

MAKING A SKETCH OF PRIESTS OF THE VIETNAMESE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: *Based on the Apostolic Exhortation Pastores Dabo Vobis of Pope John Paul II and the Pastoral Letters of Vietnam Catholic Church, the authors give the factors affecting the position and priestly life in the early years 21st century. Since then, the author has tried to sketch the image of the priest of the Catholic Church Vietnam at present, it is to adapt to social circumstances and actively engage in social-apostolate activities. However, it is not the priest model for this era. According to the author, priests must continue to learn the spirit of Apostolic Exhortation Pastores Dabo Vobis of Pope John Paul II reflected on the four demensions: Humanity, Sacredness, Intelligence and Pastoral work.*

We can say that in the early years of the 21st century, the great changes of the scientific technological revolution have influenced all levels of social life. Before these changes, we should think that Vietnamese Catholic Church, especially priests and friars need to have basic changes in accordance with the present circumstances.

Basing on last articles writing about priests in the third millennium, this article would like to speak of the elements which influence ministry and life of priests then writer makes a sketch of priests of Vietnamese Catholic Church in the early years of the 21st century and gives some conclusions.

I. The elements influence ministry and life of priests

1- The pastoral way of Vietnamese Catholic Church relates to ministry and life of priests

Vietnamese bishops are always interested in priests and friars. It is presented in *Pastoral Epistles*. Pastoral Epistle in 1976 has a paragraph as “the nature of priest is minister to preach Words of God and sacraments, first and foremost Holy Communion. Priests always change and reform their life according to will of God in sharing with others. The active Catholic life is priests should commit themselves and serve God in the heart of Vietnamese nation at present. People of God are not out

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side of great changes of country, we should mix with national community, and we should take part in building our country more and more prosperous. We should do useful things for national community but not contrary to the faith and conscience of Catholics”. Because of these senses, Vietnamese Catholic Church has to realize his responsibility under the light of the Second Vatican –Council. The later Archbishop Nguyễn Văn Bình said that “Revolution has created good condition so Catholics live the Gospel and realize council” ⁽¹⁾. Thanks to the spirit of council, Vietnamese bishops have thought and discussed together. They have consulted opinions of people of God to find pastoral way in accordance with new circumstances. This standpoint has been spoken of in the Common Letter of Vietnamese Episcopal Conference in 1980 “Living the Gospel within the nation for the happiness of countrymen”. Bishops always encourage priest to come nearer to Christ, hold communion with the Universal Church. They advise that priests should be devoted to Pope and loyal to the Second Vatican Council.

The Pastoral Letter in 1998 reminded that priests should devote much attention to and foster vocations by preaching the gospel and renewal of Church.

In the Pastoral Letter in 2004 Vietnamese bishops stressed on the teaching of miracle of Christ. Priests should prove their belief, respect and love to Eucharist. Their sentiments should be manifested in the way of rite, pray before Christ.

The main orientation of Vietnamese Catholic Church is to help priest to devote their lives to Church. It means that Church helps priests to take shape attitude, habit and the way of practicing holy life after they were ordained to be priests ⁽²⁾.

2- Apostolic Exhortation Pastores Dabo Vobis

Priests in the early years of the 21st century had to “strike deep root” into the present world and they were celibate and poor. They had to throw themselves into social life. These words were affirmed in 8th Synod of World Bishops in Rome from 30th of September to 28th of October, 1990⁽³⁾. The subject of this Synod was “*Formation of Priests in the circumstances of the present day*” to carry out the documents of the Second Vatican Council on the problem of ministry and training of priests. However, Church has spoken of this problem many times since the first Congress in October, 1967. The 8th Synod of World Bishops had 5 commissions to

¹. See Priest Nguyễn Hồng Giáo, OPM, *The Travel of Church*, Phanxico Institute, 2005, p. 48.

². See Priest Nguyễn Hồng Giáo, Ibid, p. 36.

³. See Priest Vincent Tran Van Hao, Nguyen Van Thuc, translated original document in English written by Priest Michael Paul Tran Huy Minh, *Formation and Self Formation of the Future Priests in Vietnamese Circumstances Today*, The Major Seminary, Hue, .2006, volume 5, p. 5.

carry out “the renewal of seminary”. This problem has great significance for compiling teaching and learning and studying materials of Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education.

In 1990 the Synod of Bishops was interested in increasing of priest vocation to help priests to know about their ministries in the future; defined long training orientation to encourage priests effectively in their positions and lives⁽⁴⁾. At the end of the 8th Synod of World Bishops on March 26th, 1992 Pope John Paul II declared Apostolic Exhortation Pastors Dabo Vobis on “*the formation of Priest in the circumstances of the present day*”.

The content of Apostolic Exhortation states the thought and orientation for establishment of programmers of The Synod of World Bishops and helping all those who devote to the level of formation.

The salient points spoken in Apostolic Exhortation are *the clear-headed priests*.

Priests are interested the poor: Priests are interested in the sick, the poor and all those who live in the margin of society. Priests are out of patronage, they should know how to meet and contact with others. They should be trained as good hearted priests.

Priests are interested in Church: Church should see to priest vocation because priest vocation has been in Church and served Church. Priests are ready to go everywhere. Priests should attach special importance to virtuous character. Apostolic Exhortation spoke of the life of priests and quality of Gospel. Priests should follow Christ and Apostles before and after they were ordained. Apostolic Exhortation dealt with humanity, the promissory oath of priests that they sacrifice their lives to serve Church and society. Priests should create brotherly connection to other churches.

3- On the life of priests

In the past, the lives of priests were disciplinary. Priests had to obey superior and hierarchy absolutely. They were isolated from reality. They only did religious works as administration of a sacrament, teaching of bible... They thought that priest were dispenser of the Divine Mysteries so they needed to have special lives to realize an intermediary role between Christ to human well.

⁴. The 8th Synod of World Bishop had 250 members in the world. They were divided into 13 language groups. The subject of Synod was the information of priests in the circumstances Today.

What do priests change after the Second Vatican Council?

Basically, they are different from the older priests. It is expressed as follows:

Firstly, at present, priests are more responsive to democracy, civic rights, brotherhood. They are closer to people than their senior priests.

Secondly, they have to face dangers as: snobbishness, the rat race and fear of making sacrifices, etc. According to Bishop Bui Tuan: “They can confront aloneness, stress, seduction, pressure and criticism. They may confront the worldly pleasures that damage the internal and religious life of priests. Economy has developed following the market structure that has influenced the life of priests”⁽⁵⁾. Society has experienced many great changes of the temporal tendency; the values of ethic tradition are fading away now. Furthermore, the economic market and the process of urbanization and modernization have influenced priests. Now, beings are interested so much in personal profit, at the same time they praise freedom and material wealth. They rarely take care of other people and ethic principles. This tendency becomes stronger and stronger in social life. The development of technology, science and means of communication as radio, internet, and newspapers more or less influences the ministry and life of priests. In the history of Church there were bad events as dealing of holy position, abusing of Caritas funds, haggle of the prices of stipend and sacrament... Sometimes, many ways of making money are masked by different reasons. The above remarks make us think about priests at present. In any age, priests have duty to “serve Catholics”. I should think that in the formation of Priest, Church should be interested in education of virtue and lifestyle of priest in order to preserve the values of traditional morality and encourage priests to love everybody. We are entering in the third millennium so the formation and training of priests in the circumstances of the present day are challenges of Church and society.

II. The image of Priest of the Vietnamese Catholic Church in early years of the 21st century

1- Priests become accustomed to the social circumstances

If we would like to understand the role of priests in general mission of Church and society, we need to answer the question who is priests.

According to Decree on ministry and life of priest “Priests are selected from others to implement the mission of Christ in the world. They have duty to preach

⁵. However, the Synod of World Bishop resolves a requirement of the Synod of Bishop on vocation and ministry of lays. Lays always hope that priests commit themselves to help them in carrying out general ministry of Church.

gospel”⁽⁶⁾. In the world there are many changes in the early years of the 21st century. These changes have influenced religious communities. For Catholic Church, priests have many changes in recent decades. They change from dress- style to life-style, from appearance to interior sentiment; even nature of priests can not be realized. In any date, priests have own matters. Nowadays the matters of priests become more and more severe and they harm priest’s life and ministry. Because priests are to seek so Vietnamese Catholic Church only takes care of how to form priests, it is not interested in to create new face for priest. The view of “new face” is ambiguous, general, unclear, outdated and isolated from masses. The hopes of local churches are different from each other but all of them wish for that priests are human beings of period time and their dignity will grow up.

The integration of traditional culture is an important element. The Second Vatican Council stressed this problem in Catholic preaching in Vietnam. The cultural integration should be taught in seminaries that help the future priests to adapt themselves to culture and social environment. Formerly, Pope Paul VI said that “the tragedy of the 20th century happened because we separate Gospel from traditional culture”⁽⁷⁾. Now Church tries its best to reduce the separation of faith and traditional culture. The Common Letter of Vietnamese Episcopal Council in 1980 continuously affirmed that “to build a life style and expression of faith in more accordance with national culture”⁽⁸⁾. Priests, of all people, should meet the requirement of Church in the circumstances of the present day. Priest who only knows to read Latin, live in church or in chapel, pray and carry out absolution of the dead and sacraments is an “obsolete” priest. Now, priests should know about the world. It means that priests should know about problems of economy, politics, culture and society, at the same time they should understand deeply the spiritual and the temporal to resolve all matters in the life. In the past, the duty of priests was sacerdos but now priests have to realize three duties: prophet, sacerdos and pastor. Prophet just can not sit still to preach words of God, he should go everywhere to preach words of God and help people. Sacerdos not only offer the masses but he should devote all his life in everywhere and every when. He should sacrifice his whole life to all circumstances of the worldly life⁽⁹⁾. Apostleship is the duty of priest, any priest who has the vocation will be ready to go to the region where lack priest is. Church applies this matter in

⁶ [Http://www.gplx.net](http://www.gplx.net)

⁷ The Second Vatican Council. *The Decree on Ministry and the Life of Priest*.

⁸ Selection of theology, *Priests of the third millennium*, Vietnamese Committee for Solidarity of Vietnamese Catholics.

⁹ Vietnamese Episcopal. Council *the Common Letter 1980*, p. 6.

transfer of missionaries from region to other region to meet the requirement of reality.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was the great change of the Church life in the 20th century. One of many important characteristics of council *has been coming nearer to other and getting into conversation with the outside; returning to Gospel and adapting to the modern world*⁽¹⁰⁾. In the Decree on Ministry and the Life of Priests⁽¹¹⁾, council sketches a portrait of priest with difficult tasks. Priests play an important role in the reform of Church. In order to keep their ministries in Church, priests can not live separately, they are not isolated from the masses but they should be active members of bishops to preach gospel. They are ordained priests to serve the Universal Church then they can be transferred to other region. Church has applied actively the transfer and appointment of priests.

In the past and at present, the ministry and power of priests were heightened but the duty of priests was dealt with little. The first ministry of priests is duty not title although it is “holy order”. Holy order is only title or honor. The ministry of priests is preaching to everybody but is not that priest only offer Masses and confer the sacrament⁽¹²⁾. Today the role of means of communication helps beings. Priests, of all people, know how to use effective instrument to hold communion with others. Pope John Paul II advised that “the communicative education should be developed in the training of priests, seminarians, friars in accordance with present circumstances in Asia”⁽¹³⁾.

After being ordained by Pope Benedict XVI, Assistant to Bishop Nguyễn Văn Khảm, archdiocese Hồ Chí Minh city answered interview of *Catholicism and the Nation* weekly magazine on the life of priest in present age as follows: “when speaking about the general image of globalization, especially, the development of information technology, I think of two aspects, subject and internal force. Subject is man who uses the modern means of communication, especially internet. However, the plenty of quantity does not mean the plenty of quality. In fact, means of communication can help us to broaden our scope of knowledge and raise quality of life. Nowadays, priests can use the means of communication to preach the words of God, teach catechism”⁽¹⁴⁾. When speaking of his thought on priests of Vietnamese

¹⁰. See Selection of theology.

¹¹. See priest Nguyễn Hồng Giáo, *ibid*, p. 21.

¹². The Second Vatican Council, *ibid*, p. 368.

¹³. See the Selection of Theology, *ibid*, pp. 91- 92.

¹⁴. See Priest Paul Tran Huy Minh, *Information and Self-Information of Future Priests in Vietnamese Circumstances Today*.

Catholic Church before the change of the scientific technological revolution bishop Nguyễn Văn Khảm affirmed that “If priests would like to serve Church effectively, priests can not but care for the right remarks and orientation for apostolic duty. Actually, it is not my own thought but it is advice of Church in the Decree on ministry and life of priests of the Second Vatican Council. This advice was born 40 years ago and it has presented in many later documents relating to priests. Church has continuously repeated this advice. I only apply this advice to the present circumstances and share my thought with my brothers, especially, young priests. Priests are sent to serve beings that have many problems to resolve. So priests should be interested the change of times to serve beings more effectively. This is reason why Cardinal Pham Minh Man specially cares for training of priest. It means those priests are continuously formed after they were ordained. Surely, every priest gets to know it because society has changed quickly, variedly and complicatedly”⁽¹⁵⁾

At present, the bases of education are unable to meet the real requirements. However, preferential problem is not the quantity of priests but the quality of priests. All leaders of Church affirm that “We would rather have few priests of good quality than have many priests of bad quality”

2- Priests actively take part in apostolic and social activities

The pastoral orientation of Church is set up in social background that has many challenges as the living standard of people are not equal; income of the poor and the rich is very unequal; in come of city, village, uplands and mountainous regions is unequal, too. People have to face natural calamity and many social evils. The economic market seems to change all things into commodities. Money seems to be cost index. Every day we meet many social evils as bogus goods and diplomas, bribery, bribe, women and children trade, abuse of sex etc. These challenges make May people worried about the future.

Before these challenges, priest should think over to find suitable orientation to meet the requirement of both the temporal and the spiritual. The Common letter in 2001 of the Vietnamese Episcopal Council with subject: “let them live and live abundantly” stressed that “In order to love and serve everybody, first of all we should continue the orientation of *going with nation*. We should identify and share all hope and worries of nation with everybody in the process of social development. We are not strangers to the problems of economy, politics, society and education. We should

¹⁵. *Catholicism and Nation* weekly magazine, No. 1681/2008, p. 21.

be interested in these problems and contribute to resolve them. We can not neglect the developmental program as well as the hunger and social evils because we are the members of national community and enjoying all rights and duties”⁽¹⁶⁾.

Nowadays, the hunger has been threatening the life of Vietnamese people so present Vietnamese Catholic Church is the virtual church of the poor and for the poor”. Priests, of all people, should be ready to listen to the poor. Now, the poor people meet difficulties in their life and they are victims of patriarchal structure, family violence. Therefore, participating in the struggle for the poor people is an indispensable duty of priest. Priests are always interested in the poor, mobilizes community of parish. Priest should commit himself to apostolical activities under many different ways to help the poor people, orphan children, widows so that they have condition to rise in the life. Only poor circumstance and obedience can make priests willing to devote their life⁽¹⁷⁾.

III. Conclusion

In any times priests and friars have their own matters. At present we have not yet found model of priests. That is why Vietnamese Catholic Church should find the concrete orientation, especially renovation of training and fostering priests and friars. At present, priests, of all people, should continuously study deeply Apostolic Exhortation Pastores Dabo Vobis of Pope John Paul II on *the formation of Priest in the circumstances of the present day*”. This Apostolic Exhortation has been expressed in 4 aspects: Humanity, Sacredness, Intelligence and Pastoral work. Church needs to care for the information of humanity for priests because humanity is a “base” and “nature” of priest in the third millennium. Priests should love everyone; listen to and share their experiences with other people; respect laws and commit themselves to serve church and society. /.

¹⁶. *Catholicism and Nation* weekly magazine, No. 1681/2008, p. 21.

¹⁷. Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Pastores Dabo Vobis*.