

Jesus in the Vietnamese Experience

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226. Governor Si Nghiep dies. He built many churches, statues, and monuments of Jesus on the cross. During the Hau Le period in the 16th century, the remains of these monuments were unearthed.¹

1553. According to the Royal Vietnamese Annals: ‘In the year of Nguyên Hòa (1533), under the reign of King Lê Trang Tông, there was a decree already in existence that banned Christianity. The decree mentioned the name of a European individual, Ignatio, who by seaway had landed and proclaimed the message of Jesus at Ninh Cường and Quỳnh Anh Villages, district Nam Chân’ (present Nam Định). In 1590, Spanish priest Pedro Ordonez de Cevallos baptized Princess Mai Hoa. This means that Christianity was present in Vietnam before the French.

1627. Alexandre de Rhodes (1591–1660), a French Jesuit, and several other Jesuits enter Vietnam during the Trinh – Nguyên conflict. By 1630, there were nearly 7,000 Vietnamese converts; ten years later there were said to be 39,000 Christians in Nguyên territory and 82,000 in Trinh lands. Alexandre compiled an early Latin-Vietnamese-Portuguese dictionary and produced the romanized Vietnamese language. One of Alexander's first Vietnamese converts had been a princess, called Catarina by the Jesuits, who put the story of the life of Jesus into Vietnamese verse. The Christian community grows in the Buddhist north, primarily among the poor. They offer many concrete services (health, literacy, assistance to the poor).

1777. Prince Nguyen-Phuc Anh, the sole survivor of the Nguyen House, was hunted and persecuted by the Tay Son regime; he finds refuge with Pierre Pigneau de Behaine, Bishop of Adran, on Phu Quoc Island. The Tay Son had tried to exterminate the Nguyen Dynasty and mounted a bloody campaign against all Christians in Viet Nam. Ultimately, with the help of Bishop Behaine, the Nguyen were successful in the drive north, reuniting Viet Nam, ending the persecution of Christians and founding the nation of Viet Nam as we know it today. Prince Nguyen Phuc Anh was crowned as Emperor Gia Long in 1802. The oldest son of Emperor Gia Long, Crown Prince Nguyen Phuc Canh, gave his life to Jesus.

1859. The French begin to colonize Vietnam

1906. Phan Boi Chau, the leader of the national Revolution in Vietnam, writes in his book *Vietnam quoc su, national history*, an evaluation of the impact of belief in Jesus. As a non-Christian perspective on the impact of the faith, this is valuable:

* Catholicism pays attention to mutual friendships between two persons, two groups, two communities. It is an indescribable bond without being expressed but mutually understood.

* Catholicism focuses more on people's souls and spirits than on their physical necessities. Therefore, when fulfilling their duty, they disregard hardships that might hamper them physically.

* Catholicism teaches people to care for public interests before individual ones. When serving public interests, people trust one another. This makes it easy for the work to be done collectively.

* Catholicism worships only one God rather than any other deities. Compared to other religions, this reduces the cost of the worship services, which are sometimes useless.

1925. Bao Dai becomes Emperor of Vietnam. He apparently later commits himself to Jesus. One of his earliest acts was to abolish the ancient custom that Emperors could take more than one wife. He also married the Catholic lady Nguyen Huu Hao who he elevated higher than any other woman in Vietnamese history as Empress Nam Phuong. It was the first time in Vietnamese history that the Emperor had married a common citizen, and also the first time a Vietnamese Emperor had ever married a Christian. Later, when the Communists began trying to take control of Vietnam some of the first groups to join in support of Emperor Bao Dai and a free nationalist Vietnam were the Christian leaders such as Tran Van Ly of the Catholic bloc.

1946. Many heroic acts are done by priests and laypeople under the communists. For example, Father Francis Truong Bui Diep gives his life for his 70 parishioners when they are taken captive by the Viet Minh. People claim to be healed when they pray at his tomb.

2005. There are an estimated 6 to 7 million Catholics in the country (about 8 percent of the population), now mostly in southern provinces around Ho Chi Minh City, with other large groups in the northern and central coastal lowlands. There are ~600,000 Protestants (less than 1 percent of the population), many of them in ethnic minority areas (e.g. Hmong).

¹ Pham Van Sohn, in *Viet Su Tan Bien*, published in Saigon by the Dai Nam, 1961, examines the earliest history of Christianity in Vietnam. See http://www.vnbaptist.net/Tai_Lieu/History_of_VN_bible.htm