

**THE CATHOLICS' RELIGIOUS LIFE THROUGH  
RESEARCH ON THE SINO-NÔM INSCRIPTIONS IN THE  
RED RIVER DELTA**

***Abstract:** The Catholicism's Sino-Nôm inscriptions are a product of a historical period and most of them have been found in the Red River Delta. They contain cultural cryptography that need to be decoded, especially in the context of which they are at risk. This article refers to three main issues as follow: the main viewpoints of religious life in Vietnam today; some characteristics of the Catholicism's Sino-Nôm inscriptions in the Red River Delta; the Catholics' religious life history through the Sino-Nôm inscriptions.*

***Keywords:** Religious life; inscriptions; Catholic Sino-Nôm; Red River Delta.*

**1. Discussion on the concept of “religious life” of the Vietnamese Catholics**

*1.1. Some comments on the “religious life” of the Vietnamese Catholicism*

The religious life of the Vietnamese Catholics is a topic that often appears in the Catholic newspapers and magazines. In contrast, there are not many articles and works about the religious life of the Vietnamese Catholics through Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions<sup>1</sup>. There are many different interpretations of lifestyles, religious practices of Catholics, and therefore, there are also different terms such as religious life, religious lifestyle, etc.

When discussing on the formation of religious lifestyle, some people stated that “The concept of religious life was an issue

---

\* Institute for Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

whether in Europe or in Vietnam especially during the Middle Ages (or medieval period). The Catholic world of Europe created a religious life following a Christian model which was rigid, formulaic, closed, and it primarily showed the relationship of the Church and the Christians in sacramental and canonical life. It was difficult for non-Christian social factors to have a status in this religious life”<sup>2</sup>.

In Vietnam, as a result of a specific historical condition, Vietnamese Catholicism differently developed from Catholicism in Europe. “During the 17th and 18th century, Vietnamese Catholicism formed their parishes, then the first dioceses. It was the time when the Christian religious life was abolished in Europe. Moreover, socio-political conditions of Vietnam for the next 200 years, especially when Vietnam became a French colony (1962-1945), Vietnamese Catholicism also could not have access to progressive theology. Moreover, the conflict between Catholicism and non-Catholic life was so fierce through wars and revolution. As a result of political, social, psychological, and religious reasons, the Catholic community formed a *clustered* lifestyle, so that traditional religious life has not changed, but it has been sometimes tighter and more institutional”<sup>3</sup>.

A prominent feature of the Vietnamese religious life was stated as follows: “The Catholic lifestyle is the result of an acculturation between religious faith and national culture. It can be seen through behavior of Catholics. For example, according to Catholic doctrine, a young couple needs to have the sacrament of marriage at the church, it is legal according to religion, however, they still follow all the traditional customs such as proposing marriage, giving betel, asking for marriage. In addition, the couple has to follow the procedure of reciting and asking for permission to get married. The polytheistic mindset, the worship of the Mother Goddesses of the Vietnamese have affected Catholics. Many Catholics still go to a fortune teller to ask for advice and they especially revere Our Lady.

A large number of people come to pray at places of sacred Our Lady such as La Vang, Trà Kiệu, or a priest who has the ability to “worship” (kêu cầu) as priest T. (Benedictine Order, Hồ Chí Minh City)”<sup>4</sup>. It can be said that traditional beliefs and ritual practices still have certain imprints on the Vietnamese Catholics. It has been partly explained by studies as follows:

In the book *Living a religious life in the Vietnamese way (Sống đạo theo cách Việt Nam)*, the article Catholics in my eyes-access to training through catechism) (Người giáo dân trong mắt tôi - tiếp cận sự đào luyện qua sách giáo lý), Đỗ Quang Hưng agreed with the following statement of author Tư Cù on Christian life in Vietnam: “The religious life is regulated by canon laws, interpreted into specific acts: making the sign of the cross, abstaining from meat, a vegetarian diet. Perhaps many dignitaries of the church still consider Christians like believers in the Middle Ages, it means that they are considered as uneducated Christians and they need to be meticulously guided to keep the law by specific things. Christians try to obey the law to avoid sin, not many of them understand that complying the law is a faithfulness to God; It is a responsibility of the Christians to attend Mass, they do not live in a spirit of communion with the community...”<sup>5</sup>. He also stated that “Many researchers on religions also find that it is difficult to distinguish religious events and religious life because religious practices are often performed quietly even though it is a regular liturgical celebration according to the rituals, ceremonies or educational, charitable activities, festival based on religious inspiration”<sup>6</sup>. The aforementioned comment discussed on the contemporary situation of Vietnamese Catholicism, however, it has been effective in comparing it with the Catholicism in the past. However, the book does not have in-depth studies on the Catholicism’s Sino-Nôm inscriptions.

Nguyễn Hồng Dương in his article entitled “Religious life of Catholics through inscriptions and village conventions in the

Northern Delta region until the second half of the 20th century” (*Đời sống đạo của tín đồ Công giáo qua văn bia và hương ước vùng Đồng bằng Bắc Bộ đến nửa cuối thế kỷ 20*) pointed out that the religious life of Vietnamese Catholics is expressed through the life-cycle rituals such as weddings, funerals<sup>7</sup>. The author’s study indicated the main features of a Vietnamese Catholic life cycle in the Red River Delta.

Next, *the religious life of Vietnamese Catholics (Nếp sống đạo của người Công giáo Việt Nam)* is a book with fairly diverse researches on the religious life and religious practices of Vietnamese Catholics. However, there is a lack of studies of Catholic Han-Nom about the religious life of Vietnamese Catholics, including Catholics in the Red River Delta.

The purpose of the Catholicism’s Sino-Nôm inscriptions is to preserve for a long time a memory heritage that the Catholic community needs to follow, praise, or educate the next generations. In addition, steles inscriptions for worship after death (*bia cúng/thờ hậu*) is an interesting phenomenon of Catholic culture in Vietnam. It needs to be analysed more. It can be said that it is considered as acculturation. Besides, the inscriptions related to education and Catholic schools; the dullness of inhabitants’ memories about the inscriptions’ content can help to images of the religious life of Vietnamese Catholics from the past to the present.

### *1.2. Discussion on the “religious life” in the specific social institution of Catholicism in the North*

In terms of structure, *the religious life* is only formed when there is a real religious activity of a community who believe in a religion. In which *the religious life* can be understood as an experience, practices of faith which form a habit of a religious community. The religious life consists of three main components: faith - practice - community. To operate these components, there must be an institution that includes the rules that make the social system (the

Catholic community) operate in relation to an peripheral social institution such as ethnic groups, countries.

*The religious life* in the case of Vietnam becomes *living a religious life* (đời sống đạo). It is automatically understood as a religious life of Catholics because according to the traditional way of using the language of the Northern people the word *đạo* is commonly known as Catholicism. “The concept of *religious life* can be defined as the formation of specific lifestyles based on specific religious meanings. When the concept of *religion* (đạo) in Vietnam refers to Catholicism, the concept of religious life also means that the lifestyle of the Vietnamese Catholics or a way of life is formed based on the concept of the world, Catholic values and norms”<sup>8</sup>.

There are some words associated with “religious life” (sống đạo) such as *living a religious life* (đời sống đạo), *religious lifestyle* ( nếp sống đạo, lối sống đạo). In this article, we use the term *living a religious life* (đời sống đạo) because it relates to the cyclelife of the Vietnamese Catholics. The concept of *living a religious life* is understood as all the practical expressions of faith of Catholics in rituals in the sacred space and in the environment of families, religious communities, throughout their life.

We consider Catholics in the Red River Delta as an entity, gathered together in small communities belonged to a large community as a fairly sustainable social institution. The community has religious practices and regulations regarding personal and family life in a community with a common living space. Therefore, there are rules that every individual, every community must comply, there are issues that individuals and the whole community must protect. Those things were expressed and preserved in the Catholicism’s Sino-Nôm inscriptions which were formed throughout the Catholic missionary history in the land has been considered as the cradle of Vietnam.

## **2. Some characteristics of the Catholic Sino - Nôm inscriptions in the Red River Delta**

### *2.1. The history of formation and distribution*

The disruption of time and the generation transfer along with the dissemination of Quốc ngữ since the middle of the 20th century has led to a reduction of people who know the Sino-Nôm characters in Vietnam. In addition to the ideological fluctuations of residents of the Northern Delta region, according to the fieldwork results of the author, many religious establishments and the Sino-Nôm steles were destroyed. The Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions were in the same situation.

In this paper, we studied 14 Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions<sup>9</sup>, in which three steles were found and rebuilt such as a stele of Kim Trang Đông church, a stele of Ninh Cường monument, a stele of Lê Tuyền monument. The stele of Ninh Cường monument was restored in a state of serious destruction. This shows that there was a time when religious beliefs were not associated with the sense of preserving the heritage so many Catholics did not appreciate the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions. In addition, the restoration of the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions in some localities also shows a positive sign that it is a return to tradition through the respect of the ancient inscriptions of Catholics in some parishes in the Northern Delta.

### *2.2. The form of inscriptions*

In general, through the study of the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions, we found that they were not much different from traditional inscriptions, some steles were even simpler than many steles in religious establishments of other religions, and they were often placed in positions that are favorable for Catholics to watch.

In terms of size, among the 14 major steles studied in this article, the size of the steles ranges from 46 x 46cm to 1.5m x 0.7m. We found that the size of the steles depended on the size of the steles' content, the location to place the steles or the economic conditions

of organization rather than the status of the organizer or the person who was engraved the name of praise on the steles.

In terms of shape: 11/14 of steles that had all parts of a complete stele. However, preservation was not good so some steles were broken and worn many words (such as the stele of Ninh Cường monument) or were buried at the base of the stele (the stele of Lê Tỳ monument).

In terms of decorative arts, it can be said that there is no uniformity in the decoration of the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions.

On the top of the steles, the sun (Mặt Nhật) was usually engraved in the middle, surrounded by clouds such as the stele of Lê Tỳ monument; The papal tiara was engraved in the middle, surrounded by the image of two angels, a cross under the papal tiara (the stele of Ninh Cường monument); The cross was carved in the middle, surrounded by vine (the stele of Xuân Hòa church); Two dragons face the sun (the stele of Mai Châu church). The papal tiara, the sun, the cross and grape leaves are symbols associated with God so their appearance in the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions is common; however, the motif of the two dragons face the sun and clouds is common in traditional Sino-Nôm inscriptions.

Some valances and bases of the steles of the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions were decorated with chrysanthemum pattern such as the stele of Mai Châu church and the stele of Ninh Cường monument.

The title and content of the stele was generally carved in the normal Sino-Nôm characters, did not use the Chinese calligraphy like some traditional inscriptions<sup>10</sup>.

The time (year, month) in the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions was written according to the Gregorian calendar. They did not write according to the year of the king like the traditional inscriptions while the title or a small item to write name, date of writing followed the traditional style.

In general, in term of decoration and presentation, based on the survey results of the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions, we found that they did not have the diversity like the traditional Sino-Nôm inscriptions. Based on research on the number and history, the purpose of formation, the founders of the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions mainly aimed at helping the community easily to read the inscriptions, paid little attention to the art of writing. In addition to some of the aforementioned Catholic decorations, the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions' style generally was not very different from the traditional Sino-Nôm inscriptions.

### *2.3. Content of inscriptions*

Like the general situation of the traditional Sino-Nôm inscriptions, the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions primarily related to the worship of spirits (việc cúng hậu). It was a sensitive issue and caused many misunderstandings and controversies within Catholicism as well as between Catholics and a part of the Vietnamese of the other religions. At the beginning of the 20th century, two Councils were continuously organized in the North-Outer Land (Kẻ Sặt and Kẻ Sở); the issue of receiving the offerings for worshipping of spirits (nhận lễ hậu) was still banned by the Catholic dignitaries in Vietnam: "Interdict receiving the offering for worshipping of spirits, unless you complied with all the rules that were designated by the superior of the diocese"<sup>11</sup>.

In *the Book of Recounting the General Letters of Western Cochinchina Diocese* (Sách thuật lại các Thư chung địa phận Tây Đàng Ngoài) of Bishop Gendreau Đông, the issue of receiving the offering for worshipping of spirits was prescribed as follows:

“1. Each parish must have a separate briefcase that records the receiving the offering for worshipping of spirits, and must attach the note to the top of that briefcase.

2. When a follower asks for the offering for worshipping of spirits, the parish priest must write a letter to the superior, and inform how many ceremonies that the believer asked for.

3. When receiving a letter from the superior permit to receive the offering for worshipping of spirits, you can receive the money and record it in a notebook: Writing the name of the believer (full name and holy name) and the amount of the money; then writing a letter to the superior in order to keep it in the record of the church.

4. When a follower (who had asked for the offering for worshipping of spirits) died, the parish priest must immediately write a letter to inform the superior; Until receiving a letter of permission from the superior, the record of the receiving the offering for worshipping of spirits will be erased.

5. Relatives of the follower (who had asked for the offering for worshipping of spirits) inform to the missionary when this follower died”<sup>12</sup>.

Considering the historical dimension, the worship of ancestors has been officially permitted by the Holy See since the issue of the Instruction *Plane Compertum est* on December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1939. The spirit of the Instruction was applied to China. It was not applied to Vietnam because the country was ruled by French. During the period of the country’ division, Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Vietnam (South) asked for applying the Instruction and it was approved by the Holy See since October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1964. It means that the issue of the worship included the worship of spirits (cúng hậu) was approved by the Holy See to be executed late in Vietnam. Therefore, the phenomenon of the ancestor worship as well as the worship of spirits of the Vietnamese Catholics in the Red River Delta seems to be more spontaneous than programmed in a scheme. It probably coincides with the concept of “popular piety” (lòng đạo đức bình dân) which is often mentioned today.

The custom of worshipping spirits (tục cúng hậu) has many different forms depending on the object of worship. There is a common phenomenon that “rich people without children who

cannot hand the worship after their death over to their adopted children, so they sometimes prefer to offer gifts or money to ensure that they will be worshiped in the temple or in the Buddhist temple. Depending on each case, this custom is called *purchase the worship of spirits in the temple or in the Buddhist temple* (mua hậu đình or mua hậu chùa)<sup>13</sup>.

In fact, the phenomenon of worshipping spirits is considered as a reflection of the Vietnamese conception of the world after death as well as the tradition of respect for filial piety and gratitude to ancestors. It has had an impact on the Catholic community in the Red River Delta.

There are different ways a Catholic can be worshiped such as *tôn hậu* or *bầu hậu* with categories including the first, the second, the third, etc. It depends on contributions (wealth) of the person who to be worshiped to the Catholic community, or bases on their status (it was recorded in *Tông tự bi ký* (a stele) of Đông Xuyên church, *Chư hậu bi ký* (a stele) of Kim Trang Đông church. In some localities, this phenomenon is called purchase to “ask for the annual ceremony” (mua hậu để xin lễ hàng năm). It was recorded in *Hậu hóa bài ký* of Mai Châu church. The worship of spirits (việc cúng hậu) is also divided into two main forms: the eternal worship and the worship for a period. It is similar to the custom of worshipping spirits of the Vietnamese non-Catholics, the time to worship for Catholics (the person who paid for the worship of spirits) is carried out on the death anniversary of the deceased, however, there is often praying for the repose of the souls of the deceased in November and Mass. They are often considered as an essential mass when praying for the deceased. The most noticeable difference between the worship of spirits of the Catholics (in the Sino-Nôm inscriptions) and the traditional worship of spirits is regulations related to Catholic rites. The biggest difference is probably that Catholics appreciate Mass and the church has always been the center of important ceremonies.

The majority of Catholicism's Sino-Nôm inscriptions did not have specific record of the type and number of offerings in the ceremony of worshipping spirits, so the information recorded in the inscriptions of Kim Trang Đông church and Đông Xuyên church is noticeable: "After the death of the person who paid for ceremony of worshipping spirits, the village has to prepare offerings consisted a pig head, a tray of glutinous rice, a bunch of areca nut, a bottle of wine, and a bunch of bananas, they will be offered to the temple (từ đường) for the ceremony. On the anniversary of the death, the offerings were worth 3 đồng for each person, bring them the church, recite, pray in order to express the people's unanimity" (Chư hậu bi ký - Kim Trang Đông church); "On the annual anniversary of the death, extracting the amount of 25 đồng, 18 kg of sticky rice (an average of a kg is 5 quan), 2 bottles of wine, tea, salt and soy sauce. They are all taken care of by the leader" or "On the annual anniversary of the death, extracting the amount of 25 đồng, 32 kg of sticky rice (an average of a kg is 5 quan), 2 bottles of wine, tea, salt and soy sauce. They are all taken care of by the leader" (Bi hậu ký - Đông Xuyên church). It is also regulated gifts in a stele of Đông Xuyên church as follows: On the anniversary of the death, the priest will be offered a pig head; the leader of the clan will be offered a pig chin; the leader of the commune will be offered a pig neck. The aforementioned regulations are similar to those of the traditional steles of the worship of spirits of the Northern Vietnamese. It means that the level of cultural integration between the Catholics and the traditional culture has been at highest degree.

The inscriptions recorded the history of a sub-parish (hộ đạo), a parish and building and merit for building and repairing Catholic churches and schools written in Sino-Nôm characters gave a different perspective on cultural integration. The current inscriptions have been written in Quốc ngữ which recorded the aforementioned subjects are very popular, even some of the

Catholic Sino- Nôm inscriptions on the same topic were translated into Quốc ngữ. The Catholic Sino- Nôm inscriptions that recorded the history are not much left.

It is similar to the traditional inscriptions on the same topic, the Catholic Sino - Nôm inscriptions that recorded the history of a sub-parish, a parish provided much evidence of the history of forming a religious community.

Based on the inscriptions at Tri Thủy church, it can be said that the conversion to Catholicism of a part of inhabitants in Tri Thủy sub-parish in the early 20th century orderly took place with the crucial roles of officials, mandarins and some priests. The formation of a sub-parish followed steps such as religious people (Catholics) propagated religion to their relatives towards the local leader (chief of canton - chánh tổng), after agreement to be converted, they had to announce a report (tờ tòng giáo) to the parish priest who were in charge of the area. The parish priest send missionaries come to teach people who want to convert to Catholicism. These people actively studied the religion; they were campaigned to buy land to set up houses, then build churches. Finally, they invited “the bishop come to baptize” and the sub-parish selected their patron saint (The stele established in 1927 - Tri Thủy church).

The inscriptions of Đại Ôn church named *Bia làng Đại An* (The stele of Đại An or Ôn village) also recorded the parish's history but it was more literary with two poems, one with the form of double seven, six - eight word (song thất lục bát - A Vietnamese poetic form), the other with the form of 8 sentences and 7 words for each sentence (thất ngôn bát cú). It showed that the inscriptions were imbued with the Vietnamese traditional culture, although they are cultural codes that have been absorbed from the Chinese civilization. The name of the village and the name of the parish is Đại Ôn that reminds people the merits of the person who helped the villagers during the difficult period.

The Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions belong to the stele of merits recorded names of the people who had merits for the community and some steles for worshipping of spirits (bia hậu), they expressed gratitude to those who contributed to the community. It seems that only people who had a great contribution to the Catholic community can be engraved their names and merits on the steles.

Based on the basic contents of the aforementioned Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions, it is possible to partially imagine the life of people/ Catholic communities in the Red River Delta. It showed the love of family, of village and partly reflected the view of people about the world with inheritance from the traditional Vietnamese culture.

### **3. Some manifestations of the religious life through the Catholicic Sino-Nôm inscriptions in the Red River Delta**

#### *3.1. Personal religious life of Catholics*

It can be said that the structure of a religious community consists of three basic components such as *the individual, the family and the community*. In fact, the individual can be considered as a part of the family and the family can be considered as a miniature of community, so separation of these three components is not easy and it must examine the personal life of faith in interaction with the community.

Living people care for their souls after death, children want to show filial piety towards their parents, neighbors express their gratitude to people who contribute to the community through gift giving during the holidays when they were living and praying for them on the anniversary of death. All activities were originated from the custom of worshipping spirits. Simultaneously, the information recorded in the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions clearly showed the relationship between the individual and the village community.

For example, the stele of Kim Trang Đông church prescribed regulation on the gifts for the men of merit: “Every year on the Lunar New Year, the men of merit (when they are living) are

offered gifts as prescribed". According to the fieldwork documents of the author<sup>14</sup> Kim Trang Đông church, the person who built Kim Trang Đông church is also the first Catholic of the sub-parish. Thanks his hard working (the main job was burning bricks), he became rich, had a status in the community, and enticed people becoming Catholics. The stone stele of Kim Trang Đông church was built in 1927 with beautiful design and Mr. Đoàn Văn Bru and his second wife Nguyễn Thị Phương and his daughter Đoàn Thị Lan were buried on the campus next to the church. Today, these graves are still there, however, the church's campus has been narrowed down, the old church was destroyed and has been restored recently, and this restoration has led to some disputes.

The formation of Kim Trang Đông sub-parish and its church can be supposed as follows: a Catholic who had separated from his home land for some reasons; he became rich and enticed some non-Catholics into the religion; however, he had one daughter so he thought of worshiping himself after his death. Is that the reason why he donated most of his fortune and efforts at the end of his life to build the church?

The inscriptions of the temple Lê Tù also provided information on land disputes between the non-Catholics and the Catholics at the end of the Văn thân movement in the Northern Delta. Regarding this land dispute, Nguyễn Văn Huyền who lived under French colonialist period wrote: "In some villages, if there are non-Catholics and Catholics where occur internal conflicts, most of them will be disagreements related to disputes over division of public land or the exercise of power of the chief of village"<sup>15</sup>.

Based on the inscriptions content at Lê Tù the temple, it can be said that after stabilization of French in the North Vietnam, people favored Catholicism (pro-French, pro-Catholics) had impacts led to conflicts. In this case, a powerful, historical figure named Nguyễn Hữu Độ, the Governor of Hà Nội-Ninh Bình provinces devoted to Catholicism.

The case of Tri Thủy church showed the role of the leader of the non-Catholics community (the chief of a village) and the priests in the formation of a Catholic community. Similarly, the case of Đại Ôn church, the appearance of the old man named Điem had saved the villagers from distress, and the villagers converted to Catholicism to show their gratitude to the person who helped them.

Gratitude to the people who contributed to the community along with the spirit of democracy of Vietnamese villages expressed through the phenomenon of honoring, worshipping people with merits (bầu hậu, tôn hậu). It can be proved by the contents of two steles at Đông Xuyên church as follows: “Based on the opinion of believers in the sub-parish, the former chief of village, the head of the sub-parish named Đinh Bách Cốc donated a large amount of money to spend on public works, so people venerated him and his wife each of them a saint’s name” (Source: *Bi hậu ký*); “If there is a generous person who donates money for public works, all people of the clan will organize a meeting to elect this person to become a person with merit, to be worshiped” (Source: *Tòng tự bi ký*).

Regarding the rights of people who were worshiped, the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions stated that: “The rights of people who are worshiped as follows: the saints’ names, the surnames, the fullnames are carved in detail; Every year on the day of the patron saint, a ceremony to visit the grave (1 lễ hát thỉnh mộ); Every year, all people of the clan recite for three times” (*Tòng tự bi ký* - Đông Xuyên church); “Every year on the anniversary of the death, an offering is worth 2 quan; on Lunar New Year, an offering is worth 1 quan and ask for god’s blessing (đọc Kinh) at the church. This action leads believers return to the gratitude, hundreds of generations to not forget” (*Chư hậu bi ký* - Kim Trang Đông church).

The real estate offered for worshipping spirits (cúng hậu) was usually fields, gardens, and ponds which were assigned to individuals alternately cultivate their crops in order to have benefit for the worship of the death anniversary. In the Catholic Sino-Nôm

inscriptions, there was also a similar provision: “People who have received fields for planting rice must annually give benefits to be used for the ceremonies, this work will be passed to descendants forever” (*Chư hậu bi ký*- Kim Trang Đông church); some inscriptions even stated that the person in charge of cultivation was the ruler (đương cai - a familiar position in traditional customs): “The gardening land: 5 sào and 50 đồng were given to the ruler who took it to take care of worshipping” (*Bi hậu ký* - Đông Xuyên church).

It was the behaviour towards the respectable people in the community, it was also a special treatment of the community for individuals. However, there were the behaviours towards ordinary people. For example, Hoàng Nguyên church had strict regulations on ringing the bells (it is one of important ceremonies in the life cycle of a Catholic). The Sino-Nôm inscriptions of Hoàng Nguyên church had an effect on every individual of the community: “Prohibition of arbitrary ringing the bell, if some one violate, he/she will be punished”. (*These provisions on ringing the bell of Hoàng Nguyên church* - Hoàng Nguyên church).

In general, the traditional space where Catholics have lived in the Red River Delta is a village. The community cohesion of a village is tight so Catholics have inevitably been influenced by the religious life of the community. Based on the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscription that were surveyed, the author found that the expression of individuals was relatively blurred. It was replaced by the common activities of the community, personal contributions to community, and its gratitude to the individuals. Records of individual religious practices were rare, exception for regulations on personal responsibilities in community activities. However, through the steles of worshipping spirits (bia cúng hậu) and the steles of merits (bia công đức), it can be said that Catholics of the Red River Delta were attached to community and loved their community.

### 3.2. *Religious life in the Catholic community*

A Catholic community is a group of people gathered in a unified organization, with an executive apparatus, religious activities around a religious establishment. The local Catholic community corresponds to the parish, the sub-parish.

All of the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions in the Red River Delta that we have listed are now located in important places in the life of the Catholic community: saint temples, churches, traditional rooms, etc. These locations correspond to a parish, a sub-a parish.

In term of the time of establishment, the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions were mainly built in the late 19th century - the first half of the 20th century, they must had a crucial role for the community; The traditional living style and organization of the village certainly made an impact on the religious life of the Catholic community. However, these the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions currently have not played an important role in the community because there are not many people can understand the content of these inscriptions, the religious practices are not often complied with the regulations of these inscriptions. As the aforementioned analyzes, many cases of worshipping spiritits (cúng hậu) took place only in a certain period and ended in the past.

The influence of the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions on the Catholic community has become a kind of cultural heritage, a symbol of the past, they are even a decoration. However, they can re-establish their status if the Catholic establishments, the Catholic community re-construct their history of development.

The content of the Catholic Sino- Nôm inscriptions is diverse, including the regulations of the community that everyone must follow. The inscriptions of Hoàng Nguyễn church is a typical example.

Among the inscriptions that we have studied, the worshipping spiritits steles (bia cúng hậu) are accounted for the largest number,

they are similar to the traditional worshipping spirit steles of the Buddhist temples and communal temples. The content of Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions clearly recorded that on every festival occasion, the whole Catholic community must take the benefits (money) from the cultivation of the offered fields (ruộng hậu) to organize the death anniversary for people who had merits.

The most important reason for the purchase for worshipping spirit steles after death is the needs of the community for funds to construct the worship facility, its activities. Đông Xuyên church's stele, for example, it was stated: "Restoration and construction the church cost a lot of money. If there are generous people who offer asset to pay the expense, all people will discuss on electing them to be worshipped after their death (vị tông tự)" (*Tông tự bi ký - Đông Xuyên church*). Also in this inscription, the creation of a stele written merits of people to be worshipped (bia hậu) was also decided by the consensus of the community: "The leaders of Tiên Đôi commune, Tứ Đôi canton, Tiên Lãng district, Phù Liễn province and all people of the clan discussed on the building of the stele (*Tông tự bi ký - Đông Xuyên church*).

The two steles of merits at Ô Thôn church and at Ninh Cường holy temple were also made for the same reason, for example. The stele of Ô Thôn church wrote that "Thanks to a great contribution of the bishop and the vicar as well as the generosity of people who donated wealth and materials to built a spacious, magnificent. The work was also so fast. Therefore, please list the names of those benefactors for long term gratitude" (*Công đức Ô Thôn holy temple*).

Community and its activities depended on individual contributions or vice versa, individuals donated wealth and labor to serve the community for many reasons including piety, volunteer spirit and right (being honored by the community while they were living and being worshiped by the community after death (the afterlife). The Catholic community's behaviours towards the

benefactors, the contributors wealth to the community to be worshipped after their death was not entirely equal. The behaviours depended on the value of the property (there was sometimes a regulation that treated equally to benefactors when they were living). The stele of Kim Trang Đông church regulated that “When the villagers have a party, contributors will be offered betel nuts (the gift is equal for every contributors), it is eternal, do not change” (*Chư hậu bi ký* - Kim Trang Đông church), or “the rights of people to be worshipped: Sacred names, fullnames and regulations are written in detail. Every year on the day of the reverence of the patron saint, a ceremony celebrates the grave. Every year, all the clan (a sub-parish) recite for three times” (*Tông tự bi ký* - Đông Xuyên church).

For many Catholics, especially those who lived in villages where they were a minority, they normally participated in the communal temple’s festivals. It was also an opportunity for the Catholics integrate into the traditional culture.

### *3.3. Religious life in family and clan*

In my opinion, in Vietnam, the family has two main models, the extended family with three or more generations living in the same house (this model was very popular in the Red River Delta in the past), and the nuclear family with a couple and their children (this model is becoming increasingly common in the contemporary society). It is similar between the Catholic families and non-Catholic families.

The Vietnamese traditional clan is determined on the basis of kinship, including people related to blood: people of the same clan (clan of father) and people related to marriage (clan of mother).

The Catholic clan is more diverse, it includes the bloody clan, the clan created on the basis of marriage, and the clan related to religion. A sub-parish (*hộ đạo*) can be a group of individuals, the families with religious activities in a facility, worship the a patron saint and have the same religious practices. In many cases, the

relationship between non-Catholic individuals, families and their relatives (the Catholics) has remained stably, so both groups have participated in religious practices of each other on the important occasions/festivals.

For the inscriptions about the worship of spiritits (cúng hậu), the purchase for worshipping spiritits after death can be done by people who wanted to be worshiped or their children. The solitude led some Catholics have the conception that “live with the church, to be worshiped in the church after death” (sống gửi thác về). It is an expression of personal affection as well as the love of family members for each other. For example, the Phùng Khoang church's stele stated that “I offer this field for worshipping the spiritit of my father named Bảo Lộc Vũ Đình Hưng, my mother named Anna Nguyễn Thị Tấn and my three brothers Bảo Lộc Vũ Đình Chính, Phêrô Vũ Đình Chung, Bảo Lộc Vũ Đình Dũng. Every year, the villagers have to ask for 24 prayers (lễ bàn thờ) for my parents and my three younger brothers as my desire forever, revenue of offered field will spend to these ceremonies, the villagers have the right to spend the remaining money” (*Lập hậu bi ký* - Phùng Khoang church). Research on this stele showed that it has obviously been engraved for two times, two types of characters and the opposite side of the stele has been engraved late. It can be said that the custom of worshipping the spiritits (tục cúng hậu) has been maintained in the Catholic community with the family and the clan as its nucleus.

The Kim Trang Đông church's stele is similar. It was written as follows: “I am Đoàn Văn Bru, Nguyễn Thị Phụng (my second wife) and Đoàn Thị Lan (my daughter), we donate 180 \$ (quần tiền) to the public fund to repair the church. The person who in charge of the church is the elder Cơ Văn Ấm and his assistants Nguyễn Văn Hậu, Mai Văn Lộc and all people of the commune received the amount of money. People have an agreement that the father of Mr. Đoàn named Phúc Đường will be worshiped on his

death anniversary (on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April) and his mother (surname Trần) will be worshiped on her death anniversary (on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March) at Bảo Lộc church” (*Chư hậu bi ký* - Kim Trang Đông church).

In addition, like the communal temple for the deity of the village, a sub-parish (or a parish) has its own patron saint, usually the apostles of the Catholic Church. For example, according to the inscriptions of Tri Thủy church, “this sub-parish chose to take the holy saint Matthew as the patron saint” (the inscription was written in 1927 - Tri Thủy church). The inscription of Đông Xuyên church recorded that on the day of the patron saint, the community organizes a ceremony to pray the tombs of people to be worshiped (các ngôi hậu) (*Tông tự bi ký* - Đông Xuyên church). Thus, the patron saint is the bond that unites the individuals in them into a group like a family, and that the saint also affects the sacrifice of the queen.

Thus, the patron saint was the bond that unites the individuals of the sub-parish into a group like a family, and the patron saint also affected the worship of spirits.

### **Conclusion**

As a result of changes of the Vietnamese history in the Middle Ages and Early Modern periods such as religion persecution, church destruction, civil war, famine, the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions that have been preserved dated from the 18th century to the first half of the 20th century. The Red River Delta still preserves the most of the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions because it is the oldest permanent residence of Vietnamese people and there is a deep cultural tradition. It was also the place where most of Catholics lived and its the Confucian tradition was the strongest in the country.

Based on the existing inscriptions, it can be said that the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions had the opportunity to thrive

during the French colonial period. However, they reflected a small part of the religious life of the Catholic community such as the attitude of the community to the people who have merits with the community, the pride of the community (people considered as a saint who contribute to the community to be worshiped or who protect the interests of the Catholics; rules of religious practices. Among the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions, the inscriptions recorded the provisions on worshipping the spirits accounted for the largest number despite the fact that the reception donation for worshipping the spirits at the church was strictly controlled by the Northern Councils (Công đồng miền Bắc Kỳ) such as the Kẻ Sở Council in 1912.

“It can be affirmed that the lifestyle of Catholics, whether expressed through individuals, families or communities of the parish or the sub-parish, was a unique feature that contributed to the cultural diversity of the Vietnamese. The similarity between the Vietnamese culture and the Catholic doctrine was positively promoted”<sup>16</sup>. It is the opinion of a Catholic researcher on the positive aspects of Catholic culture to the Vietnamese culture. In general, the establishment of the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions can be considered as an expression of the Catholic cultural integration in Vietnam, in the Northern Delta region in particular.

Overall, the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions has many similarities with the traditional Sino-Nôm inscriptions. There are two similarities can be found through comparison in form and content of inscriptions. In particular, the inscriptions of the custom of worshipping spirits were accounted for the largest number (among the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions have been discovered). It coincided with the great concern of the Tonkin Catholic Church on the issue of worshipping spirits through the

convention in the local councils, the provisions of the General Letters in the early 20th century.

Although there are similarities with the traditional Sino-Nôm inscriptions, the Catholic Sino-Nôm inscriptions retained their own characteristics with the Catholic symbols, regulations related to the Catholic practices. And the church had been the important center for religious practices. /.

---

**NOTES:**

- 1 In this aspect, there are three notable publications: Proceedings of workshops: *Tư liệu Hán Nôm viết về Công giáo Việt Nam (The Sino-Nôm Documents on the Vietnamese Catholicism)* (Viện nghiên cứu Tôn giáo, 2003); the books: *Sống đạo theo cung cách Việt Nam (Living a religious life according to the Vietnamese style)* (Hội đồng Giám mục Việt Nam, 2004); and *Nếp sống đạo của người Công giáo Việt Nam (The religious life of Vietnamese Catholics)* (Nguyễn Hồng Dương General Editor, 2010).
- 2 Đỗ Quang Hưng, *Sống đạo của người Công giáo Việt Nam: Khái niệm và sự phát triển, (The religious life of Vietnamese Catholics: Concept and development)*, in Nguyễn Hồng Dương (General Editor, 2010), *Nếp sống đạo của người Công giáo Việt Nam (The religious life of Vietnamese Catholics)* (Nguyễn Hồng Dương General Editor, 2010), Pub. Từ điển Bách khoa, Hà Nội: 28.
- 3 *Sống đạo của người Công giáo Việt Nam: Khái niệm và sự phát triển, (The religious life of Vietnamese Catholics: Concept and development)*, ibid: 28-29.
- 4 Phạm Huy Thông, “Nếp sống người Công giáo: Sự giao thoa giữa đức tin và văn hóa dân tộc” (The Catholic way of life: The intersection of faith and national culture), in Nguyễn Hồng Dương General Editor (2010), Pub. Từ điển Bách khoa, Hà Nội: 44-45.
- 5 Đỗ Quang Hưng, “Người giáo dân trong mắt tôi (tiếp cận sự đào luyện qua sách giáo lý)” (Catholics in my opinion- approaching through training catechism), in *Sống đạo theo cung cách Việt Nam (Living a religious life according to the Vietnamese style)*, Tài liệu hội thảo mùa Phục sinh 2004: 6.
- 6 Người giáo dân trong mắt tôi (tiếp cận sự đào luyện qua sách giáo lý), (Catholics in my opinion- approaching through training catechism), ibid: 7.
- 7 Nguyễn Hồng Dương (2004), “Đời sống đạo của tín đồ Công giáo qua văn bia và hương ước vùng Đồng bằng Bắc Bộ đến nửa cuối thế kỷ XX” (The religious life of Catholics through inscriptions and village conventions in the Northern Delta region until the second half of the 20th century), pp. 45-69, in *Sống đạo theo cung cách Việt Nam (Living a religious life according to the Vietnamese style)*, Pub. Tôn giáo, Hà Nội: 46-48.

- 8 Nguyễn Thị Thu Hằng, “Lối sống đạo của giới trẻ Công giáo Việt Nam từ khái niệm đến thực tế nghiên cứu”, in Nguyễn Hồng Dương (General Editor, 2010), *Nếp sống đạo của người Công giáo Việt Nam (Living a religious life according to the Vietnamese style)*, Pub. Từ điển Bách khoa, Hà Nội: 83.
- 9 Including the inscriptions in Hanoi: Bia đền thánh Lê Tuyền (*Bằng Sở Giáp Ngũ bi ký*), Bia nhà thờ Hoàng Nguyên (*Những điều phải giữ về sự kéo chuông trong nhà thờ Hoàng Nguyên*); Hai tấm bia ở nhà thờ Tri Thủy, Bia nhà thờ Đại An (*Bia làng Đại An*), Bia nhà thờ Mai Châu (*Hậu hóa bài ký*), Bia nhà thờ Phùng Khoang (*Lập hậu bi ký*), Hai tấm bia ở nhà thờ Ô Thôn (*Ngôi hậu Ô Thôn giáo giáp*, và *Công đức Ô Thôn thánh đường*, thực chất đây là bia chữ Quốc ngữ, có pha một số chữ Hán-Nôm); The inscriptions in Hải Dương: Bia nhà thờ Kim Trang Đông (*Chư hậu bi ký*); The inscriptions in Hải Phòng: Hai tấm bia ở Đông Xuyên (*Tông tự bi ký*, 1905, and *Bi hậu ký*, 1913), Bia nhà thờ Xuân Hòa (*Xuân Hòa hậu bi*); Văn bia tại Nam Định: Bia đền thánh Ninh Cường (*...ban bằng cho ân nhân tràng Ninh Cường*). Among 14 inscriptions, the earliest inscription was formed in the late 19th century (1898). Historically, these inscriptions can be divided into three groups: the group was formed in the late 19th century, the group was formed in the early 20th century; The group was formed in the 40s of the 20th century. All of them were formed during about 60 years. It coincides with the time of the last Vietnamese were trained under the Confucian educational model. The number of inscriptions were distributed on a small area, concentrated in Hanoi, Nam Dinh.
- 10 It means that writing the important words such as the name of the country, the name of the king, the name of the divine, or the officials at the beginning of a new line and higher than the letters of the other line in the same text.
- 11 *Công đồng miền Bắc Kỳ (Đàng Ngoài trong nước Annam): Kê Sắt 1900, Kê Sở 1912*, (Councils of the Tonkin- Outer Land, Annam), Imprinted: Kê Sở in 1915, Tái bản, Lưu hành nội bộ: 284.
- 12 *Sách thuật lại các Thư chung địa phận Tây Đàng Ngoài*, (The Books wrote about the General Letters of the West Outer Land), *ibid*: 351-352.
- 13 Nguyễn Văn Huyền (2005), *Văn minh Việt Nam (Vietnam Civilisation)*, Pub. Hội nhà văn: 92.
- 14 Diên đã Hải Phòng ngày 24 tháng 06 năm 2016.
- 15 *Văn minh Việt Nam (Vietnam Civilisation)*, *ibid*: 339.
- 16 *Nếp sống người Công giáo: Sự giao thoa giữa đức tin và văn hóa dân tộc*, (The Catholic way of life: The intersection of faith and national culture), *ibid*: 43-44.

## REFERENCES

1. Trần Kim Anh (2004), “Bia hậu ở Việt Nam” (Inscriptions of worshipping spirits), *Hán Nôm*, (số 3 (64)): 54-63.

2. *Công đồng miền Bắc Kỳ (Đàng Ngoài trong nước Annam): Kê Sắt 1900, Kê Sở 1912*, (Councils of the Tonkin- Outer Land, Annam), Imprinted: Kê Sở in 1915, Lưu hành nội bộ.
3. Cao Thế Dung (2003), *Việt Nam Công giáo sử tân biên, Việt Nam Công giáo sử tân biên (1553-2000)*, Dân Chúa xuất bản, Washington.
4. Nguyễn Hồng Dương (1995), *Về tấm bia hậu ở nhà thờ Phùng Khoang*, in trong *Những phát hiện Khảo cổ học năm 1995*, Viện Khảo Cổ học xuất bản năm 1996, tr. 326-327.
5. Nguyễn Hồng Dương (1997), *Về hai tấm bia ở nhà thờ Đại An*, in trong *Những phát hiện Khảo cổ học năm 1997*, Viện Khảo Cổ học xuất bản năm 1998, tr. 490-492.
6. Nguyễn Hồng Dương (2003), *Nhà thờ Công giáo Việt Nam*, Pub. Khoa học xã hội, Hà Nội.
7. Nguyễn Hồng Dương (2008), *Hệ quả của quá trình tiếp xúc với tín ngưỡng bản địa của người Việt ở vùng Đồng bằng Bắc Bộ của Công giáo Việt Nam*, Hội thảo Quốc tế Việt Nam học lần thứ 3 (12/2008).
8. Nguyễn Hồng Dương (chủ biên, 2010), *Nếp sống đạo của người Công giáo Việt Nam*, Pub. Từ điển bách khoa, Hà Nội.
9. Nguyễn Hồng Dương (2013), *Công giáo trong văn hóa Việt Nam*, Pub. Văn hóa. thông tin, Hà Nội.
10. Nguyễn Hồng Dương (2013), *Tôn giáo trong văn hóa Việt Nam*, Pub. Văn hóa thông tin, Hà Nội.
11. Nguyễn Hồng Dương (2015), *Đời sống đạo của người Công giáo qua văn bia và Hương ước vùng Đồng bằng Bắc Bộ*, Theo trang <http://www.cgvdt.vn>, truy cập ngày 3 tháng 8 năm 2015.
12. P. M. Gendreau Ep (1908), *Sách thuật lại các Thư chung địa phận Tây Đàng Ngoài*, in tại Kê Sở, Hà Nam.
13. Greg Dues (2014), *Những thói quen và truyền thống Công giáo (Hương dẫn chung)*, Bản dịch tiếng Việt, Pub. Tôn giáo, Hà Nội.
14. Lã Minh Hằng (2012), *Đôi nét về thư tịch Hán Nôm Công giáo tại viện nghiên cứu Hán Nôm*, in trong *Thông báo Hán Nôm học năm 2012*, pp. 250-259, Pub. Thế giới xuất bản năm 2013, Hà Nội.
15. Hội đồng Giám mục Việt Nam (2004), *Sống đạo theo cung cách Việt Nam-Tài liệu hội thảo mùa Phục Sinh*, Pub. Tôn giáo, Hà Nội.
16. Hội đồng Giám mục Việt Nam (2007), *Bộ Giáo Luật 1983*, Pub. Tôn giáo, Hà Nội.
17. Nguyễn Văn Huyền (2005), *Văn minh Việt Nam*, Pub. Hội nhà văn, Hà Nội.
18. Đỗ Quang Hưng (2012), *Công giáo trong mắt tôi*, Pub. Tôn giáo, Hà Nội.
19. Nguyễn Hưng (2000), *Sơ thảo thư mục Hán Nôm Công giáo Việt Nam*, Lưu hành nội bộ, Hồ Chí Minh City.
20. Vương Thị Hương (2000), *Thêm một tấm bia Công giáo viết bằng chữ Hán*, *Thông báo Hán Nôm học 2000*, pp.194-198, Pub. Khoa học xã hội xuất bản năm 2001, Hà Nội.

21. Nguyễn Thị Hương (2013), *Sơ bộ khảo sát văn bia chữ Nôm*, <http://nomfoundation.org>, truy cập ngày 10/6/2016.
22. Vương Tam Khánh (2013), *Nghiên cứu thờ cúng tổ tiên của Việt Nam qua văn bia chữ Hán*, in trong *Tín ngưỡng thờ cúng tổ tiên trong xã hội đương đại (nghiên cứu trường hợp thờ cúng Hùng Vương ở Việt Nam)*, pp. 374-390, Pub. Văn hóa Thông tin, Hà Nội.
23. Võ Tá Khánh (2013), *Về với cội nguồn*, Pub. Phương Đông, Cà Mau.
24. Võ Phương Lan (2012), *Thờ cúng tổ tiên người Việt*, Pub. Từ điển bách khoa, Hà Nội.
25. Nhiều tác giả (2010), *Giáo hội giữa dòng đời*, Câu lạc bộ Phaolô Nguyễn Văn Bình, Tp. Hồ Chí Minh.
26. Nguyễn Thị Hoàng Quý (2005), *Góp thêm một loại hình bia hậu*, in trong *Thông báo Hán Nôm học năm 2005*, pp. 541-544, Pub. Khoa học xã hội xuất bản năm 2007, Hà Nội.
27. Nguyễn Ngọc Quỳnh (2003), “Tục cúng hậu và lập bia hậu của nước ta trong lịch sử”, *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử*, (số 5), <http://www.vanhoanghean.com.vn/>, truy cập ngày 28/05/2016.
28. Nhất Thanh, Vũ Văn Khiếu (2005), *Phong tục làng xóm Việt Nam*, Nxb. Phương Đông, Cà Mau.
29. Phan Tấn Thành (2001), *Đời sống tâm linh*, Tập I, Rôma, 2001.
30. Phan Tấn Thành (2002), *Đời sống tâm linh*, Tập II, Rôma, 2002.
31. Phan Tấn Thành (2007), *Đời sống tâm linh*, Tập VII, Rôma, 2007.
32. Phạm Huy Thông (2007), “Quan hệ giữa Nho giáo và Công giáo ở Việt Nam”, *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, No. 4: 18-25.
33. Huy Thông (2000), “Ảnh hưởng qua lại giữa văn hóa Công giáo và văn hóa Việt Nam”, *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, No. 2: 56-60.
34. Trần Văn Toàn (2008), *Đạo trung tùy bút*, Pub. Tôn giáo, Hà Nội.
35. Tổng cục Thống kê (2015), *Niên giám thống kê 2014*, Pub. Thống kê, Hà Nội.
36. Nguyễn Quốc Tuấn (1999), “Về mối quan hệ giữa văn hóa dân tộc và tôn giáo ngoại sinh”, *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, No. 1: 47-53.
37. Nguyễn Quốc Tuấn, Nguyễn Ngọc Quỳnh (2007), “Mấy vấn đề về tín ngưỡng, tôn giáo khu vực Đồng bằng sông Hồng hiện nay”, *Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo*, No. 3: 19-25.
38. Văn phòng Tổng Thư ký Hội đồng Giám mục Việt Nam (2005), *Giáo hội Công giáo Việt Nam niên giám 2005*, Pub. Tôn giáo, Hà Nội.
39. Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo (2003), *Ký yếu trao đổi khoa học: Tư liệu Hán Nôm viết về Công giáo Việt Nam*, Hà Nội.
40. Lê Trung Vũ, Nguyễn Hồng Dương, Lê Hồng Lý, Lưu Kiếm Thanh (2007), *Nghi lễ vòng đời người*, Pub. Hà Nội.

