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**REFLECTIONS ON THE ANNOUNCEMENT JUNE 14th, 1965
OF THE VIETNAM BISHOPS HIERACHY ON A HALF
CENTURY OCCASION**

***Abstract:** The Chinese rites controversy lasted for 294 years (1645 - 1939) and it caused many damages to the Roman Catholic Church in Asia included Vietnam. In order to solve this issue, the Holy See announced “The Exhortation Plane compertum est”. After the Second Vatican Council, Vietnam Bishops demanded to execute this Exhortation and the Announcement the 14th of June, 1965 approved Vietnamese Catholics venerate their ancestors and national heroes. In the spirit of cultural integration, the Catholicism has transformed from a strange religion into a close religion to the Nation. However, it has appeared some issues that need to solve.*

***Keywords:** Catholicism, Vietnam Bishops Council, Chinese rites, cultural integration, venerate ancestor, vietnamesation of religion.*

It has been a half century since The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Vietnam released the Announcement June 14th, 1965 on reverence of ancestor and heroic martyrs. This announcement was followed by the proposal of The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Vietnam on applying the Instruction Plane compertumest December 8th, 1964. The Announcement not only ended the consequences of Chinese Rites Controversy lasted 294 years from the Pope Innocenté X issued the decree on banning worship rites of ancestor and Confucius to the Instruction Plane compertumest was released in 1939, but also removed obstacles for Vietnamese following Catholicism and for Catholicism in Vietnam not being strange with the community. On the occasion of a haft century of releasing the Announcement, we would like give some thoughts about practicing this announcement.

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Firstly, we think that the Holy See changed its viewpoint on Chinese Rites not due to dozens of thousands of Catholic martyrs, but the rigid and conservative of Vatican on this problem. When the Đàng Trong and Đàng Ngoài Dioceses were established, the Holy See sent first two bishops to Vietnam including Francois Pallu and Lambert de la Motte, and approved the text *Monitaad Misinarios* (Instructions to the Missionaries). This text expressed many aspects of inculturation, but 300 years later, it was mentioned by the Second Vatican Council. The Holy See instructed these bishops as following: “Brothers must not try to change, or force people to change their etiquette, customs unless they contradicted the Deity teachings and moral. What would be more unreasonable than imposition France, Spain, Italy or any other countries in Europe on East Asian people? It was false that carrying these things for them as the truth of faith to exclude rites and customs of any ethnics, as well as violate these rites and customs even they were not bad. In contrast, the truth must help people to reserve and maintain these”¹.

Thus the Holy See at that time was not conservative and cultural imposition on the nations. However, this viewpoint of inculturation was not popular and practiced in the world and Vietnam at that period due to series of subjective and objective reasons as well as practical situation.

Of course not after the Instruction Plane compertumest 1939, Catholicism’s inculturation began in Vietnam. According to the writings of early missionaries, as soon as Catholicism appeared in Thăng Long - Kẻ Chợ in 17th century, Catholics used coconut leaf instead of olive leaf in the Rite of Palm, used Lunar New Year pole with the Holy Cross at its top, used the alexandrine to express the Bible and some Vietnamese cooperated with missionaries to latinize the Sino-Nom for creating Quốc Ngữ language of Vietnam nation. Some missionaries in Vietnam respected local custom very much. Priest Martini recounted the story of priest Onofre Borges attending the death anniversary of Lord Trịnh Tráng held by Lord Trịnh Tạc as follow: “The father respected local custom, complied with Vietnamese rite, went barefoot, worn brown robe, kowtowed as Vietnamese style, that made Lord Trịnh satisfied, then he commanded to turn on the music which was just for Lord. So everybody surprised and thought that the Lord bestowed the father a noble title”².

Priest Alexandre de Rhodes (Đắc Lộ) also discussed on the rite of ancestor worship and confirmed that: “I recounted this quite long rite in the *Historie du royaume de Tunquin* (History of the Kingdom of Tonkin). In fact, there were some rites, if the Catholics performed them, they would not be sinned, and even they were innocent. We asserted that they could maintain these rites which were not harm to Catholicism”³.

Even Bishop Pigneau de Behaine also disapproved with the prohibition of the ancestor worship and protected this rite of local residents. The Bishop wrote that: “All things were said about invocation of dead, cult of idols that were assigned to ludicrous, unacceptable with people living in this region. The missionaries and whoever living in the region never blamed these customs in which they came to preach. Please report to the Catholic Church that, until I died, I still maintained my viewpoint on bowing before dead parent’s coffin of the East Asians”⁴.

Secondly, there were many points that explained the Nguyen Dynasty banning Catholicism due to this religion not allowed its believers to worship of their ancestor, for example: “The Vietnamese kings prohibited the Catholicism not due to fanaticism but they wanted to reserve the unity of nation on spirit and politics. The Catholics did not worship of ancestor that could damage this unity of spirit. In addition, some missionaries incited the new Catholic believers against the feudal government to establish a government which could support the Catholicism”⁵, or “The Catholicism did not allow believers to worship of ancestor that was disloyal, unfilial”⁶.

It was not accurate if someone said that the Catholics did not revere for ancestor. Catholicism ruled in the Fourth of Ten Commandments as “To be filial to parents”. This filial piety to parents is not only expressed while they are alive but also they died. In the Catholic Liturgical Calendar, the November is the month to pray for the dead people, and in the three days of Tet holiday there is one day to pray for ancestor. In the first lecture for catechumens, the missionaries also taught that: “There are three superiors as three fathers who we have to worship. The parents born our body... There were parents therefore our body was born. We indebted our mum who was pregnant in the nine months and ten days, suffered difficulties to bear our, then done breastfeeding for three years. The mother passed food from her mouth to her child; even she ate bitter food to reserve delicious

food for her child. She did lying in the wet place but the clean place for her child. The father raised us so that the father sat up late and got up early to work, managed to make money to raised children. Therefore we have filial piety to our parents that is right, if not is moral sin”⁷.

The Catholics still are filial to their parents, but they expressed the filial piety following the way, especially after their parents passed away, which was different from the ancestor worship and other religions, however it was not a basic reason that caused to the policy banned Catholicism. Appearance of the religion being different from the Kings’ religion was a main reason caused to the conflict. While researched the Oriental religions, the Chilean Professor of history S.V. Rojo concluded that: “Due to there was always a reign of the King’s religion as a national religion. The standard regulation here was the religion of King. So that converting to other religion would lead to changing the content of political thought immediately”⁸.

Thirdly, while integrated with Vietnamese culture, the Catholicism changed from a strange religion to a quite familiar religion with Vietnamese people. From liturgy to rites, religious life style of the Catholics; from literature, art, press to customs in the Catholic villages, all of them were marked by Vietnamese culture beside Catholic characteristics.

On the architecture, the Catholic churches, typically as Phat Diem Stone Church, Kontum Wooden Church, even some new churches as Cua Nam Church (Lang Son province), Cam Ly Church (Da Lat city), Pleichuet (Gia Lai province), etc., mixed with some features as a roof of communal house, a roof of pagoda which were familiar to Vietnamese and some architectural features of minor ethnics.

On the music, when the Lê Bảo Tịnh music band was established in July of 1945 with slogan “on the content of music which was service of the God and the Nation, on the art of music which was based traditional music for rhythm structure”, the sacred music in Vietnam appeared many special songs such as *Đêm Đông* (Winter Night) by Hải Linh, *Kinh Hòa Bình* (Peace Prayer-book) by Kim Long. Today, in the Catholic sacred music in Vietnam there are many rhythms of folksongs such as Bắc Ninh folksong, Lạng Sơn Then singing, Huế chanty, Southern folksong as well as fiery rhythms of Jarai in the Central Highland.

On the art, through Catholicism, the Vietnamese people knew some famous art works in the world as The Last Supper of L. de Vinci, The Virgin Mother of Rafael. Nowadays, they also can see images of traditional Vietnamese people through the oil painting, statue Đức Mẹ Việt Nam (Our Lady of Vietnam) by Nam Phong, the lacquer painting Christmas by Nguyễn Gia Trí, the statue Đức Mẹ La Vang (Our Lady of La Vang) by Văn Nhân, and oil paintings of Lê Văn Đệ, Nguyễn Thị Tâm, etc. When someone looked at the painting Madalena under the Cross, it realized that this goddess was a Vietnamese women with long hair over her shoulders and big opened eyes, confided under the Cross. If you looked at the picture Our Lady of Vietnam, you still realized that was a picture of Vietnamese Mother carrying sleeping baby.

Today, the Catholic ceremony takes place with many features that are similar to the festival village such as the drum team, the man with long coat with turban, the women with long garment, the palanquin mounted dragon's head, the parasol with symbol of phoenix as well as the dancing clown with a big drum. But in the Catholic ceremony there is an extra team as brass trumpet team.

The Catholics tried to do Vietnamization of their religion very early with beginning from foreign nouns as Vincente called Vinh Sơn, Benedict called Biển Đức. The foreign missionaries also applied the lifestyle "When in the Rome, do as the Romans do" for using their names in order to be familiar to the Vietnamese, for example, Alexandre de Rhodes called as Đắc Lộ, Pigneau de Behaine called as Bá Đa Lộc. In addition, they also spelled Deus as Chúa Đêu or Chúa Trời, etc.

On the literature and art particularly, Catholicism succeeded in creating many themes for the writers and artist in Catholicism as well as outside this religion. There were some authors who succeeded both in proposing attractive themes and the art. For example, it was the poem of Hàn Mặc Tử (1912 - 1940). Literary critics Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân extremely praised that "Hàn Mặc Tử built his own church for praying the God. If I did not believe in the God, I was only a strange visitor and could not kneel down and pray together with the poet. But could my soul not be disregard, could my mind not non-overwhelm before the glorious, solemn, sparkling, fanciful palace? There were strange beautiful verses that were spelled as blowing a light into the soul, etc. The poem of Hàn

Mặc Tử was created and it demonstrated that Catholicism in this region created a space crystallized into poems”⁹.

The immortal poems and writings such as Kinh cầu Đức Bà (Lady prayer-book), Dâng hoa (Flower offering), Hang đá (Cave), millions of Sino-Nom words of Majorica, writings by Philippe Bình, then later the works as *Sám truyền ca*, *Tạo đơan kinh*, *Lập quốc kinh* by Priest Lữ Y Doan (1613 - 1678) and *Hiếu tự ca* by Priest Trần Lục, etc.

The Catholics also created their own store of proverbs and folksongs in any regions of Vietnam. In the experience on climate, there were some statements: “The Epiphany means crabs and fishes will die” (January 6th) or “The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple means the Tet holiday is coming very closely”. In the experience on production, there were some statements: “The ceremony of Our Lady of the Rosary means at time for sowing pumpkin seeds” (October 7th), “The All Saints’ Day means harvesting pumpkin” and “The All Saints’ Day means sowing rice seed” (November 1st), “The Christmas Day means uprooting rice seedlings to plant” (December 25th).

In addition, the Catholics in each local region had got particular summaries. In Bùi Chu diocese, there was a statement: “The fathers in Phú Nhai, the yam in the Chùa market”. The yam in the Chùa market (Nam Trực district, Nam Định province) was famous delicious and so much whereas Phú Nhai was famous because it was the hometown of over 100 priests and 5 bishops. In Phát Diệm diocese, there was a statement: “The Scripture of Thê, the rite of Sâm, the tray of Sáu, the grandchildren of Thịnh”. It was explained that Priest Thê tested the Scripture of marriage very strictly; Priest Sâm held a ceremony in the church that was very long and bored, Priest Trần Lục had got a big bronze tray and Thịnh had got many grandchildren. In Hanoi, there was a statement: “The Mandarins in Vụ village, the Priests in Báng village” which meant Vụ Bán village was hometown of mandarins and Kẻ Báng was hometown of priests.

Fourthly, after a half of century practiced the Announcement June 14th, 1965 of the Vietnamese Bishop hierarchy, the Catholic Church has achieved many results and gradually built the Vietnamese Catholic Church but not the Catholic Church in Vietnam. However, the process also faced many challenges which required historians, writers, theologians, sociologists, etc to solve jointly.

In the inculturation trend, the Catholicism did the Vietnamization to become friendly as well as to highlight Vietnamese. But it would raise a question: How was the history? For example, in the Christmas we described Giuse as a farmer with brown clothes, Mother Maria as a Vietnamese woman with *áo dài* (long dress) and kerchief, beside some buffaloes and bamboo trees. Describing such that would raise a question: Where was Jesus born? In Vietnam or Belem? This problem was same to the music aspect. It is wondered that whether it was appropriate to use Bible words in the traditional music or not.

This problem was raised to the clothes of Jesus or Maria. In the Catholic viewpoint, Jesus and Maria are very humble. But it was seen that Jesus wears as a king and Maria wearing as a queen with lots of treasures in many Catholic pictures, statues in Vietnam. By this way, would it honored or alienated the Catholics? When some researchers visited the La Vang and Trà Kiệu, they said that Mother Trà Kiệu was familiar to believers and more humble. Of course, Mother Maria was the Mother of God, so that how much gold, silks and satins would not equal her. However, I was not sure whether we should do that to bring the Mother Maria and God to believers more closely.

In the relationship with other religions, Catholicism advocated the slogan “Living the Catholic faith follows the Vietnamese style”. In the past, there were “Xôi đõ” villages with Catholics mixing others which were the characteristics of Catholicism in Vietnam. Today, there are not only Catholicism and Buddhism but also many other religions coexisting in a community. From considering other religions as heresy and popular religion to consider them as friends was the great progress of Catholicism in Vietnam. However, this friendship among religions is remaining at visits on the rite day and Tet holiday or allowing their believers together build the churches, pagodas. They have not yet cooperated to resolve social issues. To do such those, it is necessary to establish some Associations of religions with larger operational programs.

Commemorating heroic martyrs raised lots of questions. For example, beside Quang Trung, Trần Hưng Đạo, Nguyễn Trãi, etc., who were meritorious heroes, there were many controversial heroes in the Vietnam history. A question was set up that whether they were meritorious or criticized so that Catholics rarely organized ceremony of heroic martyrs

because they were afraid of committing with politics. If they were invited, they would participate but rarely participated actively. In the contrast, Catholicism teaches that believers have to pray for living and died people. It was a reason making Catholics hardly to choose.

The Catholic Church was based the faith. All of things in Catholic inculturation has to be based this faith. However, we still prefer the statement of Pope Francis: “I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security”¹⁰./.

NOTES:

- 1 *Religious Life of Catholics following Vietnamese Style*, The Proceedings of Scientific Round Table, Hanoi Religious Publishing House, 2004: 164.
- 2 Marini (1666), *Histoire Nouvelle et Curieuse des Royaumes de Tunquin et Laos*, Paris: 324.
- 3 A. de Rhodes (1653), *Histoire du Royaume de Tunquin*, Paris: 76 - 77.
- 4 Phạm Huy Thông (2012), *The Interaction of the Catholicism and the Vietnamese Culture*, Religious Publishing House, Hanoi: 141 - 142.
- 5 Le Thanh Khoi (1955), *Le Vietnam, Histoire et Civilisation*, Paris: 310.
- 6 Nguyễn Đăng Duy (1996), *The Spiritual Culture*, Hanoi Publishing House: 275.
- 7 A. de Rhodes (1993), *Catechism in Eight Days*, Đắc Lộ publishing: 17-19.
- 8 Institut for Religious Studies (1994), *On the Religion*, Vol. 1, the Social Sciences Publishing House: 223.
- 9 Hoài Thanh, Hoài Chân (1988), *The Vietnamese Poets*, The Literary Publishing House: 206.
- 10 *The Teaching Lecture of the Fourth Day*, 26th, April, 2014, <http://vietcatholic.news>

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