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Cistercian Order in Vietnam - Advantages and Challenges

John Toan V. Phan

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, tphan001@csbsju.edu

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ABSTRACT:

Cistercian Order in Vietnam was found by a missionary-priest in 1918. Originally, it was a diocesan congregation with its name "Notre Dame of Annam." In 1936 the congregation of "Notre Dame of Annam" joined Cistercian Order and became Cistercian Congregation of Holy Family. In this article, father John Phan talks about the history of Cistercian Order in Vietnam with its advantages and disadvantages but he puts it in the broader context of the monastic tradition and Vietnamese culture to indicate the continuity of monastic tradition and some distinguish factors of the Cistercian Order in Vietnam.



Cistercian Order in Vietnam

Advantages and Challenges

by Fr. John Toan Van Phan

"Follow me!" is a calling that Jesus invites to every Christian, but in a special way he invites those who want to be intimately close to him. Monasticism in the Church is nothing more than the resolute response of men and women to Jesus' call to follow him. Wherever the Gospel of Jesus Christ is spread, there are many men and women who, each in a unique way, take the Gospel's message seriously and live their lives as his witnesses in the world. Such a one was Paul of Thebes, an Egyptian in the third century, who took up the eremitical life during the Decian persecution (Hier. Vita Pauli 1).¹ But the best known was Antony the Great (254-356 AD). Inspired by St. Athanasius' biography of Antony, many pious men and women left everything to go into the desert to seek God and to live a life of asceticism. Their dedicated lives have been a source of inspiration for men and women wherever the Gospel is proclaimed around the world throughout the centuries. This also has been true for the Vietnamese Church. Wherever the Gospel has been well rooted in Vietnam, there has always been someone who

1 Cf. Kelly, J.N.D., *Jerome* (New York: Harper & Row 1975), 60-61.

desired to live the ascetic life as a witness for the people to the Good News of Jesus Christ and to help the mission of evangelization of the Church in their country. Foremost among these was Father Henri Denis Benedict Thuan. In this paper, I wish to portray the formation and development of the Cistercian Order in Vietnam, its history and its challenges. First, this paper will take a short survey of the development of Christian monasticism in general, focusing particularly on St. Benedict and his Rule, then on the history of the Cistercians, their spirituality and finally the Cistercians in Vietnam within the context of the Vietnamese church.

I. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF MONASTICISM

In the first three centuries, the Church underwent many persecutions. The earliest Christians suffered at the hands of the Jews as reported in the Acts of the Apostles, St. Stephen being the first martyr. When Christianity spread through the Roman empire, periodic imperial persecutions, many of which were incredibly brutal, became a normal part of the life of the early Christians. The first Emperor to persecute Christians was Nero in 64 C.E. but the most devastating persecutions took place under the emperors Decius from 249-251 C.E. and Diocletian from 284-305 C.E.. During this period, Christian Scriptures were seized and burned, churches confiscated and destroyed, and bishops and priests were arrested.²

Fortunately, in 312 Constantine defeated Maxentius near the Milvian Bridge outside the city. Inspired by a dream and a transforming vision of the Cross of Christ, Constantine believed that he had defeated his rivals and become emperor with the help of the Christian God. Therefore, in 313 he issued the Edict of Milan, restoring all property taken from the Church by the empire and granting Christians the freedom to practice their religion. Constantine also bestowed important privileges on the Christian clergy, recognizing them “as a distinct social class [exempt] from military service and forced labor [and investing] the judicial decisions of the bishops with civil authority.”³ From now on the Church enjoyed a new situation. After having been so long reviled throughout the Empire, almost overnight the Church became the favored religion and indeed the religion of the state.

2 Lynch, Joseph H. *The Medieval Church: A brief History* (New York: Longman Publishing), 1992, 9, 10.
3 Bokenkotter, Thomas. *A Concise History of the Catholic Church* (Doubleday, New York: Image Book), 2002, 41.

By the end of the fourth century, the identification of Christian and citizen was virtually complete, and no non-Christian could hope for advancement in the imperial service. Such a radical change of social position could not but influence the internal operation of the Church...all this meant that there were now many additional reasons for becoming a Christian and even for seeking office in the Church other than simple faith in Jesus Christ. The consequent worldliness and lowering of standards did not go unnoticed. St. Jerome remarked that as the Church acquired princely might it became “greater in power as measured by its wealth, but less in virtue.”⁴

While the identification of the Church with society led to a superficial dominance of society by the forms of Christianity, it also led to an invasion of the Church by the values of secular society.⁵ Since the opportunity for martyrdom no longer existed for those who wished to respond fully to the teaching and example of Christ, the development of monasticism may well have been in compensation for this, to provide an outlet for those who were not satisfied with a mediocre Christianity. Monasticism appears, then, against the background of the changes in the Church of the fourth century as a reform movement, or rather as a new form for the older Christian idea of reformation in Christ. This may be one of the principal reasons for the rapid development of monasticism.⁶

The beginning of the monastic movement in Christianity is not totally clear. St. Jerome reports that in his time some believed that Antony the Great was the first hermit. But Jerome himself, based on information from Antony’s disciples, claimed it was a certain Paul of Thebes, who had taken up the eremitical life at the time of the Decian persecution (Hier. Vita Pauli 1).⁷ Athanasius claimed that Antony was the first to take up the desert *anachoresis* and portrayed him as a hero of the Gospel.⁸ Whether or not Antony was the first hermit, there

4 Quoted in King, Peter. *Western Monasticism: A History of the Monastic Movement in the Latin Church*, (Spencer, Mass: Cistercian Publications, 1999), 27.

5 See T. Klauser, *A Short History of the Western Liturgy* (London: Oxford University Press 1969), 117; cf. *The Rule of St. Benedict 1980: In Latin and English with Notes*, Fry, Timothy O.S.B., edit., (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1981), 16.

6 *Rule of St. Benedict*, edited by Fry, 16.

7 Cf. Kelly, *Jerome*, 60-61.

8 The term *anachoresis*, meaning ‘retirement’ or ‘withdrawal,’ has a pre-Christian history of usage in the sense of withdrawal into oneself.

is no doubt that his example and fame, thanks to Anathasius' biography of Antony, was a great impetus to the eremitical movement in northern Egypt and eventually far beyond its borders.⁹ Jean Sorabella notes that, "In regions around the eastern Mediterranean in the late third and early fourth centuries, men and women like Antony – whose biography provided a model for future monks – withdrew into the Egyptian desert, depriving themselves of food and water as part of their effort to withstand the devil's temptations."

The example of the desert hermits continued to inspire individuals and groups in the Middle Ages. However, "man is by nature a social animal" (Aristotle), needing others for healthy development. Meanwhile, the life of the solitary was full of difficulties and hazards. Lawrence wrote that only the strong dare be lonely. Lesser mortals can all easily sink into mental breakdown or despair. As he expressed it, "it was easier and safer to follow the ascetical life with the support of a community engaged in the same task and within the framework of a rule."¹⁰

Pachomius was the first to establish cenobitic monasticism, so that monks could live in an organized community and support each other by their labor and prayers. Pachomius (c. 292-346 C.E.) was a Coptic-speaking Egyptian. At first, in his quest for self-discovery he was drawn to the life of the anchorites; but after a time the need to organize and direct a colony of disciples that had settled around him persuaded him to create a collective establishment at Tebennesis, the site of a deserted village beside the upper Nile, in the region of the Egyptian Thebes.¹¹ Pachomius established an original style of cenobitic monasticism, so that monks could live in an organized community and support each other by their labor and prayers. He wrote a rule for his community that balanced the communal and solitary life; monks lived in individual cells but worked together for the common good. This community life required obedience. For him obedience was one of the most important monastic virtues. He considered that obedience fulfilled with zeal was greater than fasting or prayer. Under his aegis, the monks were commanded to obey not only their superior but also the monastic Rule. Thus, he chastised slackers.¹²

9 Benedict, *Rule for Monasteries*, 18.

10 Lawrence, C. H. *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of religious life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, (London and New York: Longman, 1984), 7.

11 Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, *ibid.*

12 For more information about Pachomius and his rule, see King, *Western Monasticism*, 21-27; Benedict, *Rule for Monasteries*, 25-30.



REST IN PEACE

by Katryna Bertucci

In Cappadocia (a region of today's Turkey) Basil the Great (330-379) traveled to different monasteries in Syria, Palestine and Egypt to acquire a firsthand knowledge of ascetic and monastic practices. After seven years he returned home, withdrew from the ordinary affairs of society, took up the ascetic life and devoted himself to an intensive study of the Bible. The result of his study was a manual of rules composed about 360, consisting of principles (supported by 1,542 verses from the New Testament) for living the Christian life. The monastic life, for Basil, was essentially the Christian life itself, i.e.: a life lived according to the Gospel. Christian life can be understood only in terms of response to the double commandment of love: love of God and neighbor. Therefore, though he "did not totally reject the authenticity of the hermit's vocation... he regarded the eremitical life as a less perfect fulfilment of the Gospel counsels than the life of the monk in community, where the spiritual gifts of the advanced members might be passed on to others."¹³

Alongside these major figures in the East, there were other, more hidden ones, no one more respected than Macrina the Younger, sister of Basil the Great and Gregory, bishop of Nyssa, who lived a life of devotion to Christ in exemplary asceticism.

Martin of Tours (c. 316-97) has traditionally been regarded as the first monk in the West.¹⁴ In literature and devotion, St Martin is the typical monk-hero, in much the same way as Antony in the East. His laudable role spread rapidly through Sulpicius Severus' biography written just before and shortly after Martin's death in 397. Sulpicius also published three letters and three dialogues concerning Martin. This biographical collection became immediately popular throughout Western Christendom, rivaling the Life of Antony and influencing all subsequent Latin hagiography.¹⁵ Exemplifying a shorter and simpler approach than that found in previous Eastern rules, Holzherr notes: "In contrast to the organizational rules of Pachomius and the biblically based rule of Basil, the first Western rules, which originate from both sides of the

13 Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 9.

14 Lawrence writes further in *Medieval Monasticism*: "Probably Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315-67) played just as big a part in transplanting Eastern monastic practices to the lands of the Western Empire... he sponsored a group of ascetics in his episcopal city of Poitiers, and he became the patron and mentor of St. Martin of Tours, who settled in Gaul about the year 360 (C.E.)," 11.

15 On Martin of Tours, see the collective volume *St. Martin et son temps*, StA 46; cf. *The Rule of St. Benedict* 1980, 51.

Mediterranean – from Africa and from the island of Lerins in southern Gaul – seem very short.”¹⁶

Regarding Western monasticism, John Cassian cannot be ignored. John Cassian (360-435) was born at Dobrogea, in the Balkan region (today's Romania). In 382 he entered a monastery in Bethlehem and after several years there was granted permission, along with his friend St. Germanus of Dobrogea, to visit the Desert Fathers in Egypt. They remained in Egypt until 399, except for a brief period when they returned to Bethlehem.

Upon leaving Egypt they went to Constantinople, where they met St. John Chrysostom, who ordained John Cassian as a deacon. He had to leave Constantinople in 403 when Chrysostom was exiled, eventually settling close to Marseilles, France, where he was ordained priest and founded two monasteries, one for women and one for men.

John's most famous works are the *Institutes*, which detail how to live the monastic life (dress, prayer, work and poverty, food, obedience, discipline, renunciation), and the *Conferences* (for a total of 24 topics), which provide details of conversations between John and Germanus and the Desert Fathers. The effect of these writings upon Western spirituality is incalculable; and these are the very writings St. Benedict urges his monks to read in order to deeply learn the monastic way of life.¹⁷

One can now see the beginnings of Christian monasticism beginning in the Middle East. It made its earliest appearance in Egypt and Palestine towards the end of the third century. In its primitive form it was a way of life adopted by solitaries, or anchorites, living in deserted places. Christian monks were inspired by the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (Mk 8:34), and in St. John's Gospel: “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life” (Jn 12:25). Jesus had recommended self-denial in explicit terms: fasting, the renunciation of all possessions (Mt 19:21), and chastity (Mt 19:12). Inspired by these ideals,

16 Holzherr, Georg. *The Rule of Benedict: An Invitation to the Christian Life*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016) xxx.

17 Moth, Sadhu Benedict. “Monasticism, the Beginnings,” accessed February 27, 2020. Published October 10, 2009: <http://www.asram.org/texts/monasticEn.html>

Christian monks responded to a vocation. They accepted the challenge of total surrender to Christ through the abandonment of worldly goods and prospects. But the quest for perfection involved more than this. Renunciation was only the beginning of the journey of the monk. His ultimate goal was union with God through contemplation and mortification. In solitude, beyond the frontiers of human society and freed from its distractions and temptations, a man might achieve that detachment from created things that prepared him for the supreme encounter with God.¹⁸ The cenobitic life, then, offered certain advantages for the spiritual and doctrinal formation of monks, and the eremitic life which is in principle reserved for monks matured by experience, allows a person to concentrate on the search for union with the Absolute in solitary meditation. Thus, the rise of monasticism in the early Church proved vital for the spread of Christianity and formed a new Christian culture.

II. ST. BENEDICT, THE FATHER OF WESTERN MONASTICISM

1. Life of St. Benedict

The life of St. Benedict comes to us through the work of St. Gregory the Great, the first Benedictine pope. Gregory devotes the entire Book II of his *Dialogues* to Benedict. From this tome we know that St. Benedict (c. 480-543) was the son of a Roman nobleman from Nursia, a small town near Spoleto. His boyhood was spent in Rome, where he lived with his parents and attended schools until he had reached his higher studies. Then “giving over his books, and forsaking his father’s house and wealth, with a mind only to serve God, he sought for some place where he might attain to the desire of his holy purpose; and in this sort he departed [from Rome], instructed with learned ignorance and furnished with unlearned wisdom” (*Dial. St. Greg., II, Introd. in Migne, P.L. LXVI*). There is a difference of opinion as to Benedict’s age at the time. For Hugh Ford, “it has been very generally stated as fourteen, but a careful examination of St. Gregory’s narrative makes it impossible to suppose him younger than nineteen or twenty. He was old enough to be in the midst of his literary studies, to understand the real meaning and worth of the dissolute and licentious lives of his companions, and to have been deeply affected himself by the love of a woman (*Ibid. II, 2*). He was capable of weighing all these things in comparison with the life taught in the Gospels,

¹⁸ Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 2.

and chose the latter, he was at the beginning of life, and he had at his disposal the means to a career as a Roman noble; clearly he was not a child.” Ford concludes, “If we accept the date 480 for his birth, we may fix the date of his abandoning the schools and quitting home at about A.D. 500.”¹⁹

St. Gregory tells us that “Benedict broke off his education in order to avoid encountering the knowledge of the world as accepted without reservation.”²⁰ Leaving Rome to seek an eremitical life, Benedict found the valley of Subiaco. There he lived in a cave in strict solitude, discreetly receiving the simple clothing of a monk and sustenance from the monk Romanus.²¹ He undoubtedly spent time with the Bible, especially the Psalter, in unceasing prayer. His path of inner purification must also have included strict fasting. As knowledge of the young monk grew, he began to attract men looking for advice, and the monastic community of Vicovaro asked him to become their abbot. He hesitated to follow this call as he had in mind a different ideal of authentic monastic life. He in fact failed at Vicovaro because of later opposition from these monks and so retired to his “beloved solitude” at Subiaco. Here new groups of students gathered around him, and he organized for them a cenobitic life in “twelve monasteries... each with twelve monks according to what had been instituted by the fathers.”²²

The monastery of Subiaco continued to exist, but because of external provocations, Benedict moved to the hills of Monte Cassino, about 150 kilometers south of Rome. The mountain of Cassino enjoys a wide view of the horizon to the south. On this hill the population had once built an acropolis for protection from their enemies, making offerings there to their patron gods. Benedict destroyed first an altar dedicated to Apollo and then one to Jupiter, turning these temples into oratories, the first dedicated to St. John the Baptist and the other to St. Martin. He founded a monastery in the acropolis, probably with the approval of the civil authorities. Here Benedict wrote his

19 Ford, Hugh. “St. Benedict of Nursia.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 2. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907. 18 Nov. 2019 <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02467b.htm>, (accessed on 11/18/19).

20 Holzherr, *The Rule of Benedict*, xviii

21 Gregory mentions the monk Romanus, who supported the young Benedict materially as well as spiritually; Romanus himself “lived nearby in a monastery under the rule of the father Adeodatus” (Dial 2.1.4-5); see Holzherr, *ibid.*, xviii

22 Dial 2.3.13.



BE STILL

by Katryna Bertucci

Rule, where he developed his ideas beyond the Master's vertical view of a relationship descending from teachers to students, into a more horizontal dimension with Christ visible not only in the abbot as teacher but also in one's brothers, in the poor, in guests and in the sick.²³

2. The Rule of St. Benedict.

The Rule of St. Benedict is a distillation of the wisdom found in the monastic tradition²⁴ as well as his own experience. Holzherr wrote: "Benedict wrote down his rule to summarize his experiences as monk and abbot, but also with those abbots in mind who, after his death would be superiors of the monasteries he founded in Montecassino, such as Abbot Constantianus and Simplicius, and in Subiaco, where Benedict continued to be honored, Maurus and Honoratus (ca. 593), who had previously been a monk in Montecassino."²⁵ St. Gregory praised the Rule of St. Benedict as filled with the spirit of discernment – *discretio*.²⁶ He accorded to St. Benedict and his Rule: "that a significant charisma was characteristic for the man of God... through the words of his teaching. He wrote a rule for monks that stands out for its discernment [*discretio*] and for the luminosity of its discourse."²⁷ Seeking to cultivate the edification of others, Gregory wrote of Benedict's Rule: "Anyone who wishes to know more about his life and character can discover in his Rule exactly what he was like as an abbot, for his life could not have differed from his teaching."²⁸

For St. Benedict, there are three factors of the cenobitic life: the monks live together in a single monastery; they corporately submit to a rule and they live under the authority and care of an abbot. His stated intention is to establish a "school of the Lord's service" (RB Prol. 45) and he presents this as a "workshop" (BR 4.78) in which, with the help of the "tools for good works" (RB 4, heading), the soul is shaped for God. In this school every desire for the love of God and

23 Holzherr, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, xlv-l. For more information of Benedict' biography, see. Lawrence, *ibid.*, 17-20; *The Rule of St. Benedict* 1980, 73-79

24 See. Melvill, *The World of Medieval Monasticism: Its History and Forms of Life* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), 32.

25 Holzherr, *The Rule of Benedict*, lvii.

26 Melvill, Gert. *The World of Medieval Monasticism: Its History and Forms of Life*, trans. Mixson, James D., (Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2016), 29.

27 Dial 2.36; as quoted in Helzherr, *The Rule of Benedict*, lix.

28 As quoted in King. *Western monasticism*, 94.

neighbor would be established, as well as the avoidance of moral vices like pride, contentiousness, and idles.²⁹

The Rule of St. Benedict advocates a balance between prayer and manual labor: *Ora et Labora*. Regarding prayer, Benedict wrote: “Let nothing be put before the Work of God” (RB 43.3). As for manual labor, he admonishes: “When they live by the labor of their hands, as our fathers and the apostles did, then they are really monks” (RB 48.8). Commenting on this latter dictum, Melvill notes: “This sentence had revolutionary potential in the best sense, because it reinterpreted the meaning of manual labor; once an activity that in the ancient tradition was appropriate for a slave but not for a free man, here it appeared as an activity that allowed access to heaven. Work was asceticism, and it had the power to ennoble all Christians, regardless of their status.”³⁰

Throughout the history of monasticism in the West up until 750, there was no single monastic rule for all. Most houses had their own disciplines, compiled from a variety of sources.³¹ The Rule of Benedict, then, was one of several. However, his codex gradually spread – to Gaul in the early seventh century,³² to England,³³ and then to Germany by St. Boniface and his companions.³⁴ In spite of the growing influence of the RB during the eighth century, Western monasticism was far from being totally Benedictine by the year 800.³⁵

A significant turning point for Western monasticism was in 792 when Charlemagne (Charles the Great) wished to establish a single empire uniting the Roman and Germanic peoples on the basis of his own God-given power and the universal authority of the Holy See... the monasteries played a significant role in this grand design, and it was important that they become centers of genuine spirituality and culture. This was to be achieved by securing uniformity of observance, and the basis for such uniformity was to be the

29 Melvill, *The World of Medieval Monasticism*, 30-31.

30 Ibid.

31 King, *Western Monasticism*, 104.

32 *The Rule of St. Benedict 1980*, 117.

33 Ibid., 119. Holzherr further notes: “We are sure that by the second half of the seventh century the RB was known both in Northumbria and in the south, but there is not clear evidence revealing how it came to England. It may have been brought by the Gregorian missionaries, but there is not support for this assumption.”

34 Ibid., 120.

35 Ibid., 121.

“Roman rule” of St. Benedict, whose excellence was being increasingly recognized.³⁶ After Charlemagne’s death, his son Louis continued his father’s wishes with the help of Benedict of Aniane. King notes that “as emperor, Louis inaugurated a program of all-embracing legislation which, in the words of one authority,

*posterity cannot fail to admire. Inspired by a conception of empire and emperor rooted in theological and Christian ideas, Louis and his advisers initiated a Renovatio imperii francorum which would embrace both the institutions of the state and the sphere of the church.*³⁷

King notes that, shortly after his accession Louis made Benedict of Aniane abbot and sent him to inspect monasteries throughout the empire. In 816 an imperial synod of abbots and some bishops met at Aachen to devise legislation which would ensure uniform monastic observance throughout the Carolingian empire... Their purpose was to make the Rule of St. Benedict normative for all monks in the empire and to reshape the traditional rhythm of monastic life in conformity to it. The concept of *una regula*, ‘a single rule,’ was balanced by that of *una consuetudo*, ‘a single custom.’ The first two statutes decreed by the synod were that the abbots should read the Rule of St. Benedict aloud to their monks, and that all the monks who were able should learn it by heart. In the following year at Aachen it was decreed that a chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict should be read in every monastery at the daily meeting of the community.³⁸ From then on, the Rule of Benedict became the dominant monastic rule for Western monasticism.

But what made the Rule of St. Benedict preferred among all others? Holzher attributes it to its balance and clarity: “It is based on a tradition that the author Benedict wanted to preserve. At times he allows mitigations, but he follows a clear path. Above all, he had the ability to create a synthesis between two hundred years of monastic practices and the needs of his time. He remained flexible because (in contrast to other rules) he left details to the discretion of the living authority of the abbot. His Rule gives instructions for issues that are important for organization but combines these with biblical

36 Ibid.

37 As quoted in King, *Western Monasticism*, 108.

38 King, *Western Monasticism*, 108-109.

and spiritual prototypes. Benedict finds the balance between two poles: the community and the individual. For this reason, Vogue says that the Rule of Benedict remains a convenient book. Thus, this Rule commended itself to Western monasticism, not least to the monasteries in the areas of the newly evangelized Germanic people.”³⁹

III. HISTORY OF THE CISTERCIAN ORDER

Due to the comprehensive Cluniac reforms, beginning at the Abbey of Cluny in France founded in 910, the Rule of St. Benedict spread throughout Europe. By the first half of the twelfth century, upward of seven hundred Cluniac communities existed⁴⁰ in France, Spain, England, Germany, Poland, and Italy.⁴¹ The movement’s great prestige during this period of history was affected not only in the life of the Church but also as a political body. King notes that “under abbot Hugh (1049-1109) Cluny reached the height of its influence and power.”⁴²

Yet the purpose of the monk is not to seek power but God alone and in him alone the monk can find his rest. The call of the desert always enforces upon the monk to return to it to find God. Among the proponents of this re-examination were Robert of Molesme and his companions: Alberic and Stephen.

St. Robert (ca. 1028-1111) was abbot of the Abbey of Molesme when he resigned from his office and, with a group of twenty-one others, established a “new monastery” (*novum monasterium*) at Cistercium (in French, Citeaux). The historian Orderic Vitalis relates “the notable words” of Robert from when he was still abbot of Molesme: “[He] had explained before his brothers that although they had all made profession to the Rule of St. Benedict, they did not follow it fully (*non ex integro*) since they did not work with their hands, as the fathers Anthony, Macarius, and others had done – those whose inimitable life as *Aegyptiorum patres* Robert now remembered compellingly.”⁴³ Orderic gives further explanation:

39 Holzherr, *The Rule of Benedict*, lx.

40 For more Cluniac movement, see. Melvill, *The World of Medieval Monasticism*, 54-88.

41 King, *Western Monasticism*, 125.

42 Ibid, 134.

43 Melvill, *The World of Medieval Monasticism*, 138.



FEAR/ANTICIPATION

by Katryna Bertucci

"The wealth of the monks of Molesme was abundant, drawn as it was from tithes, and they nourished themselves with the blood of men in whose sins they would thereby now have a share. So as not to be breakers of their oaths, they were now to follow the Rule of St. Benedict completely (omnino); they should earn their food and clothing through their own work, give up their luxurious clothing, and renounce their incomes from tithes. And yet the monks of the now wealthy Molesme – so Orderic reported further – for the most part abruptly rejected all of these impositions, asserting among other things that they well deserved their tithes, because they were members of the clerical estate and holders of clerical offices."⁴⁴

Since Robert could not convince his brothers to give up their luxurious life-style to live an ascetic life, he and "his like-minded followers retreated from Molesme and, with the help of the Burgundian nobility, settled in Cistercium. There from 1098 on they lived in solitude and resolved as Orderic put it 'to observe the Rule of Benedict to the letter, as the Jews followed the law of Moses' (*regulam Benedicti sicut Judei legem Moisi ad letteram servare penitus*).⁴⁵

The founders of "the new monastery" saw the Rule of St. Benedict as their touchstone. Melville notes that "In the *Exordium parvum*, the Cistercians underscored that the 'rightness of the Rule' (*rectitude regulæ*) was to be the measure of their way of life, and they rejected all that was not to be found there - tithes, parishes, villages, manorial rents, mills or serfs.⁴⁶ They had to live by the labor of their own hands, as St. Benedict had commended. The manual labor prescribed by the Rule was thus restored to a place in the monk's timetable at Cîteaux.

Lawrence comments,

"This total renunciation of the usual means of supporting a religious community might prove nearly impossible to sustain for more than a generation. Yet, it was prompted by more than a simple desire to avoid secular entanglements: it was the expression of a new zeal

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid, 139.

46 Ibid, 141.

for the ideal of collective poverty imitating that of Christ - a new evangelism, which drew its inspiration more from the desert tradition than from a literal understanding of the Rule. As the Exordium put it, the monks were the 'new soldiers of Christ, poor men together with Christ the pauper.'⁴⁷

The Cistercian monks wanted to imitate Christ the Poor Man not only through their food and their habits but also in the architecture of their churches, their Mass vestments and altar furnishings.

IV. THE CISTERCIAN ORDER IN VIETNAM

1. A short history of the Church in Vietnam

Vietnam, officially known as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, with a current population of approximately 97 million people in an area a thousand miles long, is an elongated country resembling a letter S. It lies in Southeast Asia, between the Tropic of Cancer and the Equator. It is bounded on the west by Laos and Cambodia, on the north by China; to the northeast it is bathed by the Gulf of Tonkin, to the east by the Pacific Ocean and to the south by the Gulf of Thailand.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ came to Vietnam in the sixteenth century by Portuguese Dominicans from the Province of the Holy Cross of the East Indies, founded at Malacca in 1550, and by Spanish Franciscans of the Province of the Holy Rosary in Manila in 1583.⁴⁸ These European attempts did not succeed, however, and as a result they abandoned their missions due to the missionaries' insufficient grasp of the Vietnamese language.⁴⁹ Phan notes that "the Christian mission in Vietnam by the end of the sixteenth century

47 Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism*, 161-162.

48 Phan, Peter C., *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam*, (New York, Orbis Books, 1998), 8-9. Phan notes: Gaspar de Santa Cruz, a Portuguese, was the first Dominican missionary to the Far East.

49 Phan, *ibid.*, 29. In sixteenth-century Vietnam two systems of language were in use: *CHU NHO* (CHINESE) and *CHU NOM*. Phan notes that China ruled over Vietnam off and on for ten centuries (111 B.C.E – 1414 C.E.). The Chinese imposed their culture as well as their system of ideogrammatic writing on the Vietnamese populace establishing it as the official language of Vietnam. Even after throwing off the yoke of Chinese domination, the Vietnamese kings continued to maintain Chinese as the official language due of necessities of international diplomacy and with a view to promoting culture.... Though Chinese remained the learned and official language, Vietnamese writers wanted a writing system of their own, known as *chu nom*, literally, popular or demotic script.

was insignificant. Despite sporadic attempts by Dominican and Franciscan missionaries, no lasting imprints were left on the country.”⁵⁰

The Gospel seed sown by Dominican and Franciscan missionaries, however, did bear fruit thanks to the work of Jesuit missionaries whose apostolate grew rapidly in the seventeenth century. The first Jesuits came to Cochinchina, the southern region of Vietnam in 1615, and to Tonkin, the northern region, in 1626.⁵¹ The advantage of the Jesuit missionaries was that they knew the Vietnamese language before they arrived, and while in Vietnam they continued to study it. Many were fluent. Fr. Francisco de Pina was the first foreigner fluent in Vietnamese; the first instructor without an interpreter. Thanks to their knowledge of the language and with the collaboration of Vietnamese converts, in 1620 the Jesuits at Hoi An (in particular Francisco de Pina) prepared a catechism in the native language, Chu Nom.⁵²

Fr. Alexandre de Rhodes a Jesuit missionary and lexicographer from Avignon, France, had a lasting impact on Christianity in Vietnam. He wrote the *Dictionarium Annamiticum Lusitanum et Latinum*, the first trilingual Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin dictionary, published in Rome, in 1651. He was convinced that mastery of the languages of the people to be evangelized was the first and fundamental condition for the effective preaching of the Gospel.⁵³ Thanks to his knowledge of the native language, the mission of de Rhodes and his Jesuit companions was a huge success. Within only three years of their arrival in Tonkin, 1627-1630, they counted 5,602 Vietnamese Christians. Nine years later there were 82,500 and more than 100 churches. In 1640, there were nearly 100,000 Christians, and in the following year the Catholic Church in Tonkin counted 108,000 Christians and 235 churches.⁵⁴ By the

50 Ibid, 10.

51 Ibid, 3-8. At the beginning of the seventeenth century the country known to the West as Annam was divided into two major parts: the northern, called the Dang Ngoai, literally the external region, under the rule of the Trinh clan, was made up of **Tonkin** (bold added), Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh, and the northern part of Quang Binh, with Thang Long (today Hanoi) as the capital. To the West this area was known as Tonkin. The southern part, called the Dang Trong, literally the internal region, under the rule of the Nguyen clan, comprised the southern part of Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Thua Thien, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai and the provinces of ancient Champa, with the capital at Hue. To the West this area was known as **Cochinchina** (bold added).

52 Ibid, 31.

53 Ibid, 75.

54 Ibid., 57.

1780s there were as many as 350,000-400,000 Catholics in Tonkin and 10,000-15,000 Catholics in Cochinchina.⁵⁵ Citing his own experience, to prospective missionaries, de Rhodes admonished:

"I would advise all those wishing to come to our province to convert souls to take this trouble at the outset. I assure them that the fruits produced by presenting our mysteries in their own language are incomparably greater than those achieved through an interpreter, who tells them only what he pleases and cannot speak with the efficacy of words coming from the mouth of a preacher animated by the Holy Spirit."⁵⁶

During this same period, the Church in Vietnam underwent a persecution. From 1798-1861 between 130,000 and 300,000 Christians were martyred. However, as Tertullian (155-240 C.E.) wrote, "The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christianity." This has been true for the Church everywhere and in every time, but particularly for the Church in Vietnam. Today Vietnam has 8,000,000 Christians in twenty-seven dioceses.

2. The Cistercian Order in Vietnam

The Cistercian Order in Vietnam has a unique history of formation and development. It was not founded by another Cistercian house, but by a French missionary, Father Henri-Denis Benoit Thuan in the Hue Diocese. He had asked the Trappists in Hong Kong, Japan and Europe to establish monastic life in Vietnam, but for some reason, they did not come.

a. The Founder: Father Henri François Joseph Denis

Born at Boulogne-sur-Mer, France, on August 17, 1880, Henri-Denis desired to offer himself to God by serving people in the priesthood. He joined the minor seminary at Wimille in 1892 and then the major seminary at Arras in 1900. At the major seminary he determined to dedicate his life to saving the souls of people in foreign countries. Therefore, he sought to join the seminary of the *Missions Étrangères de Paris*, or MEP. His letter to the Rector expresses his wish:

55 Keith, Charles. *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation*, (Berkeley: University of California Press) 2012, 19.

56 Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 46.



REST IN PEACE

by Katryna Bertucci

"Dear Father Rector, With the encouragement of my spiritual director and those others in charge, in the past as well as in the present, such as the Vicar General, Father Jejeune, Father Delattre, the rector of St. Thomas's seminary and the rector of the minor seminary at Boulogne and my pastor, I humbly ask you to accept me into the seminary of the Missions Étrangères de Paris...

Dear Father, from the time of my graduation from secondary school, I have felt the impulse to dedicate myself to the foreign missions to save souls, especially the Chinese. This inner impulse has clearly been so strong that my spiritual director is convinced that I have a vocation to be a missionary..."⁵⁷

Henri-Denis was accepted into the MEP seminary in Paris in April 1901 and was ordained to the priesthood on March 7, 1903. After ordination, Father Henri-Denis said farewell to his father and his homeland and set out toward the mission in Vietnam. He arrived at Da Nang, Vietnam on May 31, 1903 and was posted to Cochinchina,⁵⁸ to the mission at Hue where the Vicar Apostolic of Cochinchina gave him the Vietnamese name 'Thuan' which means 'obey' or 'consent.'

He was sent to Kim Long parish to learn the language and customs of the people. This was an important period of Father Henri's mission since, as de Rhodes' experience of three hundred years earlier taught him, "mastery of the languages of the people to be evangelized was the first and fundamental condition for the effective preaching of the Gospel."⁵⁹ From now on this country was his country, the language of those who live there, his language. It was not easy, but if a missionary wishes to success in his mission of evangelization,

"this first step demands openness and a change of heart, since the language expresses to a certain extent the mentality of the people. For the missionary this apprenticeship expresses another dimension which dominates all others, namely the love of Christ which the missionary is proclaiming to the people. The love of Christ is at once love for Christians and for those who do not yet know him."⁶⁰

57 Dom Jean de la Croix Le Van Doan, O Cist. *Father Benoit Thuan: in Alliance for International Monasticism: Vietnam, Land of Monastic Renewal*, English Language Bulletin, 2018. No. 115, 65

58 See note 52 above.

59 Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 75.

60 Le Van Doan, *Father Benoit Thuan*, 65.

Once he had learned the language and customs, Thuan became a teacher at the junior seminary at Annith where he taught Chinese⁶¹ and other subjects. This training remains crucial for the success or failure of evangelization for any priest today as Vatican II states: “The Council is fully aware that the desired renewal of the whole Church depends in great part upon a priestly ministry animated by the spirit of Christ and it solemnly affirms the critical importance of priestly training.”⁶² Pope St. John Paul II also emphasized this important task. He wrote: The formation of future priests, both diocesan and religious, and lifelong assiduous care for their personal sanctification in the ministry and for the constant updating of their pastoral commitment is considered by the Church one of the most demanding and important tasks for the future of the evangelization of humanity.⁶³ Father Henri-Denis Thuan acknowledged his role and he dedicated himself with zealous love for it, but the desire of becoming a missionary always impelled him. He wanted to work in the mission field among the people to proclaim to them the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While he dedicated himself in training for his duties, he took every chance to ask to become fully a missionary.

Finally, his desire came true. In 1908 he was sent to the Christians at Nuoc Man. He worked there for five years. This was a difficult time but also a happy one for Father Thuan. He was already, in Pope Francis’ words, a “shepherd with the smell of sheep.” Indeed, as the pastor of a mission and poor parish, he “had sought all possible means to meet people: he did not shut himself up in his room. He would see the people who came to him, or he would go to them. Thanks to these contacts he got to understand their lives, their burdens, their troubles and all their problems. This generous understanding allowed him a realistic view, full of love and compassion, and he knew how to help them efficaciously by estimating their priorities.”⁶⁴ As a pastor, he was not only a spiritual doctor to his people, he was also a physical doctor. He took care of

61 Ibid, 66. Vietnam in the nineteenth century had three written languages side-by-side: Han (in Chinese script), Nam (a system of transcription of Vietnamese words by means of simple or combined Chinese characters to note the sound of a Vietnamese word or its sense and sound together), and Quoc Ngu (Vietnamese phonetically transcribed into Roman letters. For more information, see note 50.

62 Vatican II, *Optatan Totius, Decree on the Training of Priests*, introduction.

63 John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, No. 2.

64 Le Van Doan, *Father Benoit Thuan*, 66.

the sick. He wrote to his stepmother that his room was full of the smell of phenol. When many people died in a cholera epidemic, no one wanted to come in contact with the corpses, so he carried out all the necessities for the dead, changing their clothing, putting them into coffins, and hiring people to dig graves. Thanks to his contact with people in their daily lives, Father Denis discovered that “beyond magic and superstition, the Vietnamese people have a desire to live in relationship with God or spirits. This is a perpetual thirst for the Absolute. He discovered the depth of soul of the Vietnamese.”⁶⁵ In doing so, he tried every way to “accompany them on the road of seeking God.” One of these ways was in establishing a monastic life in Vietnam, providing for those who entered monasteries a contemplative environment conducive to assisting them in their prayers for the Church’s mission.

b. Establishing the Monastic Life for Vietnamese People

In 1914, after five years serving as pastor at Nuoc Man parish, Father Henri-Denis Thuan was called back to the minor seminary. His zeal for evangelizing the people still burned in his heart. After his years as a professor at Annith and as pastor at Nuoc Man parish and now back to the minor seminary again, Father Thuan had time to reflect on his mission work. He saw that, though he worked hard to evangelize the people, the results were limited. He understood that the Vietnamese people had the spiritual strength to live the monastic life. And so, he yearned to establish a monastic presence in Vietnam that would be fully integrated with the local life, not only from a cultural point of view but also spiritually, and from the point of view of the Gospel.

A paragraph from one of his letters to the Trappist Abbot General illustrates this desire:

*“Most Reverend Father, I hasten to send you a new letter asking for affiliation, signed by Monsignor, the Vicar Apostolic of Hue. I must emphasize to you, most revered Father, that in affiliating us it is a purely Annamite Congregation that you are affiliating to the Order.”*⁶⁶

In choosing a monastic life for himself and its presence among his people, Father Henri-Denis Thuan was not giving up his zeal for evangelization,

⁶⁵ Ibid 67.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

but desiring to follow a different path, a hidden one. Unfortunately for him, his idea of establishing a contemplative order in Vietnam was not well received, not only in Europe but also by the Vietnamese clergy. Dom Jean Doan Le wrote: "He had to wait nine years to be able to try his monastic vocation, and most of the missionaries did little to help him any more than did the Vietnamese clergy. They viewed this foundation as a luxury in a mission country."⁶⁷ The European missionaries did not support Father Denis Thuan's idea of establishing a monastery for Vietnamese because they "underestimated the Vietnamese and had a negative view of their goodwill, deciding that they were not suited to monastic life, and that they lacked the capacity for this kind of life."⁶⁸ But Father Thuan understood the importance of the path he had chosen and was convinced of it. He unceasingly asked his bishop's permission to begin a monastic life. Finally, his desire was fulfilled.

On Augustine 15, 1918, the feast of the Assumption of Mary, he took up the contemplative life with one disciple at the mountain of Phuoc Son, a place far away from any other settlement. There were only two ways to arrive there, by boat or by horse. At first this new foundation belonged to the Diocese of Hue, with its name as Our Lady of Annam. In 1934 the order of Our Lady of Annam joined the Cistercian Order. Father Denis Thuan's perception of Vietnamese people was right: they have the capacity to live a contemplative life. Beginning with just one disciple, 18 years later the community had grown stronger, with enough members to make a further foundation in Phat Diem Diocese in 1936 called Our Lady of Chau Son.

As mentioned above, Father Henri-Denis Thuan did not give up the zeal for evangelization when he chose to live in solitude. Indeed, with his new religious name, Henri Benedict Thuan,⁶⁹ he chose a solitude separate from others only "in order to find them in God." As Thomas Merton wrote: "true solitude separates one man from the rest in order that he may freely develop the good that is his own and then fulfill his true destiny by putting himself at the service of everyone else."⁷⁰ Therefore, Father Henri Benedict and his disciples chose a hidden life not to isolate themselves from others, or simply to seek their own quiet comfort,

67 Ibid, 70.

68 Ibid, 67.

69 From now on I use his religious name Henri Benedict Thuan.

70 Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), 248.

but in order to be “open to creation and history, to the acknowledgement of adoration and constant praise of God in the world and its history, and the echo of a life of solidarity with one’s brothers and sisters, especially the poor and the suffering.”⁷¹ The zeal of evangelization was always in his heart and this foundation was clearly for that purpose. Dom Jean Doan Le wrote:

*“He was determined that the monastery and the whole of the life of a monk should be an efficacious contribution to the evangelization of the Church. He wrote solemnly in the Constitutions which he edited that the second aim of the monastery was for the conversion by prayer and sacrifice of those who did not know Christ. This was the aim of the monastery’s daily activities and devotion.”*⁷²

Indeed, the Vietnamese monks choose to live in solitude in order to find union with God through constant prayer and penance, by the oblation of self and the offering of a sacrifice of praise. In this way their lives become “a mysterious source of apostolic fruitfulness and blessing for the Christian community and for the whole world.”⁷³ As St. John Paul wrote: “In solitude and silence, by listening to the word of God, participating in divine worship, personal asceticism, prayer, mortification and the communion of fraternal love, they [consecrated religious] direct the whole of their lives and all their activities to the contemplation of God. In this way they offer the ecclesial community a singular testimony of the Church’s love for her Lord, and they contribute, with hidden apostolic fruitfulness, to the growth of the People of God.”⁷⁴ This is true of the Church, especially the mission church. Therefore, the Church encourages establishing contemplative monasteries in missionary areas because, for the Church: “in the regions where monasteries exist, the vocation of these communities is to further the participation of the faithful in the Liturgy of the Hours and to provide necessary solitude for more

71 *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*, no. 5, (accessed on 12/7/19)

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_12081980_the-contemplative-dimension-of-religious-life_en.html

72 Le Van Doan, *Father Benoit Thuan*, 69-70; The Constitutions of the Cistercian Congregation. of the Holy Family in Vietnam states, the purpose of the Congregation is to “serve the Church through a life of prayer and penance, by collaborating for the salvation of all souls who do not yet know and worship God” (Constitutions, no. 2).

73 Vatican II, *Perfectae caritatis*, no. 7

74 Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, Promulgated, March 26, 1996, no. 8.

intense personal prayer” (CCC #2691). Therefore, though their members live in solitude, the contemplative life is fundamentally apostolic. The Church confirms this in the document on the Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life: “Their contemplative life, then, is their primary and fundamental apostolate, because it is their typical and characteristic way in God’s special design to be Church, to live in the Church, to achieve communion with the Church, and to carry out a mission in the Church.”⁷⁵

The monks participate in the Church’s mission of evangelization not by going out to preach the Gospel but, by offering to God “an exceptional sacrifice of praise, they lend luster to God’s people with abundant fruits of holiness, they motivate this people and by their hidden apostolic fruitfulness they make this people grow.”⁷⁶ For the Church, this hidden path of evangelization is more fruitful than any other since it lies at the heart of the world and of the Church: “If contemplatives are in a certain way in the heart of the world, still more so are they in the heart of the Church.”⁷⁷ Thus, the Church requires that monks “loyally persevere in their form of life, for it has been of considerable service to the Church.”⁷⁸ All of this the Vietnamese Cistercian monks have been doing since the beginning of their dedication to Christ and his Church. In 2017 the Cistercians of the Holy Family Congregation in Vietnam counted thirteen monasteries: 9 for monks and 3 for nuns with 1,246 members.

3. Some advantages and challenges

a. Advantages

Vietnam is a land of rich religious tradition. The Vietnamese were fed by two basic instincts deeply rooted in their souls, that of the cult of ancestors and the cult of the spirits.⁷⁹ For the cult of ancestors, Phan notes that “The Vietnamese respect and venerate (*tho*, at time wrongly translated as adore)

75 *Vita Consecrata*, no. 26.

76 Second Vatican Council, *Perfectae caritatis*, Promulgated, October 26, 1965, no. 7.

77 *Perfectae Caritatis*, no. 15.

78 *Ibid*, no. 9.

79 For studies on the Vietnamese cult of ancestors, see Émile Ravernier, *Le culte des ancêtres précédé d'un exposé sur le Buddhism, le Taoisme et le Confucianisme* (Saigon: Albert Portail, 1926) and Joseph Vu Quang Tuyen, “La piété filiale chez les Vietnamiens” (diss., Pontifical University de Propagande Fide, Rome), 1954

their ancestors with great devotion.”⁸⁰ And with regard to the cult of spirits, Phan indicates that “Cadière⁸¹ has convincingly argued that the ‘true religion of the Vietnamese is the cult of the spirits,’ including that of heaven. This religion is not organized; it has no sacred books, no official ministers, no public houses of worship (except the *te nam giao*), and no formalized rituals. Yet it is the most pervasive and transforming cult, because it is rooted in the family with ancestor worship as its most sacred practice. Every Vietnamese worthy of the name, because of the sacred duties of filial piety, is a minister of this religion.”⁸² Apart from the belief in spirits and in heaven and the cult of ancestors, the Vietnamese soul is dominated by a synthesis of three systems: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism.

Thanks to these religions and cults, Vietnamese people formed a sense of the Absolute and a love for solitude. Thus, it is quite suitable for Christian monasticism to have taken root on Vietnamese soil and the souls of its people. Moreover, family love that ties every member of a family together is a constitutive factor in former community life. And so, there are many young men and women who easily dedicate themselves to monastic life.

Another factor is that the Vietnamese government is now more open to religious freedom, allowing Catholic monastic communities to live their religious life without interference and to purchase land for new foundations without undue restrictions. As well, thankfully, we are living in an “open world” where the healthy interchange of cultures provides an opportunity for monks to study abroad to obtain a good education in theology, spirituality and monastic history.

b. Challenges

The gap between generations

Many American and European monasteries undergo the reality of fewer young vocations, with the consequent burden put upon those of more advanced

80 Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 26.

81 Léopold Cadière, a missionary from MEP, who wrote 250 research papers concerning Vietnamese history, religions, customs and linguistics in the early 20th century. The cult of spirits is the original religion of the Vietnamese. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%C3%A9opold_Michel_Cadi%C3%A8re).

82 Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 27.

age. But just the opposite is true in Vietnam, especially in the Cistercian Order. After the fall of the South, the country was reunited and became totally communist. The government applied religious policies that had been in force in North Vietnam to the South. With the 297/HDBT government decree of November 11, 1977, the Vietnamese Communist Party added new restrictions on religious practices and organizations, while affirming the freedom of religious belief and non-belief.⁸³ The religious communities of the South were stripped of their possessions, religious were dispersed, arrested or lived more or less clandestinely. Recruitment was forbidden.⁸⁴ The Cistercian Order was not an exception. Our main monastery in Saigon was confiscated. Many brothers were put in jail and afterward forced to either leave the Order and return to their families or be sent to farm camps. Some of them left the Order. Those who remained scattered into three small communities. But in 1989/90 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in Europe the regime became a bit more liberal. Our community was able to re-form and we began to recruit new vocations. The period from 1996 on saw the blooming of vocations in Vietnam, especially to Cistercian houses. Monasteries are presently full of young vocations; full of energy but lacking in monastic wisdom. The gap in generations is not big, but the challenge is that most of the monks and their leaders belong to the “bloom of vocations” period so the deficiency in monastic wisdom and experience remains.

An adjunct challenge is the work of discernment of new vocations. Often our young vocations come from big families with five or six children. They are generally from fairly poor, rural and peasant farm families in the north or central part of the country. This causes a difficulty for communities and for candidates themselves in discerning the origin of the call. Is it a genuine call from God to a consecrated life or a search for social self-improvement? We believe that every religious vocation is from Jesus to follow him more closely. But our duty is to discern a genuine monastic call and guide the candidate in choosing.

83 Phan, Peter C. *The Roman Catholic Church in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1989-2005*, in *Falling Walls, the years 1989 and 1990 as a Turning Point in the History of World Christianity*, (Harrassowitz Verlag, Weisbaden, 2009), 248.

84 Raymond, Nathalie, “Impressions of Monastic Life in Vietnam,” *Alliance for International Monasticism: Vietnam, Land of Monastic Renewal*, English Language Bulletin, 2018. No. 115, 44.

Another challenge is the tendency to favor priesthood in monastic life. In the ancient monastic tradition, priesthood is not desirable for monks. Traditionally, there are three things from which the monks must flee, and one of them is the prospect of becoming a bishop, so they do not want to be ordained to the priesthood. But in Vietnam, the status of priest is highly valued, not only for the priest himself but also for his family. Therefore, a significant number of religious men, not excluding monks, want to be priests. On one hand this desire is good since the Church needs more priests to minister to God's people, but on the other hand, that should not be the case for monks. If a candidate enters the monastery with the idea of studying and becoming a priest, that can create a problem later if his priesthood does not correspond to the service he is required to give to the community.

Obedience and the genuine seeking of God in the monastic life of candidates is a further challenge for formators. Nathalie Raymond, an observer from outside the Vietnamese community, but very astute in her evaluation of monastic life in Vietnam, offers the following observation: "The relationship to authority in Vietnamese monasteries and more widely in all religious communities seems, at least from the outside, particularly complicated. It seems that to a certain extent the rules are made to be broken, as in a game of cat-and-mouse. It is a game which seems to me to reflect the general attitude of the population with regard to the law, for it has lost its absolutism. One can get round it by paying or simply not observing it in a spirit of resistance and muddling through. In religious communities the 'game' of getting round the rules concerns the use of cellphones, access to the internet, smoking, alcohol and other types of nourishment, or even the possession of certain consumer goods. Obedience, a central value of the religious life and in particular of the Benedictine life, is much harmed; and a great deal of psychology, discernment and humility is needed by formators and superiors to manage the situation which is already delicate, for they are sometimes ready to set up priorities among the regulations and close their eyes to what they consider secondary."⁸⁵ Yes, this is true, and it is a major problem for formators of the Order in Vietnam.

85 Raymond, *ibid.*, 49-50

These are some of the crucial challenges with which we have been confronted, but we trust in the good will of each candidate who comes to the monastery. We try to do the best we can to help them discern their real vocation. Moreover, we know that each religious vocation comes from God. In every generation, from the beginning of the Church until now, there have been thousands of men and women who respond to Jesus' call to live an ascetic life in monasteries under challenging circumstances. Each generation has labored under its particular strengths and challenges but the benefits contributed to the Church and to the world by these men and women have been countless. The Church acknowledges that truth and encourages the monks to be loyal to their vocation. Thus, despite the many complexities, we give thanks to God for the numbers of young monastic vocations coming to us and cherish them, for each vocation is a precious gift from God to the community and to the Church. We do our part as best we can, but in the same way, we must trust in the Holy Spirit who is the perfect "Formator." Step by step He can lift up each candidate and each monk and help them to live their vocation genuinely and more and more to be good disciples of Jesus, for "Everything is possible to one who has faith" (Mark 9:23).

