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The Local Catholic Orders in Vietnam: the Case of the Lovers of the Holy Cross of Phat Diem

Abstract. This article seeks to articulate various facets of the order Lovers of the Holy Cross of Phat Diem Diocese (*Dòng Mến Thánh Giá Phát Diệm*), one of the local and famous Catholic religious orders in Vietnam. After presenting its history, the article points out characteristics of the organizational structure, monastic life, and social activities of this religious order.

The article is focused on the motherhouse of Lưu Phương community which the author researched during a field trip to in June 2020. Drawing on research methods, including document analysis and participant observation as a part of field studies, this research aims to take a further step in investigating the current situation of the Lovers of the Holy Cross of Phat Diem in Vietnam and provides a further understanding of such a local form of religious order within the Catholic Church in the Vietnamese context.

Keywords: The Lovers of the Holy Cross, Phat Diem Diocese, Vietnamese Catholicism, religious order, monastic life.

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Местные католические ордены Вьетнама: орден «Сёстры, возлюбившие Святой Крест» в Фатзиеме

Аннотация. Статья посвящена деятельности ордена «Сёстры, возлюбившие Святой Крест» епархии Фатзиема (*Dòng Mến Thánh Giá Phát Diệm*), одного из известных католических орденов во Вьетнаме. Представлена его история, особенности организационной структуры, монашеской жизни и социальной деятельности. Деятельность ордена исследуется как пример локальной формы религиозного ордена в рамках католической церкви во вьетнамском контексте.

Ключевые слова: Сёстры возлюбившие Святой Крест, епархия Фатзием, вьетнамский католицизм, религиозный орден, монашеская жизнь.

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Introduction

Catholicism is the second-largest religion among the sixteen religions existing in Vietnam, with an estimated seven million Christians [Vũ Hoài Bắc et al. 2022: 19]. Within Vietnamese Catholicism, there is a diversity of forms of religious practices under various organizations spanning from laity to monastic life. The Lovers of the Holy Cross (*Dòng Mến Thánh Giá*), known as the first local religious order, was founded in what is now Vietnam in 1670. This order, with over 350 years of existence, has actively contributed to constructing the Catholic Church in Vietnam in both monastic and apostolic aspects. Over time, the congregations of the Lovers of the Holy Cross evolved into specific diocesan orders that have been distributed in different Catholic dioceses in Vietnam. In this article the author will consider one of the 25 branches of this congregation — the branch of Phát Diệm diocese.

Among them, the Lovers of the Holy Cross of Phat Diem, based in the Phat Diem Diocese (Ninh Bình province), played a pivotal role during the course of the history of Catholicism in Vietnam. Nevertheless, scholars have paid little attention to investigating this order. Additionally, the extent of research studies, typically by scholars such as Nguyen Hong Duong [2006], Phuong Lien [2007], and Le Van Tho [2011], primarily focused on the history of the Lovers of the Holy Cross of Phat Diem. Despite Le Van Tho's reference to the social activities of the Lovers of the Holy Cross of Phat Diem, his research only briefly touched upon this issue. Generally, the questions about the monastic life and social activities of this religious organization in Vietnam at present seem to have been insufficiently addressed.

Drawing on specific research methods, including document analysis and participant observation, as well as conducting a field trip to the motherhouse of Lưu Phương community in June 2020, this research aims to take a further step in investigating not only the historical issues but also the current situation of the Lovers of the Holy Cross of Phat Diem in Vietnam.

History of the Loverss of the Holy Cross in Vietnam and Phat Diem

The Lovers of the Holy Cross, hereafter referred to as LHC, was established by Bishop Lambert de la Motte (1624—1679) of the Paris Missionary of Society (MEP) in 1670 in Pho Hien, and then its first congregation was born in Kien Lao, now situated in Nam Dinh province. In the late seventeenth century, this religious order had around 20 congregations with 100 nuns, and by 1787, the number of nuns had increased to 500 living in 25 congregations [Hội đồng Giám mục Việt Nam 2017: 364]. Over time, the LHC not only developed in terms of manpower but also became more disciplined in terms of organization. In 1907, the Law of LHC, written in Vietnamese Romanized script, was republished by the Ke So publishing house, now located in Ha Nam province. Subsequently, in 1924, Bishop Cooman granted permission to publish the Law

on Simple Vows as well as the Book of Regulation of LHC's congregations in Thanh Diocese [Ibid: 365—366].

According to the statistics for 2019, the religious order by the name of LHC in Vietnam is spread across the country, including twenty-four different local orders, each commonly named according to their motherhouse's respective locations. These orders scatter across many Catholic dioceses from North to South Vietnam [Nhóm Nghiên cứu... 2020]. The earliest groups of LHC to be founded in the same year, 1670, are the LHC of Kien Lao and the LHC of Hanoi. Meanwhile, the latest group in the LHC is the LHC of Ba Ria, which was founded in 2007. Besides these domestic institutions, the LHC has had three overseas ones.

The LHC of Phat Diem was founded in 1902. This Catholic religious order is currently situated in Phat Diem district, Ninh Binh province, which is approximately 100 kilometers south of Hanoi, Vietnam. The year 1902 also marked the official establishment of the Thanh Diocese, with the episcopal seat based in Phat Diem Church. The Thanh Diocese, also called the Bac Ky Duyen Hai (Tonkin Maritime) Diocese, encompasses areas including Thanh Hoa and Phat Diem Dioceses today. It was placed under the patronage of Bishop Alexandre Marcou. This bishop brought together three different congregations of LHC, namely Bach Bat, Phuc Nhac, and Cach Tam, to establish a common organization known as the LHC of Phat Diem [Trần Ngọc Thụ 2001: 99]. He subsequently entrusted missionary Louis de Cooman with the task of composing the new law for the LHC of Phat Diem based on the 1917 Code of Canon Law. This marked the LHC of Phat Diem as the first religious order of Catholicism in Vietnam renovated according to the 1917 Code of Canon Law, which started to regulate the simple vows for sisters.

Following the new law, on February 2, 1925, 71 novices of the LHC of Phat Diem took simple vows in the Luu Phuong motherhouse [Trương Bá Cần 2008, 571]. Six years later, these nuns consecrated themselves to the solemn vows, becoming the first nuns to take the solemn vows of the LHC in Vietnam. In 1932, the Holy See in Rome decided to divide Thanh Diocese into Thanh Hoa Diocese and Phat Diem Diocese. The LHC of Phat Diem was also separated accordingly. All congregations located in Thanh Hoa Diocese took the name of the LHC of Thanh Hoa. Meanwhile, the rest of the congregations situated in the Phat Diem Diocese were named the LHC of Phat Diem. In the Phat Diem Diocese, this religious order first had the main congregation in Luu Phuong, subsequently establishing other congregations in different areas. For instance, Ninh Binh congregation, Van Hai congregation, Khiet Ky congregation, Huong Dao congregation, Ton Dao congregation, and others [Trần Ngọc Thụ 2001: 102].

In 1954, following the Geneva Accords, Vietnam was partitioned into two regions, South Vietnam and North Vietnam. Due to worries about living in a communist society in North Vietnam, at that time, many Catholics there sought to flee to South Vietnam [Denney 1990: 271]. Sisters of the LHC of Phat Diem were not an exception. In 1954, 183 sisters of this religious order, alongside Christians, migrated to South Vietnam [Trần Ngọc Thụ 2001: 104; Nhóm Nghiên cứu... 2020]. In South Vietnam, these nuns contributed to establishing the LHC of Phat Diem in Go Vap, which subsequently changed its name to become the LHC of Go Vap, now situated in Ho Chi Minh City.

In the Phat Diem Diocese, the remaining sisters of the LHC of Phat Diem, numbering around 30 individuals of old age, strived to maintain their religious practices. In 1957, they recruited 30 novices, and in 1963, these novices took simple vows [Trần Hoành 2009]. Nevertheless, during the Vietnam War, the manpower of the LHC of Phat Diem found it difficult to increase. Following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, many Vietnamese Catholics, including sisters of the LHC of Phat Diem in Go Vap, fled Unified Vietnam overseas. They also arrived in the US, subsequently setting up their congregations there.

After the Renovation, known as *Doi Moi*, commenced in Vietnam in 1986, owing to the execution of a more tolerant policy on religious issues by the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Vietnamese State, the LHC of Phat Diem experienced a significant revival in the early 1990s and continued to develop further in subsequent times. According to the statistics in 2019, the LHC of Phat Diem had 32 congregations, including 28 congregations operating within the Phat Diem Diocese and 4 congregations in places outside the Phat Diem Diocese such as Hanoi, Nam Dinh, Italy, and the US [Giáo phận Phát Diệm 2019].

Organizational structure and monastic life of the LHC of Phat Diem

As a religious order, the LHC of Phat Diem maintains strict discipline in both organizational structure and monastic life. In terms of organizational structure, the LHC of Phat Diem is a diocesan religious order under the Phat Diem Diocese, organized into two levels: the level of order and the level of congregation. The level of order administers all congregations, with the Luu Phuong motherhouse serving as its main base, located in the Luu Phuong commune, Kim Son district, Ninh Binh province (Fig. 1). Meanwhile, the level of congregation pertains to the organizational belonging of the order, and each congregation has at least three nuns taking solemn vows and one serving as their administrator.

The superior general of the LHC of Phat Diem is known as the head of the motherhouse, responsible for overseeing the order in general. The election of the superior general is determined by the assembly of nuns, and this result must be verified by the Bishop of Phat Diem Diocese. Her term of mission lasts for four years, with the possibility of being reappointed once. The nun elected to become the superior general must meet the criteria, such as taking solemn vows for at least ten years and not exceeding the age-regulated. Additionally, this candidate is also a nun who willingly dedicates her love to the order, excels in cultivating ethical standards, observes the rules and traditions of the order, expresses loyalty to the teachings of the Catholic Church, and acquires a deep understanding of theology [Tòa Giám mục Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh 1990: 133].

Supporting the superior general in the administration of the LHC of Phat Diem are the consulting board and other members, such as the general secretary and the general manager. The superior general and these members constitute the Steering Committee of the LHC of Phat Diem. In addition to the steering committee, there is another committee, namely the training committee, involved in driving various activities of the

Fig. 1. The Luu Phuong motherhouse, Luu Phuong commune, Kim Son district, Ninh Binh province. *Source:* URL: https://phatdiem.org

LHC of Phat Diem. Within congregations, each is also organized in the same way as the organizational structure of the level of order, with the header and her supporters. Generally, the organizational structure of the LHC of Phat Diem finds it centralized, placed under the leadership of the superior general as well as the supervision of the Bishop of the Phat Diem Diocese, as it is a diocesan religious order.

Regarding the facet of monastic life, sisters of the LHC of Phat Diem pursue the charism with two main foci: devoting their minds, hearts, and lives toward Jesus Christ crucified and living to disseminate the Gospel to every nation, as well as participating in building the local churches. After passing the stage of Aspirancy (*Thanh tuyen),* candidates must undergo a strict process of training and practice under specific regulations to become nuns of the LHC of Phat Diem. This process includes three primary stages: Pre-Novitiate (*Tien Tap Vien*), Novitiate (*Tap Vien*), and Temporary Profession (*Hoc Vien*). Overall, the course of becoming a nun of the LHC of Phat Diem will last from nine to twelve years, with four periods as shown in the following table.

Table 1. **The process of training to become a nun of the LHC of Phat Diem**

Stage	Duration	Title
Aspirancy	1— 2 years	Candidate
Pre-Novitiate	1— 2 years	Candidate
Novitiate	2 years	Novice
Temporary Profession	5—6 years	Vow bearer

Source: Fieldnote June 2020

The stage of Pre-Novitiate lasts from one to two years, during which candidates live in the Huong Dao congregation of the LHC of Phat Diem. They are guided to explore the grace of monastic life, their giftedness, and their aspirations. After passing the final test, candidates enter the stage of Novitiate, one of the most crucial phases in the training process of the LHC of Phat Diem. This stage aims to help candidates confirm their call to engage in monastic life. Additionally, these candidates learn subjects that focus on understanding theology and the mystery of Jesus Christ. They strive to accommodate the monastic life by learning liturgy, praying, understanding vows and rules, and more. The stage of Novitiate lasts two years, and during this time, the candidates will move to live in the motherhouse in Luu Phuong until the time of taking the solemn vows. They are not allowed to contact outsiders. The imposition of strict rules in the second stage makes it challenging for candidates. One sister of the LHC of Luu Phuong shared that if the candidates pass the second stage, they could be consecrated to the simple vows; otherwise, they could stay in this stage for many years [Fieldnote June 27, 2020].

In the stage of Temporary Profession, lasting from five to six years, sisters of the LHC of Phat Diem perpetuate simple vows every year. This stage aims to help sisters have a good preparation for taking solemn vows. Additionally, the temporary profession also enables sisters to devote themselves to Jesus Christ, further delve into understanding theology and liturgy, and nurture the harmony between monastic and apostolic lives according to the purpose of the LHC of Phat Diem (Fig. 3). After finishing this stage, sisters could take solemn vows if they met the specific requirements of the LHC of Phat

Fig 2. The rite of public vows for 12 sisters. *Source*: URL: https://hddmvn.net/

Diem. The solemn vows here are stricter than the simple vows as they include three permanent commitments, such as chastity (*khiet tinh*), poverty (*kho ngheo*), and obedience (*vang phuc*).

In the ceremony of taking solemn vows, the nun will be given a cross, a constitution of the order, a monastic fashion, and a ring by the Bishop of Phat Diem Diocese (Fig 2). Such a ring signifies that she devotes her life to Jesus Christ, as if a wife devoted herself to her husband. According to a nun living in the motherhouse of the LHC of Phat Diem, the ceremony of taking solemn vows is organized with the witness of the public, so the solemn vows are also known as the public vows [Fieldnote June 27, 2020]. After taking vows, sisters can contact outsiders, and they can be appointed to participate in vocational training courses or higher education at public or private education facilities.

Engagement of the LHC of Phat Diem in social activities

Although being a religious order, the LHC of Phat Diem is not a completely contemplative order. It instead intends to combine both the characteristics of contemplative and active in the way that its nuns can practice monastic life and participate in social activities to pursue their apostolic mission. This pursuit also accords with the duties imposed by the founder of the LHC, Bishop Lambert de la Motte. These duties include educating youth, serving patients, protecting children, and promoting the position of females in both familiar and societal lives.

In the present period, the LHC of Phat Diem has actively participated in many activities for the betterment of society. Typically, many nuns of this religious order engage in kindergartens situated in the local areas. Currently, the LHC of Phat Diem has established three kindergartens in Luu Phuong, Huong Dao, and Cach Tam. They were constructed and facilitated with the latest educational types of equipment, as well as guaranteeing a clean and secure environment for children. Each kindergarten operates many different classes in line with the specific ages of children. Among them, the kindergarten in Luu Phuong has the largest scale. To better understand the situation of the primary educational facilities of the LHC of Phat Diem, one can see the following table:

Table 2. **The list of kindergartens run by the LHC of Phat Diem**

Name of school	Number of classes	Number of pupils	Address
The private kindergarten of Luu Phuong	10	Roughly 250	Luu Phuong commune, Kim Son district, Ninh Binh Province
The group of private kindergarten of Huong Dao	6	Roughly 140	Dong Huong commune, Kim Son district, Ninh Binh province
The group of private kindergarten of Huong Dao	4	Roughly 100	Xuan Chinh commune, Kim Son district, Ninh Binh province

Source: Fieldnote June 2020.

The LHC of Phat Diem raises funds to offer scholarships to children in difficult circumstances. These funds also contribute to sharing with people who suffer from natural disasters or economic hardships.

Alongside their engagement in primary education and charitable activities, sisters of the LHC of Phat Diem actively participate in providing traditional Vietnamese medical services. This is a prominent local characteristic of the LHC of Phat Diem. As shared by a nun of the LHC of Phat Diem in Luu Phuong, from the early time of the LHC of Phat Diem, sisters inherited the knowledge of traditional medicine from their predecessors, then passed down from this generation to the next [Fieldnote June 27, 2020]. According to Tran Ngoc Thu (2001), in the early twentieth century, sisters of the LHC of Phat Diem bought medicinal materials and processed these materials into pills to provide for people living in rural areas [Trần Ngọc Thu 2001: 100]. Interestingly, such a process of making Vietnamese traditional medicine from the LHC of Phat Diem was drawn from the prescriptions left by deceased priests which reflects the Vietnamese origins of the Catholic priests [Ibid].

In contemporary times, to enhance the quality of medical services, many nuns of the LHC of Phat Diem currently join in medical training courses. The LHC of Phat Diem also established a clinic, namely the Traditional Vietnamese Medicine Clinic of the LHC of Phat Diem (*Phong Chan Tri Dong Y Hoi Dong Men Thanh Gia Phat Diem*), based in the motherhouse of Luu Phuong. In addition to prescribing herbal medicine to patients, this clinic offers traditional health treatment techniques such as massage, acupressure, and acupuncture which is not typical for Western Catholic orders and represents a striking feature of the Vietnamese Catholic community.

Conclusion

The LHC of Phat Diem is a typical example of the local religious orders within the Catholic Church in Vietnam. Throughout many vicissitudes, the LHC of Phat Diem has maintained its religious tradition and local features, as well as frequently updated modernity. The enduring existence and development of the LHC of Phat Diem are attributed to its stringent organization. Additionally, this religious order consistently expands its network of congregations, which is now not only confined to the local geographic boundary of the Phat Diem Diocese but also reaches other areas in Vietnam and even overseas.

More importantly, the monastic life of the LHC of Phat Diem persistently sustains its characteristics, providing a framework for meticulously training candidates to become devoted nuns. The process of training as such lasts for many years and contains many challenges that, in turn, constitute good qualities of nuns of the LHC of Phat Diem. Nevertheless, the LHC of Phat Diem is not a contemplative order and does not cut off total connection with social life. This religious order instead encourages its members to engage in many societal activities from charitable and educational missions to medical services including Oriental traditional medicine (which is not typical for Western Catholic orders).

By not creating the absolute dichotomy of monastic practices and apostolic practices, the LHC of Phat Diem orients itself to serve people's lives and gain the favor of local citizens. The extensive engagement of the LHC of Phat Diem in societal life exemplifies the valuable contributions of Catholic nuns in particular and Catholic

communities in general to the development of Vietnam during the course of the country's renovation. This, in turn, enables the propagation of the LHC of Phat Diem to achieve more success as it brings faith to life and demonstrates its values to society.

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