

VIOLATION OF CANON LAWS AND VIEWS OF SIN FROM PROVINCIAL CATHOLIC STUDENTS IN HANOI

***Abstract:** The sin of violating canon law is clearly defined in Catholic doctrine. Catechism also guides the Catholics to confess. Catholic students from provinces in Hanoi have undergone catechism programs so they clearly aware of sin. However, they have violated canon law when living and studying in Hanoi. On the basis of qualitative and quantitative data, the article sheds a light on the perception of Catholic students about sin; the sins they committed and how they justified their sins.*

***Keywords:** Sin; violation of canon law; Catholic students; Catholicism; Hanoi.*

Introduction

Catholic students from provinces in Hanoi are lay people - students mainly from the northern provinces, studying at colleges and universities. In terms of the educational level, Catholic students can be considered as the elite group of Catholic youth. Although there are no official figures, according to statistics of Catholic student associations in Hanoi, there are more than 2,500 provincial Catholic students who come to Hanoi to study and join the association (Vu Thi Ha, 2018: 167). These students were taught the catechism during childhood when they lived with their families in the countryside since practices and expression of their faith mostly go quite smoothly. Activities aimed at practicing and expressing faith such as attending Mass, solemn Mass, and daily, weekly and seasonal prayings have become habits and lifestyles. They are regularly encouraged and monitored by

* Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

family members for their faith, including the observance of canon provisions and repentance when they make mistakes. When arriving in Hanoi, they live away from their families and have independent lives, however, they also face more challenges in practicing their faith and observing canon law¹.

1. Sin in Catholic doctrine

The catechism of the Catholic church is doctrines with philosophical and metaphysical theological views based on the Bible, and the explanations and authority of the Catholic Church. The canon law and rituals of Catholicism are very complex including 12 dogmas, ten commandments of God, five commandments of the church, seven sacraments, Seven deadly sins, 1752 rules. However, when examining themselves for confession, the Church asks parishioners to base on the Ten Commandments of God and the Five Commandments of the Church, and the Seven deadly sins. In life, Catholics also show their piety through 7 sacraments, in which, the Eucharist and the Confession are encouraged by the Church to perform regularly.

For Catholics, sin has many degrees: *mortal sin* (serious sin) and *venial sin*. Mortal sin is identified in the ten commandments such as murder, adultery, theft, false witness, harming others, and disrespecting parents. Among these sins, there is a more serious sin and a lesser sin because the degree of guilt also depends on the sinner's relation to the dignity of the person offended; fully conscious (aware of the act is a sin, contrary to God's law but still doing it. When a person commits a serious sin, he/she loses charity and deprives himself of sanctifying grace. Venial sin does not forfeit sanctifying grace, nor does it deprive eternal blessedness.

However, committing a venial sin will weaken the faith, as well as, a person who intentionally commits a venial sin and refuses to repent will gradually lead to mortal sin and affect eternal salvation. The Bible also mentions a sin against the Holy Spirit. It is the sin of willfully not repenting and rejecting God's mercy since rejecting

the forgiveness and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit. It is not that God does not forgive, it is the sinner who separates himself from His mercy, and condemns himself.

Sin belongs to an individual act, however, lay people are also responsible when related to others' sins in many forms such as direct and intentional participation; order, instigate or approve; do not prevent; cover for evildoers.

In fact, Catholic communities consist of the smallest communities which are the families, the larger communities are parishes, and Catholic associations. These associations have an important function, which is to monitor the members' faith practice. However, this monitoring mechanism is only effective when each individual in the community practices their faith such as going to Mass, praying together, and participating in common activities. And sin belongs to the category of individuals.

In this aspect, the Church cannot have enough personnel to oversee all the actions and activities of Catholics. Therefore, for its members, from an early age, through catechism classes, the Church has lessons to forge a self-monitoring mechanism for each Catholic, it's conscience. For Catholics, "conscience is the deepest point and the place where God is present in the heart. There "a human is alone with God and His voice resounds in his heart" (Pastoral Ordinance 16)².

2. Violation canon law of provincial Catholic students

Sin and sense of guilt among Catholic students from provinces

In the Catholic Church's guidelines for confession, each individual needs to follow five steps such as first, ask for the Holy Spirit's enlightenment; second, self-examination; third, repentance of sins and determination on correct oneself; fourth, confession; fifth, do penance. The Catholic Church also has detailed instructions for self-examination, and confessions through catechesis at all levels, especially in the lesson on the

commandments. Therefore, when going through catechism classes, provincial Catholic students have formed a sense of sin. A Catholic student affirmed that, before doing something, whether it is planned or spontaneous, “we have learned the doctrine from a young age, all the commandments in our heads, so when we do something we always exclude those that are not suitable or violate the doctrine, violate Catholic law. Those who worshiped God, knew the law and obeyed the law. They do so out of faith, fear of God, fear of the law, and conscience” (a male student, born in 1994, Nam Dinh province, Hanoi Civil Engineering College Hà Nội I)³.

To find out the level of sense of guilt among provincial Catholic students before doing something, we asked the question: “*As a Catholic, before you act, do you think about guilty?*”. 85,6% of provincial Catholic students (completely agree and agree) have thought about sin before acting. In other words, most of them were aware and compared the provisions of the doctrine to distinguish a thing as right - wrong, good - bad, should - should not do.

Thus, the majority of provincial Catholic students believe that their sense of sin stems from learning catechism, especially the lessons on the Ten Commandments of God; from the direction and control of family, friends, and community. This process takes place throughout childhood and adulthood, cultivated into the conscience of Catholics. Although conscience is present in every human being, for Catholics, conscience is formed on the stable elements that are a strict, and clear Catholic catechism system referenced to God. The conscience of Catholics is a norm based on the criteria of good - bad, benevolent - evil for them to make decisions for action. This self-monitoring mechanism can be likened to the “last wall” that protects Catholics from the temptations of sin.

To find out what motivates provincial Catholic students to realize their sins, we asked the question “*What did motivate you to realize your sins?*”. The survey results show that “conscience” is the first and most important factor of 84,6% of provincial Catholic

students that makes them look back at their actions and whether it is a sin or not. Then, the factors follow such as ‘priest’s reminder’ accounts for 16,7%; “reminder of fellow believers”, “reminder of the family” and “reminder of other faiths” accounts for 8,3%.

Sins among provincial Catholic students

For provincial Catholic students, behaviors such as premarital sex, using contraceptives, and having an abortion are considered “problems”. However, the nature and severity of these actions need to examine from a religious perspective.

According to Catholic doctrine, premarital sex is a violation of the sixth commandment: “Thou shalt not commit adultery”. If anyone violates, it will be classified as a mortal sin. In particular, sex before marriage is considered an act of “fornication”⁴. T.A. a provincial Catholic student confessed in a recent talk that “I have had sex with my girlfriend for almost a year”. A provincial Catholic student admitted that “Although it is difficult to calculate premarital sex, this problem is driving Catholic youth problems” (a male student, born in 1993, Bac Giang province, University of Culture). According to this student, it is possible that 30-40% of provincial Catholic students have sex and pregnant before marriage. Many other provincial Catholic students also believe in the proportions cited by this student, although they find it difficult to accept this behavior. In addition, provincial Catholic students also use contraceptive methods during sex, commonly using condoms and emergency contraception during and after sex. For T.A or other couples, the use of contraceptives is a reluctant solution when they do not want to have consequences when having sex before marriage.

However, in fact, premarital sex among provincial Catholic students still has consequences, which as ‘abortion’. The act of abortion, according to the regulations of the Catholic Church, is a violation of the 5th commandment: “Thou shalt not kill”. According to the Church, abortion is defined as intrinsic bad behavior rather than bad behavior since the Church prohibits it⁵.

The Second Vatican Council affirmed that “For God, the Lord of life, has conferred on men the surpassing ministry of safeguarding life in a manner which is worthy of man. Therefore from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crime (Gaudium et Spes, art.51)⁶.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that “Human life must be absolutely respected and protected from the moment of conception... Since the first century, the Church has defined abortion as a crime. That teaching is immutable, unchanging. Direct abortion is a serious violation of the moral law” (Vietnam Catholic Catechism, sentences 2270-2271)⁷.

The penalty for abortion is excommunication, which means that the offender must be punished immediately for the crime, without the need for publication. People who have had an abortion are still required to attend Mass but are not allowed to receive the Eucharist. This sin can only be absolved by the diocesan Bishop or the priest entrusted by those Bishops.

Generally, abortion among students is an undesirable consequence of cohabitation and premarital sex. During the research process we participated in the activities of Catholic student groups, we followed them to the Doi Coc fetus’ cemetery (Thanh Xuan commune, Soc Son district, Hanoi)⁸ and knew the online cemetery (www.nhomai.vn).

Doi Coc fetal cemetery is partly used by the local church to bury the unborn babies from the antenatal clinics. The curator has left the notebooks on a small table, next to the statue of Our Lady in the central chapel for visitors to write their guestbook. At the time of our visit, there were 3 notebooks with no space left and one was 1/3 full. We turned the guestbook page by page. There were many different emotions recorded in the guestbook, and the words containing the torment, regret, pain and pity for the babies of the young people who have had an abortion⁹. Surprisingly, some

content in the guestbooks was from Catholic youth¹⁰. We counted 15 of those who have had abortions as young Catholics, some even have had multiple abortions.

For the online cemetery, in the section “Fetal Grave”, we also found a number of graves made for the fetus, on the tombstone, there were both holy names and secular names of the fetuses¹¹. Some content writing for fetuses also showed that the abortionists were young Catholic students. The writings also contained the suffering of young Catholics who have had premarital sex, pregnancy, and abortions.

In addition, suicide is also considered a “terrible” act for Catholics in general and Catholic students in particular. Because this is also a violation of the 5th commandment - “Thou shalt not kill”. The Catholic Church believes that each person’s life is given by God. Each person is responsible for his or her life. Believers have a duty to accept, manage and preserve life with gratitude, to glorify God and be saved, but not to dispose of their own lives. Therefore, “suicide is contrary to the natural tendency to preserve and prolong human life. It offense against the rightful love of self. Suicide is also offensive to the love of relatives because it unjustly severs the bonds with the family, nation, and humankind for which we have a responsibility. Suicide is the opposite of the love of the living God”. (Vietnam Catholic Catechism, sentences 2280-2281).

In fact, suicide among Catholics is rare. However, one of our collaborators, a provincial Catholic student also mentioned the case of her classmate in high school. “That friend, while studying at a prestigious university in Hanoi, committed suicide by pouring gasoline on herself and setting herself on fire in front of her lover’s house. This event shocked her friends and parishioners in her hometown. When I went to the funeral, I didn’t tell my dad that my friend died by suicide. If my father knew, he wouldn’t let me go. It was a horrible incident with my father, it was unacceptable behavior. According to the canon law, that action is a mortal sin, disrespecting

life. My father's way of thinking is the orthodox view, the view of the majority of Catholics" (Female student, born in 1985, Nam Dinh province, Hanoi National University of Pedagogy I)

Regarding the violation of the 5th commandment, in 2010, public opinion in Hanoi in particular, and the whole country, in general, was shocked by the murder case in Hanoi in which the prisoner was a provincial Catholic student. That is the case of Nguyen Duc Nghia killed his girlfriend after having sex and divided the victim's body for disposal¹². Catholic Catechism stipulates: Murder is a mortal sin, against the dignity of man and the holiness of the Creator (Vietnam Catholic Catechism, sentence 2320). Although it is "beyond the imagination" of many provincial Catholic students, it is an actual fact that has been happening among provincial Catholic students in particular and the young people of the country in particular.

In addition, homosexuality is also not supported by the Catholic Church. The Bible considers these acts to be gravely depraved¹³. Church Tradition has always stated that "Homosexual acts are perverse in nature" (CDF 8)¹⁴. Catholic doctrine considers these acts to be contrary to natural law because it excludes the procreative intent of the sexual act, nor does it arise from a real need for emotion and sexuality. This behavior is not acceptable under any circumstances (Vietnam Catholic Catechism, sentence 2357).

During this research, we approached a provincial Catholic student with HIV. This young man self-identified as gay and contracted HIV due to same-sex sexual intercourse without using a condom. Before being diagnosed with HIV, from being a local high school student to attending university in Hanoi, this student often worked part-time at karaoke bars and had homosexual relationships with many people. This student discovered he was infected with HIV while participating in a blood donation movement at the university. After that, this student dropped out of school and went to church less often.

3. Justifications of provincial Catholic students when violating canon law

As mentioned above, a question arises, why being regularly educated through catechism classes, commandments, Masses, the family and parish environment, the majority of provincial Catholic students who had a strong sense of guilt before acting could commit such sins?

When mentioning the sin of provincial Catholic students, we are still impressed with the story in a questionnaire distribution. After asking permission from the group leader and priests, we were allowed to attend Mass, presented the purpose of the investigation, and distributed ballots to a group of Catholic students after Mass. While the other students were filling out forms, a young man¹⁵ approached me and asked for permission to talk in private. According to my observations, before that, he didn't fill out the form like other students but read it carefully. This young man and I moved to the back of the church. He asked me the purpose of this form. He was concerned about questions related to abortion, adultery, cohabitation, and theft with options: sin, violation of ethics, mistakes, private matters, and circumstances. He argued that according to canon law, abortion or cohabitation are mortal sins, as a Catholic, they are "sins". According to him, such questions and answers are "disrespectful of Catholicism". Of course, I explained and he understood my purpose. However, this reaction also shows that there is a part of provincial Catholic students have firmed awareness of cohabitation and abortion.

In terms of violating canon law leading to sin, many provincial Catholic students believed that it is their new living environment that has affected them. Especially, for "problematic" behaviors, the majority of provincial Catholic students disagree and do not support them. However, the "insiders" have excuses that they think are reasonable for their behavior.

For example, T.A said that he also confided in his fellow believers about premarital sex. One of the “pious” friends warned T.A. that “You are committing a mortal sin. You are creating a gulf between you and God”.

Answer the question: *Are you afraid of committing a mortal sin?* T.A said that “I have thought about the issue of guilt, but my girlfriend and I have examined our consciences and found that it is necessary for our love. For us, love is important and a part of our life, sexuality leads to trust and connection. When we really feel that it is necessary for the love, we feel that the sin is not serious”. T.A. argued that “God gives human freedom. For me, my freedom is not to harm others, including my lover, which means not hurting her, not making her pregnant”.

Therefore, when going to confession on Easter week of that year, this student only confessed the sins of “arguing with his parents, insulting his brothers and sisters, missing Mass many times”, however, he did not confess the sins of premarital sex. This young man said that “this sin is included in the sentence *Father, I have venial sins, mortal sins, please forgive me*”.

Regarding the abortions of young Catholics, when I mentioned to some provincial Catholic students about the guestbooks at Doi Coc cemetery as well as on the online cemetery, they firstly were shocked because they couldn't believe what did I say. They wondered, about the sin of abortion, the canon law strongly condemned and listed it as a very serious sin, but why people still violated it. After viewing these guestbooks, there was no resentment, they had a contemplative mood with deep sympathy. They also thought that Catholic students who had an abortion will live in misery, both in terms of morals and in violation of the regulations of the Catholic Church.

A provincial Catholic student who was a leader of a Catholic student group shared with understanding: “I confirm there are abortions among Catholic students. I also read the guestbook in Doi

Coc and found that most abortionists have a difficult situation. First, their families are too strict or too difficult; difficulties in the family lead family members to be depressed. Second, cohabitation leads to pregnancy, the man does not accept or reject his girlfriend as well as the fetus; In some cases, men seduce to trick women. Therefore, women do not have the courage to keep the fetus, they have an abortion or go somewhere for a while, give birth and then give up their children” (Male student, born in 1994, Nam Dinh province, Ha Noi College of Construction I).

As a leader of the group, this student had an action plan “I organize the program Doi Coc - Light it up. Every month, I call on Facebook to ask my friends to go to Doi Coc to help the janitor bury the fetus, partly to comfort the souls of the unborn babies because they were not born, and could not see the light of the Sun. The greater desire is to let more people know, to scare people, to keep them away from things that lead to such consequences”. (Male student, born in 1994, Nam Dinh province, Ha Noi College of Construction I).

According to T.A and the leader of the Catholic student group, if having sex before marriage is an option, using a condom or birth control pill during sex is an optimal way to “healthy cohabitation”. Although they know the use of any kind of artificial contraception violates Church regulations. However, it can be said that it is a situational choice in order to help Catholic students not to commit serious sins.

Moreover, up to 90,8% of provincial Catholic students surveyed believed that abortion is a sin, and 8,0% considered it an ethical violation. This fact has shown that provincial Catholic students have understood the strict canon law on this action. However, 1,2% of Catholic students classified abortion as “due to circumstances”. And two aforementioned explanations of the Catholic students also showed that there is sympathy comes from an understanding of the difficulties and challenges, of Catholic female students in particular

when living in a social environment different from the peaceful and simple environment in the countryside. Other provincial Catholic students said that these cases are both pitiful and reprehensible.

Regarding cohabitation, only 52,5% of the students surveyed considered that behavior to be a sin. They considered this behavior to be an “ethical violation” (27,6%), due to “mistake” (6,3%), “privacy” (12,1%), and “due to circumstances” (1,2%).

Regarding homosexuality, 42,5% of provincial Catholic students considered it is a “sin”; 23,6% of students considered it is “violating ethics”; 1,2% of students said that it is a “mistake”; 21,8% of students considered it is “private matter”; 8,6% of students said it was “due to circumstances” and 2,3% thought it is “normal”, not worthy of condemnation.

Regarding the case of a provincial Catholic student who was infected with HIV because of same-sex relationships, this young person was very depressed, dropped out of school, and destroyed himself by drinking all night. He did not dare to tell his single mother for fear that she would also have a breakdown. Then, after researching information, and participating in forums and meetings of people living with HIV, he was encouraged and revived, to write books and stories on the topic of HIV. For this young man, knowing that he was infected with HIV was also the most depressing time, he did not think of giving up but only was more circumspect in relationships, especially in sex to avoid infecting others. He said that “after all, I am an educated person, a religious person”.

Regarding the case of a provincial Catholic student who had a friend who committed suicide, her father would not agree if she talked about going to this friend’s funeral. Although she knew that her father’s views were orthodox, like almost Catholics, this student and some of her friends went to the funeral since they viewed it from the perspective of understanding their friend’s

situation. She said that “We were shocked, could not believe it. We loved her and her mom. She studied very well, her father died early, and her brother was addicted to drugs, so she was her mother’s hope. When she was studying at college, she was working and earning money to help her mother. She died, and we felt the insecurity and dizzying changes of life. Obviously, looking at it from that angle, we did not make judgments, did not think it’s a sin, there’s no right or wrong thing” (Female student, born in 1985, Nam Dinh province, Hanoi National University of Pedagogy I).

Regarding the case of Nguyen Duc Nghia, he finally had to receive the highest penalty of the law, which was the death sentence. There were many articles reporting on the trials as well as analyzing the attitude, personality or inner happenings of this prisoner during the investigation and trial process. In a solitary confinement room, waiting for the execution of the death sentence, in a handwritten letter to his family, Nghia wrote that “*By this time, perhaps parents and siblings have not stopped being shocked and suffering because of what I have done. The past few days with my family as well as with myself have been the most painful and difficult days. I know that for me all doors are completely closed forever. I have lost everything. The worse thing is that I made my parents lose me*”¹⁶.

Thus, the research showed that provincial Catholic students in Hanoi have a more open view of their own sins and that of their friends based on their sympathy and understanding of their situation. They argue that “outsiders” or older Catholics often take a more critical view of the social issues they are facing. They often judge actions and events in accordance with the provisions of canon law, while young people, especially students think society or life is too complicated to judge whether an event is right or wrong.

Young people also recognize that youth are impulsive and prone to making mistakes. Except for the case of Nguyen Duc Nghia, he must be punished by law, the other cases, when making mistakes

and coming to a final decision, they have also considered all possibilities to make a the most viable options. And finally, in many apologetic arguments for sin, they often refer to the parable of the “Good Father” or the “Prodigal Son” (Lc 15, 11-32)¹⁷.

This is a parable that provincial Catholic students have learned in catechism programs at all levels. For them, this is a typical parable about God’s immense love and tolerance (in the image of a good father) for the mistakes of believers (in the image of the second son). When they mentioned this story, we noticed that provincial Catholic students always believe in the benevolence of God- the supreme being whom they worship. For them, God is like a friend, a brother who accompanies them on the path to finding the true meaning of faith.

No matter how much they make mistakes, when they realize and repent, they are forgiven by God and comforted with boundless love. When referring to this parable, they express a strong belief in God’s unconditional tolerance. This belief is a source of strength, motivation, and a strong encouragement for them to contribute and integrate into society with the spirit of “commitment” of a Catholic.

Conclusion

When living away from home, provincial Catholic students have to adjust to their new life in the city and an independent life with many risks of violating canon law. It can be said that, whether the explanation of provincial Catholic students about their own sins or those of their peers is an excuse, a compromise, or a shift in the sense of sin, the core problem is that provincial Catholic students are still living their own daily lives. They are having to deal with themselves and solve the problems of their life. In the process of finding a solution, they are deeply aware of the regulations in their religion. In other words, religion is always a spiritual support, a part of the reason for them to justify the mistake they are making. Thoughts about religious regulations are not a noose that tightens

when they make mistakes, but they become a salvific argument when they commit the most serious sins; help them to get out, not be immersed in the feeling of fear when committing crimes; comfort them when facing God. That is the positive side that Catholicism brings to its young followers; so that when going the “wrong way”, they still want to “return” to their own religion./.

NOTES:

- 1 The article uses in-depth interview stories, a part of sociological survey data for 174 provincial Catholic students during the author’s implementation of the thesis “*Catholic youth and social integration*”.
- 2 Pastoral Ordinance No. 16
- 3 In the article, the author to anonymize the informants in order to respect their privacy.
- 4 “Adultery is an extramarital sexual relationship between a man and a woman. This is a serious sin, offending the dignity and gender of the person, which is attributed to the interests of the couple, as well as the procreation and education of children. In addition, adultery is also a bad example of ruining young people” (Vietnam Catholic Catechism, sentence 2353).
- 5 Canon Law on Abortion, accessed 13/12/2014. <http://www.simonhoadalat.com/hochoi/giaoluat/TuSachGiaoLyGP/21VanDePhaThai.htm>
- 6 The Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, Article 51
- 7 Vietnam Catholic Catechism, sentences 2270-2271
- 8 Doi Coc is the cemetery of a parish. According to the guardian, for more than 10 years, during a priest’s visit, he warned about the increasingly serious situation of abortion in society. He suggested that there should be a form of collecting the fetuses for burial. Since then, a number of volunteers in this parish went to antenatal clinics in the Phuc Yen area and later a number of hospitals and clinics in Hanoi to apply for fetuses. Part of the cemetery’s land has been devoted to the burial of unborn babies.
- 9 In addition, the content of the guestbook also contains the joy of some writers who came to pray and that request came true; happy to pass the university entrance exam, peace in mind when visiting the cemetery; even anger, sadness because of things related to family, friends.
- 10 Some signs to identify: the writer signs with the holy name, or both the holy name and the secular name; In the content, there are many prayers or invocations to God, Our Lady or saints of Catholics.
- 11 As a Catholic, when given a name, both have a holy name (the saint chosen to patronize the person being named) and a secular name.

- 12 “Nguyễn Đức Nghĩa xin được chết và gặp cha đạo” (Nguyen Duc Nghia asked to die and meet the priest), accessed 15/5/2016.
http://www.conganbinhthuan.gov.vn/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5728&Itemid=61
- 13 Genesis 19, 1-29; Rm 1, 24-27; 1Cr 6, 10; 1Tm 1, 10.
- 14 Congregatio pro Doctrina Fidei / Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith No.8
- 15 After talking, it is known that this young man has dropped out of university studies, has gone to work, but still works in a group of Catholic students because he feels that the group’s activities bring joy and cohesion with the young Catholic community far from home.
- 16 “Nguyễn Đức Nghĩa xin được chết và gặp cha đạo” (Nguyen Duc Nghia asked to die and meet the priest).
- 17 Luca 15, 11-32.

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