

# THE SOUTH VIETNAM BISHOPS IN THE PROCESS OF “GOING WITH NATION”

---

Ngô Quốc Đông<sup>(\*)</sup>

This article resurveys the view and position of the South Vietnam bishops on the problem of “Nation”<sup>(1)</sup> in the historical process of Vietnamese revolution. The article only deals with historical background from 1954 to the Common Letter 1980. The main documents of this article are formal documents of bishops including announcements, common letters, circular letters in this stage.

## 1. The stage from 1954 to 1963<sup>(2)</sup>

In 1954, 676.348 Catholics<sup>(3)</sup> emigrated to the South Vietnam. This emigration upset political problem of two regions and left undesired consequence in national unity. Catholics left their villages and parishes to move in the South with their faith and fear of Communism<sup>(4)</sup>. A priest returned Hanoi 20 years later and he wondered about the political problem of emigration. He wrote that “*I really want to ask fathers emigrated that you were persecuted by Communism or you commanded troop to persecute Communism? You went to the South because believers went away or you organized to go with laity*”<sup>(5)</sup>.

When speaking of the attitude of Southern Catholicism in the early years of the First Republic Government, we often speak of the heavy preconception of Northern Catholic block towards Communism as described above.

---

\* Ma. Institute for Religious Studies.

<sup>1</sup> National aspect in this article refers to standpoint of the Catholic hierarchy for the revolutionary communists in Vietnam, for the process of national reunification, the new society after the liberation of South. National aspect from the perspective of culture is not discussed in this article.

<sup>2</sup> Up to on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1963 when the republican regime was overthrown.

<sup>3</sup> According to *the International Catholic Information*, No. 158, December 12<sup>th</sup>, 1961. This figure drew attention of some writers because it is associated with the reality. See more the article of Peter Hansen in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, volume 4 issue 3. Fall, 2009. Vietnamese version was translated by Hiếu Tân.

<sup>4</sup> This was the mentality of many Catholics who emigrated to the South. Of course, there were people who emigrate to the South because of family circumstances or the Catholics did not understand why they had to migrate and what communism was.

<sup>5</sup> Priest Trần Tam Tinh. *I Come Back Hanoi*, document in National Library, 1974, p. 54.

Actually, this preconception came from the Common Letter of Indochinese Bishop Council in 1951. The details of the Common Letter did not need to be reminded. This letter formally set precondition for a long crisis in Vietnamese Catholic Church by a policy of confrontation with communism but in the context of Vietnam, these policies were understood to resist the Vietnamese revolutionaries who struggled for national independence.

Beside anti-communist characteristic, the Letter created opposite psychological responds in Catholics and made them torment between their faith and patriotism. Communist revolutionaries considered the Letter to interfere internal affairs of Vietnamese hierarchy by French hierarchy who was leading Vietnamese Catholic Church.

Ordinance Venerabilium Nostrorum of Pope John XXIII dated on 24<sup>th</sup> November, 1960 on establishing Vietnamese Catholic Hierarchy and division of Vietnamese Catholic Church into three dioceses under the leadership of Vietnamese bishops. This Ordinance was promulgated after Lent Letter on 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 1960 of 10 Southern bishops, among them there were 6 Vietnamese bishops.

Common Letter in 1960 spoke that International Communist Bloc, lead by USSR would destroy religion: “This threat is exacerbated in that the destruction of religion is led and sponsored by an international agency which has close system of organization that is atheistic communism”<sup>(6)</sup>. The Letter of Southern bishops showed strong view of pre-Vatican II Church on prevailing Church's policy against atheistic communism. Imperceptibly, Vietnamese Catholic Church in the South Vietnam was pushed into anti-communist condition far beyond religious moral standard.

Actually, Common Letter in 1960 called for laymen to definitively abolished atheistic materialism and forbad Catholics to take part in Communist Party. Southern Bishops were afraid of Communism. They insinuated communists as “crime” and “evil spirits”. This letter had a paragraph “in order to cheat naive and trusting people, they openly propogandized the theory of coexistence that between the healthy and evil, between virtue and evil, between God and ghosts. We have to know that this

---

<sup>6</sup> Trần Anh Dũng (chief editor). *Vietnamese Catholic Hierarchy 1960-1995*, For internal circulation, Paris, 1996, p. 127.

coexistence can not be carried out<sup>(7)</sup>. From extreme view the South bishops advocated not to make concessions to Communism. Common Letter in 1960 continued view of the Common Letter in 1951<sup>(8)</sup>.

For communist leaders who led national liberation, this view was the official views of the Catholic Church in the South Vietnam before the standpoint of national resistance. This view turned Church into useful anti-communist objects of these Republic of South Vietnam. On faith of Catholics this view was pastoral guidance that every Catholics had to understand and implement.

The influence of Northern emigratory Catholics to Catholic Church in the South was manifested in Lent Letter in 1960. In this letter, emigratory Catholic part was dominant. Among 6 Vietnamese authors of this letter there were three bishops who were authors of the Common Letter in 1959 and three Northern bishops<sup>(10)</sup>. For the Common Letter in 1951, the number of Vietnamese bishops was few. In the Common Letter in 1960 Vietnamese hierarchy had not right to self control, although the number of Vietnamese bishops was not few but young<sup>(11)</sup>. Furthermore, serious disciplines of Church were strong. Some thought that “Did the Southern bishops bet on Southern political power at that time”<sup>(12)</sup>, so they chose anti-communist spirit.

Although at the peak of Southern Catholicism during the First Republic regime<sup>(13)</sup> many Catholics in the South felt there was instability in actions of Church. Catholic intellectuals realized this instability of Church<sup>(14)</sup>. While hierarchy and the believers had always expressed an optimistic belief that Catholicism had an important role in

---

<sup>7</sup> Trần Anh Dũng (chief editor). *Vietnamese Catholic Hierarchy 1960-1995*, For internal circulation, Paris, 1996, p. 133.

<sup>8</sup> Trần Anh Dũng (chief editor). *Vietnamese Catholic Hierarchy 1960-1995*, For internal circulation, Paris, 1996, p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> Bishops Ngô Đình Thục, Lê Hữu Từ, Phạm Ngọc Chi.

<sup>10</sup> Bishops Ngô Đình Thục, Phạm Ngọc Chi, Trương Cao Đại.

<sup>11</sup> “Young” meant the power of the Southern bishops comparing to the bishops of the world. At that time average age of the southern bishops was 56,2. This average age was higher than the average age of the African bishops.

<sup>12</sup> *Catholicism and Nation* monthly magazine No. 65, May, 2000, p. 17. For some Catholics, the Ngô Đình Diệm came to power to be a triumph of Catholicism after years of trying. This event made some Catholic emigrants to feel inspired.

<sup>13</sup> According to Pides, in 1963 the South Catholic Church had 10 dioceses with 1,337,964 Catholics. Church had 54 congregations, Catholic university in Dalat, training priest institutes, 12 newspapers and publishers.

<sup>14</sup> See from *Nhận định I to Nhận định V* written by Nguyễn Văn Trung, Philosophical Professor. These documents were published in Sai Gon in 1958 -1963.

the balance of political power in the South, the cultural forum had a voice in contrast with the popular thought at that time. This voice was of philosophical professor who was a Catholic believer. He wrote that: “In the whole country, Catholics seem to be foreigners to their compatriots”<sup>(15)</sup>.

In the struggle for national independence, 1954-1963, Southern Catholicism had not yet any leader to meet required issues<sup>(16)</sup>. In 1960 Vietnamese Catholic hierarchy was established, but this time was transitional period. On history, Vietnamese church was not too young so that it could continue certain “clergy traditions”, but it was not self confidence to consider these traditions. Although the First Republic regime favored Catholic Church, the standpoint of Catholic Church on national condition was on the defensive and attached special importance to proceed ‘heritage of 1951’. At that time did the South Catholic Church only cope with temporary condition to defend Church structure, so the Common Letter orientated laymen to resist communism? Returning the remark of Nguyễn Tử Lộc: “Catholicism considers contradiction of Communism and Catholicism to be main contradiction that controls all political attitude while the contradiction of colonialism - nation, imperialism - nation is left to the secondary position”<sup>(17)</sup>.

## **2. The stage from 1964 -1975** <sup>(18)</sup>

President Ngô Đình Diệm was assassinated on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1963, the First Republic regime was collapsed and the South was disordered. The South bishops met together for two days conference in Sài Gòn and the Circular Letter was dated on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1964 to send all clergymen and laity. This letter reminded Catholics: “in the serious and difficult moments we would like to call all of you to unite together in national community”<sup>(19)</sup>.

---

<sup>15</sup> Nguyễn Văn Trung. *Nhận định I*, Nguyễn Du Publishing House, Sài Gòn, 1958, p. 122.

<sup>16</sup> According to Ordinance *Venerabilium Nostrorum* dated on 24<sup>th</sup> November, 1960 of Pope John XXIII decided that Vietnamese Catholic hierarchy was established and Vietnamese Catholic Church divided into three dioceses. The power and influence belonged to Northern Catholic emigrants. In the first phase from 1960 to the date of Ngo Dinh Diem regime collapsed, the role of the Archbishop Binh relatively dim because Bishop Ngô Đình Thục was the dean of the southern bishops and archbishop of Hue diocese. Bishop Phạm Ngọc Chi took responsibility for emigrants then he was appointed to be bishop of Quy Nhơn diocese. He was famous in Roma.

<sup>17</sup> National issue poses for Catholics, Đất Nước Review, December, 1968.

<sup>18</sup> Up to April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1975.

<sup>19</sup> Trần Anh Dũng (chief editor). *Vietnamese Catholic Hierarchy 1960-1995*, For internal circulation, Paris, 1996, p. 164.

When reading clearly this letter we find an important change of standpoint of the South Catholic Church before the issues of national unity, peace and nation. This reflected the agility of the bishops in the South in the implementation of the spirit of Vatican II in the context of Vietnam<sup>(20)</sup>. This letter dealt with the duty of believers to know the self-scrutiny in accordance with the demands of the Gospel, to renew their soul to be able to mix with others. This letter written that: “Catholics who are not living in margin of society. They are living among the Vietnamese people. Catholics consider all people as their brothers (...). We see a real danger for our country if the spirit of fear, division and concurrency spread in people. We must bring all our force at any cost to achieve national unity”<sup>(21)</sup>.

In 1966 under the light of the Second Vatican Council and the policy of peace of Pope John Paul II<sup>(22)</sup>. Southern bishops called for the belligerents to cease and sit on the conference table to negotiate and restore peace basing on spirit of respect for justice and freedom. After meeting was from September, 30<sup>th</sup> to October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1966 in Sài Gòn and chaired by Sergio Pignedo. He was an envoy of Holy See and the representative of the Pope. The bishops of the South met and promulgated an announcement on January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1966. After reading announcement, we find that Southern bishops carried out peace and anti-war policies of Church. This announcement quoted clearly standpoints of Pope John Paul VI. The announcement affirmed that: Pope always worries about painful conditions of Vietnam people who are writhing in pain because of the war. He has not missed a single chance or any means to seek the peace for the world and for our beloved Vietnamese country”<sup>(23)</sup>.

In the teachings for Catholics, announcement repeated the duty of Catholics: “Catholics are ready to shoulder responsibilities in Catholic fields”(...) In all actions, Catholics have to pay attention to national interests, make the peace and avoid clash of interests”<sup>(24)</sup>.

---

<sup>20</sup> The Second Vatican Council (October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1962 – December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1965). Archbishop Nguyễn Văn Bình and Southern bishops attended to the meeting. At that time Archbishop Bình mobilized learning movement in community.

<sup>21</sup> Trần Anh Dũng (chief editor). *Vietnamese Catholic Hierarchy* 1960-1995, For internal circulation, Paris, 1996, pp. 164- 165.

<sup>22</sup> See: *Catholicism and Nation* monthly magazine, No. 185, May, 2010, p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> Trần Anh Dũng (chief editor). *Vietnamese Catholic Hierarchy* 1960-1995, For internal circulation, Paris, 1996, p. 185.

<sup>24</sup> Trần Anh Dũng (chief editor). *Vietnamese Catholic Hierarchy* 1960-1995, For internal circulation, Paris, 1996, p. 188.

The changes of Southern bishops after 1964 came from 4 following problems:

- Firstly, the First Republic regime was collapsed in November, 1963 and experience of Northern Catholics emigration in 1954-1955, so bishops met many difficulties in choosing their political attitudes.

- Secondly, the spirit of the Second Vatican Council was new breath of air influenced on Southern Catholic Church. Council actually was looking for mystery of the Incarnation, so it affirmed its role in the world. It was noted that “The Council does not make any official condemnation of communists”<sup>(25)</sup>.

- Thirdly, because of disorders and dispute in internal government from 1964-1967<sup>(26)</sup>, Southern society exposed many uncertainties, so Southern bishops needed to consider world realities that came from gospel demand and gospel foundation. At that time many Catholics and non Catholics thirsted for peace .

- Fourthly, The role of Bishop Paul Nguyễn Văn Bình, Archbishop of Sài Gòn diocese<sup>(27)</sup>.

- The above reasons explained why in 1964 the Southern bishops gave prominence to the spirit of dialogue, reconciliation, acceptance of difference and they called for peace, national solidarity.

- From 1968 to 1971, in announcements and circular letters Southern Catholic Church was ready to campaign for peace in Vietnam. This is evident through events:

- + At the end of announcement on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1968 written that “finally, we call on the goodwill of both South and North governments that we build peace together. We also repeated the words of Pope Paul VI said on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1967: “To stop the

---

<sup>25</sup> See: Articles of Priests Thiện Cẩm and Nguyễn Hồng Giáo in *Catholicism and Nation* monthly magazine, No. 185, May, 2010, p. 10 and p. 111.

<sup>26</sup> In this period, many struggle for power within the Southern government happened. The situation was okay when the Constitution of the Second Republic regime was born on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1967.

<sup>27</sup> After 1965, the struggle for national liberation developed strongly. During this period Bishop Nguyễn Văn Bình listened and sympathized with all standpoints and then found the common denominator to unity. That was the spirit of charity and love. During this difficult period he stood outside the political parties to keep the unity of God's people. All his activities were aimed at the purpose of building a prosperous and happy country. See: Archbishop Nguyen Van Binh, *Catholicism and Nation* monthly magazine, 1995, p.10.

raids on Northern Vietnamese territory and also to end the infiltration of weapons and war material to the South”<sup>(28)</sup>.

The Circular Letter on January 5<sup>th</sup>, 1969 wrote that “our nation consists of various cultural origins and the compositions, but not for the reasons that caused the split, whereas cultural origins and the compositions make energy sources more abundant (...) This country is not of any individual, but it is of all Vietnamese people. Basing on the political, economic, cultural, social, aspects, we exchange together according to the position of citizens, so we will easily sympathize with each other”<sup>(29)</sup>.

The Pastoral Letter in 1973 and Declaration in 1974 affirmed consistent standpoint for peace of Bishops' Conference of Vietnam since 1966 and urge all people and parties to sign Pari Agreement in order peace and national reconciliation were implemented in Vietnam. The Declaration in 1974 has paragraph “With responsibility for God's people as well as for home, we hope to contribute in restoring peace to the country and the national reconciliation”<sup>(30)</sup>.

However, the Pastoral Letter on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1979 reminded Catholic believers to keep a watchful eye on atheist materialism “whether you like it or not, in an atmosphere of relative freedom of the South will have conflict of consciousness between two notions of life. It was consciousness of Christianity, Christ, Gospel, church with all the spiritual values of people. We have an occasion to repeat this conflict in Lent Letter on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1960. We repeated that atheist materialism is not only in countries that oppose and vilify Church”<sup>(31)</sup>.

In general, Church had many important changes on pastoral views at that time. Bishops were direct toward the Second Vatican to renew life of God's people and call for peace, such as encouragement of a clear religious life, charity with the country people to have a chance of eliminating war. Although the directions of calling for peace, charity from religious ethics did not repel the war. The Southern Catholic hierarchy only called Catholic believers. They did not dare to throw

---

<sup>28</sup> Trần Anh Dũng (chief editor). *Vietnamese Catholic Hierarchy 1960-1995*, For internal circulation, Paris, 1996, p. 194.

<sup>29</sup> Trần Anh Dũng (chief editor). *Vietnamese Catholic Hierarchy*,... Ibid, p. 209.

<sup>30</sup> Trần Anh Dũng (chief editor). *Vietnamese Catholic Hierarchy*,... Ibid, p. 237.

<sup>31</sup> Trần Anh Dũng (chief editor). *Vietnamese Catholic Hierarchy*,... Ibid, p. 231.

themselves in the struggle for national reunification. But progressive Catholic intellectuals and priests actively threw themselves in national struggle. The advantage of standpoint of Southern Catholicism was to quickly catch the world situation and call for peace in Vietnam. In fact there was wide gap between teachings of hierarchy and life style of Catholic believers. Leaders of Church made their effort to call for peace but Catholic believers still had anti – communist thought<sup>32</sup>. So we can find that political thought of Catholic believers was controlled Catholic thought. The new breath of air of the Second Vatican influenced Vietnamese Catholic hierarchy but not to influence the whole of Catholic believers in the South because in the Pastoral Letter in 1973 of Southern Church still remained Catholic believers to be vigilant over atheistic ideology<sup>33</sup>. Before 1975 Southern Church still reserved Communism and Lent Letter in 1960 still printed in god's people. The question where were God's people when hierarchy called for peace? Kind heart was not able to repel the war in Vietnam. Communists repelled the war and united country. They created comfortable condition for reconciliation of Catholicism and Nation.

Although Southern Catholic Church had many important changes, hierarchy did not throw itself into national struggle. Priests, however, created first steps for harmony of Southern Catholics and communists after 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1975.

### **III The stage 1975 -1980**

Different from Summer in 1954, Spring in 1975 almost of bishops and priests volunteered to stay in liberated zone. This determination was not innocent determination but primary intention of bishops and priests in the South. In the last days of Hồ Chí Minh campaign, archbishops in Huế and Sài Gòn and some Catholic believers called Catholic believers to stay in Vietnam for building our country. Many people understand that at the time of April 30<sup>th</sup> just a small omission or any wrong decision could create unfortunate consequence as 1954 in the North of Vietnam. Two archbishops realized and contributed significantly to stabilize the situation at that time. They took all their prestige to reassure the faithfuls not to evacuate as

---

<sup>32</sup> see: Catholic Information Agency in Vietnam, Saigon in January 1968 p. 98, 103, 11. Southern Catholics join the puppet army for various reasons, including ideological reason

<sup>33</sup> This issue was dealt with more flexibly in Pastoral Letter in 1973 . It does not refer to Communism but to the atheism that atheism and the Catholic faith are in contrast

1954- 1955. This time the Vietnamese Catholic hierarchy proved to be autonomy and self-control<sup>34</sup>.

After event of 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1975 three letters of head of Catholic Church in Sai Gon<sup>35</sup> sent to the faithfuls. In such sensitive condition, the role of the leader of Church as archbishop Nguyễn Văn Bình was necessary to stabilize the masses. Revolutionaries / Communists have acknowledged the contributions of archbishop Nguyễn Văn Bình<sup>36</sup>

After 1975, a dialogue of Southern Catholicism and revolutionaries was necessary<sup>37</sup>. To adapt to new circumstances<sup>38</sup> was a question for the leaders of the Catholicism in the South. It dispelled the long-standing internal concerns of the Catholic patriots. Psychologically, many Catholics were afraid of communism<sup>39</sup>. In New Year message archbishop said: "of course there are difficulties to arise either inappropriate for the new society, or the misunderstanding between brothers and sisters in the church, or our internality has not innovated properly"<sup>40</sup>.

8 months after the event of April 30<sup>th</sup>, the annual scientific meeting of the bishops of the South was held ( from 15<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> December, 1975). It was held after both South and North had agreed compromise. This showed the caution of the bishops of the South. After the meeting, the announcement instead of the common letter was promulgated.

---

<sup>34</sup> In 1954 several dioceses had migrated despite the directives of superiors, but in 1975 this phenomenon hardly occurred. Church had "matured" in the light of the Second Vatican Council. In the letter dated on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1975 Nguyen Kim Dien, archbishop Huê diocese called on Catholics to do well the duty of citizens under the leadership of the revolutionary government

<sup>35</sup> These were letters: the letter was sent to bishops, clergymen, and laity on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1975; The Circulars Letter dated on June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1975 and the Common Letter was written on the occasion of National Day, September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1975

<sup>36</sup> Before the South was liberated, Archbishop Nguyen Van Binh called on Catholics to stay in country and receiver the cause of national liberation as God's grace

<sup>37</sup> On temporary, many Catholics took part in the puppet military and they failed. On religion many Catholics had been evacuated. On ideology, many Catholics still feared communism. Fortunately, progressive intellectuals and priests created good premise for the reconstruction of Catholicism and Nation

<sup>38</sup> See *Catholicism and Nation Monthly Magazine*, no 65 May, 2000

<sup>39</sup> After visiting the North Priest Chan Tin wrote an article on *Đổi Diện* review no 82 on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1976. In that article he expressed the concerns of many Southern Catholics before the problem of national reunification issue and moving to socialism

<sup>40</sup> See *Catholicism and nation Monthly Magazine* April, 1986 p. 24

Through the press, we know that the conversation between the revolutionary government and the bishops was straight, open and friendly. This is initial character for the new relationship between the Communists and Catholics in the South. Notably, in the annual meeting of the Council of Bishops there were both priests and Catholic intellectuals. Bishops based on the real status of the church to find the solution so that the church integrated into new condition<sup>41</sup>. They wanted to listen to many different viewpoints before making decisions. On the other hand, they "*seek to transform the traditional structure of the church into dynamic, flexible and creative organization*"<sup>42</sup>. This preliminary meeting prepared for meeting in 1976 and repeated the need to reform the church. An announcement was drafted and promulgated on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1975. A telegraph was sent to Pope John Paul II to express communion. Then a telegraph was sent to Tr nh Nhu Khu , archbishop of Ha Noi diocese to welcome to Northern Catholic Church and hope for reunification<sup>43</sup>.

Common Letter on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1976 *formally affirmed the position of Southern bishops.*

Article six of the Common Letter formally affirmed the standpoint of Southern bishops for homeland after liberation. "Catholics shoulder to shoulder with others build the country and do what is beneficial to the national communities but not against faith and Christian conscience" Article 7 wrote that "indeed, there is conflict between the Christian faith and socialism and Marxism-Leninism. Everyone sees conflict. However, there is dialogue between those who sincerely serve the people". The letter concluded that "Faith is not a wall to separate Catholics and non-Catholics"

The letter formally abolished view that had existed long in Church that "Christians and communists can not have dialogue". A period of four years, from Common Letter in 1976 to the Common Letter in 1980 was the period of *contact* and

---

<sup>41</sup> Southern bishops divide into three groups to discuss problems such as : study of correlations in new society; the study of Southern internality; study of training of God's people in new condition

<sup>42</sup> See the article of priest Vu Khoi Phung in *Dung Day Monthly Magazine* no 76 December, 1975 p. 32-35

<sup>43</sup> The short answer of archbishop of Hanoi diocese Tr nh Nhu Khu  "look forward to meeting". See *Dung Day Monthly Magazine* no 76 December, 1975 p. 41

*integration* between the Communists and Catholics<sup>44</sup>. The salient feature of this period was action Archbishop Nguyễn Văn Bình.

In general, the documents of the Vietnamese bishops of this period reflected that the period after April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1975 to the Common Letter in 1980, Vietnamese Catholic hierarchy determined to find a direction to live with the nation, with the revolution and the communists in Vietnamese homeland. Southern Church remained firmly peaceful solution since 1963. This was a solid choice for worship of God and love of nation.

The period of 1975- 1980 was difficult period because Catholics had many worries. The relation between Catholics and communists met many difficulties. Many Catholics thought that the purpose of the Communist Party is to limit or eliminate Catholics. So any administrative or legal measures relating to Catholics could be considered as measures to eliminate the Catholicism. The cause of all deadlock was probably due to the Vietnamese Party and State as well as the Vietnamese Catholic Church had not fully evaluate cooperation<sup>45</sup>.

Actually, after April 30<sup>th</sup> Southern Catholic Church integrated into nation because following problems

1- The view of bishops over peace, reconciliation before 1975; 2- The spirit of Vatican was strong; 3- The radical –Catholic movement before 1975; 4- Our country was reunification to create real condition for reconciliation; 5- The policy over religious unity of State.

At last, the first Congress of Vietnamese Bishops was held in Hanoi on from 24<sup>th</sup> April to 1<sup>st</sup> may, 1980 with Cardinal Trịnh Văn Căn and all bishops in Vietnam. After a week of working, Congress had established the Standing Committee consisting of 10 members and sent a letter to Christians and clergymen.

The Standing Committee of the first Congress of Vietnamese Bishops included 01 chairman Cardinal Trịnh Văn Căn , 02 vice chairmen; Archbishops Nguyễn Văn

---

<sup>44</sup> One priest said: "*unfortunately, some government officials and some progressive Catholics criticized that bishops did not definitively and actively called for Catholics shoulder by shoulder with other in building country.* See article of priest Nguyễn Hồng Giáo in Catholicism and nation Monthly Magazine April, 2010 p. 66

<sup>45</sup> From 1975 Northern church and Southern Church met each other and discussed the situation of Church

Bình and Nguyễn Kim Điền; secretary general bishop Nguyễn Tùng Cương (Hải Phòng diocese); 03- deputy secretaries general bishop Phạm Đình Tụng, (Bắc Ninh diocese), bishop Nguyễn Quang Sách (Đà Nẵng diocese) bishop Lê Phong Thuận (Cần Thơ diocese) and three bishops' commissions. Bishop Phan Thế Vinh (Hưng Hóa diocese) bore responsibility for commission of parishioners; Bishop Huỳnh Đông Các (Quy Nhơn diocese) bore responsibility for commission of priests and clergymen; bishop Bùi Tuần (Long Xuyên diocese) bore responsibility for commission of worship and Holy Arts. Through this congress we find united determination of Congress.

On structure. The 1<sup>st</sup> Congress of Vietnamese bishops was simple with three commissions. The special feature of the Congress of Vietnamese bishops was the Common Letter on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1980 on *renewal of church in the spirit of Vatican II, and living the gospel within the nation for the happiness of fellow Vietnamese*.

The Common Letter consisted of 13 articles with 3 parts: the first part: The information on the Congress of Vietnamese Bishops and expression of his gratitude; Part 2 consisted of 10 articles about the pastoral direction of the church in modern times; Part 3 spoke to God's people. Finally, the conclusion with a view of past, present and future of the church.

The most interesting content was in the second part – the pastoral orientation. Basing on the first message of Pope Paul VI on Christ Church, bishop defined what church was, aim and mission of church in modern society. The Congress of Vietnamese bishops proposed concrete duties of the faithfuls for the country that faithfuls actively contributed in building and defense of the homeland, and the faithfuls built a lifestyle and an expression of faith in accordance with national traditions. *“New general direction of the Common Letter in 1980 was a voluntary choice basing on Good News and community spirit in accordance with the reality”*<sup>46</sup>.

---

<sup>46</sup> The reason for this situation, partly because the implementation of religious policy of the Party and our State is not consistent. Those people who take responsibility for implementing of the Party's religious policies are afraid of that religion can be taken advantage of undermining the cause of people. It is suspected that because of context of war and the changes in the Central Highlands and the Northern border

In general , we find that 5 years was a route for Church to integrate into nation in new society. At first the route met many difficulties. Through time Church and nation gradually understood each other. Church determined clearly its orientation in the Common Letter in 1980. Experiences showed that peace can not be carried out without reconciliation and reconciliation only became a reality when the communists and Catholics live together in perfect harmony in Vietnam.

This was the real transformation in perception and action. Church went through a challenge that was facing the Communists, at the same time Church had to “ reassess” its anti-communist sense in the past. Catholics had to recognize the fact that Vietnamese communists always devote their life to national independence. For Southern bishops, the choice of living with the communist-revolution was key condition in order that Church harmonized with people and reaffirmed to be an important part of Vietnamese nation.

#### **IV. Looking back on the process of changing perceptions.**

1. For Vietnamese Catholics, national problem has been always a great problem. On the one hand this problem not only *world problem*, but also *emotional one* to the homeland that Catholics can not ignore. In the struggle for national independence, Vietnamese State always has been interested *patriotic* or *unpatriotic problems*, Vietnamese State thinks that religion should unite with the nation in defence of the homeland and our State also opposes the use of religion. After the South was liberated Catholicism was reconciled with nation to make development for both sides.

After reading formal documents we find that before 1963 Southern Catholic Church had been not really active when they received instructions from the outside, from foreign countries as well as heavy anti-communist idea following the spirit of Holy See before the Second Vatican Council.

The special feature which was stated in 2 Common Letters in 1950 and in 1960 was that Communism was out of harmony with Catholicism and Communism and Catholicism were opposite. The Common Letter in 1973 and Declaration in 1974 dealt with gentle state of Communism and Catholicism. Priests considered the war in the past as “fratricidal war”. In 1973 and in 1974 the change was right because the

decision of bishops influenced on millions of Catholics. So that this change also reflected the activity of Southern bishops after the Second Vatican Council.

Before the Second Vatican Council influenced on the South, bishops seemed to make the most of relative stableness of Catholic life so they were not enlightened<sup>47</sup> and renewal<sup>48</sup>. This stableness more or less connected with an affection of the First Republic Regime for Catholicism. Although hierarchy was established in late 1960, the stage of 1954 – 1963 was the transitional period of Vietnamese Catholic Church, but Vietnamese Catholic Church was still controlled by foreign bishops.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, before the Second Catholic Church the attitude of Universal Church towards Communism was severe.

Before 1963 Southern bishops were in position which was *separated from nation and their standpoint was anti-communist standpoint*.

2- After the Second Vatican Council, some radical Catholic intellectuals and priests has revolutionary actions. They set forth anti-war program. They took part in demonstration against arrest of students. Because of their attitude many radical Catholic intellectuals and priests were arrested<sup>50</sup> and many newspapers were suspended.

Many radical Catholic intellectuals were not satisfied with Announcement and Common Letter which were adopted by high –ranking hierarchy<sup>51</sup>. Their attitude connected closely movements “ Catholicism builds peace” “ Catholicism and Nation”. Their attitude more or less influenced the standpoint of Southern bishops<sup>52</sup>.

During 1964- 1973, Southern bishops began to consider the thought and action of hierarchy. They dealt with many problems such as the *restoration of peace in Vietnam; national solidarity*, anti- fratricidal war; social inequality. They

---

<sup>47</sup> See Catholicism and Nation monthly Magazine, No 1758, May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010, p. 14

<sup>48</sup> This is supposition of causality

<sup>49</sup> The role of cardinal Spellman was the most outstanding.

<sup>50</sup> See Catholicism and Nation No 6/ 1971 and No 9-10/ 1973

<sup>51</sup> This problem was showed in Doi Dien, Dung Day, Dong Dao magazines in 1969-1975

<sup>52</sup> In 1967 Archbishop of Hue Nguyen Kim Dien declared to international newspapers that “Communists are my brothers”. See Catholicism and Nation Monthly Magazine, No 65 may 2000 p. 17

emphasized expression of the gospel in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council in accordance with the reality in Vietnam.

The attitude of Archbishop Nguyễn Văn Bình was harmonious. He thought highly of peace problem and unity of Catholicism and nation. In these years of war, he did not participate in political actions. He tried his best to find solution for national reconciliation.

In late 1974 and early 1975, Southern Catholic Church, particularly hierarchy advocated the line of action of Church how to meet the demands.

of practice and correspond with situation. The Common Letters and Announcements of Southern bishops in this period reflected clearly the adjustable reforms of “structure”<sup>53</sup> and traditional behavior of the church towards communism, namely the state and the revolutionary communists.

In general, from the Second Vatican Council to April 30<sup>th</sup> 1975 Southern bishops had *many worries*. They still dealt with atheism<sup>54</sup>. They did not throw themselves in danger spot, they only called for peace and national reconciliation<sup>55</sup>

For the event 1975, Catholics more or less changed the inherent structures of Church<sup>56</sup>, especially the cultural structure. In fact, war and revolution had changed the cultural habit and lifestyle of Catholics in the South. In order to correct the changes, Catholicism of the South and the North, Southern Catholicism and revolutionary government, hierarchy and laity should have necessary time for reunification and harmony of both the South and the North. That was the reason why the Vietnamese Council of bishops was established in 1980 and the light gospel of the Common Letter in 1980 newly enlightened God’s people.

---

<sup>53</sup> Bishops oriented the principle of religious life of believers

<sup>54</sup> The Common Letters in 1973 and in 1976 dealt with atheism. But the atheism was dealt with in the Common Letter in 1980 n

<sup>55</sup> Archbishop Nguyen Van Binh stood apart internal dispute of Vietnamese Catholicism

<sup>56</sup> The structure of Church was influenced

The correction of traditional and psychological habits of Catholics made some first changes.<sup>57</sup> In general, in 1975- 1980 the decisions of hierarchy were carried out by almost of Catholics .

The Common Letter in 1980 was the result of the innovative process of Vietnamese Catholic Church. The Common Letter in 1980 was not only timely resolution but also innovative orientation of Vietnamese Catholic Church<sup>58</sup>. Here, Vietnamese Council of Bishops resolved two hard problems of Catholicism and Nation: *going with nation and integrating into national culture*.

The important significance of the Common Letter in 1980 was to create many changes in thought and action of Church so Church could integrate into nation. Church realized that church was the centre of the reform. Because church recognized the its limits in the past. Because Church countered the communists who devoted their life to the cause of national liberation so church seemed to take part in the struggle for national independence later. Until the Common Letter in 1980 Church rejected anti- communist idea and actively has taken part in social activities in new background when our country has been completely united. We should listen to the recent remark of bishop Bui Tuan “The Common Letter in 1980 has an important significance because it changed untimely thought of Vietnamese Catholic Church at that time. This thought was “ implacability with communists”<sup>59</sup>.

From 1975 to 1980 Southern bishops changed from worry to throwing themselves into danger spot. They decided orientation Going with nation. Archbishop Nguyễn Văn Bình has had a special role in this result. /.

---

<sup>57</sup> At that time there were some cases of Catholicism as Vinh Son case and case of order in Thu Duc. These cases made Catholics to worry. See Catholicism and Nation Monthly magazine no 34 October, 1997 p.88

<sup>58</sup> See Catholicism and Nation Monthly magazine no 184, April 2010 p. 72

<sup>59</sup> Catholicism and Nation Monthly magazine, no84, April 2010 p. 74-75