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## CATHOLICISM AMONG THE VIETNAMESE CHINESE IN HO CHI MINH CITY

**Abstract:** *The first Catholics appeared in the Chinese community in Vietnam around the late 18th or early 19th centuries. At present time, Catholicism has grown steadily in this community, especially in Ho Chi Minh City. From the approaches of Sociology and Religious Studies, the article focuses on the situation of Catholicism among Vietnamese Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City, the largest city in Vietnam, through exploring aspects such as faith, practice, and community organization.*

**Keywords:** *Vietnamese-Chinese people, Catholicism, Ho Chi Minh city*

### Introduction

According to the data of the 2019 Population and Housing Census, the Vietnamese Chinese population is 749,466 people, accounting for nearly 0,78% of the country's population, scattered across 63 provinces and cities (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2020: 43). Catholics among Vietnamese Chinese communities mainly concentrate in Ho Chi Minh City with more than 3,000 people (Dinh Thien Phuong, 2022: 53), accounting for 1,05% of the total Vietnamese Chinese population (Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs of Vietnam, 2020: 485). The Vietnamese Chinese Catholic community is not large but emerged quite early. Though this community exhibits many unique features, it is mentioned less in religious studies.

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Francis Xavier Church, a place that gathers the largest number of Vietnamese Chinese believers to participate in the ritual, is mentioned in the previous studies by Tran Hanh Minh Phuong (2003), Le Thi Thanh Thuy (2013), and Dinh Thien Phuong (2022), which paid attention to the aspects of architectural style and decorative arts of the church. The facilities of the parish campus from the main gate, the large yard with the Mother Mary's statue, the church, and the buildings serving the parish's activities such as the funeral house, the rectory and meeting rooms, the large hall, and the catechism classrooms are described in details. These researchers argued that the Francis Xavier Church was built in a harmonious style that combines European Gothic architecture similar to churches in Europe, and Asian styles characterized by Chinese and Vietnamese cultural elements. Some other researchers have addressed the amount of Vietnamese Chinese Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City and certain religious activities occurring at the Francis Xavier Church. Catholicism entered the Chinese community during the period of the French colonial invasion of Vietnam. According to Phan An (2005), there are about 10,000 Vietnamese Chinese Catholics in the Southern region (Nam Bộ), concentrating in District 5 and District 6 with 3,500 followers. Before Phan An, Nguyen Thi Hoa Xinh (1997) estimated that the number of Vietnamese Chinese followers in Ho Chi Minh City is about 3,000 people, of which Cantonese people account for 2/3 with four places of worship such as Cha Tam Church, Joseph Church, Duc Ba Hoa Binh Church, and Phu Tho Hoa Church. They still practice their ancestor worship, and though do not burn incense daily, they pray for the souls of their loved ones. At funerals, in addition to lighting candles, they are allowed to burn incense. On the 15th and 1st of the lunar month, they still go to the temple to pray for the protection of deities.

In District 6, according to Tran Hong Lien (1990), the number of believers is 500 people, almost all of whom often attend mass at two churches such as Hien Linh and Binh Phuoc, while some execute their religious practice at Cha Tam church. The scriptures were sent from China and Hong Kong. The ceremonies are performed in Cantonese. The ritual system follows the general regulations of Catholicism. It

can be said that studies on Catholicism in the Vietnamese Chinese community have been quite general so far and, therefore, it is necessary to have further research with updated detailed data.

This study mainly relies on the methods of participant observation and interview at the field site. The field studies were conducted from July 2019 to September 2020. The observation was the most preliminary method of collecting information on the religious activities and behaviors of Vietnamese Chinese Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City at home and in churches. The author observed many Mass and weekday ceremonies in 2019 and 2020 in Francis Xavier Church and St. Joseph Church in District 5. In this study, special attention was paid to the architecture and decorative arts of the church, and the altars in Vietnamese Chinese families.

The interviews were conducted including in-depth interviews and semi-structured interviews with Vietnamese Chinese believers and priests residing and practicing religion in District 5. Direct conversations and interactions with the Hoa people help to deepen understanding of their religious needs and the hidden contents behind their religious concepts and behaviors. Through the use of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary methods along with the functionalist theory regarding religion as a social entity; the author focuses on analyzing the beliefs, practices, and communities of Vietnamese Chinese Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City.

## **1. Overview of the process of Catholic proselytization among the Hoa community in Ho Chi Minh City and the architecture of religious establishments**

### ***1.1. The introduction of Catholicism to the Vietnamese Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City***

Catholicism was introduced to the Hoa community at a time when the French colonials invaded Vietnam in the 19th century. In 1865, Philippe, a priest of the Paris Foreign Missions Society of the Cantonese diocese, arrived in Cho Lon to establish the first church for the Hoa people there, aiming to keep up with the growing number of Chinese parishioners (there were a dozen people who had settled to do

business, along with a few converted patients being treated at Cho Quan Hospital). This church was called Saint Michael the Archangel (it no longer exists).

In 1866, after visiting the Michael Church, the Governor of Cochinchina, Pierre-Paul de La Grandière, ordered the Public Works Department to use state funds to build a larger church named Thanh Nhan on Cay Mai Street (now 203 Hung Vuong Street, Ward 14, District 5). This was the second church in Cho Lon and also the only church for the Hoa people in the South of Vietnam at that time.

In 1898, Jean-Marie Dépierre, the apostolic vicar of the Western Cochinchina (Tây Đàng Trong) diocese (1894-1898), noticed that the Hoa parish was decreasing day by day, from 100 people to about 40 people. Therefore, he decided to send a Chinese priest, an assistant priest at the Saigon Cathedral, and a professor at La San Tabert School, Tam Assou (Đàm Á Tổ)<sup>1</sup> to Cho Lon to revive the religious life of the Hoa people. This priest took a Vietnamese name Cha Tam (Father Tam). Cha Tam found and bought a very beautiful piece of land, about 3 acres wide, located in the center of Cho Lon, and he then started building the Francis Xavier Church (also known as Father Tam Church). Lucien-Emile Mossard, the Apostolic Vicar of the Western Dang Trong Diocese (1899-1920), celebrated the Laying of the First Stone on the Feast of Saint Francis Xavier on December 3rd, 1900 and the Solemn Dedication on January 10th, 1902. After building the church, Tam Assou also established a school, a nursery, a boarding house, and some rental houses. The number of Chinese parishioners at that time was about 400 people.

Soon after the demise of Father Tam Assou in 1934, the parish's activities declined, and many parishioners abandoned their faith. The parish's religious life began to be improved with the arrival of the Paris Foreign Missions Society's priests from Guangxi (China) in 1952. During this year, Father Robert Lebat rented another large house in District 1 to build the Our Lady of Peace chapel (the Our Lady of Peace parish church of the Saigon-Cho Quan deanery now). In 1960, a minor seminary for the Hoa people was established in this church by Father Carolo Chang.

Priest Joseph Guimet opened another missionary post in Binh Tay and built Binh Phuoc Quan church in 1953 (Binh Phuoc parish church belongs to Saigon-Cho Lon deanery now). Then, he established Phu Lam missionary station, Phu Lam church for Chinese and Vietnamese parishioners in 1962 (Epiphany parish church belongs to Cho Quan deanery now). In 1963, Priest Charles Chang, along with the help of Bishop Carlo Van Melckebeke, inaugurated the St. Carolo Minor Seminary for the Hoa people next to Phu Lam Church. In 1968, Priest Joseph Guimet built the St. Joseph Church on An Binh Street, District 5. On the inauguration day, Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Saigon (1965-1990) Paul Nguyen Van Binh baptized 17 Vietnamese Chinese people.

In 1975, the number of Vietnamese Chinese parishioners in Francis Xavier parish reached 8,000 people including 17 major seminarians and 32 minor seminarians of the two orders of John the Baptist<sup>2</sup> and Teresa. Regarding facilities, there was a minor seminary, a Vietnamese Chinese Catholic center, three chapels, three high schools, four elementary schools, 118 rental houses, a catechism school, a monthly information magazine, a catechism broadcasting group and a team of catechists who went on evangelized missions throughout the provinces. In March 1975, Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Saigon (1965-1990) Paul Nguyen Van Binh signed an order assigning responsibility to the priests at the Francis Xavier Church to directly manage and operate all Vietnamese Chinese churches and religious facilities in South Vietnam (Archdiocese of Saigon, 2012).

Thus, eight Catholic places for worshipping have been established in connection with the Hoa community in Ho Chi Minh City from the past until today. Currently, the Vietnamese Chinese often come to places that have their mass such as the Francis Xavier Church, the St. Joseph Church, and the Our Lady of Peace Church. The number of Hoa Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City is about 3,000 (Dinh Thien Phuong, 2022: 53).

**Table 1: Churches in connection with the Vietnamese Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City**

Order	Name	Year of Establishment	Address	Founder	Current Parish	Current Number of Parishioners
1	Our Lady of Peace Church	1955	26A Nguyen Thai Binh, Nguyen Thai Binh Ward, District 1	Priest Robert Lebat	Priest Giuse Đinh Đức Thịnh	About 50 Chinese out of 300 parishioners
2	Francis Xavier Church (Father Tam)	1865-1898	25 Hoc Lac, Ward 14, District 5	Priest Tam Assou	Priest Toma Huỳnh Bửu Dự	3000
3	St. Joseph Church (An Binh)	1969	4 An Binh, Ward 5, District 5	Priest Joseph Guimet	Priest Martino Vũ Anh Khoa	About 200 Chinese out of a total of 608 parishioners
4	Saint Jeanne d'Arc Church (Nga Sau)	1928	16A, Hung Vuong, Ward 9, District 5	Priest Gioan B. Huỳnh Tịnh Hường	Priest Giuse Bùi Văn Quyền	A few Chinese out of a total of 2,000 parishioners.
5	Mai Khoi Church, Cho Quan deanery	1976-1996	666/66 Vo Van Kiet, Ward 1, District 5 (formerly 48/39 Ben Ham Tu)		Priest Giuse Trịnh Thanh Hoàng	
6	Sacred Heart of Jesus Church (Cho Quan)	1727 (destroyed and rebuilt many times)	120 Tran Binh Trong, Ward 2, District 5	Priest José Garcia	Priest Gabriel Trịnh Công Chánh	3864 (in 2019)
7	Binh Phuoc Church	1956- 1986	634 Pham Van Chi Street, Ward 8, District 6	Priest Joseph Guimet	Priest Gioan B. Đào Quốc Chung	2100
8	Epiphany Church (Kinh Duong Vuong)	1967-1975	38 Kinh Duong Vuong, Ward 13, District 6,	Priest Abel Troger	Priest Phêrô Nguyễn Văn Võ	

*[Source: author's survey data 2019-2022]*

### ***1.2. Architecture of worship facilities***

The Hoa people in Ho Chi Minh City often come to the churches located on the street. The church grounds include a large yard with a statue of the Virgin Mary; the main sanctuary; and buildings serving parish activities such as the Easter hall (where the remains of parishioners are kept), the rectory and meeting room; and the large hall and catechism classrooms.

The churches stand out with their unique architecture, combining the Gothic style of European churches with Chinese and Vietnamese cultural elements. The church gates were often built like the traditional Chinese three-door gate style of the pagodas and temples (with red or blue color. The gates' roof was covered with yin-yang tiles, decorated with lotus flowers or carp. The church nameplate was written in Vietnamese and Chinese characters. For example, the nameplate of the Francis Xavier church has an upper line in Vietnamese characters, and a lower line in Chinese characters “方濟各天主堂” (Phuong Te Cac Thien Chu Duong) which means “Franciscan Catholic Church”. The sanctuary of the church often has Chinese parallel sentences; the pillars in the main hall are painted in red, a color that is not commonly found in Catholic churches. Besides Chinese features, the church's decoration also shows Vietnamese features through many small decorative details on some screens such as rice flowers, and five-petal yellow apricot flowers (a typical flower of Southern Vietnam).

## **2. Faith, practices, and communities of the Vietnamese Chinese Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City**

### ***2.1. Faith***

The Hoa Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City share the same beliefs as all Catholics in the world. The basic Catholic dogmas that they believe in mainly include:

*First*, the “Trinity” is one God existing in three persons (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit). God the Father created the universe, all things, and mankind. God the Son became a human to redeem fallen mankind. The Holy Spirit sanctified, motivated, and

elevated life. The Son of God was born 2000 years ago, named Jesus, lived 33 years, preached, suffered, was crucified, died and resurrected, and ascended to heaven.

*Second*, everything in the world was created by God. The world will come to an end and Jesus will come again to judge: the good will be rewarded with eternal life in heaven, and the wicked will be punished with eternal death in hell.

*Third*, Jesus founded the Catholic Church. This is the unique, holy, catholic, apostolic Church that has the power to forgive sins in the world.

*Fourth*, all people are sinners. Sin refers to what people say, do, and think that is following their own selfish, desires and contrary to God's will. God created Adam and Eve, the first ancestors of mankind, and they were placed in the Garden of Eden to live a carefree life. Then, under the temptation of the devil, Eve encouraged Adam to steal the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden (the forbidden fruit, the fruit of wisdom), thus offending God and being expelled from Heaven. The sin of Adam and Eve was passed down to future generations and became the root of all human sins and sufferings. Human beings were born as sinners in front of God and need the redemption of Christ. Only by sincerely repenting to God, humankind can be forgiven of their sins, and seek eternal life after death. In addition to faith, man must do good deeds to be saved.

*Fifth*, the grave is not the final destination of life, the human body will one day be resurrected. Human life is eternal, people do not die like a lamp that burns out.

*Sixth*, regarding the afterlife, Catholics do not only recognize "heaven" and "hell", but they also recognize the existence of "purgatory". Heaven is a world of happiness. Hell is full of eternal fire, snakes, and scorpions everywhere, a terrible world. Purgatory is a place where people who have committed certain sins but are not destined for hell will suffer temporarily after death to purify their sins, only after their sins are purified can they enter the kingdom of heaven.



*Seventh*, the Catholic faith is based on the Bible and Sacred Tradition (holy tradition or apostolic tradition). The Bible consists of seventy-three books, including forty-six in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New Testament. Catholics believe that the Bible is the holy word of God with an objective, precise meaning. The traditional Chinese characters version of the Bible is used by the Hoa community in Ho Chi Minh City.

Like believers around the world, the Vietnamese Chinese Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City also worship the “Trinity” including God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. In addition, they honor the Virgin Mary, the Angels, the 12 Apostles, the Martyrs (there are 120 Chinese Martyrs), and other Saints.

Although some Vietnamese Chinese have converted to Catholicism, they still worship their ancestors and the God of Wealth. Regarding ancestor worship, they believe that the purpose of worship is to promote filial piety and continue the good qualities left by their ancestors.

## ***2.2. Religious practices***

Religious practices of the Hoa Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City take place in two spaces: at home and in worship facilities.

*At home*, the object of worship is the Trinity. The space for worshipping complies with religious regulations. Most Vietnamese-Catholic families have an altar with the top level arranged with the Cross and a picture of God, the lower level may or may not have an incense burner (for worshipping ancestors), a fruit plate, a vase, or a flower basket. This shows that although they believe in a monotheistic religion, they are still influenced by traditional concepts and customs of ancestor worship. Some other families only hang pictures of God and the Cross on their home walls without an altar. A few families still maintain an altar for the God of Wealth (Thần Tài) and the God of the Land (Thổ Địa). This is a manifestation of polytheism and practicality, aiming at praying for fortune in the religious consciousness of the Chinese people, even though they believe in a monotheistic religion.

The religious practices of the Hoa Catholics at home mainly consist of reading scriptures and praying. They read the Bible and some other catechist books. They usually pray in front of the altar at different times of the day. However, most people pray in the morning after waking up, in the evening before going to bed, and before meals.

It is worth noting that the preservation of traditional values in the behavior of the Hoa Catholics. To some extent, they still maintain ancestor worship. Some people burn incense on holidays (Tết) and the death anniversary of their ancestors. Some people do not burn incense, but they pray (praying for the souls of their loved ones to rest in peace). Despite believing in God, some people still worship other guardian gods such as the God of Wealth and the God of Land) by burning incense and offering offerings (flowers, wine, fruit, traditional cakes...).

*At church*, the religious practices of the Hoa Catholics follow the regulations in the Roman Missal and the regulations of the Catholic Church in Vietnam according to the Code of Canon Law in 1983. During the year, every believer around the world must participate in many Mass to build and nurture their faith; including solemn Mass, ordinary Mass, Sunday Mass (occurring every Sunday), and weekday Mass.

Solemnities are days that believers are required to attend. In addition to Sunday Mass, in Vietnam, there are six Feasts that Catholics must observe and participate in, including:

1/ Christmas is officially held on December 25, and the night of December 24 is called “Vigil”.

2/ Easter, commemorating the resurrection of Jesus after three days of crucifixion and death on the cross, is around March 22 to April 25 of the Gregorian calendar.

3/ The Feast of the Ascension of Jesus Christ takes place 40 days after Easter. According to the New Testament, when Jesus was resurrected, he stayed with his disciples for 40 days, then ascended to heaven to end his presence among people on earth.

4/ The Feast of Pentecost is celebrated 50 days after Easter.

5/ The Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary is celebrated on August 15.

6/ The Feast of All Saints (All Saints' Day) is celebrated on November 1 to honor all the Saints.

Regular Feasts are not required to attend such as Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Ash Wednesday (beginning of Lent), Palm Sunday, Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, and All Souls' Day. In addition, the Catholic Church also divides the year into months and seasons to serve as the main focus for religious activities of believers such as March (the month to honor Saint Joseph), May (the month of offering flowers to the Virgin Mary), June (the month to honor the Heart of Jesus), November (the month to pray for souls, Advent (from November 30 to Christmas)... (Nguyen Hong Duong, 2017: 185-191).

In addition to solemnities and ordinary Mass, believers can attend Mass on weekdays (not mandatory). Generally, a weekday Mass at Francis Xavier Church and St. Joseph Church has about 20-50 Hoa believers attending (women aged 40-60 years old account for the largest proportion). On Christmas Day 2019, Francis Xavier Church attracted roughly 380-400 Vietnamese-Chinese Catholic attendees, including both men and women with quite balanced criteria in terms of their ages. It can be said that weekday Mass usually has fewer followers and is attended by only middle-aged and elderly individuals who live near the church. Meanwhile, young people face difficulties in attending mass due to their busy work. On solemnities such as Sunday and Christmas, a large number of followers attend because they have to comply with religious laws.

Regarding whether the Hoa believers often go to church, Father To Buu Du (former parish priest of the An Binh church and parish priest of Francis Xavier church) said: *"For example, compared to the Vietnamese, the Hoa people are inferior in Vietnamese language skills. When the Hoa people grow up, they have to go to Binh Duong to find jobs since many Chinese people do business there. The elderly often go to church (the young have to go to work). On the occasion of Tet and*

*Christmas, the church is full; on normal days, it is empty, the young are absent, and there are just the elderly and a few children. There are more Vietnamese than the Hoa people, they regularly attend church”<sup>3</sup>.*

**Table 2: Number of believers attending church services (people)**

Date	Gender		Age				Total
	Male	Female	<20 years old	20-40 years old	40-60 years old	>60 years old	
<b>Francis Xavier Church (Father Tam)</b>							
Monday 7/8/2019	6	11	0	3	9	5	17
Monday 23/12/2019	8	14	1	3	15	3	22
Thursday 16/1/2020	13	24	3	16	16	2	37
Saturday 1/2/2020	21	33	12	9	24	7	54
<b>St. Joseph Church (An Binh)</b>							
Sunday 21/6/2020	12	25	5	7	20	5	37
Sunday 19/7/2020	12	18	4	6	15	5	30

*[Source: author's survey data 2019-2020]*

The Hoa Catholics attend Mass at Francis Xavier Church and St. Joseph Church according to the schedule and space reserved for them. On weekdays and Sundays, the mass reserved for the Hoa people usually takes place after the mass for the Vietnamese people. For example, at Francis Xavier Church, the weekday mass for the Vietnamese people takes place at 5:30 a.m., for the Hoa people takes place at 6:30 p.m.; on Saturdays, the mass for the Vietnamese people takes place at 6:30 p.m., for the Hoa people takes place at 7:30 p.m.; on Sundays, the mass for the Vietnamese people takes place at 5:30 a.m., 8:30 a.m., 4:00 p.m., for the Hoa people takes place at 7:00 a.m., 5:30 p.m. On the most important feasts such as Christmas and Easter, the mass for the Hoa and Vietnamese people is held at the same time (the Vietnamese people attend in the main courtyard of the church,

while the Hoa people attend in the large hall on the second floor of the building on the right. At St. Joseph Church, on weekdays mass, the ritual is in the Vietnamese language; on Sundays, the mass for the Vietnamese people takes place at 6 a.m. and 5:30 pm, and for the Hoa people takes place at 7:30 am. Due to the small space and small number of believers, on major obligatory feasts such as Christmas, Easter, and Tet (the first, second, and third days of the year), the Kinh and Hoa people attend at the same time in the main church.

Results from participant observations of many ceremonies at the two churches showed that the activities of the Vietnamese-Chinese clergy (priests) and laity (believers) strictly follow the doctrine and canon law. Like all other Catholic churches, the structure of a Mass at Francis Xavier Church includes the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The religious practices include reading the Bible, praying, and singing hymns. It is noteworthy that they pray, read the Bible, and sing hymns in Cantonese.

The preservation of traditional values in the behavior of the Hoa Catholics is a noticeable thing. After praying at the statues of Jesus, Saint Joseph, or Mother Mary, many people will light one or three incense sticks to express their respect. Therefore, the churches of the Hoa people often place incense burners in front of the statues of the Holy Spirit on the church grounds and the place to keep the ashes of the deceased in the Resurrection Waiting House to facilitate the worship of believers.

In addition, on the anniversary of the death, the descendants will hold a prayer ceremony at the church, after the ceremony, they come to the Resurrection House to burn incense and offer flowers. The Vietnamese-Chinese believers also maintain traditional customs on Tet with some changes to suit the teachings and regulations of Catholicism.

Priest To Buu Du said *“On New Year’s Eve, we also ask for blessings and pick a fortune (hái lộc). In the past, the Chinese picked a fortune from trees. Catholics also follow that ritual, but they pick up a Holy blessing slip (in a red envelope), with quotes from the Bible*

written on it, such as “We must live by God’s words to receive eternal mercy.” We choose sentences that are meant to comfort and encourage, such as Bible verses about family, how a wife must obey her husband, how a husband must love his wife, etc. The Holy Blessing slips are hung on the apricot tree in the church and then everyone takes turns picking them up. In the past, this ritual was held on New Year’s Eve, today, for the convenience of parishioners, especially the elderly, the ceremony is held at 6-7 am or 9 am in the other churches. On the morning of the first day of Tet, it is a day to thank God and pray for peace. There is a mass at 7-8 am (no afternoon mass). The mass is shared by both the Hoa and Vietnamese people. After the mass, there is a dragon dance, not a lion dance because the lion dance is too noisy. The second day is to worship ancestors, to remember our ancestors. We worship together, to pray for our ancestors and for the priests of the church who have passed away. The third day is to pray for a good harvest. Nowadays, we live in the city since we pray for jobs and business, it’s called sanctifying work. For example, if someone is a journalist, they bring up a shirt and the priest blesses it; someone brings up a measuring tape, a laptop... a tool that symbolizes their job”<sup>4</sup>.

### **2.3. Religious community**

The Hoa Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City are followers of the Catholic Church (the Christian Church in full communion with the Bishop of Rome) under the spiritual leadership of the bishops in Vietnam. They mainly have religious activities in the Francis Xavier Parish (Francis Xavier Church) and An Binh Parish (Saint Joseph Church) of the Saigon Cho Quan Deanery - Saigon Archdiocese. The organizational structure of the parish complies with the regulations of the Catholic Church as follows:

The parish priest is the head of the parish and is appointed by the diocesan bishop and is under his authority. The parish priest has the rights to administer the sacraments to parishioners in the parish (except the two sacraments of confirmation and holy orders), establish and maintain baptismal, marriage, death, and other registers for

regular reporting to the bishop; celebrate religious ceremonies on Sundays and liturgies as prescribed, and celebrate funerals for parishioners who have passed away in the parish. Since its establishment, the parish has had French, Chinese, and Kinh priests. In recent years, Chinese priests have been more active in participating in local social organizations<sup>5</sup>.

Assistant parish priests and deacons are individuals who act as assistants of the parish priests. The assistant parish priest is a collaborator under the authority of the parish priest. The assistant parish priest must report to the parish priest on the pastoral program done and will be implemented, and he also has the right to be ordained as the parish priest in cases prescribed by law. The deacon works at the parish in collaboration with the parish priest, and has a specific role in the pastoral activities of the Mass, in charity work, and teaching; the deacon has the right to preside over the Mass in the parish community on Sundays in the absence of the parish priest.

In helping the priest oversee the parish, there is an organization by the name of the Pastoral Council. This includes selected parishioners whose mission is to collaborate in managing the parish's activities under the guidance of the parish priest. The Pastoral Council grasps the situation of the parish in all aspects, especially in terms of faith life, coordinates pastoral programs activities, and organizations of the parish; encourages everyone to participate in the common work of the parish; collaborates with other Pastoral Councils and departments and branches of the diocese; contributes to planning the goals and programs of the diocese. The Pastoral Council meets every two months to discuss and come to an agreement on common activities such as the parish situation, and extraordinary meetings convened by the parish priest and the Congress once a year. The term of the Pastoral Council is 4 years. The structure of the Pastoral Council consists of the Standing Committee (Chairman, Vice Chairman of Internal Affairs, Vice Chairman of External Affairs, Secretary, and Treasurer) and the Special Committee for Pastoral Care (Liturgy and Sacred Music; Education and Catechism; Mission and Organizations; Youth and Children).

### 2.3.1. Francis Xavier Parish

The current parish priest is Toma Huynh Buu Du, a person of Cantonese origin. The assistant parish priest is Giuse Nguyen Manh Hung (Kinh). In assisting the priest, there are two parish pastoral councils: one for the Hoa and the other for the Kinh. In addition, there are 22 groups, sharing the responsibility for parish activities such as liturgy, catechism teaching, evangelization and re-evangelization, and charity.

Activities at Francis Xavier parish include liturgical activities (Mass), catechism classes, and other activities (social charity).

\* Regarding liturgical activities, the timetable is as follows:

- + Weekdays: 5:30 am (for the Vietnamese), 5:30 pm (for the Hoa)
- + Saturday: 6:30 pm (for the Vietnamese), 7:30 pm (for the Hoa)
- + Sunday: 5:30 am (for the Vietnamese), 7:00 am (for the Hoa), 8:30 am (Vietnamese), 4:00 pm (for the Vietnamese), 5:30 pm (for the Hoa).

Eucharistic adoration: 2:30 pm every Sunday (for the Vietnamese + the Hoa)

\* Regarding catechism activities: the parish has 15 catechism classes for teenagers, four catechism classes for catechumens, and one catechism class for marriage preparation (for students from many parishes, with a teaching board consisting of priests and catechists).

+ Initiation, First Communion, Confirmation, Intercession, Entering Life, Bible classes... for children on Sundays (Chinese 8:30-11:00; Vietnamese 2:00-4:00).

+ Catechism for Catechumens (Chinese 9 am-10 am every Monday, Wednesday, Friday; Vietnamese 6 pm-7 pm and 7:30 pm- 8:30 pm every Monday, Wednesday, Friday).

+ Catechism for Marriage (Chinese 7 pm-8 pm every Tuesday, Thursday; Vietnamese 7:30 pm-8:30 pm every Tuesday, Thursday).

\* One of the outstanding activities of the Francis Xavier parish is charity. The parish established the “Humanitarian Clinic Base 3”



under the Red Cross Society of District 5 in 1995 and the Traditional Medicine Diagnosis Team in 1999. Currently, free consultations and medicine provisions for people take place on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The doctors and support staff are skilled and dedicated to community health. In addition, since 1994, the parish has established the Vinh Sang charity group specializing in social work, especially monthly relief for poor families; providing free lunches for the poor and the elderly living alone near the church (120 meals/day).

In addition, Francis Xavier Parish also actively supports the Red Cross Society of Ward 14, District 5; contributes to charitable weeks to help the poor on the Tet occasion, and provides relief to people affected by natural disasters and floods (Archdiocese of Saigon, 2012).

### *2.3.2. An Binh Parish*

The current parish priest is Martino Vu Anh Khoa (the Kinh); Father Toma Huynh Buu Du was previously the parish priest. Assisting the priest is the Parish Pastoral Council consisting of 2 Hoa people and 8 Kinh people. In addition, there are three Vietnamese choirs, one Chinese choir, the Catholic Association Legio Mariae (the Army of Mary with six members), the Vietnamese-Chinese Communications Committee, the Vietnamese-Chinese Altar Servers (consisting of 23 children), the Eucharistic Children's Group (consisting of 40 children), and the Caritas Committee specializing in charitable work.

Activities at An Binh parish include liturgical activities (Mass), catechism classes, and charitable activities.

- Regarding liturgical activities, the timetable is as follows:
  - + Weekdays: 5:30 am and 6:00 pm (the Vietnamese).
  - + Sundays: 6:00 am and 5:30 pm (the Vietnamese), 7:30 am (the Hoa).
  - + Patron saint of the parish: Saint Joseph (May 1).
- Regarding catechism activities: Catechism classes for Initiation, First Communion, and Confirmation are taught by the Sisters of Providence. The Hoa children attend from 9:30 to 11:00 on Sunday

mornings. The Vietnamese children attend from 4 to 5:15 p.m. on Sunday afternoons. Catechism classes for Marriage and Catechumens are held regularly (Archdiocese of Saigon, 2020).

According to Father To Buu Du, “*The Hoa Catholic community is currently facing difficulties in personnel. There are not many Hoa priests, the catechists are old, and the young generation cannot meet the demand. The number of Hoa people trained as catechists is very small, while the number of Vietnamese is very large; since the Vietnamese have to learn Chinese to evangelize.*”<sup>6</sup> There are also a few Hoa seminarians trained at the St. Joseph Major Seminary in Saigon after 1975. The Archdiocese of Saigon currently has five Hoa priests.<sup>7</sup> (Martino Trung Kiên, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

The Hoa Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City have outstanding characteristics in their religious life. *In terms of faith*, they worship the Trinity; and devote the Virgin Mary, the Angels, the 12 Apostles, and the Martyrs. Some believers also worship the God of Wealth and ancestors. *In religious practices*, the Hoa Catholics comply with the provisions of the Roman Missal and the regulations of the Church (reading and preaching the Bible; individual and collective prayer; singing hymns) however, they also preserve some traditional cultural values such as burning incense, praying on the death anniversaries of deceased. *Regarding the community*, the Hoa Catholics are gathered in the Roman Catholic Church. They mainly practice their religion at the Francis Xavier parish and An Binh parish of the Saigon Cho Quan Deanery, Saigon Archdiocese. The parishes have increasingly engaged in activities to attract followers.

In the past five years, Francis Xavier parish has started using social networks such as Facebook and YouTube channels to post and promote its activities as well as teach doctrine. Especially at a time when Vietnam and the world faced the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of social networks has been enhanced, for example, to execute online Mass. The activities of the parishes do not only aim at the Hoa but they also focus the Kinh people, towards the youth. In addition, the

parishes also carry out many social charity activities throughout the country. However, the Hoa parishes are facing difficulties in human resources since the number of Hoa priests and catechists is decreasing. This is an issue that needs attention to find a solution so Catholicism can play an active role in the cultural and spiritual life of the Hoa people./.

(Translated by Hoàng Thị Bích Ngọc)

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#### NOTES:

- 1 Priest Tam Assou was born in 1855 in Macao, China. He went to Saigon at the age of 8.
- 2 The Order of John the Baptist was founded in China in 1928 with the motto of evangelizing the Chinese people. Currently, its headquarters is located in Taichung-Taiwan.
- 3 In-depth interview July 22, 2020.
- 4 In-depth interview July 22, 2020.
- 5 Typically, Father Huynh Tru (parish priest of Francis Xavier parish from 1976 to 2019) was a member of the Vietnam Fatherland Front Committee of District 5 for the 2019-2024 term.
- 6 In-depth interview July 22, 2020.
- 7 Currently, there are Hoa priests such as Father Stephano Huynh Tru (parish priest of Francis Xavier Church from 1976 to 2019, retired), Father Toma Huynh Buu Du (parish priest of Francis Xavier Church from November 2011 to present), Father Phaolo Huynh Quoc Vinh (assistant parish priest at Binh Thuan parish, Tan Son Nhi district), Father Dam Minh Luu Nhuan Hien (studying in Taiwan), Vincent Co Dieu Thanh (a seminarian of the 19th course).

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