

Theoretical and Practical Issues Regarding Catholic Associations in Vietnam

NGUYỄN PHÚ LỢI*

ABSTRACT: The paper begins with discussion on some theories regarding Catholic associations. The author puts that establishing association is a method to gather believers for Catholic religious and social purposes. Catholic associations are various and exist in many different forms. In Vietnam, Catholic association has been a historical issue since Catholicism was imported and developed within the country. During the two resistant wars against the French and the American, some Catholic associations in Vietnam were exploited for activities against Vietnamese Revolution and the national interest. Now a day, the revival and development of these associations have become an objective reality, and are supported by Vietnam Catholic Church's policy.

Association is the largest mass organization in Catholic Church, born in responded to religious need as well as many social activities of Catholic followers. This organization has an important role in Catholic Church in the preservation of the religious life and in the developing Catholic Church, it has made Catholic activities more lively in the secular society. A research of Catholicism can not therefore neglect the association. This article sets forth few theoretical and practical issues on Catholic associations and Vietnamese Catholic associations.

1. A Few Theoretical Issues on Catholic Association

The concepts of association: In the written text of Catholic Church the term "association" is used for different organization of religious believers with the different names as *assembly, association, union*, etc.

*. MA., Institute for Research on Religions and Beliefs, Hồ Chí Minh Academy of Politics and Administration.

The Catholic Code in 1983, differentiates the *Order of Oblates* and *Apostolic College of brothers*, the organizations of clergy and laymen or both of clergy and laymen is named the *association of believers*¹. Its 298 article pointed out “In Church there are many associations different from Order of Oblates and Apostolic College of brothers, including clergy and laymen or including both of clergy and laymen who work together to live a better or to propagate the common rites to serve the Christian doctrine or to practice charitable activities in the world in line with the Christian spirit”.² The word “association” itself reflects the association of followers of clergy in an organization, a collectivity or the relationship of the different organizations in given activity. It has a compulsory character and does not belong to administrative system or to religious orders. Canon law also distinguishes between the *association of clergymen* and the *association of laymen*. Here, the association of laymen means association including *Third Order*. Although the believers must follow order law, they have not religious vow and living concentration in the convents. They live their normal life as “leading religion at home”. The essence of this association is *Catholic Association* because all the participators are Catholics. Priest Hồng Phúc explains: “Third Order is an order of laymen in world, the moral associations depend on an order with members try to follow the virtuous life of the Saint who creates the order, in a life in line with the common life.”³

In the *Dictionary of Catholic faith*, Priest Hồng Phúc thinks that: association is a noun to denote two organizations in Church: 1. *Moral association*, in this association there are many believers such as the younger, the older, the married persons, parents with their common desire to live a virtuous and philanthropic life. They are Catholics without religious vow; 2. *Religious order or order* grouping male and female priests with their vow. This organization is called *secular institute*⁴. Actually, this concept does not reflect wholly function of Catholic association according to article 298 of Catholic Code. It only deals with the associations of Catholics interested in moral and philanthropic activities, and does not speak of the associations of apostles. An association is set up not only to live a virtuous life, or to preserve the religion, it has also the aim of propagating the religion. *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* of Second Vatican Council points out clearly: “Catholics can perform their role personally or in a group or in an association.”⁵ This Decree has not distinguished between the association of following the priest livelihood and the associations of Catholic (and including also priests) as determined by the religious code.

Thus the concept of association has been used with different names and divisions. But despite the division and appellation the association remains the concept to

express the organization of Catholics (with the priest as the leaders) in the service of religious and social needs of Catholic Church. Second Vatican Council affirms “Catholics have rights to organize an associations, to direct the association and to register their name in a ready made associations, on condition that they have to keep the necessary connection to religious power.”⁶

In Vietnam, the term of “Catholic Association” has many different appellation. In the people used the term as *họ* (parish), *phường* (guild) *hội* (brethren)⁷. Recently many new names have been appeared like *giới trẻ*, *giới cụ ông*, *giới cụ bà*, *giới trung niên*, etc. Now, the term of association is popularly and has been accepted by law.

The *association* can be understood as following: the word *hội* to denotes a common group, the general activities of Catholics to pray or participate religious activities in social life; the word *đoàn* means an organized collection, an association, a group of believers with the same creed, following the same aim, the same ideal or performing a certain work. The association corresponds with the character of religious activities. In other word, an association is an organization including a number of people following the same ideal, believing in certain dogma, in line with the common religious activities. This state is quite familiar with Catholicism.

In short, the association is a form to unite Catholics in a spontaneous or conscious organization, which has the right to perform religious activities, to follow, preserve and develop the religions or socio-cultural activities of the Catholic Church.

The origin, function of association: The Catholic association was born before all else from the inherent needs of religious activity and from the particularities of the Catholic life. The religious activities of Catholicism has a great communal character. This fact is clearly expressed in the participation of Catholics to common rites of highly communal character at the church. These highly collective activities are the environment and condition for the birth and development of the Catholic association. The new Testament has spoken of the collective litany as an important condition for believers to receive God's grace. Jesus taught that “if two persons among you united and asked anything, then the Master, the God in heaven would grant you. Wherever two among you united in the name of Master, the Master who is in the heaven would be there, among them” (18, 20). Catholics believe that prayer, especial through collective prayer in the church the would enjoy great favor of God. Though prayers, faith, love and confidence are expressed and reinforced. The church law considers prayers as an important content of the Christian service and the participation to

collective worship in church as duty of Catholics. The Second Vatican Council considers that the prayers “will make believers believe in what they have accepted owing to the faith”⁸. The Church considers these actions to be necessary for preaching the religion to strengthen the confidence of Catholics. So Catholic Church pays attention and encourage Catholics to take part in prayer, special collective prayer.

Apart from prayers, believers also express their faith in the participation to rites of worship. Prayers and the participation to individual or collective rites are only the expression of the common life in God, from persons having received baptism. The important demand to a Catholic is not only expressed in the consolidation of his faith, in his participation to the propagation. The Second Vatican Council pointed out that “any believer, irrespective of the social origin, though having not the ability or the opportunity to participate into an association is called and even is responsible to work as an individual apostle.”⁹

In the religious life, a Catholic has two obligations: to participate into the rites of the cultural, and to participate into individual or collective predications to consolidate the faith and enlarge the country of God. The participation into collective rites creates the need of groups, societies of mass character in the rites and in the predication. The Church, therefore encourages this activity to serve the religious need. This is the basis of the birth and development of association.

In the Middle Age, associations had appeared in Catholic Church of Europe. They were associations of prayer and Third order as Third order of St Francis, Third order of St Dominic, Third order of Mt Carmel. These associations of religious character which participated to cultural and social activities appeared only in the recent and modern times. Since the beginning of the 20th century, especially after the First World War, to oppose the Protestant theology and especially to oppose the materialist philosophy and the laic movement, the Catholic Church had to present the Catholic social doctrine and at the same time had to pay attention to the role of believers to enlarge the country of God by developing the movement of *Catholic Action* over the whole world.

Catholic Action, according to Pope Pio XI (1922-1939) is the “participation of Catholics into the work of apostles among the clergy.”¹⁰ Because “the situation had shown the way we had to go as well as the first period of history of Church. At present we have to cope with the situation of a world which seems to sink into unmoral wave. Many Catholics have forsaken Christ”¹¹. Pope Pio XII (1939 - 1958)

said “all the Christians who have received baptism become apostles and members of *Catholic Action* are special apostles in a strict cooperating with bishops and priests.”¹²

After the Second Vatican Council, together with the extolment of the role of apostle, the Church has been more interested in the development of associations. It especially pays attention to the activities of collective apostles in advising them to participate to associations. *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* of Council pointed out that “Catholics participate to the functions in the cultural of Christ in their own way”¹³ so that the whole world recognizes and accepts this Happy News. Catholics have more condition to “reform” the world order than clergymen because their forces are more crowded and they live in the world. So the Catholics must group in the organization of associations. The decree pointed out clearly: “Associations are set up for collective work, to assist and educate the members in the hope the results would be greater than the individual action. In the present situation, wherever the apostle activity exists, this activity should be carried out in a collective way.”¹⁴ The extolment of the Catholic Church toward the role of Catholics as apostles in the modern world has pushed forward the birth and development of Catholic associations.

The types of associations: The Catholic Church divides associations into many different kinds on the base of rule of organization and function. Association are divided into two kinds: the public association and private association. In the religious code, all kinds of association public or private, already set out or would be set up must be recognized by the religious power.

Public associations are under the direction of competent organs of the Church (the Holy See, Episcopal Conference, Metropolis) which may set up, dissolve, approve their activities, appoint persons in charge. Associations of international character in their activities are set up by the Pope or by the Holy See, associations of national scale are under the control of Episcopal Conference, and associations in diocese are under the responsibility of the bishop of the area.

For the private associations, the Church does not set up or direct. It only points out the direction of their activities and controls problems in relation to moral and religion. These organizations are funded, governed and directed by the Catholics but they must have relationships with the missionaries to carry out the collective aims of the Catholic Church.

In fact, associations are divided into different forms on the basis of their functions. The Second Vatican Council pointed out that “there are different associations of apostles, some carry out the general aims of the Church. Others have to propagate the Gospel and sanctify it in ‘special manner’. There are associations to Christianize the world order. There exist also associations to demonstrate the presence of Christ especially by humanitarian and charitable actions.”¹⁵

Associations considering prayers, religious rites and charitable actions as their aim have a common name called *moral associations*. Associations considering the religious propagation as their main object are normally called *Catholic Action*. Pope Pio XI pointed out that “associations and Catholic Action will have a friendly harmony and sympathy with each other... Catholic Action is organized cleverly to transform peaceful force taking part in ‘holy wars’ to safeguard Christ country.”¹⁶

The Second Vatican Council remarks that “the Popes and a great number of bishops are right when they believe and exhort these organization and call them Catholic action. These activities are therefore expressed as a collaboration of the Catholics to the work of religious orders.”¹⁷ The Second Vatican Council listed four characters of Catholic Action: 1. Preaching gospel and spiritualizing people; 2. Working with clergymen, but having private duties; 3. Having collective activities; 4. Depending the direction of clergymen. The associations have above elements are called Catholic Action though their forms and their names are different because of requirement of their regions and their nations.”¹⁸

Priest Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ explains “the word ‘actio Catholien’ translated in its literal meaning into ‘Catholic action’ is right, because all activities following the Catholic principle like reciting prayers, assisting ceremonies, visiting paralytics, helping the poor ... are in its strict meaning, conform to Catholic Action which must carry out the aim of propagating the religion to enlarge the kingdom of God in the world and to penetrate into all the minds.”¹⁹

The Catholic Action is therefore not identical with Catholic organizations in general but it means only association propagating Catholicism. Other speaking, Catholic associations are set up to propagate the religion, to develop outside, independently of the international, national and regional size under the leadership of the hierarchy.²⁰ And the Catholic associations in general have a largest content, including also moral associations in which Catholic action is chief element in the activity of the religious propagation.

Hierarchy, clergy towards the associations: The Church has clearly defined the role and responsibility of hierarchy, clergy towards the associations. The Second Vatican Council pointed out clearly: “the apostolate of the laity, individuals or collectives should be rightly placed in activities apostles of the whole Church” and “it should be carried out by hierarchy.”²⁰ In which “the duty of hierarchy should help the activities of the apostolate of the laity by giving the rules and helping instruments.”²¹ The diocesan bishop is the person who has the right to set up or to dissolve, to approve the rules of operation, or to find the person in charge of the association within his diocese. The person in charge of association is often appointed by an organ (by the Holy See, assembly of bishops) or priest (in the diocese). The Catholic priest directly in charge of association are called *chaplains* or *spiritual advisers*. They have not right to set up or to dissolve the association, for they only represent the bishop of the area in controlling an running the association. They have, however, a great role and have a direct influence on the association in the area under their direction.

Like spiritual advisers priests of the parish have not the right to set up or to dissolve the associations even the associations in their area except when they have been ordered by the diocesan bishop. As “pastor of the parish” is charged by diocesan bishop so the priest of parish has the important role in Catholic associations. As almost Catholic associations base on parish to set up their activities. Therefore, article 529 of Catholic law advises the priest of the parish “to be conscious of their role to urge all the believers to take part in mission of Church by encouraging associations to meet religious aims.”²² The priest of parish is the chief, manager, helper and director the associations in the parish so the believers not to be influenced by the other forces. To assist the priest of the parish in the managements of the association are deacons, friars, parish council, etc.

In short, Catholic hierarchy, special diocesan bishop and the priest of parish, spiritual adviser have a very important role in Catholic association. In which the priest has the right to decide the establishment and developing of Catholic association. The diocesan bishop gives priest of the parish and the spiritual adviser charge to set up or undertake an association in the parish. The management of the state towards Catholic association takes care of this issue.

2. The Issue of Catholic Associations in Vietnam

As a branch of the world Catholic Church, Vietnamese Catholic Church has therefore to follow the rule of Catholic law on the association issue. However, on account of

specific peculiarities of Vietnam, and of the relative independence of each diocese, the Vietnamese Catholic Church has some specific issues.

Together with the integration process of Catholicism into our country, Catholic associations were step by step shaped to meet the needs of religious life among the Catholics. At first, a number of Catholics in the parish united to pray or to carry out a common religious activities. Gradually, groups of Christians were set up with people in charge of common prayers or a common philanthropic activities. In the early centuries, associations were spontaneously set up by religious believers in different parishes, then missionaries helped, encourage and set up association. The first association in our country called “họ” (a Vietnamese word meaning patril lineage) like the Rosario patril lineage from the common letter of Feliciano Phê, bishop of the Northern region (Haiphong) in 1798.²³ Since the middle of the 21st century, especially in the beginning of the 20th century, a number of bishops sent a common letter on setting up associations. However, up to 1920s, the associations set up in our country were mainly moral ones, including prayer association, the Third Order of St. Dominic to preserve the religion and religious living. Some associations created for religious rites and activities also appeared and were called *phường* (guild) like guilds of eight kind of musical sound, the guild of songs (group of singers).²⁴

The association of apostolic preach with a strict organization appeared only after the First World War. In 1930s under the influence of Catholic Action movement, special from France, Vietnamese Catholic association developed rapidly, many associations belonged to Catholic Action in abroad. This event had been promoted by the Indochinese Council meeting in Hanoi in November 18th 1934.²⁵ This council asserted “its readiness to follow the orders of the Pope and decides to set up the Catholic Action movement in the place where we promote preaching.”²⁶

After the formation of the Indochinese Council, Catholic associations, especially the associations belonged to Catholic Action developed strongly in all most the parishes of North Vietnam. As a fact worthy of attention, many associations had a political, social character like the Thanh Sinh Công, Catholic league, the Catholic Association for National Salvation.

In the period of resistance against the French, the Vietnamese Catholic Church was very interested in the development of the association. In 1951, the apostolic delegate in Indochina set up the Central Office for Vietnamese Catholic Action to develop Catholic Association. In 1952, the bishops in Vietnam sent a common letter saying, for example, as follow: “to effectively carry out your missionary task, we

strongly advise you to participate to Catholic Action in your parish as you have known the Catholic Action is an apostolate of the laity with hierarchy and missionaries to Christianize the world."²⁷ At the same time, it pointed out "the highest and most effective form is prayer and a bright example. The special form of Catholic Action is apostolate of prayer. The apostolate is easy and effective. Therefore we earnestly hope that apostolate of prayer is set up in all most parishes in Vietnam."²⁸

The Common letter in 1953 of Vietnamese bishops pointed out: "Every Catholics is bound to cooperate with hierarchy to fully carry out the mission that God had to entrusted to the Church ... This cooperation of Catholics with priests is often called *Apostle of the Laity* or *Catholic Action*". "Catholic Action is a means of preach a religion."²⁹ At the same time the letter called upon "the apostolate of the laity is an urgent and necessary effort for Catholics and we want to enlarge this organization in any forms. Catholic Action is directed toward religious aim to saturate all activities with Catholic spirit."³⁰ And it affirmed that "the Catholics enjoy the freedom to earn these favors of the Vietnamese citizen to set up secular organization like cultural economical, political associations ... on the condition that they base themselves on Catholic principles to guide all their activities and gestures."³¹

In the 1950-1954 period, Catholic associations developed strongly. Numbers of associations of political color like Catholic league, the Anti Communist Youth, the Blue Army, The Army of Holly Mother were benefited by reactionary elements to destroy revolution and make difficult for the war of resistance in North delta, especially in the two religion area of Bùi Chu and Phát Diệm. In 1954, they made use of associations to organize a propaganda against the political line of the Party and State, spoke ill of the State power and summoned the people to go South. In the book *The Cross and Sword* priest Trần Tam Tinh remarked: "If sabotage activities of the French and the American exerted influence on all Vietnamese people, there were other propaganda which were more influential on the whole Vietnamese people. First of all, they made use of the Virgin Fatima Mother whose veneration had increased in the recent years through setting up the Virgin Mother Army, the Blue Army, the Association of Fighters for the Virgin Mother. The Virgin Mother was give a political role to liberate those who venerate her. People said that the Virgin Mother had appeared at Ba Làng in Thanh Hóa province to order the Catholics to move to the South as she also left the North to the South."³²

After 1954, most of associations in the North which were linked to politics were dissolved, there remained but associations for religious rites. In the South, Catholic

associations develop rapidly especially the movement of Catholic Action. In 1957 Catholic Action was officially set up in Sài Gòn “including associations, organizations under the leadership of the Church for social progress and for the glorification of God. Associations were divided two kinds: specialized associations (for a given sex, age, profession and environment) and non-specialized associations (common to all Catholics).”³³ The Bishop Council of South Vietnam set up the *Commission of Catholic Action* (in 1974 it was changed into the *Commission of Apostle of the Laity*). In the diocese, there existed the executive board with priests and Catholics to push forward the activities of Catholic Action in their parish. Priest Nguyễn Ngọc Sơn remarked: “The development of society especially in South Vietnam enjoyed the active and great contribution of associations, especially of the Catholic Action movement. Each sex, each age had an organization to guide them in an active orientation.”³⁴

After 1975, the Catholic Action organization in South Vietnam were dissolved, most of their associations ceased their activities. But since the late 1980s to early 1990s, Catholic associations were step by step rehabilitated and they developed in most religious parishes in Vietnam.³⁵ The Church indicated: “Looking ahead into the new millenary, the Bishop Council of Vietnam wants to assume its obligation toward the Catholic Action. Organs, groups, movements of the Catholic Action will be directed by the Bishop Council and concerned committees.”³⁶ At the same time it affirmed: “Each full Catholic organization and association must never have a controversial attitude towards other groups in the Church or towards other social organization. On the contrary, as members or Christians owing to the development of the society of the world.”³⁷

At present, the Catholic association in our country are developing in all parishes with many various and attractive forms, with the participation of many Catholics of any age, sex, profession so the religious life has become more animated.

3. Some Remarks

Catholic association is the form of organization grouping the believers to serve religious and social aims of Catholicism. The birth of the Catholic association, before all else, was dictated by the inherent need of a life in line with the religion, to develop the religion and to answer the social needs of the Catholic society. Then it became, after its birth and development, an effective means of the Church to consolidate the religious faith, to enlarge the country of God and to express the

position of a person in the society. Such has been the reason why the Catholic Church always supports, exhorts and develops the Catholic associations.

Catholic Associations are very various, rich with many different forms. Some have a restrict sphere of action in the parish, some have a national or international character. Some aim at bolstering the faith, at preserving the religion; the others aim at enlarging the country of God. Some are only religious but some stretch to political, cultural, social spheres. This diversity of Catholic associations comes from different and social needs of the believers and of the Church. Associations, therefore, have attracted the mass of believers of any age, any sex and profession.

As the personification of God in the world of human being, the Catholic Church always makes use its religious power to control Catholic associations. In the hierarchy, especially diocesan bishops, priests and the religious have a very important role in the development of the Catholic association.

The Catholic Association in our country is a historical issue, born in the process of integration and development of Catholicism in Vietnam. This birth and development in Vietnam has greatly contributed to preservation, to the development of this religion. The Vietnamese Catholic Church has therefore helped, exhorted and developed the association for its religious and social aims. However, in its development process, especially in the anti-French, anti - American resistances, many associations in our country have been used in the activities against the revolution and the national interest.

The restoration and development of the Catholic associations in Vietnam is an objective reality determined by the economic basis of the renovation period of the country. It has also been pushed forward by the standpoint, direction of the Vietnamese Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council and the Common letter in 1980 from the Assembly of Bishops in Vietnam. This development responded to the need of religious, social activities of a part of Catholics, but some problems are born here and there lead to conflict, to a breach of the unity, and some associations do not follow the direction of the administrative power at the basis, and there affairs should be regulated. As an organization of religious and social character, Catholic associations are therefore easy to be used for activities against the national interests. Negative elements should be therefore removed from the activities of the associations and the organization should be cleaned up to create condition for the Catholics to enjoy a good life in both “the religious and the material existence”./.

Reference:

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- ³. Hồng Phúc. *Dictionary of the Catholic faith*, Catholic office of Hồ Chí Minh City, 1996, p. 125
- ⁴. Hồng Phúc. *Dictionary of the Catholic faith*, op .cit, p. 235.
- ⁵. The Second Vatican Council. *Constitutional System, Decree, Declaration and Message*, Theological department , St. Pio X Institution, Đà Lạt, 1972, p. 549.
- ⁶. The Second Vatican Council. *Constitutional System, Decree, Declaration and Message*, Op.cit, p. 553.
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- ⁸. The Second Vatican Council. *Constitutional System, Decree, Declaration and Message*, Op. cit. p. 72.
- ⁹. *Ibid.*, p. 550.
- ¹⁰. Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ. *Catholic Action*. Hien Tai Pub. Sai Gon, 1961, tr. 28.
- ¹¹. Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ. *Catholic Action*, Op. cit. p. 72.
- ¹². Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ. *Catholic Action*, Op. cit. p. 23.
- ¹³. The Second Vatican Council. *Constitutional System, Decree, Declaration and Message*, Op cit. p. 204.
- ¹⁴. *Ibid.*, p. 552..
- ¹⁵. *Ibid.*, p. 553.
- ¹⁶. Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ. *Catholic Action*, Op. cit, p. 70.
- ¹⁷. The Second Vatican Council. *Constitutional System, Decree, Declaration and Message*, Op. cit., p. 554.
- ¹⁸. *Ibid.*, pp. 554-555.
- ¹⁹. Nguyễn Khắc Ngữ. *Catholic Action*, Op cit., p. 28.
- ²⁰. The Second Vatican Council. *Constitutional System, Decree, Declaration and Message*, Op. cit., p. 557.
- ²¹. *Ibid.*, p. 558.
- ²². Canon law 1983, Op. cit., p. 180.

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- ²³. Nguyễn Hồng Dương. *Catholic Association –its history and its present*, Op. cit., p. 44.
- ²⁴. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-46.
- ²⁵. Indochinese Council in 1934 had approved "Pastoral regulation" with 5 chapters in which the chapter IV with 4 details and 46 articles on Catholic Action.
- ²⁶. Nguyễn Văn Vi. *A Study the International Catholic Action and Vietnam*, Hien Tai, Publishing house, Saigon, 1965, p. 103.
- ²⁷. Trần Anh Dũng (ed). *Hierarchy of Vietnamese Catholicism*, Paris, 1996. p.113.
- ²⁸. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- ²⁹. *Ibid.*, p.119-120.
- ³⁰. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- ³¹. *Ibid.*, p.122.
- ³² Trần Tam Tinh. *The Cross and Sword*, Youth Publishing house, Hồ Chí Minh City, 1988, p. 103.
- ³³. The Vietnamese Bishop Council *Vietnamese Catholic Church-Yearbook 2004*, Religion Publishing house, Hanoi, 2004. p. 424.
- ³⁴. *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201.
- ³⁵. *Ibid.*
- ³⁶. *Ibid.*, p. 424.
- ³⁷. *Ibid.*, p. 425.