

# AN ANALYSIS OF THE VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST PARTY'S SUPPRESSION OF THE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

In this analysis I shall first speak briefly of *the reason and purpose* why the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP)<sup>1</sup> has suppressed the religious freedom of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. Then I shall present at full length *three strategies* which the VCP has used to suppress the Church's religious freedom for the purpose in question. I shall end my analysis with an explanation what is *the most destructive effect* which these suppressive strategies have caused to Catholics in Vietnam.

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## I. *The reason and purpose why the VCP has suppressed the religious freedom of the Catholic Church in Vietnam*

As an absolute totalitarianism, the VCP has never considered the people's and the country's well-being as its goal. Its only and unchanging goal is to maintain and expand its power, once established. Everything else is simply used by it as means to that end or at least must be rendered incapable of causing any obstacle to that end. Even the well-being of the people and the independence and unification of the country are not exceptional, let alone the life and activities of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. However, from its four-decade experience in dealing with the Church, the Party has known very well that a Stalin-typed persecution, though used predominantly in the past, especially for the Catholic Church in the North, has never been able to destroy the Church so that the Party could remove once for all any possible obstacle that she might pose to its power.

Those premises being understood, it is easier to see: (1) What the VCP needs to do to the Church is not to wipe her out but to suppress her religious freedom; (2) It has done so, *not* because it fears or suspects that she, if allowed to be free, will be able to pursue and to cause some disadvantages to the people and the country of Vietnam. The so-called "errors" of the Church such as her 'idealist,' 'anti-scientific' doctrines<sup>2</sup> or her so-called "crimes," for example, her past 'anti-revolutionary' activities in collaboration with the French colonialism, etc., used to be exploited and propagated by the Party as front-lined reasons to justify its suppression of her freedom. However, in the last analysis, they mainly covered a deeper and more realistic reason: a Church, if allowed to have freedom, would constitute a spiritual and social force extremely dangerous to the totalitarian dictatorship of the VCP.<sup>3</sup> *Such a freedom would be detrimental to the nature of communist totalitarianism.* If this was already the case in the past, it is still

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<sup>1</sup> As will be seen throughout the analysis, I use "Vietnamese Communist *Party*" instead of other names such as "Vietnamese Communist Government," "Vietnamese Communist Authorities," or "Vietnamese Communist Police," and so on. The reason is simple and evident: As a totalitarian dictatorship of would-be absolute power, the VCP controls and possesses every power or authority in the country. Supreme Court, National Congress, Government, Armed Forces, Police, etc., are different instruments or forms of the Party's totalitarian power.

<sup>2</sup> From the early 1950s to the late 1980s the irreconcilable opposition between an atheistic Communist ideology and the Catholic faith was obviously one of the reasons for suppression. However, from the beginning of the last decade on, because the majority of VCP members, including leaders, no longer believe this ideology, the ideological opposition has ceased to be a reason in reality.

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, despite the different alleged reasons the Land Reform in 1956, the Nhan-Van-Giai-Pham case of the late 1950s, and the case of Revisionism (chu nghĩa Xet Lai) of the late 1960's were intended to serve the same goal behind the scene. They were all directed to strengthen the VCP's totalitarian power by terrorizing the peasants, the writers and the poets, and many party members themselves, respectively, and thereby to crush any potential opposition in them.

more so today. In the first place, a true religious freedom for the Catholic Church relativizes or weakens the absolute totalitarianism of the VCP, not only on her,<sup>4</sup> but also on other religious organizations and on other parts of the people, who *will certainly be encouraged by her religious freedom* to demand or to fight for the religious freedom of their own or other fundamental human rights. In the second place, allowing the Church to enjoy a true religious freedom *can risk to enable* her members to speak out to defend the human rights and human dignity of the Vietnamese people and to condemn all forms of social injustice whose principal political and social cause is obviously the VCP. Hence, the Party has suppressed the religious freedom of the Catholic Church in Vietnam in order that it can prevent from happening any benefit that this freedom may bring to the other fundamental human rights of the Vietnamese people or contribute to the democratization of the country.

However, the Party has not been pleased simply with the removal of any potential opposition to its totalitarian ruling that may emerge from the exercise of this freedom. It wants something further, something productive to this ruling. As a matter of fact, the VCP has suppressed the religious freedom of the Church in such a way that it can at the same time *change the Church into a certain instrument or means to serve its totalitarian dictatorship*. In more specific terms, it *tries its best to obtain submission and collaboration from Church hierarchy members*. The Party wants all Church's activities must be ordered in different ways to its *use*, helping it to stay on in power.

In a word, in suppressing the religious freedom of the Catholic Church in Vietnam, the VCP has no other purpose than *depriving her of independence and autonomy, mainly obtaining submission and collaboration from her clergy, and thus changing her into a means to serve its totalitarian power*. It was Mai-Chi-Tho, former head of the VCP's Ministry of Interior, who alluded to this purpose by his following threat at the meeting on June 23, 1990 with Catholics of Saigon (Bishop Nguyen-Minh-Nhat, the then President of the Episcopal Conference, was also present at the meeting). Tho said, "If you do not walk with us, this means that you cannot unite with us and also that you are opposed to us. There cannot be any other meaning! (*sic*)"<sup>5</sup>

## **II. The *strategies* which the VCP has used to suppress the Church's religious freedom with a view to depriving her of independence and autonomy, mainly obtaining submission and collaboration from her clergy, and thereby reducing her to a means to serve its totalitarianism**

To achieve the aforementioned purpose, the VCP needs to devise and to employ other suppressive strategies than Stalin-typed suppression. These strategies, which can be *public* or *covert*, *physically violent* or *psychologically deceptive*, *consistent* or *inconsistent with the laws made by the Party itself*, can be divided into *three* following classes.

### ***A. The first strategy***

The VCP has tried to subject the Catholic clergy in Vietnam to its domination by way of its more or less *official* restrictions and prohibitions on the normal activities of the Church such as appointment of bishops and diocesan administrators, priestly ordination, appointment and transfer of priests, episcopal or presbyteral meetings, recruitment of seminarians, etc. Much has been described of these restrictions. However, to my knowledge foreign reports or testimonies on the Party's suppression of the Church's religious freedom have failed to explain the *strategical* nature of the Party's use of these restrictions. That

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<sup>4</sup> Without knowing the VCP's insistence on an absolute totalitarianism, one finds it impossible to understand why it fiercely and nastily objected to the canonization of the 117 martyrs of Vietnam by the Holy See in 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Tho's entire speech was published by *Catholicism and the People (Cong Giao va Dan Toc)*: the August 5 and 12, 1990 issues. *Catholicism and the People* is the weekly newspaper of the Unifying Committee of Patriotic Catholics (Uy Ban Doan Ket Cong Giao Yeu Nuoc). More will be said of this committee later.

is, the Party has not applied these restrictions equally or impartially but discriminatively or selectively for the following objectives.

(1) To exclude from leadership positions, religious ministries, or even a mere clerical status any Catholics who are inclined to oppose the VCP's suppression in defense of the Church's independence and autonomy in her religious activities.<sup>6</sup>

Among many well-known clergy of this *first* group are the late Archbishop Nguyen-Kim-Dien of Hue, Father Chan-Tin, C.S.S.R. in Sai-Gon, Father Nguyen-Van-Ly also of Hue, and Bishop Huynh-Van-Vaên-Nghi of Phan-Thiet. The attitudes and activities of the first three clergymen have been so well-known that I do not need to mention here. Instead, something needs to be said about the case of Bishop Nghi. When appointed as Apostolic Administrator of Sai-Gon by the Holy See on August 10, 1993, Bishop Nghi attempted to limit the power of Father Huynh-Cong-Minh, Vicar General, whom the Party strongly supported.<sup>7</sup> On account of this effort of his, the VCP did not acknowledge the appointment and hindered him from performing this ministry until the Holy See appointed the current Archbishop Pham-Minh-Man in 1998.

Some other clergymen of this first group, who have been personally known to me, are a pastor of a certain diocese<sup>8</sup> and Father Phan-Van-Loi. The pastor in question several times "annoyed" the VCP by making smart comments by which he was able both to criticize the Party for its suppression of the Church's religious freedom and at the same time to rebut any possible charge against him from it. As a result, in 1989 when he was appointed by his bishop to be Vicar General of the diocese, the Party hindered him from performing this function by refusing to permit him to transfer to the diocesan chancery. The Party also tried to put a certain psychological pressure on him by blaming that it was because of his 'bad' attitude toward it that it was holding back a few major seminarians in his parish from priestly ordination. Even several years later, when this priest left his diocese around 1993 and joined another diocese, the Party still did not forgive his 'sins.' It did not permit the bishop of the new diocese to assign him to even a small parish. Once a Catholic is on the "black" list, the VCP will hold grudge against him to death, unless he truly redeems his 'fault' by something acceptable to it.

Concerning Father Loi, he has been banned from his priestly ministry, not only because he was ordained secretly by Archbishop Nguyen-Van-Thuan<sup>9</sup> on May 21, 1981, but also because he directed a play entitled "Consecrating children to the Blessed Mother (Dang Con Cho Me)" in the Cathedral parish of Phu-Cam on Sept 21, 1981, which criticized the VCP for barring a group of Catholics from making a pilgrimage to the Marian Shrine of La-Vang. On account of these two 'sins,' the Party imprisoned him in a labor camp for 7 years, from 1981 to 1988. Especially, since the end of 2000, Father Loi has been a strongly and faithfully outspoken supporter of Father Ly's fight for religious freedom. For that reason he has been under house surveillance by policemen round the clock, though without any formal sentence.

(2) To *threat* and to *warn* beforehand those Catholics whom the VCP has not yet been able to identify their attitudes toward it<sup>10</sup> that they would better show their docility and submission to the VCP if they want to be in a "good" status. (It is also easy to see that this *second* group is the largest of three).

The following incident is one of innumerable examples of such a threat and warning. When the Major Seminary of Hue was permitted by the Party to re-open in 1994, those seminary candidates in Da-Nang were summoned to the Police Bureau there for several times. The Party's policemen bluntly said to some candidates, "You must know that your country is Vietnam, not the Vatican; so you must know whom you are to be faithful to." To others they insulted the Catholic conviction of the sacred and free nature of

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<sup>6</sup> Hereafter, Catholics who have this attitude toward the VCP will be referred to as those of the *first* group.

<sup>7</sup> Much will be said of this priest later.

<sup>8</sup> For the security reason, to avoid the possibility that the Party may harass him, I would have to keep in secret the details concerning names and locations.

<sup>9</sup> Archbishop Thuan, who was then under house arrest at Giang-Xa, Son-Tay, is now a cardinal and President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

<sup>10</sup> Hereafter, Catholics like these will be classified as the *second* group.

priestly vocation, arrogantly saying, "Not God, but we who choose you to enter the seminary and make you priests."

(3) – *To support and to reward* with fewer or even no restrictions those Catholics who show to be subservient in the face of the VCP's suppression of the Church's independence and autonomy or who at least prove to have no desire to oppose this suppression.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the Party has used priests and bishops of this *third* group as favorable "mediators," whose helps it has expected the Church to seek, if she wants to ask it to relax some specific restrictions.

This intermediary role the VCP used to officially grant to priests of the third group when they joined the Unifying Committee of Patriotic Catholics (Uy Ban Doan Ket Cong Giao Yeu Nuoc).<sup>12</sup> This committee, which is subdivision of the Fatherland Front of Vietnam (Mat Tran To Quoc Viet Nam), is essentially a Party-run organization, and one of its duties toward the Party is to act as its semi-official spokesman for Catholics in Vietnam by publishing a weekly newspaper called *Catholicism and the People*.<sup>13</sup> The late Archbishop of Sai-Gon, Most. Rev. Nguyen-Van-Binh, had to acknowledge, "We have to depend on the UCPC to solve several problems. For example, if I want to summon the faithful and ask the government permission, it will refuse. But if I summon the faithful in the name of the Committee, the government will grant [me] permission easily."<sup>14</sup>

It is also noteworthy, as many proofs have shown, that the VCP has sought the participation of many Catholic clergy in the UCPC and in some other political organizations such as the National Congress and People's Council at different levels to entice them into disobedience to the Church, to use many political meetings and jobs to hinder these clergy from fulfilling their own priestly duties toward Christ and the Church,<sup>15</sup> and finally to easily trap them into moral mistakes for its blackmail,<sup>16</sup> which would guarantee their loyal submission or collaboration to it;

– Also *to interfere* in such a way that Catholic clergymen of the third group can acquire important positions in the Church leadership. Then through them the VCP can infiltrate the very structure of the Church and develop there effective vehicles that serve its purpose legally.

The most notorious case is probably Father Huynh-Cong-Minh, a very active member of the UCPC. Elected a congress representative, Fr. Minh declared in his speech at one meeting of the National Congress in 1976, "a new man, a new society that everyone dreams of and that every believer in Christ for ever dreams of, such a new man, such a new society cannot come into being, will never exist, if there is no leadership and organization of the Vietnam Labor Party, the leading team of the worker class (*sic*)."<sup>17</sup> Fr. Minh was also the former general editor of *Catholicism and the People*, a Party newspapers as indicated above. The dangerous nature of his connection with the Party has been evaluated more appropriately since it was disclosed in one private letter which Father Vuong-Dinh-Bich, the then president of the UCPC in Hochiminh city, wrote to some organizations of the Party on December 25,

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<sup>11</sup> Hereafter, these Catholics will be classified as the *third* group.

<sup>12</sup> Hereafter, UCPC.

<sup>13</sup> Answering the question "What do you think of the UCPC (Que pensez-vous du Comit   d'union des catholiques patriotes)?" of *Eglises d'Asie* at the interview on December 12, 1990, Bishop Nguyen-Minh-Nhat of the Diocese of Xuan-Loc said, "The Committee holds the only Catholic newspaper in Southern Vietnam: 'Catholicism and the People.' However, both should be considered rather as the organs of the government. The articles of the newspaper are always in favor of the government's policies and very often critical of the Church. They do not give a right idea of the Church in Vietnam ... (Le Comit   d  tient l'unique journal catholique du Sud Viet-Nam: "Le Catholicisme et la Nation." Cependent, l'un comme l'autre doivent   tre consid  r  s plut  t comme des organes de l'Etat. Les articles du journal sont toujours en faveur de la politique gouvernementale et tr  s souvent critiques vis-B-vis de l'Iglise. Ils ne donnent pas une id  e juste de l'Iglise du Viet-Nam)"

<sup>14</sup> Answer to the interview by *Il Regno Attualit  *. April 15, 1990.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Mt* 6:24: "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other."

<sup>16</sup> See the second strategy.

<sup>17</sup> News 07/07/1976 from the VCP's News Agency reported this speech.

1997 to re-explain to them a divisive contention among UCPC members over some financial issues.<sup>18</sup> With so many 'good' qualities and achievements according to its standards, the VCP obviously has considered Fr. Minh as its best candidate for the archbishopric of Sai-Gon. But after finding with certainty that this priest was clearly *persona non grata* in the eyes of the Holy See for any episcopal position, it insisted on the following demand as one of the conditions for its acceptance of any other candidate than Fr. Minh for the archbishopric of Sai-Gon: whoever becomes new archbishop must not remove him from the position of vicar general or curtail his power, which he had enjoyed in the time of the late Archbishop Binh. That is to say, Fr. Minh's power in reality has been far more than that of a normal vicar general according to the Canon Law. Furthermore, in the time of Archbishop Binh the Party interfered in different ways that Fr. Minh and other Catholics of the third group were able to dominate the College of Consultors of the Archdiocese of Sai-Gon. "This college, besides two bishops [ex officio], consists of six members, but four are the top [members] of the UCPC (Nguyen-Huy-Lich [priest], Phan-Khac-Tu [priest], Huynh-Cong-Minh [priest], Nguyen-Dinh-Dau [lay man]). The rest are Fathers Mai-Xuan-Hau and Chan-Tin."<sup>19</sup>

Another case that is less known but equally serious is Father Nguyen-Binh-Tinh of Da-Nang (now Bishop), who supported the activities and policies of the VCP so publicly and so enthusiastically as to scandalize many Catholics in the diocese. For example, in his liturgical homilies, he quoted the Party's documents as kind of moral instruction for the Catholic faithful.<sup>20</sup> It has been reported by many Catholics in Da-Nang that in 1991 Fr. Tinh allowed a Party official to speak in his parish church (An-Hai) on one Sunday, inviting parishioners to participate in a Party-run interests program. As this was not enough, in March 1993 at a Sunday mass again Fr. Tinh himself handed out to his parishioners Party pamphlets on contra-conception and abortion (noted that the Party has not only allowed for but also encouraged an unrestricted abortion). Having such a 'good' priest at hand, the Party demanded that he had to be made Rector of the Major Seminary of Hueá as one of the conditions for re-opening it in 1994. Not only so, it also succeeded in its persistent and organized effort to push the Church into a corner where she could hardly avoid the appointment of Fr. Tinh as coadjutor-bishop of Da-Nang in June 2000 (now actual bishop of the diocese).<sup>21</sup> Since then, exactly as the Party planned and anticipated, thanks to his episcopal authority, his submission and collaboration with it has been all the more effective. Two following incidents can be considered as examples. At the end of last year, when the Party refused to compensate

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<sup>18</sup> The letter wrote, "I [Fr. Bich] frankly and urgently told Tu and Can [= Phan-Khac-Tu and Truong-Ba-Can, two very active priests of the UCPC] that the real problem of our Organization was not the Study Group but *our Group of four brothers: Minh* [= Fr. Huynh-Cong-Minh] –*Can-Tu-Bich*, [whom] *Leaders* [obviously from the context: high-ranked communist cadres who were in charge of religious affairs] *raised up and entrusted with the duty of gathering and recommending members for* [dieâu doăng] *the Movement of Patriotic Catholics in this city*" (my emphasis).

<sup>19</sup> Rev. Chan-Tin's *Letter to Archbishop Nguyen-Van-Binh on Oct 17, 1989*.

<sup>20</sup> As an altar boy in the Parish of Thanh-Duc, Da-Nang, during the early 1980's I witnessed for myself a case like this at one Triduum celebration, which Fr. Tinh presided since my pastor temporarily lost his voice after a throat surgery.

<sup>21</sup> As early as 1995, 1996 many priests and lay people of the Diocese of Da-Nang knew of a document once sent to Fr. Tinh from Da-Nang policemen, in which they had bluntly called him "Bishop." Another incident should be known also. There were a few priests in the diocese, who were more or less qualified episcopal candidates but who had been assigned to teach on the faculty of the Major Seminary of Hue since it truly needed their help. The Party demanded that since these priests now lived and taught at the seminary as its faculty members, they had to cancel their permanent residency in Da-Nang and registered it in Hue. As a result, they lost their permanent residency in Da-Nang. This demand turned out to be a step in a long-prepared plot by the VCP, which later used the status of a different permanent residency as a legal reason to refuse their nomination to the bishopric of Da-Nang and thus to leave the opportunity for episcopal appointment to Fr. Tinh alone. If the same logic above had been applied, the Party should have demanded the cancellation of his permanent residency in Da-Nang more than it did to the aforementioned priests since he was Rector of the Major Seminary of Hue. But it instead insisted that he had to preserve this residency. Finally, a private source reveals that although former Bishop Nguyen-Quang-Sach was in a very poor health and deadly needed a successor or at least a coadjutor, he still neither wanted Fr. Tinh in an episcopal position nor nominated him to it, probably for fear of future great harms to the Church.

the parish of Thanh-Duc for about 2,000 square meters it took from the parish's property to widen the road, the pastor, Rev. Dang-Dinh-Canh, and most of the parishioners unanimously decided to use the laws to fight for the the compensation. Bishop Tinh visited the parish to investigate the case. After hearing for himself the decision of the parish, on leaving, he spoke privately to Fr. Canh: "I do not want [the parish] to make noise about this." Understanding what the bishop meant, the priest chose to obey and advised the parishioners to drop their original decision, letting the Party obtain the land without spending a penny. More recently, at the interview with *Catholicism and the People* in May this year, Bishop Tinh came to publicly defend the participation of Catholic clergy in the Party's political organizations, specifically the nomination of one of his priests, Rev. Nguyen-Tan-Khoa, to the National Congress. He said, "The Church advised priests not to participate in political parties or in a government for fear that their pastoral duties may be influenced and [that they] may cause division. In the context of our Vietnam, there is a little presence of the Church in the public authorities, so I find it normal and necessary the participation of priests in the National Congress which is the assembly of the great united block of representatives from different parts [of the people]. Therefore, in my diocese, if any priest is trusted by the people to be elected National Congress representative, I do not see any obstacle."<sup>22</sup>

### ***B. The second strategy***

In order to go to great lengths in its effort and plan to obtain submission and collaboration from the Catholic clergy in Vietnam, the VCP has combined official restrictions and prohibitions of the first kind of strategy with *covert spying* tactics. After spending more than 12 years (1978-1991) to investigate and to interview Vietnamese boat people of different backgrounds (including officials and agents of the Party) especially from Northern and Central Vietnam, an analyst and researcher of the U.S. government summarized the insidious, malicious, and despicable tactics of the second strategy as follows: "The control of the Catholic Church and of the changes and developments inside the Church was a very important task for the security branch. From MOI<sup>23</sup> and its A-16 Department to the provincial and metropolitan PSS<sup>24</sup> and their PA-16<sup>25</sup> Bureaus, the greatest effort was concentrated on the base component of the Church, the clergy. The tactics were the exploitation of any historic negative role of the Church in Vietnam; the exploitation of past and current mistakes and wrongdoing, and the personality of a number of individuals among the clergy; and the widening of the Church's internal contradictions. In carrying out the tactics, MOI cadres screened the bishops and the priests for potential special collaborators. Then appropriate methods were devised for each individual to get him. In short, *the network of special agents inside the Catholic Church was usually built and broadened from the low elements, who should be elevated to higher positions or status*. The purpose was to know all of the Church's plans and to crush them at their embryonic stage. The ultimate goal was *to transform the Church into a puppet organization*."<sup>26</sup>

It should be noted that *if the VCP cannot find any moral mistake to exploit in a seminary candidate, a seminarian, a priest, a bishop, it then simply uses such religious objectives or goals as admission to a seminary, ordination to priesthood, graduate studies abroad, teaching in a seminary, becoming a bishop, a cardinal, etc., to prey on them*. Exploiting their strong desires to achieve these objectives or goals, the Party tries to press them for some kind of collaboration with it.

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<sup>22</sup> For the whole interview, see the May 24-30, 2002 issue of *Catholicism and the People*: p.14 and p.40.

<sup>23</sup> MOI: the Ministry of Interior (from the author's glossary of abbreviations).

<sup>24</sup> PSS: Public Security Service (from the author's glossary of abbreviations).

<sup>25</sup> PA-16: The code name of provincial/municipal counter-reactionaries beaureaus of the security branch (from the author's glossary of abbreviations).

<sup>26</sup> Tran An Binh with Gilbert B. Layton. *The Secrets of King Midas*. Gaithersburg, MD: VN Education Fund, 1995: 29. (The book has the Foreword by William E. Colby, Retired Director of Central Intelligence). (All the emphasis is mine).

It is also important to know that in order to avoid any future opposition to its suppression of the Church's independence and autonomy, the Party finds it easier and more effective to threaten and to exclude any potentiality of opposition even at its *embryonic* state, that is, in seminary candidates as well as in seminarians, and by different means to press for any possible collaboration from this early stage. More precisely, "after their biographies are submitted to provincial authorities, seminary candidates are then investigated by religious policemen, and almost all are 'suggested' to accept the mission of spying in major seminaries."<sup>27</sup> "Suggested" is the 'polite' language used by the Party's policemen, which in reality often bears the meaning of an authoritative demand. That is to say, "the seminarians of six seminaries have to work with Police, and in many places policemen require them 'to report' them about the seminary if they are permitted to enter the seminary."<sup>28</sup>

Of its nature, of course, evidence of this strategy is not easy to obtain and even more difficult to verify. However, I myself have heard from direct "witnesses" the stories concerning the VCP's infiltrating seminaries and running spying networks inside them and its use of religious objectives or goals to prey on seminary candidates, seminarians, and priests for collaboration with it. Following are some typical examples.

During my visit to Vietnam in summer 2000 I met a seminarian of the Diocese of Da-Nang who has studied at the Major Seminary of Hue.<sup>29</sup> He told me that returning home every summer, he was "invited" to go out with one particular policeman of the city of Da-Nang. During the conversation the policeman told him many things even in details about the activities both of the seminary and of individual seminarians during the past formation year as if he had been a seminarian there himself. More surprisingly and fearfully, the policeman even "predicted" the future, telling him that a particular seminarian X would leave seminary in a year. It came out to be true as he foretold (it was said that while being seminarian, X was engaged in a romantic affair). The message the policeman wanted to convey was clear, "We [the Party] know everything. You should not do or even attempt to do anything to displease us if you want to continue on in the formation and to be ordained priest in the end."

The existence of a spying network in the Major Seminary of Hue was indirectly acknowledged by Father Nguyen-Binh-Tinh (see above), rector of the seminary, when he told his seminarians that they could go ahead to report [understood: to the VCP], but they should make an honest report. In other words, himself submitting to and collaborating with the Party, Fr. Tinh found no moral problem with the very existence of this insidious and despicable tactics among his seminarians. The only moral obligation which he asked from those seminarians who were spying on others was to report to the Party only what actually happened, not to make any false accusation.<sup>30</sup>

A priest of a diocese in the North told me his story of application for a major seminary. Despite the fact that he had grown up in the North from birth (before 1975) and served in the Army of the Party, this above-average political background was not enough for him to be accepted as a seminarian. After submitting his application, he had to work with the local Party authorities on both levels, district and province, for some twenty-five times in order to ask for their approval. During these times they both persuaded him to collaborate with the VCP to spy on other people and their activities in his future seminary and indirectly threatened him that this collaboration was a necessary requirement for admission. Following the advise of a pious and solid priest, he refused such a sinful action and entrusted his fate to the hand of God. Fortunately, he was eventually accepted as a seminarian in 1993 without compromising his Catholic integrity, thanks to the intervention of the Provincial Secretary. Though being a Party

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<sup>27</sup> Rev. Phan-Van-Loi and Rev. Nguyen-Huu-Giai's *Report on the Vietnamese Communists' religious persecution (Ban Tuong trinh ve viec Cong san Viet Nam bach hai ton giao)*, which was completed on June 19, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> Rev. Chan-Tin's *Comment "On the Detoxification by Some Vietnamese Clerics in America" (Nhan Dinh cua Linh Muc Chan Tin "Ve Viec Giai Doc Cua Cac Chuc Sac Ton Giao Viet Nam o My")*, written on June 12, 2002 and publicized on internet shortly after.

<sup>29</sup> For the sake of the witnesses' security as well as for some other reasons, I cannot reveal their names and related details in these examples.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Father Phan-Van-Loi's *News 01/09/2002 of the fight for religious freedom in the Archdiocese of Hue*.

member, he thought highly of the Catholic church in his heart. Knowing by accident the difficult situation of this seminary candidate, he decided to help him without letting him know. Finding out later from whom the help had come, the priest in question above all attributed this to God's miraculous intervention.

Another priest of a diocese in the Central told me what had happened to him when he was asking permission from the Party to go abroad for graduate studies in philosophy at the Institut Catholique de Paris in France. The Party privately required him to collaborate with it by spying, for example, on fellow Vietnamese student priests in Paris and reporting to its Embassy there. It tried to impress him that his acceptance of this requirement were a necessary condition for it to grant him the permission. He refused to do such a shameful job. In the long run, the Party gave in and processed his case normally as its laws prescribed. He, however, suspected that some of his fellow student priests who either had lacked firmness to persist in their refusal or had been too ambitious for the prospects of their graduate studies abroad may have yielded to the Party's requirement of collaboration.

### ***C. The third strategy, the most insidious and malicious***

Over the past decade the Party has relaxed many previous restrictions on the Church's religious activities and allowed them to be increased both in number and in kind. For example, more churches have been renovated or rebuilt; commemoration of great religious events has been allowed to celebrate both on a diocesan level such as the anniversary of the establishment of a diocese and on a national level such as the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the apparition of Our Lady of La-Vang; more seminarians have been admitted; four more seminaries were re-opened; more priests have been ordained; priests have been permitted to go abroad for graduate studies; priests and religious men and women have been issued visas to go to visit relatives abroad; more bishops have been appointed to long vacant sees; bishops have been allowed more easily to go to Rome for ad limina visits or for different meetings in the curia, and so forth.

The VCP's relaxation of many previous restrictions and its permission for an increase in religious activities do not necessarily come from any positive change in its interior attitude toward the Church and her religious freedom. All these relaxations and permissions are partly inevitable on account of many weaknesses which the Party is facing in its *status quo* such as ideological crisis and loss of Party confidence among Party members, bribery and embezzlement widespread to almost every member, low morals or even debauchery in the majority of members, grave division in the Party leadership, difficulties in hiding "infavorable" information from the people in the country and from the world community, etc.

But the VCP *controls these relaxations and permissions in such a way that it can use Stalin-typed suppressions when it still needs*. Its relaxations and permissions do not affect its continuous imposition of Stalin-typed restrictions *in those local areas where it still has conditions to do so to the Church*. Following are just a few among innumerable examples of the Party's existing Stalin-typed suppressions.<sup>31</sup> Since last year the Party in Quang-Tri province has forbidden Archbishop Nguyen-Nhu-The of Hue to go and say mass in the region of Khe-Sanh, where there are many Vietnamese (Kinh) and montagnard (Thuong) Catholics. The Party in this province has also hindered the appointment of two associate pastors for parishes La-Vang and Cam-Lo, one for each, and has expelled religious sisters who were serving many parishes in the provincial territory for the reason that they did not have permanent residency there. Still more it has forbidden Catholic lay people who live far away from churches to gather in private houses for community prayers. Since 1975 it has not permitted Catholics in remote areas such as Nam-Dong, A-Sao, A-Luoi, Khe-Sanh, Ba-Long, etc. (in the territory of the Archdiocese of Hue) to build chapels and to have pastors, though the Archdiocese has requested these things so many times. As a result, they have been able to attend mass only twice a year, Christmas and Easter. When montagnard Catholics from these areas went down to urban parishes for catechetical training, the Party ruthlessly drove them back as happened in such urban parishes as Phu-Cam, Mother of Perpetual Help (Me Hang-

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<sup>31</sup> All the following information is taken from: Rev. Phan-Van-Loi and Rev. Nguyen-Huu-Giai's *Report on the Vietnamese Communists' religious persecution (Ban Tuong trinh ve viec Cong san Viet Nam bach hai ton giao)*, which was completed on June 19, 2002.

Cuu-Giup), and Phuong-Tay. Concerning priestly ordination, throughout fifty years the VCP has restricted the number of new priests almost to zero in mountainous dioceses in North Vietnam such as Lang-Son, Hung-Hoa, and Bac-Ninh with a view to wiping out these dioceses in the future. On March 22, 2002 the Party, for the first time from 1937, permitted Hung-Hoa, the largest diocese in Vietnam geographically (54, 351 square kilometers), to have 7 new priests. The ordination raised the total of priests in the diocese to 23 who have taken care of 135, 795 Catholics.

Still having all the relaxations and permissions under control, the VCP does not accord them to the Church on any *effective* legal basis, that is, according to the objective and indifferent criteria of the laws. There is no legal guaranty, and even if there were, it would not make much difference under the Communist totalitarianism. In order for the Party to obtain submission and collaboration from the Catholic clergy, like restrictions and prohibitions in the first strategy, relaxations and permissions in the third one need to be allotted mainly *at its mercy or disposal*. Therefore, the Party still has full authority to withdraw its relaxations and permissions at anytime if it discovers any signs of opposition that a bishop, a priest, or a seminarian may show with respect to its suppression of the Church's independence and autonomy.

*Furthermore, the VCP does not lose any material benefits to the Church on account of its relaxations and permissions.* They do not entail a return of Church properties which the Party previously 'confiscated.' *Not only so, these relaxations and permissions do not prevent it from continuing to 'confiscate' new Church properties.* More precisely, the Party continues to keep and to seize more Church properties especially when it can make a lot of money by using these properties for tourism and entertainment purposes. Following are some of a great number of cases where the Party has refused to return Church properties or seized even more recently: the land of the Archdiocese of Ha-Noi, surrounding the Episcopal office and residence,<sup>32</sup> the Hoan-Thien College Seminary of the Archdiocese of Hue, the land of Loan-Ly parish in the province of Thua-Thien (also belonging to the Archdiocese of Hue),<sup>33</sup> the land of Thien-An Benedictine Monastery in Hue, the church of Thanh-Quang at Tra-Kieu in the province of Quang-Nam (belonging to the Diocese of Da-Nang), the land of Bau-Goc parish in the province of Quang-Ngai (belonging to the Diocese of Quy-Nhon),<sup>34</sup> the elementary school of Binh-Phuoc parish in Sai-Gon, etc.

Still having the relaxations and permissions under its full control and losing no material benefits to the Church, the VCP, on the contrary, *devised the most effective suppressive strategy, at least in its weakened status quo. That is to say, from the early 1990's to today the Party is using these relaxations and permissions to maintain and strengthening more effectively its plan and effort to deprive the Church of her independence and autonomy. This most insidious and malicious strategy has two principal aspects to analyze below.*

**1. The VCP has used its relaxations and permissions in the past decade as propagative means to deceive many people that (1) The Church now has a true religious freedom though it is not complete yet; (2) The VCP has some good will to dialogue with the Church, and thereby it can change for the better in the way it deals with her**

*a. The first impression*

The VCP, using these relaxations and permissions, deceitfully causes in the mind of many superficial and inexperienced Western observers the impression that the Catholic Church in Vietnam today has a true religious freedom though it may not be complete with respect to certain areas. For example, from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> of May this year the Party sent a small group of clerics of a few different religions in Vietnam

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<sup>32</sup> More will be said of this case later.

<sup>33</sup> Concerning the land of the parish of Loan-Ly, see: Father Phan-Van-Loi's *News 7/30/2002 of the fight for religious freedom in the Archdiocese of Hue*.

<sup>34</sup> It is the pastor of Bau-Goc, Fr. Van-Ngoc-Anh, who cried for help via internet right after the Party not only invaded the land of the parish to widen the road but also beat him and about 50 parishioners who were standing out to prevent it on July 15, 2002.

to the U.S.A. to propagate that impression.<sup>35</sup> To make sure no disadvantageous incident might happen, it even had some top officials of its Religious Committee (Uy Ban Ton Giao) such as chairman Le-Quang-Vinh and vice-chairman Nguyen-Van-Ngoc (in charge of Catholic affairs) accompany and watch over the group throughout its time in America.<sup>36</sup> The Party forced these clerics to appeal to religious activities obtained from its relaxations and permissions as proofs for true religious freedom in Vietnam.<sup>37</sup>

However, this impression must be discarded as a false one. Religious activities cannot be mistaken for religious freedom, at least in the context of a country ruled by a totalitarianism like the VCP. In this context religious freedom for the Church must mean that *she is completely independent of the Party and truly self-governing or autonomous in her own organization and in all her religious activities*. Then *religious freedom is not identical to the existence, kind, and number of religious activity*. Religious freedom is rather *an intrinsic quality* which every religious activity should have. No religious freedom can exist without religious activity, but *there can be religious activities without religious freedom*.<sup>38</sup> Thus understood, it is obvious from my foregoing analysis that the religious freedom of the Vietnamese Catholic Church is *still suppressed in essence* by the Party. As a matter of fact, as will soon be shown, today it is using many relaxations and permissions in return for *more concessions from the Church which gives it even more opportunities to deprive her of independence and autonomy*.

*b. The second impression*

A Western analyst who is somewhat experienced in the situation of Vietnam may not, on the basis of the Party's relaxations and permissions over the past decade, rush to conclude that the Catholic Church in Vietnam now has true religious freedom. But he may still be deceived to think that these relaxations and permissions show a certain sincere intention from the VCP to dialogue with the Church and to be open to better changes in the way it deals with her. *Even many Catholic clergy in Vietnam are deceived in a similar way*. Anyway, as the VCP does with the first impression, it usually has some Catholic clergymen make public remarks to propagate the second one for it. For example, at the same interview with *Catholicism and the People*, mentioned above, Bishop Tinh made this remark, "We have a *very friendly and open* relationship with the government of Da-Nang city and [that] of Quang-Nam province. My opinion is that *dialogue always brings many mutual understandings and sympathies*. Ordination, appointment, and transfer of priests in the diocese always occur smoothly. In Quang-Nam province, sometimes, at some places, there are still a few difficulties, but according to me, with time, *when there is a common voice* [between the government and the diocese], *everything will be handled correctly* [...]"

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Rev. Chan-Tin's *Comment "On the Detoxification by Some Vietnamese Clerics in America"* (*Nhan Dinh cua Linh Muc Chan Tin "Ve Viec Giai Doc Cua Cac Chuc Sac Ton Giao Viet Nam o My"*), written on June 12, 2002 and publicized on internet shortly after.

<sup>36</sup> Fr. Chan-Tin also told us that before 1975 Nguyen-Van-Ngoc was a Catholic student, member of the Catholic Students Club run by Fr. Nguyen-Huy-Lich, O.P. I however suspect that Ngoc was never Catholic even before 1975. The VCP infiltrated him as its "spy" among Fr. Lòch's leftist Catholic students to manipulate their activities for its benefit. Because of his mission, Ngoc had to fake himself as a Catholic. If I were wrong; that is to say, if he had been truly Catholic, then may God have mercy on him and help him to repent not only for his apostasy but also for all his activities inimical to the Church at least since he started to work for such a diabolic committee.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Catholicism and the People's* Interview with Rev. Dinh-Chau-Tran, O.P., a member of the group (June 7 to 13, 2002 issue). Reading his replies carefully, we find that though forced to propagate for the Party's attitude toward the Church's religious freedom, Fr. Tran tried not to distort the truth too much. No place in the interview did he say that human rights or religious freedom has been respected in Vietnam.

<sup>38</sup> In the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century the Catholic Church in the West was able to have all kinds of religious activities, but she did not have a true freedom when carrying out many of them. Religious activities such as consecrating and appointing bishops were subject to the manipulation of many Western kings or princes for their own benefits. Today in China the Patriotic Catholic Church publicly and easily performs many religious activities which the underground Catholic Church can hardly have because the Chinese Communist Party has never stopped increasing its crack-down on her. However, understood in terms of autonomy and independence, the underground Church has not lost her *true* freedom in whatever religious activities she has been able to perform, though underground. On the contrary, the officially sanctioned Church does not have any true freedom, for it takes orders from the Party for every religious activity it performs.

think, if we are sincere and live in harmony [with the government and other religious organizations], we shall not face any difficulty (*sic*)."<sup>39</sup>

It should also be noted that to add more propagative strength to the second impression the Party has ordered some 'changes' or 'corrections' in some official documents issued by it in order that their language could mitigate or no longer have a content inimical to religion. The Party also allowed a few scholars and writers to have some freedom to present the good aspects of Catholicism either in their speeches, discourses at conferences<sup>40</sup> or in published literary works.<sup>41</sup> All of this has been used by the Party only to produce in the mind of many Catholics an impression that it is now moving to a 'positive' and 'correct' understanding of the Church, and thereby it will treat the Church better.

But the VCP's intention to dialogue and to be open to changes must be highly suspected on the basis of the fact which my analysis pointed out above. That means, the relaxations and permissions from the Party cannot be evidence of its 'good' will or intention whereas it has managed them in such a way that it continues to use Stalin-typed suppressions and to keep and to seize the Church's properties. Above all, if a Western observer or a Vietnamese Catholic has a *correct* understanding of the reason and purpose why the VCP has suppressed the religious freedom of the Church,<sup>42</sup> it is not too difficult to see that an impression like the second one is *completely deceptive*. In fact, from what I pointed out at the beginning of this analysis, unless the Party were no longer a communist totalitarianism, it cannot change its basic attitude toward the Church and any other realities, wanting to use all of them as means to serve its totalitarian power. Then the way the Party treats her religious freedom cannot change in essence. What matters with the Party is not how to understand the Church correctly but how to *use her in accordance with its power*. As a matter of fact, the Party from the depths of its heart understood the Church correctly long time ago. It knew very well that the Church is a spiritual and social force which plays a very positive and important role in building up, defending, and improving human dignity and social justice. Thus understanding, the Party, of course, has considered the Church as a very dangerous enemy to its totalitarian power. Therefore, it must change that enemy into its subject and collaborator. To do this, it must first of all deprive the Church of her independence and autonomy.

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<sup>39</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>40</sup> For example, the conference "*Mot So Van De Ve Van Hoa Cong Giao Viet Nam Tu Khoi Thuy Den Dau The Ky XX (Some Issues of Vietnamese Catholic Culture from the Beginning to the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century)*," which the Party allowed and encouraged to be held in Hue from October 24 to 27, 2000.

<sup>41</sup> For example, such works as *Con chien lac bay cua Chua (God's Lost Sheep)*, *Co hoi cua Chua (God's Opportunity)*, *Chia khoa cac kho bau (Key to Treasures)*, etc. The last work was a short story by Ngo-Van-Phu, published in *Van Nghe (Literature and Arts)* (the September 10, 1994 issue), Ha Noi. Its content was fairly positive and open to the history and faith of Catholicism. There is a very great distance between its content and that of the novel *Sau hoi chuong cau nguyen (After the Bell Strokes of Prayer)*, another work by the same author, published only 8 years before (1986).

<sup>42</sup> Perhaps, it is not very practical to expect a Western observer to have such a correct understanding. This is true even of the document "Peace, Reconciliation and Religious Freedom in Vietnam," A Statement by Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza, President of National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference. This document was issued on November 24, 1999 after Bishop Fiorenza led a delegation of the U.S. Conference of Bishops to visit Vietnam from August 26 to September 2, 1999. We see an incorrect understanding of the reason and purpose why the VCP has suppressed the religious freedom of the Church behind the following lines of the document: "We strongly encouraged a rethinking of measures that seem to express a fear of the Catholic community, a tenth of the Vietnamese people, who seek only to be *patriotic and productive citizens*, free to express their commitment to Jesus Christ and to His Church [...]. It is our fervent hope that the authorities come to understand that *the responsible exercise of religious belief not only does not threaten the peace and good order of Vietnamese society but can positively enhance the general well-being of all*" (emphasis mine). Ironically, contrary to the thoughts of Bishop Fiorenza, it is exactly "the responsible exercise of religious belief" that the VCP fears most. This responsible exercise makes Catholics genuinely "patriotic and productive citizens" who can but "positively enhance the general well-being of all" and who thereby cannot avoid opposing the totalitarian dictatorship of the VCP in one way or another, for this totalitarianism is the real and greatest enemy of the common good of the country, the most horrible destroyer of the culturally and spiritually noble values of the Vietnamese people.

*c. The benefits which the VCP is directly intended to obtain through the two false impressions in question*

Of course, these impressions have been created by the VCP for no other final purpose than maintaining and expanding its totalitarian power, as pointed out at the beginning of this analysis. But these impressions serve the Party's final purpose by helping it directly achieve subordinate objectives such as the following benefits.

*The first benefit* is that by creating these two false impressions the VCP hopes to persuade developed countries, especially the USA and Western European countries, that its respect for religious freedom is being improved considerably. Henceforth, there should be no negative reason concerning human rights that would be serious enough to forbid these countries to grant it economic aids of different forms and to pursue trade and investment relations with it. Of course, the Party cannot achieve this benefit without devising a complicated and multi-staged plan to effectively combine together different campaigns with respect to religion, international relations, relations between Vietnamese people in the country and those abroad, etc. It is not unreasonable, for example, to speculate that before the U.S. lifted its economy embargo, the Party must have used some high-ranked Catholic clergy in Vietnam in different ways to influence some Vietnamese clergy in America whom it would have expected to work for it. The latter clergy must have worked for the Party either unintentionally and indirectly, if they had been only misguided by the above-mentioned high-ranked clergy in Vietnam without knowing, or consciously and directly, if their moral mistakes had been blackmailed by the Party. In either way, they must have been successful to build a bridge between the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the U.S. and some leaders in the Episcopal Conference of Vietnam. Next step, the Party must have used the latter to lead the former to a deficient view of the situation of the religious freedom of the Church in Vietnam. Once the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the U.S. did not have an accurate and complete knowledge, the Party could anticipate some favorable outcomes from the episcopal conference's influence on the U.S. government's foreign policies toward it.

The above benefit is not so important to the conservative group in the Party which wants to maintain the Party's totalitarian power by submitting to the Chinese Communist Party than by opening the door to close diplomatic and economic relations with the West. However, both the conservative and the progressive group find the following *second benefit* as necessary, indispensable. That is to say, once the VCP can produce the second impression in the mind of the Catholic clergy and deceive them about its spirit of 'dialogue' and 'openness,' they will find it all the more justified to continuously follow a soft, compromising, concessive, and subordinate attitude toward it as if this attitude were in the long run the only best way to restore religious freedom to the Church.

In other words, according to the Party's plan, the Church hierarchy, once trapped in this illusion, will *refuse to employ the united force within the Church, especially between the hierarchy and the crowded forces of laity*, to demand firmly and decisively, though non-violently, the Party to cease its plan and effort to deprive the Church of independence and autonomy. In fact, *this refusal is a very great and important benefit for the VCP*, for the Party in its weakened status quo sees very well that it is no longer capable of subduing this united force of the Church.

That is why today whenever the Party smells a real threat from this united force of the Church, in order to ease and to prevent it from bursting out before it is too late it *quickly*, though *unwillingly*, has recourse to some concrete actions that appear to be 'dialogue' or 'openness' but are truly transitory and deceptive. These actions are already planned for no other purpose than tempting the Church not to demand what obviously belongs to her. Even these 'reluctant' cases prove above suspicion that the Party's intention of 'dialogue' and 'openness' is *not sincere at all*. Following is one of such 'unwanted' cases. On July 28 and later on Sept 28, 2001 Cardinal Pham-Dinh-Tung, Archbishop of Ha-Noi, wrote to Prime Minister Phan-Van-Khai, requesting him to intervene to stop the construction by the local authorities of Hoan-Kiem district of Ha-Noi on the land legitimately registered as diocesan property since 1933.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> The Party 'confiscated' this land in 1954. Recently the Archdiocese requested it to return the land, it did not. According to its own administrative directives (thong tu) No. 02/TT-TGCP issued on Sept 24, 1992, the Party was

Shortly after the second letter by the Cardinal, 46 pastors of the Archdiocese of Ha-Noi one after another signed another letter of the same content and sent it to the Party to express their unanimous unity with their bishop on this matter. Despite two letters written by a Cardinal, who was then still President of the Episcopal Conference, and despite the letter by his priests, the Party still did not bother to respond even by sending a note of receipt. On the contrary, the Party continued to let the local authorities continue the construction. There was a *contemptuous* silence from the side of the Party throughout 3 months and a half. It was a slap to the face of any one who used to think that the Party had some intention to dialogue and to be open to change. Its silent contempt for the Church authority would have lasted infinitely if on Sunday November 11, 2001 and for the first time the Cardinal had not publicized his letter and that of his pastors *to all his faithful* by having these documents read from the pulpit in every church of the Archdiocese. His action gave rise to strong and public supports from all his faithful. No sooner had the Party seen this imminent threat than it began to send different delegations to meet the Cardinal and his clergy. The meeting with the highest delegation from the Party took place on Dec 06, 2001. At this meeting though promising to temporarily stop the construction, it continued to refuse to return the diocesan land in question.

**2. The VCP has used its relaxations and permissions over the past decade to weaken, to paralyze, or to destroy many moral and spiritual qualities in Catholics, especially the desire and effort of the Catholic clergy to defend the Church's independence and autonomy**

These relaxations and permissions are not free of charge in *material* terms even though they are granted only to those Catholics who at least prove to have no opposition to the Party's depriving the Church's independence and autonomy. In its state of incurable corruption the VCP more than often demands bribes or 'gifts' from Catholics in return for a relaxation or a permission concerning religious activities as seminary admission, priestly ordination, assignment and transfer, travel abroad either for graduate studies or for visit, renovation, reconstruction, or construction of churches or buildings of other religious uses, etc. These bribes or 'gifts' are not symbolic at all. They are costly.

Earning material benefits for itself, the Party at the same time uses these relaxations and permissions, thus granted, to weaken, to paralyze, or to destroy many moral and spiritual qualities in Catholics. The first is their conscience or moral consciousness. Many Catholics so often have to practice bribery, though with a good intention for the sake of a good end, that they become comfortable with it, no longer caring about the fact that this practice is a moral evil in itself and therefore cannot be justified by any good end or good intention. The second quality is their sense of the sacredness of religious realities, especially the holy order of priesthood. The Party's extortion of bribes or 'gifts' in return for its relaxations and permissions can make many Catholics gradually secularize these sacred realities. They may think or believe that they can achieve these religious realities by themselves and thanks to the helps of human means, even morally bad ones. This inevitably leads to the diminution and loss of the third quality, that is, an awareness and trust that sacred realities, especially the holy order of priesthood, are God's free gifts and thereby dependent only on the divine will and power. Catholics' "yes" of freedom, humble trust, and endeavor to corresponding holiness do not make these sacred realities exist but are proper responses to God's already and freely given gifts. Furthermore, even these positive responses are also the effects of God's grace. The list of other moral and spiritual qualities diminished or made lost by the Party keeps being unfolded through their corresponding regresses, for example, such as substitution of the externality and formality of Catholicism (especially in the "movement" of the "renovation" and "reconstruction" of churches) and its less essential needs for its interiority and fundamental demands, the decline in the life of simplicity and temperance among many Catholic clergy, and so on.

But for the VCP *there is no moral or spiritual quality the diminution and loss of which benefits it more than the desire and effort of the Catholic clergy to defend the Church's independence and autonomy*. The Party's use of relaxations and permissions in the past decade has obtained submission and collaboration from Catholic clergy *even more effectively than the two previous strategies*. When the hand

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supposed to maintain the status quo of the property, that is, without building any new construction or condemning any old one, while the Archdiocese was waiting for its resolution.

of the Party releases its many restrictions and allows for more religious activities, including those only dreamt of, many Catholic clergy *can easily become content with its comfortable grasp*. At least, they surrender easily to this lot, dropping their will and effort to escape that hand. The VCP uses religious activities as *opium* to fascinate many Catholic clergy and to bind them to the orbit of its domination apparently gently *but indeed more tightly*.

More precisely, using its relaxations and permissions as temptation to gradually extinguish in Catholics any desire and effort to defend the Church's independence and autonomy, the VCP increases and strengthens the *third* group.<sup>44</sup> It permits the Church to admit more seminarians to seminaries, to ordain more priests, and to appoint bishops to vacant sees more easily. But if by means of that the Party infiltrates the internal structure of the clergy with more seminarians, priests, and bishops who are more prone to submit to it and collaborate with it, then such a permission is more advantageous to it. With respect to Catholics of the *first* and *second* groups, the Party, using its relaxations and permissions, gradually tempts many of them to accept a less and less determined and zealous attitude toward the defense of the Church's independence and autonomy. They thereby become less and less opposed to the Party's suppressive plans and efforts. It permits a diocese to ordain more priests, to build or to renovate the chancery, to open a seminary, and to build or to renovate more churches. But if by means of that it does not encounter any opposition from the leadership of the diocese in regard to its suppression of one or two dissident priests of the same diocese or its 'confiscation' of one or two churches that benefit it economically. Nothing benefits the Party's suppression of the Church's religious freedom more than this kind of permission. The following incident perhaps reveals a set-back in the attitude of some clergy of the first group. In April this year the Episcopal See of Xuan-Loc wrote a letter, which called upon clergy, religious, and laity in the diocese to participate actively in the election of representatives for the National Congress and highlighted this participation as an important and meaningful duty.<sup>45</sup> The letter indirectly advocated the National Congress, which every Vietnamese knows very well is simply a puppet organization created and controlled by the Party only to deceive the world. What is hard to believe is that the letter was undersigned by Bishop Nguyen-Minh-Nhat, who during his visit "ad limina" to Rome and then his trip to France in November and December 1990 had showed no fear in expressing his agreement with the truths of the Party's suppression of religious freedom and in publicly criticizing the UCPC and its newspaper *Catholicism and the People*.<sup>46</sup> Was the bishop truly the author of the letter? If yes, why did he betray himself by reversing his attitude toward the Party? If no, how is this incident explained? Hopefully, the letter had been written and publicized through no faults of his, but even in this case, the bishop should have done something publicly afterward to correct its harmful effects.

At the same time the VCP has used relaxations and permissions as a certain kind of pressure to cause a decline in the implicit support which many Catholics of the *second* group used to give to some people of the *first* group who have been outspoken in defense of the Church's independence and autonomy. These people now begin to be seen as "imprudent" or "radical," getting in the way of the Church's effort to obtain relaxations from the Party. In other words, using its relaxations and permissions, the Party is isolating some people of the first group more effectively than it did before. What has just been said helps to explain in part why the fight of Father Nguyen-Van-Ly and of his friends for the true religious freedom of the Church has not received much considerable support from the Catholic clergy in general, including both bishops and priests. Neither did the Party's growing actions of suppressing his voice, culminating in the trial on October 19, 2001, which sentenced him to 15 years in prison and 5 years under house arrest, provoke any objection or criticism from most of the Catholic clergy.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See above the classification of Catholics according to their different attitudes toward the Party's suppression of the Church's religious freedom.

<sup>45</sup> The letter was published on *Catholicism and the People*, the April 26 to May 2, 2002 issue.

<sup>46</sup> See footnote 13.

<sup>47</sup> Except the public and strong condemnation by his two priest friends, Frs. Phan-Van-Loi and Nguyen-Huu-Giai, and by Father Chan-Tin in Sai-Gon, the public prayers offered for him as a victim of injustice by two or three other priests in Hue, and the partially hidden objection from many other priests in Hue and from one or two bishops.

### **III. The most destructive effect of all the three strategies above: Catholics are to be silenced about the *truths* of the VCP's religious suppression and above all of its plan and effort to deprive the Church of her independence and autonomy**

#### ***A. Truths of the VCP's religious suppression in general***

It is one thing that the whole world knows well that the Catholic Church has been suppressed in Vietnam. It is still *another* when Vietnamese Catholics break silence and begin to speak out on this already-known fact and thereby publicly demand a *true* religious freedom for themselves. Only then can significant and even dramatic changes take place to the situation of the Church's religious freedom. In fact, when Vietnamese Catholics speak out that they are religiously suppressed in their country and therefore do not have a true religious freedom, they will begin to take effort and action to liberate themselves from the VCP's domination, moving outside and beyond the state of passive endurance, an effort of mere survival in the past. Since their act of speaking out on the truths of religious suppression is the first and indispensable step to set in motion other actions fighting for the Church's true religious freedom, this action will be a sure and great sign that not only encourages a widespread participation in their country but also attract the special attention and support from the international community.

Well aware of the meaning and effect of outspokenness, the VCP with the help of all the three suppressive strategies analyzed above seeks *first* and *above all* to destroy in Catholics the ability to *speak out* on the truths of its suppression of the Church's religious freedom. As a matter of fact, nothing can measure the effectiveness of the three strategies with a greater directness and certainty than the fact whether they can succeed or not in preventing Catholics from thus speaking out. As a result, the three aforesaid strategies, combined with Stalin-typed suppressions if necessary, are first and above all devised to discover potential out-spoken Catholics, to prevent them from doing so, to terrorize and to punish those who did or want to do so, and finally to crush a real desire of doing so. In a word, *essential part of the VCP's suppression of the Church's religious freedom is its suppression of a possibility and act of speaking out on the truths of that suppression.*

The following story is just one among innumerable examples of the VCP's suppression of a possibility and action of outspokenness.<sup>48</sup> In October 1998 the United Nations sent Mr. Abdelfattah Amor, Special Reporter on "Religious Intolerance," to Vietnam to observe and to make a report on the situation of religious freedom. On hearing of Mr. Amor's visit, many priests in the Archdiocese of Hue suggested Archbishop of Hue, Most. Rev. Nguyen-Nhu-The, to summon a meeting of all priests and religious men and women. The purpose was that they could make together one *accurate* and *complete* report on the situation of religious freedom in the Archdiocese and later would hand it to Mr. Amor. The archbishop dismissed this suggestion, knowing very well that if it had been carried out, the Party would have caused many troubles and disadvantages to the archdiocese and even to him. No sooner had Mr. Amor arrived in Hue than the archbishop left Hue probably to avoid meeting him. When Mr. Amor went to the diocesan chancery, the vicar general alone received him in the living room. However, a big crowd of the Party's cadres and policemen surrounded Mr. Amor and the Priestly Residence directly connected with the chancery. To effectively prevent any contact with him many policemen even sneaked in *beforehand* and spread everywhere *inside* the chancery. The archbishop's secretary priest was tightly held by two policemen in his own room, next to the living room. One senior priest in the Priestly Residence, who knew the religious situation of the Archdiocese very well, tried to meet Mr. Amor, but the priest was stopped by the policemen right in the hall leading to the living room. As a result, Mr. Amor did not meet

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<sup>48</sup> Fr. Phan-Van-Loi directly told me this story when I visited him in Hue in the summer 2000. Recently, he publicized it on the internet but removed those specific details that could directly identify the diocese and the bishop (Cf. *News 01/02/2002 of the fight for religious freedom in the Archdiocese of Hue*).

any Catholic priest of Hue, except the Vicar General, who in order to stay in his position could hardly be an outspoken priest.<sup>49</sup>

If the VCP finds out or even simply suspects that a certain Vietnamese Catholic is outspoken on its suppression of the Church's religious freedom, it will 'punish' him in different ways, which includes various forms of prohibition and restriction on religious activities, continuous harassment (of his private, professional, or ministerial life and of the well-being of people under his care, namely family, religious community, parish, or diocese), defamation or threat of defamation (by disclosure of his moral mistakes or most often simply by slander or false accusation), physical torture, prolonged detention without charge, clandestine detention, severely unjust sentence to prison, secret execution, and assassination. It should be noted that some of these forms of punishment do not spare anyone, including a bishop.<sup>50</sup> The most well-known case is the death of the late Archbishop Nguyen-Kim-Dien, who ceaselessly and courageously spoke out against the Party's religious suppression. There are more and more credible proofs that when the archbishop was an inpatient at state-run Cho-Ray Hospital, the Party secretly had him poisoned and killed on June 8, 1988.

***B. Truths of the VCP's plan and effort to deprive the Church of her independence and autonomy, mainly to seek submission and collaboration from her clergy, and thereby to change her into a means serving its totalitarian power***

Truths of the Party's suppression of the Church's religious freedom are not of equal importance. It is obvious from the foregoing analysis that what the VCP wants to *hide* and to *distort most* about its religious suppression is *its plan and effort to deprive the Church of her independence and autonomy, mainly to obtain submission and collaboration from her clergy, and thereby to change her into a means serving its totalitarian power*. Therefore, the more Vietnamese Catholics speak out on *the* truths exposing these things, the more greatly they grow in their capacity to liberate the Church from the control of the Party. More precisely, as long as Vietnamese Catholics refrain from speaking out against the Party's suppression of the Church's independence and autonomy, they still fail to resolve the present situation of their religious freedom *at its root*.

As a result, since the past decade what the Party has tried to suppress *most* is the possibility and act of outspokenness on the truths concerning its suppression of the Church's independence and autonomy. It should not be surprising then that although several Vietnamese Catholics now begin to speak out on such and such restrictions or prohibitions which the Party continues to impose on the Church's religious activities, very few, if not counted by fingers, are outspoken on the truths of its depriving the Church's independence and autonomy. Not daring to be outspoken, many Catholics in Vietnam also refrain from telling these truths in *private* contacts unless they can make sure beforehand that what they are going to say will not come back to haunt them, but this hypothesis in the context of Vietnam remain to be unlikely.<sup>51</sup> That is why most of the Vietnamese bishops and priests, even when they go abroad, refuse to tell truths of this kind. On the contrary, if any Catholic bishop or priest makes any public statement that covers, misleads, or distorts a truth of this kind, the Party will reward him with more relaxations and permissions on the religious activities of his own or those of the community under his care (parish, religious order, diocese).

Then it is somehow unreasonable to expect an *accurate* and *complete* picture, even in miniature, of the VCP's suppression of the Church's religious freedom in the document "Peace, Reconciliation and

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<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, throughout his ten-day visit (starting from Oct 16) to Vietnam, despite his effort, Mr. Amor was still hindered by the Party from meeting Venerable Thich-Quang-Do and Father Chan-Tin, who were then ones of the most outspoken on the Party's suppression of religious freedom.

<sup>50</sup> Of course, if an outspoken person is a bishop, the VCP, avoiding causing any counter-effect at least in recent years, does not want to turn to *any* form of punishment. It has to restrict its punishment to only a few ways such as prohibitions and restrictions on religious activities, defamation, and assassination.

<sup>51</sup> See the second strategy above.

Religious Freedom in Vietnam" – A Statement by Bishop Joseph A. Fiorenza, President of National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference, on Nov 24, 1999.<sup>52</sup> This document was composed on the data which Bishop Fiorenza and some other American bishops in their visit to Vietnam from August 26 to September 2, 1999 obtained from what they saw and heard in their meetings with many Vietnamese bishops, priests, religious men and women, seminarians, and lay people. Whereas it is needless to mention what these American bishops saw (superficial and even deceptive), what they heard needs to be briefly commented. What matters here is how *much* of the *whole* truth those Catholics whom the American bishops met told them concerning the present situation of the Church's religious freedom. No doubt, on the basis of the information gathered, the document recognizes that in her religious activities the Church continues to suffer many restrictions and prohibitions. Those Vietnamese Catholics might tell some truths about the Party's restrictions and prohibitions, and yet they might also point out there have been changes for the better, namely more relaxations and permissions, from the side of the Party regarding the Church's religious activities. There are some truths in what they thus said. However, they *must have been completely silenced about the other truths which bear on the VCP's plan and effort to deprive the Church of her independence and autonomy, mainly to seek submission and collaboration from her clergy*. Since those Vietnamese Catholics did *not tell* the American bishops any truth of this kind, those truths they did say not only cannot *be evaluated appropriately* but even can *mislead* or *deceive* the hearers. They did not tell the American bishops simply because they *could not*, unless they had been ready to endure the Party's 'punishments' as listed above. In any way, on returning home, the American bishops, failing to know the *real* reason and purpose of the Party's suppression of religious freedom, had a false impression that it can have some good will or intention to dialogue or to change for the better, though slowly and not without much patience from the Church.

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I affirm that all the examples or incidents used as data for this analysis are true with respect to the sources of information from which I have heard, seen, or read them. I would thank anyone who reads or listens to this analysis with with patience and openness.

With those who share the same Catholic faith with me, let us continue to pray that through the intercession of Our Lady of Lavang and of Martyrs of Vietnam, whether in the times of feudalism or under the totalitarian regime of the VCP, God protect Catholics in Vietnam and enable them to walk in truth, in whatever situation they may encounter, above all when the Church's independence and autonomy have been suppressed by the Party, for "truth will free you" (*Jn* 8:32). Anyway, let us offer praise and thanksgiving to the Almighty God for the fact that despite all kinds of suppression from the Party there have been several outspoken Catholics in Vietnam, whether known or unknown to us. These Catholics have courageously stood out to bear witness to the truth about the *reality* of the Party's suppression of the Church's religious freedom. Among those who have been more or less known are late Archbishop Nguyen-Kim-Dien, Father Chan-Tin, Professor Nguyen-Ngoc-Lan, Father Nguyen-Van-Ly, Father Phan-Van-Loi, Father Nguyen-Huu-Giai, Mr. Nguyen-Chinh-Ket, etc. After Archbishop Nguyen-Kim-Dien passed away, Father Nguyen-Van-Ly and Father Chan-Tin have been the most consistent and enduring outspoken persons in defense of the Church's independence and autonomy.

Father Paul Tran-Xuan-Tam  
Archdiocese of Washington, USA

The Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary August 15, 2002

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<sup>52</sup> See also footnote 42.