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“FINDING PEACE IN GOD” – FAITH PRACTICES OF PROVINCIAL CATHOLIC STUDENTS IN HANOI

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Abstract. Hanoi is one of the major educational centers of Vietnam. Every year, about 500,000 – 600,000 students come to Hanoi to study at colleges and universities, including provincial Catholic students. They mostly come from the northern provinces of Vietnam where Catholics live in tightly-organized, one could almost say closed, communities organized around the daily practice of their faith. For each individual, the way they express and practice their faith in the city shows that they are searching for the practical meaning that religion brings to their lives in this very different environment. Based on anthropological research and sociological surveys with a target group of provincial Catholic students in Hanoi, this study describes how they construct emergent religious identities in order to cope with unprecedented challenges to their understandings of morality and Catholic personhood. This article focuses on understanding the shift in faith practice of provincial Catholic students in Hanoi, the debates within the student community around the core issues of faith and sin, the general tolerance for behaviors -their own and others- that would not be possible in village life. Above all, it describes, how they reach God in ways compatible with these challenging new experiences.

Keywords: provincial Catholic students in Hanoi, Catholic, faith practices, sin

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«ПОИСК СПОКОЙСТВИЯ В БОГЕ» – ПРАКТИКА ВЕРЫ ПРОВИНЦИАЛЬНЫХ СТУДЕНТОВ-КАТОЛИКОВ В ХАНОЕ

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Аннотация. Ханой – один из крупных образовательных центров Вьетнама. Ежегодно в Ханой для обучения в колледжах и университетах приезжает около 500–600 тыс. студентов, в том числе студенты-католики из провинций. Они приезжают в основном из северных провинций Вьетнама, где католики живут хорошо организованными, почти автономными общинами, организованными вокруг своей повседневной практики веры. Для каждого человека то, как он выражает и практикует свою веру в городе, показывает, что он ищет практический смысл, который религия придаёт жизни в этой совершенно другой среде. Основываясь на антропологических исследованиях и социологическом опросе целевой группы студентов-католиков, приехавших в Ханой из провинций, исследование описывает, как они построили новую религиозную идентичность, чтобы адаптироваться к беспрецедентным вызовам, с которыми сталкивается мир, как они понимают католическую этику и поведение. Статья отражает изменения в религиозной практике студентов-католиков из провинции в Ханое, дебаты в студенческом сообществе вокруг основных вопросов веры и греха, терпимость к своим и чужим поступкам, невозможную в деревенской жизни.

Ключевые слова: провинциальные студенты-католики в Ханое, католицизм, исповедание веры, грех

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Introduction

In the world, there have been major changes in Catholicism following the trend of modernization that are quickly grasped by young people. In Do Quang Hung's research, it is emphasized that to demonstrate the direction of Lay Theology, the Church has paid special attention to young people and focused more on evaluating and analyzing their role and position in the Church's future [Do Quang Hung 2012a, b]. In Vietnam, on a number of websites of dioceses and Catholic student groups, articles by priests discussing issues of Catholic youth confirmed that scientific and technological discoveries and an open lifestyle... are opportunities for advancement for young people, but are also an era challenge that puts young people at risk of a crisis in moral and ethical values of the society [Tran Nguyen Lam; Vu Van Trinh].

Up to now, according to incomplete statistics from the leaders of the Catholic student associations, about 2,700 provincial Catholic students have participated in Catholic student associations in Hanoi [Vu Thi Ha 2021b: 276]; and they are mostly from the northern mountainous

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provinces and the Red River Delta [Ibid: 93]. Researches on Vietnamese Catholic youth have just begun by defining such concepts as: Catholic youth, Catholic lifestyle, and youth pastoral [Nguyen Thi Thu Hang 2010]. To date, there has been only one study on the Mass-going behavior is directly related to Vietnamese Catholic students. Research shows that they are very diligent in going to Mass. Their behavior shows a deep awareness and absolute belief in their faith. For them, living the faith means putting God's teachings into practice in daily life [Pham Thi Hong Bich 2013].

In this research, we approached our work as ethnographers. During our first fieldtrips (2005) to Catholic areas in the rural North, some Catholic parents said that their children had studied in Hanoi. When we come back to Hanoi, we contacted them regularly. In addition, we also used part of the results of a 2018 sociological survey of 174 provincial Catholic students to quantify the individual behaviors, beliefs and faith practices of this target group.

This article focuses on the question how they come to God. God addressed through prayer, is described by these students as the place they go to express themselves and find inner peace in a one of the liveliest cities in Vietnam.

Peaceful homeland

“When we went to the city, we were all disorientated, not only because of the living environment but also by religious activities” (male student, Thái Bình province). This is how a provincial Catholic student described his feelings, and he was not alone. A sense of disorientation in the new living environment is also what the majority of provincial Catholic students feel. In the sociological survey of 174 provincial Catholic students in Hanoi, 5.2% were “very disorientated”, 29.9% felt “disorientated” and 43.6% were “slightly disorientated”, 18.4% were “not disorientated” and 2.9% have “no opinion”. The confusion of provincial Catholic students comes from the difference between two living environments: their hometown and Hanoi. Students describe their hometown as follows: “In the countryside, everything is very organized. There are strict rules about praying and which prayers one must abide by. Up to now, everyone has to wear *áo dài*, their hair must be worn down, their hair must not be tied up, and they must walk gracefully... I think it is also good to create a peaceful space” (female student, Nam Định City). So, in each Catholic society (sub-parish, parish...) in the countryside, going to Mass every day is central to life.

Local morality is defined by Catholic practice and the rhythms of a Catholic ritual calendar (such as: Advent, Christmas, Ordinary Time, Lent and Easter). Church is considered as the symbol and heart of the parish, the place where Catholics gather for the rituals that manifest their faith. Participating in these ritual celebrations is the way Catholics feel united with each other and feel happy.

“Hometown” (*quê*), “in the hometown” (“ở quê”) is often mentioned by provincial Catholic students when talking about the place where they were born, raised and studied before coming to Hanoi. For them it is a place of peace where they have family, where the practice of faith through the daily repetition of attending Mass takes place as a habit. The hometown is also a place where they are closely followed by relatives, even reminded the way receiving Communion to show respect to God.

“Going to Mass” in the capital city – The shift in the purpose of attending Mass

Change the habit of attending Mass

Đi lễ (going to Mass) is the word Catholics use to refer to attending Mass at churches. The change in the habit of attending Mass among provincial Catholic students is reflected in the fact that they no longer *đi lễ* in a certain fixed time frame. The time to *đi lễ* is changed and flexibly adjusted according to the free time they have. Living in Hanoi, their time to *đi lễ* depends on more factors such as study hours, Mass hours of the churches, distance from the place of residence or work to the church, traffic conditions... Therefore, they are forced to adjust their time *đi lễ* to match and satisfy at least one of the above factors. “As a student, I lived in many different places, so I didn't go to Mass at one church, but usually followed my work schedule and my accommodation (female student, Nam Định City).

In Hanoi, there are some churches that have Mass dedicated to students and young people⁹. In those Masses, the priests' homilies will be more concerned with young Catholics' issues. Attending these Masses, provincial Catholic students also have the opportunity to get acquainted and establish social relationships with Catholic friends and find it easier to empathize with each other. Moreover, each church in Hanoi has different characteristics in terms of space, architecture, time of Mass, choir, and parish priest. With the desire to discover a new living environment, many provincial Catholic students often go to Mass on their own or with fellow believers at several different churches to choose a suitable church to attend regularly, then sometimes they change to another church to experience a different atmosphere and space.

The change in frequency in attending Mass was also noted in the sociological survey. The percentage of students “attending Mass every day” decreased significantly, only about 1/5 maintained their previous habit (from 68.4% to 14.4%), while the percentage of students “attending Sunday Mass only” increased nearly 5 times (from 12.6% to 62.1%); the students “attending the Solemnity (Holy Day of Obligation) only” decreased (from 6.9% to 4.6%). At the same time, students “attending Mass sometimes” doubled (from 6.9% to 14.9%); and students who “only read the Bible” decreased (from 5.2% to 4.0%). While the changes reveal both increases and decreases, the decrease in the frequency of Mass attendance stands out. Even so, the students still try to follow Church law enjoining attendance at Sunday Mass.

The shift in reasons for attending Mass

The change and adjustment of their Mass attendance habits also comes from a shift in the purpose of attendance. In the hometown, the most important purposes for provincial Catholic students attending Mass was “a Catholic's duty” (37.9%), followed by “to strengthen faith in God” (35.7%), “to please parents and neighbors” (9.2%), “want to meet God” and “want to meet Catholic friends” (8.6%). After coming to Hanoi, “a Catholic's duty” only ranked fourth (8.6%) after “for strengthening faith in God” (39.1%); “want to meet God” (31.1%); “want to meet Catholic friends” (15.5%) and before “to please parents and neighbors” (5.7%). This means that only a small percentage of them still consider attending Mass as an expression of faith and duty.

Normally, when a sense of duty is no longer a priority, provincial Catholic students will neglect the practice of faith, specifically in *đi lễ*. However, for them, attending Mass to strengthen

⁹ The time of Masses for Youths: St. Joseph's Cathedral (20h00 Sunday); Thái Hà Church (20h00 Saturday); Nam Du Church (19h00 on the first Wednesday of the month and 19h00 on the 4th Sunday of the month).

their faith in God, being able to meet and be face to face with God, and having opportunities to meet Catholic friends become more important. In other words, for provincial Catholic students, attending Mass brings spiritual benefits, relieving everyday anxiety in life far from home instead of being regarded as a duty of their faith or something performed out of concern for the perception and possible criticism of others. Thus, both, the reduction in the frequency and the shift of purposes in attending Mass marks a shift in faith practice. They focused on quality of spiritual experience. Many Catholic students find themselves going to Mass because of life needs when facing difficult problems and deadlocks. Going to Mass, pray, meditate or meet with priests is the way to find solutions to problems.

The choice between “keeping” the faith or “living” the faith

When talking about the concept of *giữ đạo* (“keeping” the faith), people often think of a passive way of practicing and expressing faith; participating in social activities is mostly to let others know about their religion. By contrast, *sống đạo* (“living” the faith) is also focusing on studying the Bible, doing charity work, “proclaiming the Good News” or “witnessing to God”; as well as becoming involved in activities related to earthly justice, politics, and social issues.

Choosing a sống đạo spirit demonstrates deep and wide social integration

Provincial Catholic students who choose the spirit of *sống đạo* show that, in addition to fully complying with the provisions of Catholic religious obligations, they also think that *sống đạo* is to show a spirit of charity, living and acting for all people. For them, *sống đạo* is not only observance of obligatory provisions but also expressing the desire as “professing faith”, “proclaiming the Good News”, “being a living witness for God” and “bringing God to everyone”. Each student who carries the spirit of *sống đạo* does so with an understanding of and deepening reflection on faith. However, among provincial Catholic students who choose to *sống đạo*, they divide themselves into two groups.

The first guiding principle is a strong “profession of faith”. “Profession of faith” is a willingness to recognize and openly express one’s religion without fear; from simple gestures such as making the sign of the cross before each meal, in front of non-Catholics, to defending one’s religion when it is misunderstood or incorrectly described by others. For provincial Catholic students, these actions, although very simple, require bravery, courage and a deep understanding of the faith and teachings of the religion they belong to. The majority of provincial Catholic students believe that there is still a gap between Catholic and non-Catholic communities due to a number of issues in history and society. Therefore, in the eyes of most pagans, there are still some prejudices against Catholics. Students with the spirit of *sống đạo* think that living a religious life is not being afraid to show that they are Catholics.

Regarding the protection for the faith when there is inaccurate information, we have recorded many stories of students who have publicly stood up and defended their faith. Among them, we cannot help but mention the story “Student argue against teachers' arguments related to the Catholicism” by N.V.T¹⁰. In our interviews with provincial Catholic students in Hanoi, they actively mentioned this

¹⁰ In 2015, N.V.T was a student of a university. When studying a subject related to religion, in the teacher's lecture, N.V.T realized points that seem to be misrepresented. For example, she said that Joseph and Mary were in love, got pregnant, and then couldn't get married. If you are not a Catholic, you will understand that Mary “slept” (ngủ) with someone, then was saved by Joseph or that the two of them had premarital sex. All 8 points in the lecture were recorded and N.V.T presented and criticized 6 points in a handwritten letter to the lecturer. After a few days, N.V.T decided to post the entire content of the handwritten letter on a personal page in the social network.

debate as an example of the ways that Catholic students with a *sống đạo* spirit should respond when non-Catholics express or indicate misconceptions about their religion.

Another group of provincial Catholic students, with the desire to integrate deeply into society and live their faith vividly in daily life, actively participated in social activities, including with non-Catholic. One male student from Nam Dinh province described finding a balance between performing a useful social mission and also being a member of the Representative Committee of a Catholic student associations. “I am also a President of the Reproductive Health Club of a university. The Club mainly propagates reproductive health and contraceptive methods. The President of Representative Committee knows about this. Oneday I received an email from the senior in charge with the suggestion of ‘The President’ telling me not to participate in the Representative Committee anymore because ‘being in a group that propagates reproductive health is in many respects contrary to our Catholic morals such as using birth control and condoms...’ I thought a lot and decided to still participate in the Club and the Representative Committee. To avoid violating Catholic morals, instead of propagating contraception, I only propagate reproductive health. I believe it is a kind, useful thing to do for others. It is close to the Catholic tenet of faith.”

Choose the spirit of giữ đạo to avoid sin

For the provincial Catholic students who choose *giữ đạo*, the importance of practicing and observing the regulations of the Catholic religious obligations is the first priority. The choice of *giữ đạo*, as many provincial Catholic students explain, is those who strive “to make no mistake”: first, not to commit the offense of violating Catholic religious obligations; second, there is no compromise when there is a wrong decision in the social situation where it is difficult for them to distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong. For example, a student – a leader of a Catholic student association – called people to carry out a volunteer program of Mid-Autumn Festival for Hmong children in a remote village at weekend. Because it is quite a long walk from any church, there will be no Sunday Mass in the activities. Some of this student's friends really wanted to join but were afraid they would have to skip Sunday Mass. Although this student said that they can read the Bible for “penance” (*đền tội*), those students did not participate in the voluntary work. It is an example that the leader gave us when he talked about friends practice their faith only in a formalistic way.

On the psychological side, some choosing to practice faith according to the attitude of *giữ đạo*, partly because “I don't like to be noticed much” and partly due to low self-esteem about limited understanding of one's own religion. They also assert that, because of this weakness, they are not able to explain the philosophical passage when there is confusion from friends or non-Catholics about their faith. “When studying at university, everyone is required to study philosophy, especially Marxist-Leninist Ideology. Everyone thinks according to what they have learned, which is ‘*Tôn giáo là thuốc phiện của quần chúng*’ (Religion as the opiate of the masses). Normally, my classmates and I have a good relationship but when I share some thoughts about Catholicism, they say they don't believe; they talk about my religion in a negative way” (female student, Thanh Hóa province). For this student, such experiences have affected her social interaction. “In class, teachers have wrongly preached about Catholicism, I know it is wrong, but I am also afraid to stand up to debate publicly.”

In the eyes of *sống đạo* Catholic students, the faith practices of *giữ đạo* Catholic students are poor and tedious, only to “show to the community and others that we practice according to the Church law” (male student, Thái Bình province). Therefore, *giữ đạo* students also join Catholic student

associations as a way of proving that they are not separate from the Catholic community, but *sống đạo* Catholic students commented that, they are not active members of the association.

Violations of Church law among provincial Catholic students in Hanoi

The tội lỗi (sin) among provincial Catholic students in Hanoi

For provincial Catholic students, behaviors such as “premarital sex”, using contraceptives during sex, and abortion are considered “*vấn nạn*” (problematic) behaviors. The *vấn nạn* is not because these behaviors are more common among provincial Catholic students, but rather because the nature and severity of the behavior is considered from a religious perspective. A provincial Catholic student admitted: “Although the prevalence of premarital sex is difficult to measure, it is a serious problem among young Catholics” (male student, Bắc Giang province).

Not only premarital sex, provincial Catholic students also use contraception during sex, commonly condoms and emergency contraception. For T.A or other Catholic student couples, the use of contraceptives is a “salvation” (*cứu cánh*) option when they do not want to have undesired consequences of premarital sex. In fact, premarital sex among provincial Catholic students can result in pregnancy and abortion.

Abortion among provincial Catholic students in general is an undesirable consequence of “cohabiting”¹¹ and premarital sex in many cases. During the research process, we joined the activities of Catholic student associations to the Đồi Cốc infant cemetery (Thanh Xuân commune, Sóc Sơn district, Hanoi) and got to know about the online cemetery¹². Đồi Cốc infant cemetery is partly used by the local parish to bury unborn babies that they get from antenatal clinics. The cemetery management has left the notebooks on a small table for visitors to write their guestbook. We counted 15 guestbook entries by young Catholics who have had an abortion; even some who have had multiple abortions.

Suicide is also considered a terrible action for Catholics in general and provincial Catholic students in particular. The Church believes that each person's life is given by God. Each person is responsible for his or her life before God. Believers have a duty to accept, manage, and preserve life with gratitude, to glorify God and be saved, not to dispose of their own lives. In fact, suicide is rare among Catholics. However, a female provincial Catholic student mentioned the suicide case of her Catholic friend. “My friend, while studying at a famous university in Hanoi, committed suicide by pouring gasoline on herself and setting herself on fire in front of her lover's house. This event shocked me and her close friends. When I went to the funeral, I did not tell my father that she died because of suicide. If my father knew, he wouldn't let me attend the funeral. My father's way of thinking is the orthodox view, the opinion of the majority of Catholics” (female student, Nam Định City).

Justifications of provincial Catholic students when violating Church law

From what were presented above, one might ask how provincial Catholic students, after being educated regularly through catechism classes, the Ten Commandments, Masses and through the influence family and parish environment such that they have a strong sense of “sin”, could find themselves performing such theologically problematic acts.

¹¹ Couples who love each other come to live together as husband and wife but have not yet held a wedding or registered their marriage.

¹² Website address: <http://www.nhomai.vn>

In terms of the risks of violating Church law leading to the sins, some provincial Catholic students said that the urban environment has affected them but with respect to “problematic” behaviors, the majority of provincial Catholic students would disagree. Some have found justifications that they consider reasonable for behaviors counter to church law. For example, answering our question “Are you afraid of guilty for premarital sex?” T.A said, “I did think about the sin of premarital sex, but both of us examined ourselves and found that it [sex] was necessary for our love and creates trust, connection. So, we feel that this sin is not very serious.” Thus, T.A. argues: “God gave man freedom. For me, my freedom is not to harm the others, including my lover, which means not to hurt her, not to make her pregnant.” With the behavior of “*sống thử*” (cohabiting), provincial Catholic students have a rather “open” view when 52.5% of the students surveyed consider such behavior a sin, 27.6% of them think it is a “moral violation”, 6.3% think it is “make a false step”, 12.1% considering is an issue of “privacy”, and 1.2% think it is “due to personal circumstance”.

With the abortions, when we mentioned it to some provincial Catholic students through guestbook at *Đồi Cốc* cemetery as well as on the online cemetery, at first, they were shocked because they couldn't believe what we said. They wondered how Catholics could possibly be guilty of abortion, which Catholic law strongly condemns as a very serious sin. After viewing these entries in the guestbook, they no longer felt resentment but rather a contemplative mood with deep sympathy. They also anticipate that Catholic students who have had an abortion will live in misery, both in experiencing a sense of moral failure and because they have violated the regulations of the Church. Another provincial Catholic student, a leader of a Catholic student association, who regularly organize visiting to *Đồi Cốc* cemetery with other provincial Catholic students, shared: “I also read the guestbook in *Đồi Cốc* and found that most of those making the decision to abort have difficult situations”.

Both T.A. and the leader of the Catholic student association said that if premarital sex is an option, using a condom or emergency contraceptive pills is an optimal way to have “healthy cohabitation” (*sống thử lành mạnh*). Although they both know that using any kind of artificial contraception violates the Church regulation. However, the choice or suggestion of using contraceptives can be seen as a compromise of a situational nature intended to help provincial Catholic students avoid falling into more serious sins. The results of a sociological survey show that, not only T.A. and the leader quoted above, but 90.8% of provincial Catholic students surveyed also think that abortion is a “sin”, 8.0% think it is a “moral violation”, and 1.2% think abortion is “due to personal circumstance”. This suggests that Catholic students have internalized the strict Church law on this behavior. However, their explanations suggest some degree of sympathy and understanding of the plight, difficulties and challenges of an unwanted pregnancy, especially for provincial Catholic female students when living in a social environment different from the peaceful and simple environment in their hometown. Other provincial Catholic students say that these cases are both pitiful and reprehensible.

For the Catholic student whose friend committed suicide, knowing with certainty that her father would disagree, knowing her father's views were as orthodox as most Catholics, she and her friends still attended the funeral because they recognized their friend's behavior from the perspective of young people living in a complex social environment and they understand their friend's plight.

Thus, provincial Catholic students in Hanoi have a more open and tolerant view of their own and their friends' sins based on the sympathy and understanding of their situations. They argue that “outsiders” or older Catholics often take a more critical view of the social problems they are facing.

They often evaluate the behaviors of the youth in comparison to Catholic law while young people, especially provincial Catholic students, find their life situations too complicated to judge as simply right or wrong. Catholic students also recognize that youth are impulsive and prone to making mistakes. And finally, among many apologetic arguments for their sins, they often refer to the parable of the “Good Father” or the “Prodigal Son” [Lc 15, 11-32]¹³. For them, this typical parable is about God's immense love and tolerance to the mistakes of believers. When they mentioned this parable, we noticed that, provincial Catholic students always trust in the benevolence of God. God is like a friend, a brother who accompanies them on the path of finding the true meaning of faith. When referring to this parable, they express a strong belief in God's unconditional tolerance. The belief in God is like a source of strength, a source of motivation and an encouragement for them to contribute and integrate into society with the spirit of “commitment” of a Catholic.

Conclusion

It can be said that practicing faith is an important part of the life of provincial Catholic students in Hanoi. The students developed a new way of becoming Catholics that is more compatible with their new lives. Living in an environment without the strict supervision of religious communities as in their hometown, choosing how to practice faith in the city seems more a personal choice than following standards that have been predestined by the religious community. In some cases, their choices and expressions of faith transgress the boundaries of the religious lifestyle that the religious community in their hometown has ordained for them, but they received sympathy and understanding from their peers. This is an expression of a new tolerance they would not have had in the village.

For each individual provincial Catholic student, when choosing to express and practice their faith in their own way, this has happened at some emotional cost. In a sense, whether the explanation of provincial Catholic students about their own sins is an excuse, a compromise or a shift in the sense of sin, the core issue is: they are still living their own daily life and they have to solve the problems of their life. When finding a solution, they are all deeply aware of the regulations in their faith. Thoughts on the regulation of religion are not “a rope” that “tightens” their life, but become a salvific argument when they commit the most serious sins helping them to find emotional resolution rather than immersing them in feelings of fear when facing God. That is the positive side that Catholicism brings to the young followers; so that when they go, in their terms, the “wrong way”, they still want to “come back” to their own religion and find inner peace.

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¹³ The Gospel According to Saint Luke 15:11-32.

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