

# Ladislav Bučko

## Civilization that will survive

### Abstract

The article shows the situation of the Catholic Church in today's united socialist Vietnam. The author, a Slovak misologist, does this on the basis of the experiment of life at the monastery of Vincentian brothers in Ho Chi Minh City as well as through small research. This qualitative research was carried out by means of in-depth interviews with a research sample of participants, which consisted of priests from the missionary society of St. Vincent de Paul and a Franciscan missionary from South Korea. The results are surprising and show that the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam and the unification of the country under communist rule was not a tragedy for the Catholic Church but, on the contrary, this situation helped her to consolidate inwardly and strengthen its mission.

### Key words

Catholic Church. Communist government. Mission. Vietnam.

I lived in a monastery. It is located in Ho Chi Minh City in the South Vietnam. The city is better known as Saigon. Its name was changed in 1975, after communist rule dominated that part of the country. I trained the elite units for the mission work. They were brothers from the Missionary Society of St. Vincent de Paul. I taught them Slovak, English conversation and Missiology.

### Life in the Monastery

Every day, we did get up at four in the morning. In the Vincentian monastery, the day begins with early prayers, meditation, and Holy Mass. After breakfast, the brothers dissipate on motorbikes to theological institutes. They visit a few of them: Dominican, Franciscan or Redemptorist. Traveling Saigone by the motorbike is an adventure, for some even horror. The streets are actually streams of motorcycles that are mixed at the crossroads and again splitting. In the apparent transport chaos, however, there is some sort of order. In fact, the cars on the loaded streets are hindering. Brothers spend by riding motorbikes to the school and back on an average two hours a day. They want to dedicate their lives



University Buddhist pagoda in Saigon



Ladislav Bučko lecturing missiology to the brothers of the Missionary Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Saigon



Sunday catechesis in the Catholic parish of St. Martina in Saigon

to the missionary work. Charisma of st. Vincent is predestinating them for missionary service to poor people in own country and abroad. Some have a desire to come to formation and later to work as missionaries in Eastern Europe. Therefore, they decided to learn Slovak, which may be an entrance ticket for them to this region. This stems from the convention on global

mission and intercultural dialogue between Vincentian provinces in Central and Eastern Europe and the Vietnamese province. It is a pilot project. The ambition of the project is not to teach them perfectly Slovak language. The aim is rather to give them a taste of the spirit of language and thought. When we consider that Slovak is a center of Slavic languages, it can serve as a springboard for other Slavic cultures.

There are 54 brothers - students of theology in the monastery. Fourteen of them decided to learn Slovak. Of course, these young missionaries need mainly English, which brings about them a great difficulty. That's why I had lessons of the English conversation with them. They asked me to give them missiology lectures too, so I had enough work. I was such their older brother. They called me a "teacher" or "Lasko" (my first name was very difficult to pronounce). Those who learned the Slovak language sometimes told me "ucitel". I engaged in all the activities of the monastery: prayers, cleaning, washing. When dining, I was such a strange figure from the West who can not handle the chopsticks, pulls awkwardly the long-cut noodles from the bowl, learns how to cut meat using a spoon and a fork, get trouble with names of countless Vietnamese soups and other meals. They laughed at me, I

laughed at how they laughed at me and we were well together. We had plenty of vegetables and tropical fruit. For the first time in my life I ate snake meat and meat from a dog. The brothers said that they also eat caterpillars, which is delicacy.

We built the tribune to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Vincent's charisma. I have noticed that brothers are very manually skilled, they have a sense of work and they bravely climb the scaffolding in dangerous heights. They explained to me that they climbed trees and collected coconuts from childhood. These boys mostly come from poor or middle-class Catholic families. Among them is only one brother from Buddhist family. On Sunday morning, the brothers spread for mission to the city or neighboring villages to serve as animators of Sunday schools, some visit poor families and spend time with children with special needs.

### Faith in Vietnam

The Catholic Church in Vietnam is growing steadily. Monasteries and seminars are full of young blood. The largest congregations are traditionally Dominicans, Redemptorists, Franciscans, and Salesians. Vincentians, who belong to the medium-sized communities, also have a decent growth each year. They currently have about 25 postulants and 20 novices. The Church lives here with one's own life. Since the state does not allow her to work in schools, thus parishes and monastery pastoral centers are full of children, young people and young adults who are preparing for sacraments at Sunday catechetical schools. In Ho Chi Minh City, there are hundreds of young people who spend hours in the church space every Sunday. Catholics in some villages and small towns in southern

Vietnam even make up a majority of the population. Protestant Christians are also present in Vietnam, albeit in a much smaller number. In recent years, however, they have seen a dynamic increase in membership. Their missionary activity focuses predominantly on members of ethnic minorities who live in the mountainous areas of Vietnam.

The most numerous religion in Vietnam is a vague popular religion, which is a mixture of animism, cult of ancestral worship, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism (according to official statistics it has about 45% representation, but the number is hard to find). However, the state does not officially recognize it. The second is buddhism with about 20% of the population. Christianity presents about 8% (7% Catholics, 1% Protestants) and other smaller religious groups follow. Approximately 20% of the population can be included in the box "without confession". Vietnam has about 90 million people together. The two largest officially recognized religious groups, Christians and Buddhists, live in friendship and in some places even establish joint social and development projects.

### Communist Regime and the Church

Generally speaking, Vietnamese Catholics do not like the Communist regime, as they still remember its tough anti-church policy after World War II, which lasted until the early nineties. The South Vietnamese people recall in particular 1975 when, after the departure of the US troops, the North Vietnamese army occupied the entire country, and the totalitarian government of the Communist Party was established. But Vietnamese Catholics do not have the ambition today to rebel against the Communist regime. Since the

early nineties, the regime has been more open and has enabled the local Catholic Church to breathe freer. It was the result of a more complex process of transformation of communist ruling ideology, which in the economic sphere resulted in a "socialist-oriented market economy". This path was inspired by Soviet and Chinese reforms. Nowadays, Vietnam is under pressure from China, which wants to dictate its political and economic orientation. Therefore, many Vietnamese do not maintain a positive affinity for present China, although Vietnamese culture is historically and substantially influenced by Chinese culture in particular.

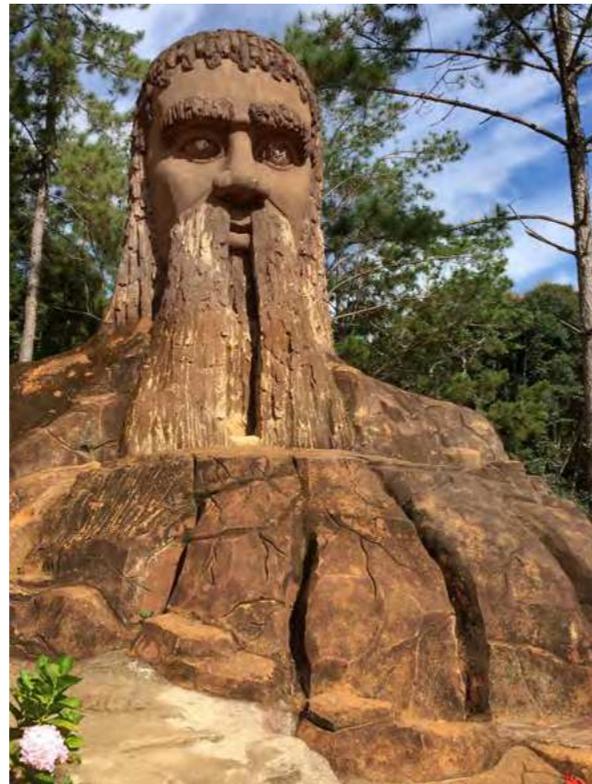
### Interviews

I've had some interesting interviews on these topics with middle-aged and older priests or religious brothers. The younger ones did not want to talk about politics. The older ones, however, shared with joy their opinions and experiences, even though they muffled their voices. Father Thu is a 70-year-old priest who spent nine years in prison (1976-85). Only in 1996 he could travel to the West for the first time. Since then he has visited more than 20 countries around the world where Vincentians are active. I asked him how he judged 1975, for some it was a year of national disaster. Without hesitation, he told me that the events



Composition of stone sculptures hewed from natural stone in the country near Dalat in the central Vietnam

A character from Vietnamese national mythology



of 1975 he considered to be God's grace. The war ended, the killing was over, there was peace, which was very necessary for the country. After the unification of Vietnam, the communist power put him to a jail because the state interested in the rectory house where he worked. Therefore they sent brothers in a prison, and the house was confiscated. When Father Thu was released, he had been feeling an injury and bitterness for several years against the Vietnamese communist government. After some time, however, he realized that the years spent in prison were blessing. He secretly served holy Masses there. Superintendents did not punish him by beating, but with hunger and various constraints. Despite all that he experienced, he thinks that the departure of the Americans, and therefore peace in Vietnam, was a blessing. Otherwise, the war could last for years with a lot of victims on both sides.

Currently, the Church can live and work in Vietnam, although under the control of the government. However, the Church in Vietnam did not split up to the official part collaborating with the Communist government and underground part faithful to Rome as it happened in China or partly in the former Czechoslovakia. The Church is an institution on a nationwide level that holds autonomy and the state respects it to a certain extent. As Father Tninh (46 years) confirmed to me, compared with the majority Buddhist community, which is divided into a part subject to and co-operating with the state power and an independent part, the Church in Vietnam is united and autonomous.

An educated and large-minded father Gerard, seventy-two-years-old man who has been in high function for six years in the Roman curia, told me in beautiful English that thanks to the communist regime, the

Catholic Church in Vietnam woke up and revived. Before the communist revolution, the Church in Vietnam was elite and rich. Motivation for priesthood or a life in religious order has often been conditioned by a desire to have a comfortable, secure and carefree life. Paradoxically today, under communist rule, the Church is much more lively, more viable and more spiritual. Motivation for entry into the religious order and priesthood is more authentic, although also today some of the adepts are motivated by the high social status that the priests still have in Vietnam.

Here is confirmed the historical paradigma that the Church is developing spiritually during the period of oppression. Faith of many is much more true than in times of prosperity and luxury. This paradigma was also acknowledged by sister Zenobia, a 58-years Franciscan missionary from South Korea who has been working in Vietnam for the last 5 years. She is a graduate of missiology studies at Urban University in Rome with more than 20 years missionary experience in Kenya and Mexico. She speaks about the rise of the Church in Vietnam even though she criticizes Church traditionalism in its formal life and she would expected a more flexible response of the Church's missionary methods to the challenges of a secularized and globalized world. On the other hand, she likes that the changes in the Vietnamese Church take place gradually and not through a skip, as was the case in Korea, where the Church got into the crisis under pressure of rapid growth of the material wealth. According to her, the communist government is paradoxically and unknowingly a protector of these gradual changes, which she sees as a positive side of the situation of the local church.



Charity tailoring at the Monastery of Daughter of Charity of st Vincent de Paul in Dalat, where deaf women work



Former Catholic parish house in Dalat; the metal communist star hides a stone cross



The church at the Catholic center of spiritual retreat on the height of Dalat

### Conclusion

I lived in a monastery in Vietnam. I used to get up at four in the morning. This civilization has a future and survives. They are modest, diligent, intelligent and cheerful. To survive, they need a bowl of rice, a handful of caterpillars and a few green leaves. They have life and a spark in their eyes. And more and more they become open to the joyous message of the Gospel



Artifacts in the parish museum of the original culture of the tribe of Cham



A group of women from the tribes of Cham and Coho prays in a Catholic temple built by vincentine missionaries in the architectural style of Cham culture



The grave of the first missionary bishop in Vietnam (his name is on the tombstone) in the settlement for lepers in central Vietnam; church for lepers in the background



Interview with father Nguyen Trong Trinh



Radial highway in the developing district in the edge of Saigon; developers are mostly from China

### Ladislav Bučko

prof. PhDr. Ing. Ladislav Bučko, PhD.  
St. Elizabeth University  
Missiology Department  
Nám. 1. mája 1  
811 06 Bratislava  
Slovak Republic  
emisla@vssvalzbety.sk

He graduated Cybernetics at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering of the Slovak University of Technology, and Theology specialization at the Faculty of Theology of Trnava University. He studied at the Austrian branch of the University of Steubenville, Ohio, at Gregorian University in Rome and at the University of Birmingham in UK. He is one of the founders of Missiology in Slovakia after 1989. He was a Dean of the St. John Paul II. Institute of Missiology and Tropical Health and nowadays, he is a head of the Missiology Department at the St. Elizabeth University. He works as a university teacher at universities in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. He also lectured in Kenya, Cambodia, Bolivia, Burundi and Vietnam. He is the author of Missiology Monographs On the

Way to Liberation (2003) and Mission and Charity (2009), three university textbooks and more than 30 scientific and scholar articles in national and foreign periodicals. In his scientific research, he specializes in the field of relation between mission and social development as well as in the field of inculturation regarding missionary models in various cultural contexts in connection with interreligious dialogue. He is the editor-in-chief of the academic journal Acta Missiologica which publishes scientific and expert articles related to missionary, development and humanitarian issues. He engaged in development projects in Slovakia, Russia, Cambodia, Kenya and Vietnam. He was the main organizer of the first missiology conference that took place in Bratislava in 2016.