

Papal surprise: Laos gets its first cardinal

Pope Francis continues to deliver on his promise to focus on the church's peripheries Papal surprise: Laos gets its first cardinal



Pope Francis has named Bishop Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun, apostolic vicar of Pakse, as the first ever cardinal in the impoverished, repressed Communist nation of Laos, a country where Catholics make up only a tiny minority.

After his Sunday audience May 21 at St. Peter's Square, the pope named the five new cardinals to Mali, Spain, Sweden, Laos and El Salvador, in keeping with his choosing cardinals from the "peripheries." Laos, Mali and Sweden have very small Catholic communities. The consistory is scheduled for June 28, the vigil of the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul.

"The church is treated very poorly in Laos — probably the worst in ASEAN save for Brunei," a well placed diplomatic source noted "One reason is that most of the Catholics are of Vietnamese heritage or hill-tribes — not Lao Llum — the lowland Lao who rule the country."

Christians make up about 1 percent of Lao's 6 million people of whom about 45,000 are Catholics.

Bishop Ling, 73, is an ethnic Khamu, a hill tribe from northern Laos and southern China. In 2000, Pope John Paul made him apostolic vicar of Pakse in southern Laos.

"I never dreamed that this appointment was possible," Bishop Ling had told ucanews.com when the appointment was decided 17 years ago.

Before his appointment as bishop he was based in Pakxan, where he was formerly vicar delegate of the Vientiane apostolic vicariate.

Catholics in Laos told ucanews.com that Bishop Ling is both diligent and kind to the local community.

Also, as head of Pakse Vicariate, Bishop Ling has taken a keen interest in environmental issues, opposing the rapid deforestation by well-connected companies that pushed villagers from their land and created a spiral of social problems, priests explained. Damming in Laos too had threatened ecosystems while rampant corruption was speeding the degradation.

"Now we are starting to destroy ourselves," Bishop Ling told ucanews.com in a previous interview. "It's not from climate change itself but [it is] coming from human beings and humans doing something very wrong to destroy the earth."

The new cardinal is also something of pioneer in the formation of priests. "The positive thing is that we have married catechists who are true missionaries, who go to live in the villages and become the 'roots' of evangelization. They go, live, they begin to build bonds ...," he told Asia News in 2015.

"We offer this experience to the seminarians. Seminary students must study three years, then they must stop for at least a year, up to three years, to mature in their decision, but also for pastoral experience as catechists, carrying medicines, aid, prayers for the people of the mountain. They integrate with the villagers, live as the villagers do in everything.

"We now have eight major seminarians. They are very dedicated to the people, to the families. Through this sharing we make our most important contribution, that is the faith."

Pakse vicariate covers Champasak, Saravan, Xeguang and Attapu province and has 1.3 million people, 15,120 of whom are Catholics who live mostly in Champasak and Saravan provinces. Catholics in Pakse are served by six diocesan priests, a religious priest, nine male religious and 16 nuns.

Pakse is the second most populous city in Laos, which has a population of about 7 million people, after the capital Vientiane, and is situated in the south, very close to Cambodia and to southern Vietnam.

Cardinal-elect Ling was born April 5, 1944, in Baan Samkorn in Xieng Khoang province, northern Laos and ordained a priest in 1972.

Pakse is one of four vicariates in Laos. The others are Thakhek-Savannakhet in central Laos, Vientiane and Luang Prabang in the north.

Each Catholic group in Laos has reacted differently to the communist takeover of the country in 1975.

Catholic Khamu, expecting persecution in 1975, disbanded communities, stopped public services and neglected children's religious instruction. But government anti-religious policies were not as harsh as anticipated.

Since 1983, when the government initiated a policy of cautious toleration, the Khamu re-opened some churches.

While many full-time church workers among Catholic Lao lowlanders emigrated, enough lay leaders remained to sustain the church in the decade following the communist takeover.

Among both Catholics and Protestants, baptisms, worship services and evangelization continued, and lowland Lao Catholics are officially recognized by the government although a program of repression remains in place.

The Hmong hill tribes, who stretch across a range of the country's region, fought the communists in the civil war and were reportedly espionage support to the U.S. forces in the Vietnam War.

When the Communists won in Laos, a substantial number of Hmong left Laos as refugees. The few Hmong Christians who remain "were like sheep without a shepherd."

In 1986, Catholics quietly celebrated the 100th anniversary of the first Catholic missions in Laos, receiving Pope John Paul II's message through the apostolic nunciature in Bangkok.

Many Catholics in Laos, as well as Lao refugees in Thailand, read the pope's message in Seng Arun, a Lao-English quarterly newsletter published by Paris Foreign Mission Father Louis Leduc, a former missionary in Laos and Thailand.

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