

The church in Vietnam keeps growing, but the obstacles persist.

For Vietnamese Catholics, a delicate balance. The church may be growing, but the obstacles have far from vanished



All day long, parishioners trickle into The Most Holy Redeemer church in Saigon. They pause at the font and cross themselves. They silently pray at the Ave Maria grotto. They quietly seek help from priests: money problems, family problems. Each afternoon, queues form at the confessional.

"I've been at this church for four years and more people come each year," said Father Joseph Giang.

"The development of Catholicism in Vietnam is very good now and it's getting better. Of course, there are some obstacles in places where they want to curb Catholic activities. But the problems don't matter," he said.

The vibrancy of church life here today is both a testament to the power of Catholicism in this country and a reflection of the delicate line that must be walked. While younger members marvel at openness and growth, older ones recall that the government school next door was once part of the church; that the public pool on the other side used to be church property; that the church was once the most powerful institution in the country.

"In the past, this whole area was just land and mud. Where we're sitting now used to be a canal, it was really smelly. The more people came here, the more priests developed the place. But that was before

1975. Nowadays, they can only develop a little," said a 61-year-old who — like many parishioners — asked that only her Catholic name, Maria, be used.

For older Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City, the fall of Saigon represents a fault line not just in life but in religion. Asked if the situation is improving, they invariably point to the flourishing of Catholicism under the French and during the 20 years of quasi-democracy following independence — particularly under the controversial rule of President Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic whose tendency to promote the religion at the expense of Buddhist oppression became his undoing.

At its height, the Catholic Church was the largest landholder in Vietnam. In some northern provinces, more than a quarter of the population was Catholic and the church wielded significant clout. After the communists came to power in 1954, an estimated 750,000 Catholics migrated south, ballooning the population. Under Diem, Catholics held officer positions at double the rate of the rest of the population, according to historian Anthony James Joes; after the migration, as many as one in seven Saigonese were Catholic.



That position of prominence came to a resounding close in April 1975, when the North Vietnamese gained control of South Vietnam. Traditional communism had little place for religion, less so for one associated alternatively with colonialism and anti-Viet Minh sentiments.

An estimated 7 percent of Vietnam's population is Catholic, making it the second-largest religion in the country.

Brutal crackdown

The results were brutal and immediate. One Jesuit official recalled to ucanews.com that half of the order's 12 priests were jailed.

"The new regime wasted no time in taking various measures against the Southern Catholic community," writes political scientist Nguyen Van Canh in *Vietnam Under Communism: 1975-1982*. "The new relationship between church and state in Vietnam requires the Catholic Church to endorse the party line even on ecclesiastical matters."

Arrests and harassment became common, work was scheduled so as to block people from attending Mass, and anti-Catholic raids were carried out on troublesome communities and churches, Nguyen recounts.

Over the years, as Vietnam opened, such abuses have lessened. But they are from having ended. In August, two Catholic youth activists were arrested after serving four years in prison for attempting to overthrow the government — the pair was part of a group of at least 17 Christian and Catholic activists arrested and sentenced around the same time on charges widely considered to be spurious. In 2013, a group of 14 were sentenced to between three and 13 years in prison after holding peaceful protests or calling for freedom of expression. In the highlands, human rights groups report routine and protracted persecution of Christian and Catholic followers.

Even fairly benign activity, meanwhile, is monitored and controlled. Until this year, a group of interreligious leaders met regularly in the Redemptorist church to discuss challenges they faced; now, according to a member, they have to move around after police took exception to the fact that some participants weren't government-approved.

"By document, religion is free. But in reality, there is control, especially in the rural areas. It's not easy to build a church or do some [basic] things," said the Jesuit leader, who asked not to be named because open discussion of religion is still sensitive.

John Baptist, an active member of his church in southwestern An Giang province, said parishioners routinely face problems when trying to carry out work in rural areas.

"In Tay Ninh province, there are many ethnic people, so it's going to be a problem if we spread the religion to the ethnic people. It's not impossible, but it's very difficult for us to hold Mass in ethnic villages. If a village wants to hold Mass, they have to submit papers and request it through local government," he said. "It's getting more popular, but it's slow."



Despite the logistical delays, Baptist maintained the situation has vastly improved over the decades. In the 1980s, he recalled, Catholics entering remote villages were often stopped and detained on the spot. As a youngster, he saw a visiting priest arrested after arriving to hold a Mass for local Catholics. "Now it's not as bad," he said. The Catholic Church was once the biggest landholder in Vietnam, but saw its holdings diminish after the communist takeover. (ucanews.com photo)

Religion flourishing

Even in the highlands, where abuse and government harassment is particularly rife, some Catholic strongholds have managed to flourish. In some villages that date missionary origins back more than a century, the government appears to have little presence.

"It's mostly Catholic in my community, since the beginning, since a very long time ago," said Maria K'lien, a member of the K'Ho minority who moved from the central highlands to Ho Chi Minh City for work last year. "In my village, they're building churches; there's no problems from the government."

Teresa, a 23-year-old student studying languages in her native Ho Chi Minh City, said the church had ballooned in numbers thanks to growth in such rural areas.

"It's more popular because so many people go and join the Catholic [Church]. [Before,] only a few people in the countryside were Catholic but now more and more people join."

This is the first part of a two-part series.