# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE STATE OF VIETNAM: A JOURNEY TOWARDS JUSTICE, CHARITY, AND FAITH

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## Introduction

### Main Concern

The Vietnamese government has recently made a momentous decision by granting permission for the resident representative of Pope Francis to operate in Vietnam. This move signifies a significant development in the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Vietnamese government. In addition, the President of Vietnam has formally invited Pope Francis to visit the country, underscoring the growing rapport between the two entities. This gesture holds promise for fostering greater understanding and collaboration between the Catholic Church and the Vietnamese government.

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the government in Vietnam has been complex and, at times, contentious. The government has, at times, restricted the activities of the Church, leading to tensions and disagreements. However, in recent years, there have been efforts to improve relations, with the government showing greater tolerance towards the Catholic Church and allowing for more religious freedom.

This paper aims to thoroughly investigate the evolving relationship between the Church and the Vietnamese government,

focusing on understanding the factors contributing to its improvement. Additionally, it will analyze the potential implications of this evolving relationship for the future of both entities. Accordingly, the Vietnamese Church has embodied the principles of Justice, Charity, and Faith to promote the spirit of harmony and love in Vietnam.

## Method: See-Judge-Act Pastoral Framework

See:

- The development of the intricate dynamics between the State and the Church in Vietnam will be carefully examined in this paper. Furthermore, an analysis will be conducted on the relationship between the State of Vietnam and the Vatican, delving into the complexities and nuances that have shaped their interactions over time.
- The paper also evaluates the contribution of the Catholic Church to social life in Vietnam, especially amidst the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Over the years, the Vietnamese state has undergone a significant transformation in its approach toward Vietnamese Catholics, with a noticeable increase in trust in the Catholic Church. This paper is to discuss this shift in policy, reflecting a growing recognition of the positive contributions that the Catholic community makes to society.

Judge:

- The paper will assess the reasons for mutual suspicion between the state and the Church of Vietnam.
- It will also consider the efforts of the Vietnamese Church to live the value of Justice, Charity, and Faith,

about the Vietnamese state, both without creating further misunderstandings and not to be controlled by the state.

Act:

- Learning from the realities of its relationship with the State of Vietnam, the Church can continue to preach the Gospel in harmony both with the State and with other sectors of Vietnamese society.
- We can learn from the spirit of Synodality to create a fruitful atmosphere of harmony and collaboration in both the Church and the society of Vietnam.

## The Developments in the Church-State Relations in Vietnam

### Stages of Development in the Relationship between the Catholic Church and the State of Vietnam since 1975

In 1975, Vietnam experienced a significant milestone as it unified into one country with the title "The Socialist Republic of Vietnam."[1] This event had a profound impact on the Catholic Church in Vietnam, leading to substantial changes within the religious community.

***Stage 1 Repression and Resistance (1975-1986):*** After the reunification of Vietnam, the Catholic Church faced severe restrictions and persecution. Many church properties were confiscated, foreign missionaries were expelled, and local clergy and laity were arrested even without a sentence. The Church resisted the government's interference and maintained its loyalty to the Pope and the universal Church. Many Catholics fled the country as refugees.

1. The National Assembly Of Vietnam, *The Constitution Of The Socialist Republic Of Vietnam* (Hanoi, 2013), no. 1.

***Stage 2 Reform, Dialogue, and Reconciliation (1986-2016):*** With the introduction of the Doi Moi (Renovation) policy in 1986, the government adopted a more pragmatic and tolerant approach to religion, allowing for some degree of religious freedom and social service activities by the Church. The Church also initiated a dialogue with the government, seeking to improve the situation of the Catholics and to normalize the relations between the state and the Holy See. Some positive signs of progress were the release of some imprisoned priests, and the reopening of some seminaries and churches. The visit of President Nguyen Minh Triet on 11 December 2009 resulted in the establishment of a Viet Nam-Holy See Joint Working Group.[2]

The new millennium witnessed a further improvement in the relationship between the Church and the state, marked by mutual respect and collaboration. The government recognized the Church's contribution to the development and stability of the country and granted more permissions for pastoral activities, religious education, and charitable works. The Church supported the government's efforts to combat poverty, corruption, and social evils. The most significant achievement of this stage was the restoration of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Vietnam in 2011, after decades of estrangement.

***Stage 3 Existing Challenges and Opportunities (2017-present):***

The Church has taken numerous new initiatives in its relationship with the Vietnamese government. The Church may set up additional parishes and dioceses. The Church can organize priestly ordinations, just by informing the Vietnamese state,

2. Lisa Zengarini, "Vietnam's President Meets with Catholic Bishops in Ho Chi Minh City," *Vatican News*, August 8, 2023, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-08/the-vietnamese-president-meets-bishops.html.

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rather than seeking approval as previously required.[3] The State recognized the favorable impacts of the Church on Vietnam in both domestic and international matters. There are still some challenges, nevertheless, the circumstances have improved significantly compared to the past.

## Misunderstanding between Catholic Church and the State of Vietnam

After the unification of Vietnam in 1975, there was a significant misunderstanding between the Catholic Church and the government of Vietnam. This resulted from various factors, including historical tensions, political ideologies, and conflicting interests.

The Vietnamese State perceived Catholicism as a threat to their authority and mistakenly associated it with the Western world and anti-Communist forces. "Vietnam's rulers are acutely aware that Catholics were among the most committed anti-Communist Vietnamese during the Vietnam War."[4] They believed that all Catholics, especially the clergy, were opposed to Communism, leading them to view Catholicism as a challenge to their power. This misunderstanding led to strained relations, with the government imposing restrictions on the Catholic Church and its activities. The Church, in turn, resisted these limitations, leading to a prolonged period of conflict and mistrust.

3. TCTCNN, "Quyền Tự Do Tôn Giáo Tại Việt Nam [Freedom of Religion in Vietnam]," *National Organization Magazine*, September 3, 2023, https://tcnn.vn/news/detail/61016/Quyen-tu-do-ton-giao-tai-Viet-Nam.html.

4. Samuel Gregg, "Corruption, Communism, and Catholicism in Vietnam," *Acton Institute*, August 12, 2009, https://www.acton.org/pub/commentary/2009/08/12/corruption-communism-and-catholicism-vietnam.

The misunderstanding mentioned marked the start of a journey aimed at fostering reconciliation and mutual understanding between the Church and the government of Vietnam.

## The Vietnamese Church Goes Through Hardships with Faith and Perseverance

We are going to examine the immense difficulties that the Vietnamese Church had to endure following the year 1975, specifically by illustrating the challenges through the use of concrete and specific instances.

### A Cardinal is Arrested after the Event of 1975

The arrest of Cardinal Van Thuan demonstrates his unwavering resolve during difficult times. It represented the challenges that the Vietnamese clergy had to face. The government's arrest of Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan in 1975 was not merely a single occurrence; it served as a powerful representation of the significant obstacles that the Catholic Church encountered in Vietnam. His situation embodies the intricate and intense misunderstanding that has characterized the connection between religious beliefs and political authority in the nation.

Cardinal Francis Xavier's detention, occurring only days before the collapse of Saigon, had a profound impact due to its timing and the specific individual targeted. He was not just an ordinary clergyman, but rather a prominent figure within the Church, representing its ethical influence and unwavering strength. His imprisonment during the unstable period of governmental transition conveyed a chilling warning to the broader Catholic community.[5]

5. Xuân Lộc Đoàn, "Về Đức Hồng y Nguyễn Văn Thuận [About Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan]," *Vietnamese BBC News*, October 22, 2010, https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/world/2010/10/101022_cardinal_thuan_news.

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"He spent 13 years in prison and under house arrest in his homeland after the State came to power in 1975, after the Vietnam War, and began repressing the Roman Catholic Church."[6] His experiences mirrored the persecution faced by countless clergy and faithful: land confiscations, restrictions on worship, and societal pressure. However, his unwavering faith and ability to forgive even his captors offered a beacon of hope and resistance.

While persecution was a brutal reality, the Church faced another challenge: navigating a new political landscape. Van Thuan's imprisonment highlighted the complex question of how to engage with the government of Vietnam. Should the Church confront the regime openly or seek dialogue and compromise? This dilemma continues to shape the Church's actions today.

The difficulties experienced by Van Thuan and the Church still have an impact in the present time. The issue of religious freedom remains a worry in Vietnam, and the connection between the Church and the government is still changing. His narrative serves as a reminder of the lasting power of faith in the presence of political suppression, providing important teachings for communities dealing with comparable challenges worldwide.

## Confiscation policy of the State after 1975-event

Just after 1975, "Many of the Church's activities — from faith and pure worship to educational, medical, charitable activities — are restricted and prohibited. Many Church facilities — such

6. Reuters, "Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan, 74; Was Held Prisoner in Vietnam," *The New York Times*, September 21, 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/21/world/cardinal-nguyen-van-thuan-74-was-held-prisoner-in-vietnam.html.

as schools, hospitals, charity centers — were confiscated."[7] Its action came from the idea "based on the goal of eliminating socioeconomic class struggles by creating a classless society in which everyone shares the benefits of labor and the state controls all property and wealth."[8] The State wanted to use the confiscated property for its purposes, such as building public facilities, housing, or offices. It also wanted to deprive the Church of its economic and social resources and influence. Consequently, many of the Church's activities, including those related to faith, worship, education, healthcare, and charity, were restricted or prohibited. This significantly hindered the ability of the Church to carry out its mission and serve the community. The government took control of confiscated Church facilities, including schools, hospitals, and charity centers. This limited the access for both Catholics and non-Catholics in Vietnam to essential services that had previously been offered by the Church.

Furthermore, the government's actions were aimed at undermining the economic and social resources of the Church. By confiscating its properties, the government sought to weaken the Church's influence and control over the community. There was a misconception that the Catholic Church posed a threat to the Vietnamese government, which led authorities to be concerned about its influence within Vietnam. This had a profound effect on the ability of the Church to support its members.

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7. Xuân Lộc Đoàn, "Giáo Hội Công Giáo VN Sau Biến Cố 30/4 [Vietnamese Catholic Church after the April 30 Incident]," *Vietnamese BBC News*, April 19, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/forum/2015/04/150419_30april_doanxuanloc.

8. National Geographic Society, "Communism," *National Geographic Education*, accessed May 10, 2024, https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/communism/.

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Overall, the confiscation of the Catholic church's properties by the Vietnamese Government had serious consequences for the Church's capacity to function and serve the community, as well as for the welfare of the population that relied on the Church's services.

## Reflection on the Relationship Between the Catholic Church and the Vietnamese Government in Light of Justice, Charity, and Faith

### No bishop Gives Up the Flock

Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan accepted being imprisoned to fulfill his mission as a shepherd, following Jesus' teaching that "I will lay down my life for the sheep."[9] This was just one example among many bishops and priests who chose to stay in Vietnam to uphold the Church's existence in the country. "Xung quanh biến cố 30.4.1975, không một giám mục nào ở miền Nam rời bỏ đất nước và đoàn chiên của mình." [Around April 30, 1975, not a single bishop in the South left his country and his flock].[10] This reality reflected the resolute stance of the Bishops in Vietnam, who refused to leave their mission and their congregation during this challenging time. This unwavering dedication to their mission exemplifies the strength and determination of these religious leaders in the face of adversity. It also signifies the strong Faith of Vietnamese Catholics.

This event may establish a relation to Bartolomé de Las Casas' determination and perseverance in fighting for the

9. Jn 10:15 (NAB).

10. Công Đức Lê, "Nhìn Lại Giáo Hội Việt Nam 60 Năm Qua - Nhận Diện Những Cơ Hội Và Những Thách Đố Hiện Nay [Looking Back At The Last 60 Years Of The Vietnamese Church - Identifying Current Opportunities And Challenges]," *Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam*, May 8, 2021, https://hdgmvietnam.com/chi-tiet/nhin-lai-giao-hoi-viet-nam-60-nam-qua-nhan-dien-nhung-co-hoi-va-nhung-thach-do-hien-nay-41882#_Toc71356557.

freedom of the Indians. He saw "the bleeding underside of the tapestry. And he devoted his life to healing it."[11] His unwavering commitment to justice, coupled with his resilience in the face of opposition, cemented his legacy as a champion for the rights of indigenous people and a pivotal figure in the early advocacy for human rights.

At that time, all Vietnamese clergy demonstrated remarkable faithfulness to the Church and the message of the Gospel, especially during challenging times. This unwavering dedication exemplified their commitment to evangelization. This is also a demonstration of hope that is expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."[12] Despite facing challenges, the Vietnamese Church holds the belief that through unwavering faith in Christ, it is possible to seek genuine justice and love while yearning for a future filled with trust and charity. Indeed, this path is lengthy and demands considerable sacrifice and steadfastness.

## The Way of the Living Word

The Church of Vietnam is strongly connected to the pursuit of embodying and following God's way. This connection is especially evident in the practices and beliefs of the Vietnamese Catholic Church. The principles of the Living Word have been consistently upheld by this faith community, guaranteeing

11. Bartolome de las Casas, *The Only Way*, ed. Helen Parish, trans. Francis Patrick Sullivan (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 11.

12. Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution On The Church In The Modern World* (Gaudium Et Spes), December 7, 1965, no. 1, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

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that their actions and outreach are based on the teachings and love demonstrated by Jesus Christ.

Central to the Vietnamese Catholic ethos is a profound commitment to the Word of God, which has guided the Church's engagement with the wider society. This dedication manifests in a range of activities aimed at uplifting and supporting the community, emphasizing the heavenly values that the Church seeks to bring into the context of Vietnam. The Church's focus is not on political involvement but instead on contributing positively through education, charity works, and promoting religious dialogues, thereby embodying obedience to the Mother Church in a manner that keeps it aloof from political entanglements.

The relationship between the Vietnamese Catholic Church and the government is intricate, especially considering the government's attempts to restrict the Church's activities. Despite facing such obstacles, the Church remains patient and resolute in its commitment to a path of love – a love that even extends to those seen as opponents. This unwavering adherence to the teachings of Jesus, particularly the lessons on responding nonviolently[13], emphasizes the Church's devotion to peaceful and friendly interaction with all sectors of society.

Historical figures like Chrysostom have emphasized the importance of ideal missionaries who, "win the friendship of those who hate us by our unfailing charity. Gentleness is powerful."[14] The Vietnamese Catholics adopt a similar perspective, seeking to interact with the Vietnamese government as potential friends in collaboration. This method of constructing

13. Mt 5:38-42 (NAB).

14. Francis Patrick Sullivan, *Indian Freedom: The Cause of Bartolomé de Las Casas, 1484-1566 : A Reader* (Kansas city: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 208.

connections instead of barriers has promoted a developing comprehension and faith between the Church and different sectors of Vietnamese society, demonstrating the effect of conversation and companionship.

The commitment of the Vietnamese Catholic Church to live according to the teachings of the Gospel has resulted in significant achievements in evangelization. By placing importance on the teachings of Jesus and living out the virtues such as patience, love, charity, and faithfulness, the Church has not only encouraged harmony and understanding within Vietnam. It has also made valuable contributions to the social and spiritual well-being of the community. Through these efforts, the Church demonstrates how adhering to the message of the Gospel can bring about transformation in societies, bridging gaps and fostering a culture of peace and mutual respect.

## COVID-19 Pandemic and Fruitful Cooperation

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2019, was the most devastating crisis worldwide in recent years. It has affected countless lives, disrupted the global economy, and posed a challenge to the healthcare systems across many nations. Vietnam also experienced significant repercussions from the pandemic, including a high number of fatalities, infections, and enforced lockdowns. During this challenging time, the Church in Vietnam demonstrated its unity and collaboration with the government and society in the battle against the pandemic, reflecting with the message conveyed by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*.

In his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis highlights the interconnectedness of all human beings and the importance of brotherhood and social companionship in light of the worldwide obstacles. He writes: "True, a worldwide tragedy like the

Covid-19 pandemic momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person's problems are the problems of all. Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together."[15] This message resonates with the Vietnamese Catholics, who have a long history of suffering and resilience, as well as a strong sense of community and faith.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnamese Catholics have made significant endeavors to contribute to the fight against the virus, working together with the government. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (CBCV) has issued pastoral letters and statements urging both the faithful and the general public to adhere to health guidelines, pray for the end of the pandemic, and provide support to the vulnerable and the needy.[16] The CBCV has also provided financial assistance and equipment to the government and the health sector, encouraging parishes and religious communities to participate in relief efforts.

The Church made a significant contribution through the voluntary service of many Vietnamese religious individuals. They offered to care for COVID-19 patients in specific hospitals, despite the risks of exposure to a potentially deadly virus. Some of these religious individuals contracted the COVID-19 virus and even died from the infection while working in the

15. Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti Of The Holy Father Francis On Fraternity And Social Friendship*, October 3, 2020, Encyclicals, no. 32, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

16. CBCV, "Hội Đồng Giám Mục Việt Nam: Thư Gửi Cộng Đồng Dân Chúa (05-05-2020) [Conference Of Bishops Of Vietnam: Letter To The Community Of God's People (May 5, 2020)]," *Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam*, May 5, 2020, https://hdgmvietnam.com/chi-tiet/hoi-dong-giam-muc-viet-nam-thu-gui-cong-dong-dan-chua-05-05-2020--39838.

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hospital.[17] They selflessly gave their lives for the well-being of others, following the example of Christ and the saints. The government and society recognized and appreciated their heroic service. The Church in Vietnam played a significant role in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the nation's efforts to overcome the crisis.

The remarkable contributions of the Church in Vietnam are trying to help the Vietnamese society and government recognize the true value of the Gospel that Vietnamese Catholics are spreading within the country. As a result, the government and the Church in Vietnam developed a mutual understanding and trust, facilitating improved dialogue and cooperation for the future. Therefore, the Covid-19 pandemic was not only a challenge but also an opportunity for the Church in Vietnam to demonstrate its faith and love in action.

## Justice and Charity

In the society of Vietnam, the Catholic Church remains a beacon of hope and a steadfast proponent of the Gospel's values. With a mission deeply rooted in the virtues of justice and charity, the Church tirelessly works to embody the compassionate spirit of Christ's teachings. Its approach to truth is not one of contention or confrontation; rather, it is a gentle invitation to experience the transformative power of God's love.

Vietnamese Catholics are making a substantial contribution to Vietnamese society by engaging in numerous charitable activities. Inspired by the teachings of the Gospel, they actively engage in initiatives that prioritize helping the less fortunate and marginalized members of their community. From running

17. Quynh Trang, "Hàng Trăm Tu Sĩ Công Giáo Tham Gia Tuyến Đầu Chống Dịch [Hundreds of Catholic Religious Joined the Front Line in Fighting the Epidemic]," July 23, 2021, https://plo.vn/hang-tram-tu-si-cong-giao-tham-gia-tuyen-dau-chong-dich-post638567.html.

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shelters for the homeless to organizing food drives for those in need, Vietnamese Catholics demonstrate a deep commitment to serving others with love and compassion. Their dedication to charity not only provides essential support to those facing hardships but also serves as a shining example of selfless giving and kindness in Vietnamese society.

The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) is engaged in charitable work in Vietnam through various activities, particularly by establishing a Charity Home for poor children, including those from ethnic minority backgrounds. At present, Charity Home is providing care for 70 children, comprising orphans and those from extremely disadvantaged situations. Within this group, there are 04 children from the Ma ethnic community, 06 from the H' Mong ethnic group, 29 from the M'Nong ethnic group, and 31 from the Kinh ethnic group.[18] The Vietnamese government has acknowledged the contributions of the OMI. It has granted permission for them to conduct missionary work across Vietnam without any constraints. This development signifies the growing trust of the Vietnamese authorities in missionary congregations operating within the country.

Additionally, Vietnamese Catholics are providing care for those affected by leprosy and HIV/AIDS. The task of caring for these patients is both challenging and risky. Furthermore, these individuals often face social discrimination. As a result, there is a limited number of individuals willing to work in this sector. However, Vietnamese Catholics, particularly religious, demonstrate a willingness to serve in healthcare centers taking care of those with HIV. The care of individuals living with HIV/AIDS is a key point for dioceses and religious

18. Xuan Hien Ngo, "Nhà Tình Thương O.M.I. [Charity Home O.M.I.]," *O.M.I. Vietnam*, May 17, 2022, https://donghiensi.com/bai-viet/nha-tinh-thuong-ho-dao-bung/852.

congregations. For instance, in 2005, "Mai Tam House" in Thu Duc District, operated by The Camillians, and Mai Hoa Center, run by the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, was established to support patients in the advanced stages of HIV/AIDS. Similarly, Mai Tam House in Phu Nhuan, managed by the Pastoral Department of the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City, provides care for individuals with terminal-stage HIV/AIDS.[19] Certainly, the involvement of Catholic laity is crucial in these charitable endeavors as they work alongside the religious to share God's love with all. These initiatives represent just a fraction of the numerous charitable endeavors undertaken by Vietnamese Catholics.

## *Caritas in Veritate*

The Church of Vietnam plays a crucial role in advocating for human dignity within Vietnamese society. The Vietnamese Church frequently addresses the importance of preserving the environment and supporting the marginalized individuals affected by climate change and environmental pollution. The Bishops' Conference of Vietnam consistently highlights the significance of freedom of religion as a fundamental right, urging all to respect this freedom stated in the Constitution of Vietnam.[20] Additionally, the Church actively engages in initiatives aimed at safeguarding the well-being of children,

19. Phú Lợi Nguyễn, "Vai Trò Của Người Công Giáo Tham Gia Vào Công Tác Xã Hội Trên Lĩnh Vực Giáo Dục, y Tế và Bảo Trợ Xã Hội, Từ Thiện Nhân Đạo [The Role of Catholics Participating in Social Work in the Fields of Education, Health, Social Protection, and Humanitarian Charity]," *Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs*, January 5, 2021, https://btgcp.gov.vn/tin-bai-nghien-cuu-va-trao-doi-y-kien-cua-doc-gia/vai-tro-cua-nguoi-cong-giao-tham-gia-vao-cong-tac-xa-hoi-tren-linh-vuc-giao-duc-y-te-va-bao-tro-xa-hoi-tu-thien-nhan-dao-postZQR82OMqdA.html.

20. The National Assembly Of Vietnam, *The Constitution Of The Socialist Republic Of Vietnam*, no. 24.

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women, and other vulnerable ones from exploitation and mistreatment.

While the Church "cannot and must not replace the State,"[21] She continues to put in significant effort for justice and the common good, issues the Church deeply cares about. The Vietnamese Church is willing to speak against sins, but not to condemn sinners. Furthermore, The Church is prepared to dedicate itself to enhancing social issues in Vietnam, even if it means making sacrifices for the greater good. "A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak."[22] Truly, on many occasions, expressing love through actions holds greater significance than mere words. Love has been expressed and significantly contributed to the mutual understanding between the Church and the Vietnamese state.

## ENCOUNTER

Encounter holds a significant importance in fostering mutual understanding. In this light, the relationship between Vietnam and the Vatican has improved significantly due to regular annual exchanges. In July 2023, President Vo Van Thuong and Pope Francis, during a visit to the Vatican, announced the agreement between the two sides regarding a permanent resident Papal representative in Vietnam. This marks the first time in history that an official permanent representative of the Holy See has been established in Vietnam. Furthermore, from April 9 to 14, 2024, Archbishop Paul Richard

21. Pope Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Letter Deus Caritas est of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVIe to the Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, Men and Women Religious, and all the Lay Faithful on Christian Love,* December 5, 2005, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html, no. 28.

22. Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, no. 31.

Gallagher, the Vatican's Secretary for Relations with States, visited Vietnam, representing the first visit by a Vatican foreign minister to the country. The positive developments in the relationship between Vietnam and the Vatican demonstrate that conflicts and disparities can be resolved through love and a willingness to engage and exchange perspectives in the spirit of the Gospel. The local Church of Vietnam plays a significant role in fostering the connection between the Vatican and the Vietnamese government, promoting encounters, dialogue, and the love of Christ.

The Church's actions are not directed against any individual or authority; instead, they are an open embrace, extending God's benevolent presence to all, regardless of their status or belief. In this way, the Church in Vietnam seeks to be a living testament to the Gospel, fostering a society where the light of truth and the warmth of love are freely shared among its people.

## Efforts Towards A Promising Future

### Always Seeking Peace through Dialogue

The Christian faith is not a "religion of the book." Christianity is the religion of the "Word" of God, a word which is "not a written and mute word, but the Word which is incarnate and living."[23] Accordingly, the living Word of God must be lived out with the constant pursuit of peace through dialogues and encounters, fostering mutual understanding and respect. The same principle applies to the relationship between the Church and the Vietnamese government. In Vietnam, the Church consistently engages in dialogue with the government at various levels, from national to local. While the Church

23. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Makati: Word & Life Publications, 1997), no. 108.

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does not allow governmental interference in its activities, it acknowledges the state's administrative jurisdiction. Through open and sincere dialogues, the Vietnamese government gradually comprehended that the Church's mission does not pose a threat to the political structure. The Church in Vietnam remains independent from any political entity, advocating solely for the Only Way of Christ: Faith, Hope, and Love. Emphasizing unwavering loyalty to the Holy Father and the Holy See, the Vietnamese Church has gained the state's understanding and acceptance. The progress in this relationship highlights the significance of pursuing peace through dialogue. This relationship between the Church and the Vietnamese government demonstrates that through respectful communication and mutual understanding, even seemingly conflicting institutions can find common ground and work towards the common good. The commitment to dialogue and the recognition of each other's autonomy and responsibilities have led to a peaceful coexistence and collaboration that benefits society. It showcases the power of diplomacy and communication in resolving differences and building trust and cooperation for a better future.

## The Spirit of Synodality: Collaboration

In the context of the relationship between the local church and the state, synodality promotes the idea of the Church as a dynamic and active participant in the broader community. The Church is called to be a protagonist of mission and to activate the ministries and charisms present in her life. This suggests that the Church is not isolated from the world, but rather engaged in dialogue and collaboration with the state and society to promote the common good and contribute to the well-being of all people.

Synodality, as expressed in the ecclesiology of communion, highlights the active role of all members of the Church, including the faithful and the bishops, in working together towards the mission of the Church. This implies a sense of co-responsibility and participation in decision-making processes, as well as a recognition of the diverse gifts and charisms present in the Church. [24]

Las Casas consistently affirmed and preached the Good News that salvation is inclusive and available to all. His teachings stress the universality of salvation and the need to share the Gospel with everyone. This principle is also highlighted in the concept of Synodality. All individuals are viewed as God's children and as brothers and sisters, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. This mindset plays a crucial role in the Catholic Church in Vietnam to engage in the country's social dynamics, assisting all sectors of Vietnamese society in comprehending the Church's mission. Subsequently, Vietnamese Catholics have continued to collaborate in a spirit of unity with individuals of various faiths in Vietnam. Furthermore, living out the spirit of Synodality within the Vietnamese church is crucial for enhancing collaboration with the Vietnamese state and other sectors of Vietnamese society.

## Conclusion

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the state in Vietnam has undergone significant evolution and challenges since the unification of the country in 1975. The complex dynamics and historical context have shaped the interactions between the Church and the government, leading

24. International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church," 2018, nos. 6–9, Vatican, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

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to periods of tension, restrictions, and mistrust. However, amidst these difficulties, the Vietnamese Church has demonstrated unwavering faith, perseverance, and a commitment to the values of justice, charity, and faith. The Church's efforts to engage in dialogue, collaboration, and social outreach have contributed to the gradual improvement in relations with the Vietnamese government, leading to greater understanding and cooperation. Specifically, the Church's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, its advocacy for human dignity, and its dedication to the teachings of the Gospel have showcased its positive impact on Vietnamese society and its commitment to fostering peace, mutual respect, and a culture of love and understanding.

Furthermore, the principles of synodality and dialogue have provided valuable lessons for the Church's engagement with the Vietnamese government. The Church's unwavering commitment to its mission, despite challenges and persecution, serves as a source of inspiration and encouragement. The ongoing journey towards reconciliation and mutual understanding between the Church and the government highlights the potential for positive transformation and collaboration. As the Church continues to uphold the values of justice, charity, and faith, it remains dedicated to fostering a society where the light of truth and the warmth of love are freely shared among its people. The evolving relationship between the Catholic Church and the state in Vietnam reflects the power of faith, perseverance, and the pursuit of peace through dialogue and encounter, offering hope for a promising future of mutual respect and cooperation.