

Catholicism's Influence in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT: The author tries to indicate influence of Catholicism in Southeast Asia in fields of culture, education, life style, music and arts, introduction of Western scientific achievements and knowledge, charity works and in social activities. Catholicism also comes with negative influences and these are also analyzed by the author. In the conclusion, he argues that, as what is stated in the "Ecclesia in Asia" issued on 6 November 1999 in New Delhi, in the 21st century, beside existing problems, the Catholic Church in Southeast Asia is facing to even more critical issues in the process of deeper integration into indigenous cultures.

Catholicism was born in the Middle East in early years of the Christian era and developed to be one of world religions with the biggest number of followers at the present. According to the Year Book published by the Vatican on 5 February 2000, the number of Catholics in 1999 was 1,045,000 (not including Protestantism, Orthodox and Anglicanism), took for 17% world population. However, it is amazing to find that there were only few Catholics in Asian – the homeland of Catholicism – with 105 millions which took for only 3.1% of population in this area. This picture was also true with countries in the Southeast Asia.

In comparison with other present religions in Southeast Asia, Catholicism appears later. Although legend said that one of the first Jesus' 12 disciples, Toma, came to promulgate Catholicism in India in the first century, reliable historical data reveals that Catholicism was introduced in this land in the 15th century thanked to Portuguese Dominican missionaries. On 25 November 1510, when priest De Souza held the Cross entering Goa, one of the most busy cities in India at that time, then established Catharina monastery, this had become a bridge for missionaries to South East.

Despite ups and downs of history and of the fact that each country had its own conditions and situation, Catholic still rooted, developed in Southeast Asia and left many traces in these countries' culture and society though could not gained deep

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influence as Buddhism in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos or Myanmar or as Islam in Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei.

We learn that Catholicism appeared in the East but developed strongly in the West and when entered Southeast Asia, had brought with its many Western cultural nuances. Via Catholicism, people in this area learned more about church architects such as gothic, roman or basilique, or artistic masterpieces such as “Farewell feast” by L. Vinci, “Maria” by Raphael or famous music works such as “Ave Maria” or “Jingle Bell”, “Silent Night”, “Il est né le divin enfant”, etc. The Bible, an immortal literature, has been translated into many different languages in the area.

While there are many different festivals in Southeast Asia, Catholic festivals have contributed significantly to the cultural diversity in these countries. At the present, people in these area, especially the young, all consider the Christmas Day (25 December), Valentine Day (12 February) the common festivals. The church bell’s sound has been familiar with the daily life of the local people, and also found in poetry, music and paintings. Many artists have excellent works inspired from Catholicism such as: *Giáng sinh, Ba vua* by Nguyễn Gia Trí, *Giáng sinh* by Nguyễn Tiến Chung, *Xuân như ý* by Hàn Mặc Tử (Vietnam). Catholicism also contributes to the arts, print and newspaper in many countries.

It should be noted that in the process of cultural integration, Catholicism has contributed to the local cultures, and at the same time been enriched by those cultures. History recorded that “Chinese rituals” was in nature the Catholics’ acceptance of Oriental life style and customs. However, this caused disputes during ten Popes’ reign from 1631 to 1742 thus created big difficulty for carrying out missionary works in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. In fact, right from that time, some missionaries from the Dominican order had been aware of the unreasonable requirements such as forcing anyone who joined Catholicism to cut their hair short or destroy their ancestor altar. Alexandre de Rhodes (1593-1660) – a famous missionary who stayed in Vietnam for 8 years and 9 months and in Macau for nearly 10 years – wrote: “Moreover, when they came back, they forced Catholics to put off their homeland costumes. It was out of my imagination that those ordinary people got incredibly discontent. I don’t know why they were asking them to do what our God doesn’t want to. That made them deny the baptism and the Heaven. In my mind, I know that, in China, I was strongly against those who forced new Catholics to have their hair cut short. They had a habit of wearing long hair like women, if not; they could not travel freely in their homeland, or visit monasteries. I had told them that the gospel requires them to get rid of sin in mind, not the hair on the head”¹.

Due to failures in contact with indigenous people, missionaries had then to “act according to local customs”. They learned local language, customs to get closer to the grassroots. Missionaries in Vietnam took the same names as Vietnamese (Đắc Lộ, Bá Đa Lộc, etc.) Missionaries came to Laos learned how to have sticky rice, play wind instrument and live in house on stilts. On 14 June 1965, Vietnamese Catholic Church allowed Catholics to proactively practice and participate in ancestor worship ceremonies. “The Church doesn’t prohibit polite gestures, attitudes and ceremonies; these are even encouraged to be represented in accordance with specific conditions of each region”². In Cambodia at the present, the Church is experimenting burial ceremony according to traditional way. Along with this trend of cultural integration, there appear many fantastic characteristics in Catholic rituals in Southeast Asia. At Catholic rituals and festivals, besides clarinet and drum, choral society in Western style, there were bands using traditional oriental music such as gongs, flute, two-string Chinese violin and drum. This Western-Oriental culture exchange showed clearly in Catholic festivals and also other Catholic arts. The bamboo organs in Church Lagumen (Philippines), stone church Phát Diệm in Vietnam are good samples.

One Catholic contribution into culture in many countries is, thanked to many Western missionaries, that many Western scientific achievements and knowledge had been introduced into the region. In Vietnam, Phan Huy Lê commented that: “Among missionaries, there were persons only worked for their faith, and helped introduce some Western scientific achievements into Vietnam. Jean Baptise Sebastian, a specialist in maths and astronomy, Jean de Lucrerio, Francois de Lima (Portuguese), Joseph Neugebeau (German), Jean Sibert (specialist in medicine), Jean Koffer (Slovakia), Charles Slamenski (Hungarian), etc. were missionaries who helped Nguyễn lord in Cochinchina. Alexandre de Rhodes and Francesco de Pina, Christos Borri, Gaspar de Amaral, Antonie de Babose put Latin characters into Vietnam thus helped creation of Vietnamese the official characters”³.

Charity works by Catholicism are recognized in many countries in the region. In Philippines, the Church runs 4 hospitals, 19 dispensaries, 206 centers for health care which serve million people each year. Besides, the Church operates 8 orphan houses with 32,057 children and takes care of 3,904 elder in old people’s homes. The Church also runs 4 universities, some are famous such as Santo Tomas, Letran where 4 state presidents and some tens ministers are former students. Catholic educational system has educated 130,000 students, over 150,000 primary pupils and 336,000 nursery pupils. In the Southern region of Vietnam, according to statistic in July 1969,

the Church had 1,030 primary schools with 258,409 Catholic pupils and 97,347 non-Catholic pupils; 266 secondary schools with 82,827 Catholic pupils and 70,101 non-Catholic pupils; 41 hospitals with 7,000 beds; 230 dispensaries, 36 maternity hospitals, 9 leper's hospitals, 82 orphan houses and 29 order's houses, etc.⁴ In Myanmar, Catholic Church bases offer healthcare and treatment for 15,000 participations each year. In Indonesia, Catholic schools from primary to secondary levels are very attractive not only for low school fee but also for good educational quality and service. In a village called Boro in Java, two sisters are taking care of 150 orphans. These activities are meaningful and helpful especially in poor countries. That is why Caritas organization and sisters from Catholic Missionary order were allowed to enter Cambodia after the terrible genocide by Red Khmer.

Catholic Church has practical programs in helping countries fight against social evils such as prostitutions, drug, HIV/AIDs, or unemployment, polluted environment, etc. In Thailand where there are over 1,25 millions drug addicts, the Church forbid Catholics to use the drug. Who breaks the rule won't be allowed to go to confession and the ones who are addicted cannot join this religion. Priest Jean Mille set up community camps with security men and applied advanced methods to treat addiction. Philippino Bishop Council sent letter to the President asking for strong method to deal with addiction which was maltreating 1,5 millions people here. In Vietnam, Cardinal Phạm Đình Tụng, president of Vietnamese Catholic Bishop Council, has sent out an appeal: "I call everyone to join hands to stop and get this evil out of our parishes and villages. I require priests to talk about this epidemic so that people can clearly understand what it is. Each parish needs to have a plan to investigate and discover timely the addicts. Parents must often keep an eye on their children, never let them get close to, or involve with the addicts."⁵ Sisters from Order of Adorers of the Holy Cross in Kiên Lao (Vietnam) had to take an oath from the beginning, within 5 oaths, 4 of those are: correct the depraved women, take care of sick women, and provide training for unemployed women. Many orders of sister still maintain this tradition until present. In Hồ Chí Minh City, all 47 orders and association participate in social charity⁶.

In dealing with the situation of too many illegal emigrants living without home, the Philippine Church had purchased land and built houses for them to stay. The government finally let the Church govern two camps in Narawal with 1,400 emigrants. In order to fight against violence to children, Catholic parish in Cebu launched a campaign to boycott toys of violence. Madalena, a Catholic association in

Indonesia, set up by priest Robe Boduyn in 1978 in North Java, each year offers vocational courses for around 2,000 prostitutes to help them to return to normal life.

Issues concerned by the Church are dialogue with other religions in the region such as Buddhism, Islam and at the same time participation in program of national harmony. The declaration of Asian Episcopal Council in Samphan (Thailand) in January 2000 wrote: "We hurt when we know that: religious conservatism or more correctly, religious extremism is appearing, and continuously splitting Asian societies and thus creating misery to Asian nations. An innovative church must encourage its members to actively participate into cultural and social activities at local and national levels to fill in the gap between different religious communities and build a harmony among various sides"⁷. In the Philippines, the fight between follower of "Islamic Liberation Front of Moro" with state troops and Catholic guerillas in last 24 years has caused 120,000 deaths. Bishop Fernando Capala in Davao was the one who arranged a negotiating table for all sides in 1999. In Indonesia, Bishop F. X Belo won a Nobel Prize in 1996 for efforts in conciliating conflicts in the hot land of East Timor.

However, there are negative impacts created by Catholicism on society and culture of Southeast Asian countries.

The most Catholicism's visible negative impact in the region was that the missionary process here came along with Western Europe's colonial invasion in which some missionaries had taken advantage of the colonial power to expand the religion. Therefore, Catholicism was accused to have colluded with colonial regimes to cause separation among national communities between Catholics and non-Catholics. That was the reason for the French colonist to open fire to invade Vietnam and Indochina in the 19th century. The Catholicism's development caused fears towards some religions and states such as Nguyễn dynasty in Vietnam in the past, or Islam organizations in Mindanao (the Philippines) or in Aceh (Indonesia) at the present. The religion may have caused social disorder via migrations because of a mixture of political and religious reasons such as migration in 1954 or evacuation in 1975 in Vietnam. Illegal Catholic missions in Laos, Vietnam recently are concerned by social managers. The number of Christians rose rapidly from 10% to 18% (1980-1988), in which there were 140,000 Catholics (took for 3.7% of the population). Catholicism had significant influence on Education in Singapore: 30% pupils year 12 and 41% students were Catholics. The number of Catholic lawyers or doctors was even higher. This was a challenge to a nation which traditionally follows Confucianism such as Singapore.

According to the Catholic teachings, the Church only accepts the natural method to avoid pregnancy thus it becomes difficult to carry out birth-control in Catholic areas, especially in the nations where Catholics are crowded such as The Philippines, East Timor or Vietnam. States have difficulties also in planning social policies in Catholic areas such as divorce, death sentence, sex education, migration to un-churched areas, etc.

Catholicism maintains a human-based morality which is recognized by many religious scholars. The reformer R.M Roy from India wrote: “I see that Christ’s teachings create morality, and are the most suitable, for people with reason than any other religions that I know”.⁸ Catholicism strongly criticizes superstitious forms such as fortune telling, mediumship, telling bad days or good days, etc. which are still popular in the region. A missionary in Vietnam in the 17th century wrote: “That is why we openly criticize superstition and these odd customs that: they dare to send to their parents amours that the poorest people will refuse to wear”⁹. However, the Catholics are easy to be attracted to those superstitious forms. A sociological survey in Vietnam reveals that Catholic people here are very pious: 99.4% often go to church. However, 4.7% said they sometimes participate in fortune telling, mediumship and 36% believe in magic or telepathy¹⁰. This helps explaining why sometimes some tens thousand people would gather around one place when they heard rumors of “the appearance of Mother Maria”.

In the beginning of the 21st century, the Catholic Church must face to many challenges as stated in the “Ecclesia in Asia” issued on 6 November 1999 in New Delhi. It reads: “If there are churches execute their missions peacefully and freely, there are also churches which are facing conflicts or violence or being threatened by other entities because of religion or others. In this much diversified world of the Asia, the Church has to cope with challenges of philosophy, theology and preaching. In other places, churches have more difficulties with their missions because they are the minority, except for the Philippines where Catholics are majority”¹¹. In order to overcome these challenges, the Catholic Church set its duties as follow: Cultural integration, religious liberation and dialogue. According to the explanation of a Philippine theologian, “cultural integration is to make the faith really rooted in Asia thus Catholic will be no longer alien; liberation means to liberate Asia from poverty, injustice and; dialogue means having talks to traditional major religions here”¹². To this motto, Southeast Asian churches have implemented many measures. Philippine bishops, in the Epistle on 17th March 1998 on the celebration of 100 years of fighting against the Portuguese domination, had officially apologized Philippine people for in

the past “there were some bishops and organizations of the church which were against the fight for national liberation”. The letter asks the Catholics to correct the fault by fighting against poverty and injustice. In Vietnam in the Epistle in 1980, bishops defined that: “Loving the country, loving compatriot are not only natural feelings of the Catholics but also a requirement of the gospel”. The Epistle year 2000 wrote: “We devote our life to provide service for the poor. They are: poor children who love going to school and they need help in order to continue their study; women who are treated badly in the families or abused in the society who need to be respected; the older abandoned people who need care and comfort; ethnic minority compatriots who need just treatment and help to get promotion in every field; country men coming to the city and are being exploited need to be upheld and protected; victims of social evils who need sympathy and help to be back to ordinary life; victim from natural disaster who immediately need food and costume to overcome difficulty...”¹³. The Church also participates in Family Plan of birth control with new viewpoint by criticizing the old thought of “each day brings its own bread” and stating that “hot issues at the present are the responsible parturition and education of children”¹⁴.

In Malaysia, in the updated program for celebration Holy year 2000, the Church in this nation had given priority for dialogue with Islam because 50% of the population here are Muslims while the Catholics only take for 3.2%. In Indonesia, after the event of East Timor, the Church has taken a lesson of not trying to deeply engage into political affairs which may affect Catholic characteristics. On the Christmas in 1997, the Catholic Church only organized a simple ceremony in order to not provoke the Muslim in their Ramada period. When the extremist Muslim made attacks in Maluku, many Catholics lost their lives and many churches were burned down. The Catholic Church, however, still stayed calm and a unified pray by 5,000 Catholics, Muslims and Protestants were still organized on 22nd October 2000 in Sumatra. This is a big effort by religions to prevent conflicts in this country.

Entering the 21st century, the Catholic Church in Southeast Asia is still developing but also being challenged with critical issues.

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- ⁶. Cited from *Vietnamese Catholics*, No. 8, 1992 and No. 9, 1997.
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- ¹². *Ibid.*, No. 5, p. 247.
- ¹³. According to *Vietnamese Catholics*, No. 43, 2000, p. 6.
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