

## MIGRATION, RELIGION AND FACEBOOK: A STUDY ON THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES OF CATHOLICS

**Abstract:** *The research aims to further understand the relationship between Catholic migrants from some Northern provinces to the capital Hanoi and the role played by Facebook in their religious practice. Relying on a mixed perspective combining traditional ethnography (offline ethnography) and online ethnography, this study argues that migration to the capital Hanoi has led to changes in the religious practices of Catholics coming from rural areas. However, thanks to Facebook, these Catholic migrants can have more connections to each other, and become closer to their home church and more interested in their religion. This study points out: 1. Facebook as virtual churches- “other” spaces to maintain migrants’ religious practices; 2. Facebook as an online library of “spiritual guidance” for the religious practice of migrants; 3. Facebook is a means of evangelization, inspiration, and awakening migrants who are losing their religion, and 4. Facebook is a means of connecting Catholic migrants with their homeland/church.*

**Keywords:** *Catholics, migration, Catholic migrants, Facebook, Hanoi.*

### Introduction

Studies by many scholars around the world on the relationship between migration and religion showed that migration affects the religious beliefs and practices of followers in two ways: First, it increases religious beliefs and practices by mitigating the difficulties

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\* School of Interdisciplinary Studies, VNU.

followers face when migrating to a new place; second, it reduces religious beliefs and practices. Many researchers pay attention to the relationship between migration and religion, especially researchers in Europe and America. However, their studies insufficiently mentioned the relationship between domestic migration from rural to urban areas during the period of urbanization and industrialization in developing countries like Vietnam.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the relationship between migration and religion, particularly by researchers in Europe and America. However, these studies rarely address the relationship between internal migration from rural to urban areas during the period of urbanization and industrialization in developing countries like Vietnam. The question of how migrants and their religious practices are taking place in the context of the strong development of the internet in general and social networks such as Facebook in particular, and how information technology has impacted the religious practices of migrants from rural to urban areas, seems to be an open issue.

The year 1997 was a time when the internet appeared in Vietnam [Bui Hoai Son, 2008; Nguyen Thi Phuong Cham, 2013]. Many social networks based on internet platforms quickly developed such as Messenger, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and more. Among them, Facebook emerged in 2009, subsequently becoming the most popular social network in Vietnam. By July 2020, the Vietnamese population had a total of nearly 97 million people, of which 69,270,000 individuals used Facebook via mobile devices. With 70,1% of users, Facebook has become the largest social network in Vietnam, followed by YouTube (15,34%), Pinterest (7,93%), Twitter (5,92%), Instagram (0,16%), and so on. Compared to other countries in the world, Vietnam ranks 7th in the number of Facebook users, behind India (290 million), the United States of America (190 million), Indonesia (140 million), Brazil (130 million), Mexico (89 million), and the Philippines (76 million) [According to Statista.com].

Statistics also show that Facebookers in Vietnam mainly belong to young people; however, the number of middle-aged people using Facebook has also increased over the years. For many Vietnamese people, Facebook has become a place to share information without

boundaries of space and time, to connect them with their communities, and to study, entertain, and do business as well. In Vietnam, all aspects of life are likely to be exposed on Facebook.

The development of Facebook has created a new space for spreading religion in Vietnam. Many Facebook-based pages, with religious news, videos introducing religion, live streams of religious practices, comments, and discussions about the Bible or Buddhist teachings, were observed, and most traditional religions have widely employed the internet [Christopher Helland, 2007: 10]. “Traditional offline religious activities are brought online” [Heidi Campell, 2010: 31-32].

Vietnam is a multi-religious country with the presence of almost all types of religions such as Totemism, shamanism, animism, and institutionalized religions. Vietnam is almost a museum of religion which has also been to be shifted to social networks, Facebook in particular. Nowadays, social networks like Facebook also witness the presence of Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Caodaism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, folk beliefs, ancestor worship, and Mother Goddess worship. In this regard, Vietnam is not only a space for online churches, pagodas, and cemeteries but also a religious market with religious services such as buying and selling clothes used for religious rituals, offerings, and pilgrimage services on Facebook. This kind of service has existed and developed vividly. Facebook is a place for religious believers to learn and practice their faith, and connect with their fellows.

The scope of this study is the exploration of the role played by Facebook in the religious practices of Catholic migrants to the capital Hanoi from the northern provinces such as Nam Dinh, Ha Nam, Thai Binh, and Ninh Binh. By using a combination of traditional ethnography (offline ethnography) and online ethnography, the article argues that migration to the capital Hanoi has caused some changes in the religious practices of Catholics from rural areas, and for many of them, migration has made them lose their faith and become more religious. However, thanks to Facebook, Catholic migrants have connected with fellow believers, with their hometown church, and become more enthusiastic about religion. The study contributes to pointing out the role played by technology in religious practices in the modern society context of the 4.0 era.

This study uses a combination of traditional ethnography and online ethnography. Different from traditional ethnography (researchers come to the studying community to observe directly and interview face-to-face with the research objects), online ethnography is a type of qualitative method used to collect information from virtual communities, and communities on the internet, especially on Facebook, Twitter, and so on. In this regard, document collection (data collection), online observation, and online interviews are important techniques of online ethnography.

This paper aims to study the role played by Facebook in the religious practices of rural Catholics migrating to the city. Therefore, the employment of the online ethnography method here is completely reasonable to collect data from Facebook-based pages, and migrant communities on social networks.

## **1. Migration to the City and its Effects on Religious Practices**

### **1.1. Migration to the City**

In addition to studying the Facebook profiles of 30 people who are members of the page entitled *Catholic Families Far from Home in Hanoi* (*Gia đình Công giáo xa quê Hà Nội*) as a member of many Catholic Facebook-based pages such as *Vietnamese Catholic*, *Proud to be a Catholic*, *Catholic Questions* (*Công giáo Việt Nam*, *Tự hào là người Công giáo*, *Thắc mắc Công giáo*), the author collected a large amount of information from writing posts on Facebook of Catholic individuals and communities, especially those living far from home, to understand the thoughts and feelings of Catholic migrants, the difficulties they faced in their faith and religious practices, etc. Furthermore, to be able to analyze these vivid situations, in 2022, the author interviewed 21 out of 30 people whose profiles on the Facebook page of *Catholic Families Far from Home* in Hanoi (interviews were conducted in both online and offline ways).

The interview questions focused on specific topics: the stories of migrants, the difficulties they faced in practicing religion, and how Facebook supported them in keeping their faith and religious practices. First, the author requested them to conduct interviews by phone or offline, and 21 out of 30 people agreed to join. These interviewers have worked many different jobs such as office workers, manual labor

workers, taxi drivers, merchants, students, and more. They are between 19 and 56 years old, coming from the villages of Nam Dinh, Ninh Binh, Ha Nam, and Thai Binh provinces in the North of Vietnam.

The interviews were conducted in urban areas of the capital Hanoi where Catholic migrants have settled down to study and work. Data collected from online and face-to-face interviews were processed, coded, and divided into two important categories such as: 1) Migration and difficulties in practicing religion and preserving faith. 2) The role played by Facebook in practicing religion and preserving the faith of Catholic migrants from rural areas to the capital city of Hanoi.

According to research results, there are currently four domestic migration directions in Vietnam including migration from rural-to-rural areas, rural-to-urban areas, urban-to-urban areas, and urban-to-rural areas [Central Steering Committee for the Population and Housing Census, 2019:100]. Domestic migration has emerged stronger in Vietnam since Doi Moi (1986), with characteristics depending on specific periods. From 1989-1999, the increasing trend of domestic migration was mainly due to the state's policy of encouraging migration to new economic zones, the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy along with the development of transportation.

Since 1999, migration has become more common in the context of an economic structure shifting from agriculture to industry and services, the strong development of industrialization, modernization, urbanization, and recently the internet [Central Steering Committee for the Population and Housing Census, 2019:101]. Regardless of the context, rural-to-urban migration has been one of the strongest domestic migration flows in Vietnam. In the northern region of Vietnam, the group of 10 provinces with the highest out-migration rates [Luu Bich Ngoc, 2016: 11] was all purely agricultural provinces such as Ha Nam, Thai Binh, and Nam Dinh, etc. These provinces also have the largest number of Catholics in the North, even having a lot of entirely Catholic villages.

This article will discuss the migration of Catholics from the rural areas in the northern region of Vietnam (focusing on Nam Dinh, Ha Nam, Ninh Binh, and Thai Binh provinces) to the capital Hanoi in the

context of industrialization, urbanization, and development of the internet and social network, particularly Facebook.

Catholicism was introduced to Vietnam in 1533 when a person by the name of Inekhu secretly came by sea to preach the Catholic faith in Nam Dinh. After nearly 500 years of development with many historical vicissitudes, Catholicism has become increasingly affiliated with the nation and has had important contributions to the cultural, spiritual, medical, educational, and charitable fields. According to the latest data from the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, by early 2021, Catholicism in Vietnam had three archdioceses such as Hanoi, Hue, and Saigon, 27 dioceses, and over 3,000 parishes, with 46 bishops, around 6,000 priests, and over seven million followers [Dao Thi Duom, 2021]. The higher density of Catholics and churches is found in northern provinces of Vietnam such as Nam Dinh, Ninh Binh, Thai Binh, Thanh Hoa, and Nghe An, as well as in southern provinces such as Ho Chi Minh City, Vinh Long, Can Tho, and Da Lat.

During the history of Vietnam, Catholics from North Vietnam experienced a huge migration to South Vietnam between the years 1954 and 1956. This wave of migration impelled by the deliberate programs from the United States of America- Diem's government led roughly one million people from the North, including about 800,000 Catholics of certain provinces such as Nam Dinh, Ha Nam, Ninh Binh, Thanh Hoa, and more left their villages and churches to flee to the South. This migration marked a historical turning point and significantly influenced the lives of a part of Vietnamese Catholics. It was not simply a demographic migration but also a cultural one [Nguyen Duc Loc, 2014:85]. Economic and cultural aspects of life, especially religious practices, were greatly disrupted by this migration, accordingly.

Since 1986, along with the significant growth of domestic migration, Catholics from rural areas have also flocked to urban areas. Among the major cities in Vietnam, Hanoi is one of the top choices, with a compelling attraction for migrants. In 2019, Hanoi's population was about eight million people after the extensive development of urbanization and immigration. Generally, the economic reasons became one of the impetus for the migration of northern rural

Catholics. The interviews of 21 Catholics coming from Nam Dinh, Thai Binh, and Ninh Binh showed that they were students, company employees, office workers, taxi drivers, and traders. They admitted that they came to Hanoi to seek jobs and increase their income. Some students said they came here to study at university and expected to seek better working opportunities in Hanoi after graduation. Ta Thi Tam (2013) in her research on the innovation of religious practices of people in Xuan Thuong commune, Xuan Truong district, Nam Dinh province also demonstrated the economic reasons for migration. Since the 1990s, especially since 2000, the movement of going to work far away has flourished in this commune. By June 2012, the commune had 1,000 migrated households, accounting for 60% of the commune's population, leaving almost only the elderly and children in the countryside [Ta Thi Tam, 2013:67]. When arriving in Hanoi, women often choose to work as scrap collectors, scrap purchasing businesses, and housemaids, some set up a restaurant to sell Nam Dinh's traditional beef noodle soup (Pho); men mainly work as cyclo, motorbike, or taxi drivers. The Xuan Thuong commune had 700 people working as scrap dealers, mainly concentrated in inner-city districts of Hanoi such as Ba Dinh, Cau Giay, Thanh Xuan, Dong Da, Gia Lam, and some suburban districts such as Thanh Oai, Phu Xuyen, and so on [Ta Thi Tam, 2013:68].

The interviewees also said that Hanoi is a "promised land" but "Hanoi is not rosy". Hanoi has opened opportunities for them in life, improving their life quality; however, living there is uneasy, even "very tiring" and extremely tough due to expensive accommodation, high living cost, high competition, and "changing jobs" frequently, full of risks in running business. As such, the Catholic migrants must face many difficulties. The living environment in such a new land is one of the factors that impact the religious practices and faith of Catholic migrants.

### ***1.2. The effects on religious practices of Catholic migrants to Hanoi***

The study of Claudia Diehl and Matthias Koenig (2013) indicated that there was a decline in religious practices among Muslim Turks and Catholic Poles when they migrated to Germany. This study of

domestic migration, specifically the migration of rural Catholics from the Northern provinces to the capital Hanoi, shows a mixed result. Besides those who remain fervent in their religion, many Catholic migrants interviewed said that in the early stages of moving to Hanoi, they practiced religion less or rarely expressed themselves as Catholics and showed signs of “religious fading” and “religious dryness” (nhạt đạo, khô đạo).

Some believers did not regularly pray and make the sign of the cross before eating. Going to church once a week is an obligation for Catholic believers; however, many interviewees admitted that when first arriving in Hanoi, they did not go to church as frequently as they had done in their home villages. “Hesitance”, “forgetting” and “unwilling to go to church” showed three levels of the decrease in religious practices recorded from the interviews.

The reasons for not regularly practicing religion explained by the interviewees in a variety of ways stem from subjective and objective factors such as lack of transportation means, unawareness of the roads in the capital, unknowing the locations of the churches, unknowing the church mass timetable, and so on. The decline in religious practices of the migrants has its economic causes. Some Catholic migrants admitted that being busy with making a living, suffering economic difficulties, and moving back and forward several times made them unfocused on attending church and praying as well as taking their children to catechist classes to practice their faith. The urban environment also has many temptations for migrants, especially for young people. A game-addicted student said, “I prefer to stay at home playing games than attending church. Sometimes, I get so absorbed in playing games that I forget to go to church” (In-depth interview, male, 23 years old, student). Another female student added, “In the past, I lived in the countryside. Church was my whole world. I taught children to sing hymns and I wished that when I grew up, I would become a nun. Then, I went to college, I saw that the world was so big and there were so many interesting things. I no longer wished to become a nun. I attend church less often. It seems like I am leaving God” (In-depth interview, female, 22 years old, student).

Furthermore, being far from their homeland, church, and Christian community, migrants do not have relatives to remind them to attend Mass frequently. Interview data also showed that the urban cultural context has contributed to the problem of religious apathy among some Catholic migrants to the capital. The cultural and faith differences in the urban areas prevent many Catholic migrants from openly declaring that “I am a Catholic”. For example, an interviewed student responded that living in a dormitory with nine other friends, all of whom were not Catholic, made him feel shy and unwilling to make the sign of the cross before meals or praying.

The decline in religious practices among migrants also stems from political and social factors related to historical issues regarding the relationship between Catholicism and the nation in the past. The involvement of certain Catholics in the French colonial invasion in the past has made many people somewhat wary of this religion and its followers, which is also the reason why some people do not have much sympathy for Catholics. The results from the interviews also showed different attitudes of Catholic migrants on reducing their religious practices (“forced”<sup>1</sup> or “intentional”<sup>2</sup>). Besides some were quite indifferent, many people – especially those who love their religion – felt very problematic and regretful while decreasing the frequency of their religious practices. *“The first time I forgot to attend mass, I felt so guilty, that I cried that night. I wondered, why would someone like me forget to go to mass. But it is true that what happens once will happen again. The second time I forgot to attend mass, I was a bit sad and worried. The third, fourth, and then the next time, I thought ‘It’s okay, I can go another time’. In our religion, if I forget to go to mass, I will read the Bible to make up for it. At first, I read it carefully, then, I gradually just do it perfunctorily”* (In-depth interview, female, 21 years old, student).

## **2. The role of Facebook in the religious practices of Catholic migrants in Hanoi.**

### ***2.1. Catholic migrants to the City and Facebook***

Along with the emergence and development of the internet and Facebook, Vietnamese Catholicism was “imported” into social networks and developed quite strongly in this “new land”. Campbell (2012)

discovered that the Internet has become a tool to expand the church's pastoral offline into the online space [Heidi Campbell, 2012: 10].

Vietnamese Catholics have their Facebook-based page and most churches have their Facebook-based pages to carry out proselytization and increase the fervor of believers in living their faith. Observing online participation on Facebook shows that Catholics also create communities on Facebook to share their faith, answer questions about religion, and connect. Facebook-based pages such as *Vietnamese Catholics*, *Proud to be Catholics*, *Catholic Questions*, *Catholic Skills* (*Công giáo Việt Nam*, *Tự hào là người Công giáo*, *Thắc mắc Công giáo*, *Kỹ năng Công giáo*) are favored and followed by many people. In addition to that, the Catholic migrants also create common groups on Facebook, the largest of which is currently *the page of the Catholic community far from home in Hanoi* (*Cộng đồng công giáo xa quê Hà Nội*).

Most of the interviewees admitted that they use Facebook regularly and daily. For them, Facebook is useful for studying, working, doing business, and entertaining, and one of the most important purposes is for religious practices. With the question: "Which Facebook pages do you visit regularly?", the respondent listed no less than five Facebook-based pages related to Catholicism. The most mentioned Catholic Facebook-based pages are *Vietnamese Catholics*, *Catholics*, *Hanoi Archdiocese*, *Vatican*, *Catholic Questions*, *Jobs of Catholics* (*Công giáo Việt Nam*, *Người Công giáo*, *Tổng giáo phận Hà Nội*, *Toà Thánh Công giáo Vatican*, *Thắc mắc Công giáo*, *Việc làm người Công giáo*). Catholic Facebook-based pages can be grouped into two categories: Facebook pages for all Catholics and Facebook pages specifically for Catholic migrants.

The Facebook-based pages for all Catholics include pages that are channels for spreading news of the Catholic Church in Vietnam, of parishes such as *the Vatican*, *Vietnamese Catholics*, *Hanoi Archdiocese*, *Saigon Archdiocese*, *Bui Chu Diocese*, etc,...; Some pages meet the needs of understanding about religion and questions of Catholics such as *Catholic Questions fan page*; the pages aimed at developing soft skills of Catholics such as *Catholic Life Skills fan page*; pages of religious orders, pages dedicated to specific Catholic

groups such as students, and merchants such as *Bui Chu Catholic Students Fanpage*, *Catholic Students*, *Catholic Community Online Business*, *Connecting*, and *Developing Catholic Businesses*.

The Facebook-based pages for Catholic migrants include Catholic communities living far from the home of archdioceses, parishes, or Facebook-based pages of migrant groups divided by the criteria based on Facebookers' village, commune, and district and these Facebook-based pages are usually named the village, hometown of the migrant. The famous Facebook-based page, which is followed, liked, shared, and includes comments by most migrants, is *Catholic family far from home in Hanoi* (*Gia đình Công giáo xa quê Hà Nội*) with 18,000 followers (as of November 2023). This is the official information page of the General Catholic Migration Council of the entire North of Vietnam (Tổng di dân Công giáo của cả miền Bắc Việt Nam), based at Thai Ha Church (Hanoi) and placed under the supervision of three priests. *Catholic community far from home in Hanoi* (*Cộng đồng Công giáo xa quê Hà Nội*) is a common Facebook-based page of 30 Catholic migrants' communities from the Northern provinces such as Nam Dinh, Ninh Binh, Ha Nam, Thanh Hoa, and Nghe An.

In addition to the general Facebook page, each of the 30 communities has its Facebook-based page. There are many purposes for which Catholic migrants use Facebook, including getting news and connecting with the Catholic community in their homeland, learning and practicing their religion, seeking jobs, enjoying Catholic movies and music, and expanding their social network. Depending on the different purposes, users will access different Facebook-based pages.

## ***2.2. Facebook as virtual churches-an “other” space for maintaining migrants’ religious practices***

Ahmed Al-Rawi (2016) argues that Facebook is a virtual mosque and there is a correlation between offline religion and online religion. Such evidence was found when observing Catholic Facebook-based pages in Vietnam. There was a “shift” of offline Catholic churches into online churches, creating virtual churches on Facebook-based pages. These virtual churches also celebrate Mass every Sunday through Facebook's live streaming feature, organize prayers for the Christian community, celebrate Catholic feasts, teach catechism, and more.

Thus, the Facebook-based page by the name of *the Vietnamese Catholics (Công giáo Việt Nam)* is the largest virtual Catholic church because it has the largest number of followers. In addition, *the Vietnamese Catholics* page also functions as a network of “multi-churches” since it often shares the celebration of Masses of many different churches in Vietnam. The Catholic family far from home in Hanoi also regularly livestreams Masses held at Thai Ha Church (in which the Hanoi General Migration Office-an organization of migrants from Northern Vietnam located), directly sharing livestreams of Masses of 30 Northern parishes with immigrants to Hanoi.

Once virtual churches have the same “features” as the functions of offline churches, they can meet the religious practice needs of migrant Catholics in the context when they are unable to go to offline churches. As mentioned above, the economic, cultural, and political context of migration has disrupted, interrupted, and thus reduced the religious practices of Catholics. In the case of new migrants to Hanoi, practicing religion online on Facebook-based pages is a temporary solution to maintain religious practice and retain the faith. Sometimes, due to being too busy at work or returning home after a tiring working day, Catholic migrants cannot attend church, so watching the priests perform mass on Facebook (or YouTube) is regarded as an option. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Catholic churches as well as all worshipping places of other religions were closed and large gatherings were also restricted following the slogan “fighting the epidemic like fighting the enemy” of the Vietnamese government, online ritual practices served as a very useful way.

In my opinion, there was a “revolution” in attending church in Vietnam during the Covid pandemic period. In the past, believers only went to church offline; however, at that time of the pandemic, going to church online became popular. And in the forced situation of the pandemic period, they even had to choose to attend church online. The Buddhists also went to online temples, the Hung King’s death anniversary was commemorated online, and Catholics attended church online, sang hymns, and prayed online. In other words, the internet and Facebook serve as a means to facilitate religious experiences, a tool to promote religion or religious practices, and a technology to affirm religious life.

However, does attending church online on Facebook meet the spiritual needs of Catholics in general and Catholic migrants in particular? Studies on the relationship between online and offline religion showed that while online religion shares similarities with offline religion, it even embraces features that are much more modern. For example, it allows believers to execute virtual pilgrimages to a shrine thousands of miles away from their living areas, which they may never have the opportunity to visit during their entire lives. Online religion only supplements and expands, but cannot replace offline religion (Young, 2004).

Most of the Catholic migrants from the northern part of Vietnam to the capital of the country involved in the interview said that they would rather attend Mass at church to commune with God and sympathize with the community than stay at home and watch Mass via Facebook and other online media.

### ***2.3. Facebook as an online library of “spiritual guidance” for migrants’ religious practices.***

For Christians in general and Catholic immigrants in particular, Facebook is like a borderless library containing vast knowledge about their religion. On Facebook, people can find Bibles, articles, research papers about Catholicism and other religions, forums or confessions about religion, Catholic movies or music, and works of art (paintings, statues...) about God and the saints. Facebook is an online library for people to “look up” and “ask and answer” any questions about their religion. This online library has the effect of “spiritual guidance”, it guides the spiritual life of Catholics to help them to understand and practice their religion correctly. Some interviewees said that this library helped them “not to be led astray and influenced by heresy”. Therefore, when they do not understand something about their religion, Catholics will search for information on the internet, and Facebook serves as a perfect library for them.

For Catholics migrating to the capital, this online library plays an even more important role. Hanoi is one of the two largest cities in Vietnam (along with Ho Chi Minh City), where people come from all over the country, resulting in the cultural and religious diversity that becomes a prominent feature of this thousand-year-old city. The Catholic

migrant community has left behind their hometown community to “integrate” them into the capital characterized by the diversity in terms of population, religion, and beliefs. Therefore, these people have much more opportunities to interact and culturally exchange with the outside world than what they ever encountered while living in the countryside, since it is more difficult for them to keep and practice their religion than their religious fellows in their hometown. Today, young people not only tend to be exposed to more religious diversity than their parents, but they also tend to be “spiritual tinkers”, cutting and pasting the panorama of other religions, adapting it, and designing their spirituality. Migrant Catholics, who are living in a place with a diverse culture and religion like Hanoi, may fall into the situation of cutting and pasting other religious practices and thus distorting their religion. Facebook as an online library helps them in practicing and keeping their religion. Some Catholic migrants said that when they do not understand a religious issue, they often post their questions on some groups specializing such as *Catholic Questions and Answers*, *Answering questions about Catholicism* (*Thắc mắc Công giáo, Giải đáp thắc mắc Công giáo*). For example, the *Catholic Questions and Answers* page, with 236,151 members (by November 2023), has a series of Q&A on topics such as Catholic doctrine, Saints’ days, studying the Bible, praying, fighting heresy, discovering the faith, information about religious orders, theology, the Vatican, Catholic knowledge, Catholic marriage, and more. All of these topics are hashtagged so that members can easily read, like, comment, or share.

For example, on July 6, 2020, a Facebooker named Vinh Kiu raised the question, “Are Catholics, who marry Protestants, ‘excommunicated’?”. This question immediately sparked a contested discussion, attracting 262 likes, 248 comments, and 23 shares. Additionally, there are a series of other questions posted on this fan page such as: “Whether or not should they hang pictures of God and the Virgin Mary in the bedroom?”; “When people passed away and went to heaven, could they recognize each other?”; “Do Catholics bow in front of the Buddhist altar at funerals?”; and “How do Catholics celebrate the Vietnamese Lunar New Year?”. These questions, along with a series of reciprocal comments, also constitute an important source of knowledge in the “Facebook library”.

***2.4. Facebook is a medium of evangelization and inspiration, capable of awakening migrants who are becoming indifferent to religion.***

Evangelization is simply understood as making non-believers understand the Gospel of God, the doctrines and canons of this religion to inspire them to love God, and eventually convert to Catholicism. However, evangelization not only targets to non-believers but also those who are already believers to help them maintain their faith in any difficult circumstances. With its modern features, Facebook has helped churches evangelize through images, sounds, and authentic and touching stories, and it also allows churches and believers to livestream all religious activities. The combination of these features also increases the effectiveness of evangelization. On Facebook-based pages, some articles stick pictures, music, and videos illustrating piety, how God sacrificed and suffered to redeem humanity and give people the life they have today, the good things that God taught, etc. Besides this, articles about the goodness of Catholicism such as filial piety, respect for parents, treasuring friendship, do not commit theft and killing, and so on are also spread quickly thanks to Facebook's like and share features. Some other Facebook-based pages provide viewers with a sense of the humanity of the Catholic community and make people willingly live in such a sympathetic community. For example, when someone is sick or passed away, the community often prays for that person to recover from the illness or go to heaven. On the page, *Life and Prayer (Đời sống và cầu nguyện)*, including 225.700 members, a woman posted that she was seven-month pregnant and at risk of miscarriage, asking for everyone's prayers. Immediately, she received comments from the community, with the involvement of 1,345 people, praying for her fetus to be safe. Activities of Catholic charity groups are also regularly posted, for example, donating warm clothes and books to children in the mountainous areas of Northern Vietnam; picking up abandoned fetuses from clinics and hospitals for burial; helping the elders and the loners who do not have sufficient supports to live on. Accessing Catholic Facebook-based pages also helps people feel that Catholicism is not only humane, but coming to this religion, people can also engage in fun and entertainment activities such as wearing

beautiful Ao Dai to attend mass on weekends, participating in sports movements, and catechism competitions, as well as learning many useful soft skills such as communication skills, behavior with friends, survival, presentation, and teamworking.

For Catholic migrants, the missionary content of Facebook-based pages is truly valuable, in the sense that it inspires their love for God and people, showing pride in their religion, and awakening those who tend to lose their faith. For example, as an interviewee said, *“There are times when I feel bored, don’t want to go to church or read the Bible, get bored of praying. Reading posts on Facebook, my emotions suddenly come back, I remember my childhood, and I realize that I used to affiliate with the church, I used to listen to the priest’s sermons. Then, I think that everyone in my hometown is praying for me, for people far away from home like me, why I need to feel bored. I must reconsider myself”* (In-depth interview, female, 31 years old, sales). Another shared, *“We always think that God and our religion are light. When we feel bored with going to church or praying, it means we go far from the light to move into the darkness. The posts on Facebook touched us, when we return to religion, we are returning to the light”* (In-depth interview, 39 years old, office worker)

### ***2.5. Facebook is a medium connecting migrant Catholics with each other and with their homeland***

Christopher Helland (2007) argued that when people access the internet for spiritual purposes, they often want to do more than simply obtain spiritual information. In addition to obtaining religious information, migrant communities have a special need to maintain close relationships with each other as well as with their homeland - which is also considered their religious origin. It can be said that the internet, especially with the emergence of social networking forms such as Facebook, has provided them with an environment for them to do such a thing conveniently. Most of the Catholic migrants coming to Hanoi, as interviewees in this research, joined some groups of Catholic communities away from home on Facebook. Although scattered across different districts of Hanoi, Catholic migrants share a common sense of “home” due to having a common Facebook community. They can “see each other” and “talk to each other”

through video calls, messaging via messenger, and expressing sadness, happiness, and sympathy for each other's situation by way of showing emoticon buttons. The migrants not only associate with each other but also connect with their homeland.

All information on many activities from how the Mass is celebrated in the hometown; the economic, cultural, and charitable activities of the hometown; who has passed away, and how the community is praying for them, and so on, are regularly updated on Facebook. This makes people far from home feel like "*they are living in their hometown*" (In-depth interview, female, 22 years old, student). As mentioned above, one of the reasons for the reduction of religious practices among many Catholic migrants in the capital is no one reminds them.

Therefore, "sometimes due to laziness, busyness, immersion in playing games, or being in the middle of a football match, many people are willing to not go to church" (In-depth interview, male, 37 years old, employee). By participating in the community of migrants on Facebook, migrants will feel that they are living in a community and naturally receive reminders from this community. For example, the Facebook-based page, the *Catholic community far from home in Hanoi (Cộng đồng Công giáo xa quê Hà Nội)*, often posts statuses such as "today is a solemn day, remember to go to church" or "Don't forget to gratitude God every morning when you wake up", etc.

### **Conclusion**

The aforementioned analysis showed that migration has affected the religious practices of believers. Catholics from the Northern provinces migrated to Hanoi for many purposes such as earning for living, studying, and working, whether want or not, the changes in their residing places, living conditions, and culture while moving to the new land also led to disturbances in religious practices. Along with those who still resisted maintaining the habits and pace of religious practice from their homeland, there were only a few people who were in the process of becoming indifferent to their religion and somewhat neglecting their faith.

In that context, Facebook is meaningful to them. Facebook is like a virtual church- another space to maintain the religious practices of

migrants. Facebook also become an online library of “spiritual guidance” for their religious practices. Facebook is a great means of evangelization and inspiration, capable of awakening migrants who are becoming indifferent to religion. Moreover, Facebook is a medium connecting Catholic migrants with each other, with their homeland, and church in their homeland. Facebook in particular and social networks in general are playing an important role in religious practices in the contemporary context of the 4.0 technological era./.

(Translated by Hoàng Thị Bích Ngọc)

(Institute for Religious Studies)

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#### NOTES:

- 1 “Forced” to reduce religious practices means that they love religion, are enthusiastic about religion and wish to fulfill their duties as devout believers, however, they are forced to reduce religious practices due to circumstances. In other words, the context forces believers to reduce their religious practices.
- 2 “Intentional” means that believers actively reduce religious practices.

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