revolution Vietnamese Catholics *casted off colonialist yoke*. That was why so many Catholics were present at important time of the August Revolution.

*2.3 The August Revolution in 1945 created opportunity “Catholicism goes together with Nation” following the orientation “respect for God and love of county”*

The August Revolution in 1945 and the foundation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam established the relation between Vietnamese states with Catholic Church. It was necessity<sup>26</sup>.

What did the orientation base to carry out *the harmony between Catholic faith and national interests?*

In the colonial period, Vietnamese Catholics lived in inferiority complex. They wondered how to maintain their faith with God while they could be life and death for our country. It was unjust when speaking that Catholics lived in inferiority complex so they forgot their country. It was difficult for Catholics to leave their religion for their country. *They were stuck by two problems God and Nation.*

Because of the last preconceived option of feudalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnamese Catholics met many difficulties to integrate in nation. Therefore, they felt that they were *in marginal nation*.

In other words, in the First World War, while Church allowed French Catholics freely showed their patriotism to their country, Vietnamese priests and Catholics were forbidden to do some thing like that. Choosing the orientation of *“respect for God and love of country”* was great desire of Vietnamese Catholics.

When leading the national liberation movement, the Vietnamese communists *did not separate Catholics from national community; Oppositely, they provided good condition for Catholics to take part in revolutionary practice and national liberation*

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<sup>26</sup> Because of Catholic institution, the Vietnamese Communist Party found that the relation between Vietnamese Catholic Church and State was carried out hardly. Vietnamese State always respected the characteristics of Vietnamese Church, specially the relation between Vietnamese Church and Holly See. One of problems was presented clearly in Decree 234 of Hồ Chí Minh dated in June 1955. That was *no interference of the relation of Vietnamese Church and Holly See*.

war. The Catholics participated in revolutionary practice that was they took part in resistance and revolutionary organizations. *Their participations were helped by revolutionaries.* When summing up the Catholics' contributions in the war of resistance against the French colonialists in Northern part in 1946-1954, our Party noted " in 8 years of resistance, our Catholics have been helped to have their organizations like Catholic Liaison Resistance Committee III so they have contributed their achievements to the cause of our resistance"<sup>27</sup>

We can find that Regulation of Vietnam Communist Party, the appeal of resistance as well as Hồ Chí Minh letter for Catholics in Tết holiday dealt with assembling Catholics to take part in resistance. Since then Vietnamese Catholics heard phrases: respect for God and love of country; God - Country; Independent country - Religious liberty; the Spiritual and the Temporal.

The way of religious life in Vietnam was found. Vietnamese Catholics' thought of "respect for God and love of country" was expressed clearly. We can say that the August Revolution and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had bridge a gap between Catholicism and Nation. *Respect for God must go together with love of country. Two conceptions were not set part from each other.*

However, the history of 1946 – 1954 was not simple. The confrontation of Communist and Colonialism, typically, the confrontation of USSR and United States had influenced Vietnamese Catholicism. So not all Vietnamese Catholics could overcome psychological obstruction to carry out two conceptions: respect for God and love of country. A catholic professor said: I am always pulled about two contradictory consciousnesses: religious consciousness and national consciousness.... I tried my best to study what historical event creates contradiction on religion and nation. I have known the French made Vietnamese Catholics believe that after the Second World War French invaded Vietnam again for defence of Catholic faith. Many Catholics were pulled about two choices Religion and Nation so they resigned themselves to living in marginal history even going upstream of history"<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *The Circular Letter 1*, 1995 of the Central Party Secretariat.

<sup>28</sup> *Đúng Đây Review*, vol. 71, 1975 p. 30.

In 1945- 1954, the orientation of respect for God and love of country was “constructed” and created by Hồ Chí Minh’s concreted actions<sup>29</sup>.

Thanks to the foundation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the orientation of Vietnamese catholic actions was established. It was in *common with the national tendency* in national liberation war. That was respect for God and love of country. Therefore, Vietnamese Catholics cleared away restrained consciousness that remained very long time. Catholics were not stuck by God and Nation.

### **Some remarks**

Because of inferiority complex of a historical past, Vietnamese Catholics always desired to express their standpoints, views as well as attitudes to nation. The August Revolution in 1945 gave them an opportunity to open their wish. It was a rare opportunity for them to manifest their desire to non Catholics. Their desire was “in common with nation”.

We can say that, the significance of the August Revolution was to wipe off inferiority complex of Vietnamese Catholics<sup>30</sup> that was held back a long time.

The August Revolution influenced strongly Vietnamese Catholics. *It made Catholics to have a deep change from ideology to the activities in social aspects.*

The August Revolution was a beautiful symbol of Vietnamese Catholics in common with nation. At the time, we could say that Vietnamese Catholics were national Catholics because they were not interested in ideology and the complexion of war.

Thanks to the August Revolution, the Vietnamese Catholics had the right to talk about their nation and to discuss on their nation that they were not allowed to directly and openly discussing toward the Church before. The support and participation in the August Revolution were important bases for Vietnamese Catholics to undergo many following severe trials. Catholics’ patriotic activities were considered great value for nation. Their activities in favor of Vietnamese Revolution contributed significantly to our revolutionary movements<sup>31</sup>. /.

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<sup>29</sup> See *Catholicism and Nation* monthly review, vol. 150. p. 113-137.

<sup>30</sup> This only description because Catholics have “psychology of superiority complex”, they consider themselves to be chosen by God.

<sup>31</sup> See the article of Ngô Quốc Đông on Military History review, vol. 188, August 2007. p. 6-10.