

The Vietnamese Catholic Church in Modern Times: Challenges and Opportunities for Pastoral Transformation

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Abstract: This article explores the current transitional moment of the Catholic Church in Vietnam through a critical and reflexive lens, highlighting the interplay between tradition and transformation in a rapidly changing socio-cultural context. Since the early 1990s, the Vietnamese Church has undergone substantial growth in terms of vocations, parish life, and religious infrastructure, especially in rural and migrant communities. However, recent decades have introduced new challenges, including urbanization, globalization, and secularization, that have exposed the limitations of inherited ecclesial structures. Drawing from an autoethnographic approach, this study examines regional variations in religious practices, especially the generational disconnection among Catholic youth and the institutional fatigue seen in declining vocations and overstretched clergy. Rather than framing these developments as signs of irreversible decline, the article argues that they reflect deeper processes of religious maturation and adaptation. In this light, the Church's future vitality will depend on its capacity to integrate spiritual tradition with pastoral transformation, liturgical depth with technological engagement, and institutional reform with authentic community-building. By embracing this moment as an opportunity for ecclesial renewal, the Vietnamese Catholic Church may not only sustain itself but also contribute meaningfully to the moral and spiritual life of modern Vietnamese society.

Keywords: Vietnamese Catholic Church, spiritual tradition, vocation, pastoral transformation, identity crisis.

INTRODUCTION

The Catholic Church in Vietnam is a well-established religious institution with a history dating back to the 16th century, when missionaries from Europe, particularly the Jesuits, introduced Christianity to the region. Despite facing the turmoil under various dynasties and political regimes, the Church has maintained continuity and growth. A major turning point occurred in 1954, when nearly one million Catholics from North Vietnam migrated to South Vietnam following the Geneva Accords, significantly shaping the Catholic presence in South Vietnam.

Following the Reform (Đổi Mới) of the late 1980s when the Vietnamese state gradually loosened its control over religious activities, various experiences, situated across vastly different socio-cultural settings, led observers to reflect more deeply on the trajectory of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. As John Kleinen (2007) observed, "since the early 1990s, religious life in Vietnam experienced a veritable explosion, as if a tightly sealed pressure valve had suddenly been released." The Catholic Church, once subjected to significant restrictions, began to thrive again, particularly in rural parishes and migrant communities, with increasing vocations, revitalized parish life, and the rebuilding of ecclesial infrastructure.

According to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (CBCV, 2022), the Catholic Church in Vietnam currently comprises twenty-seven

dioceses, including three archdioceses, Hanoi, Hue, and Saigon, with a Catholic population exceeding seven million, representing approximately 7.21 percent of the national demographic. The Church operates thousands of parishes, religious congregations, seminaries, and charitable institutions. It plays an active role in areas such as education, healthcare, and social services, although it functions within a socialist state where religious activities are practiced and carried out in accordance with the tradition of the religion, the law and regulations.

It is interesting that more Vietnamese people have exposure to international contexts, and those who live within the Catholic milieu of North Vietnam if attending a Mass in Western countries like the United States, France, Switzerland, etc. would never imagine a church, traditionally the most sacred of spaces, being repurposed so thoroughly for secular use as observed by the researchers. It was an international conference in Amsterdam which had its gala dinner inside a grand, centuries-old Catholic church with the stained-glass windows and the altar remained intact. The most interesting thing was that the sacred space was transformed with banquet tables, stage lighting, and a full audio system. Similarly, beneath the soaring arches once filled with prayer and incense were guests who clinked wine glasses, laughed, and conversed freely.

Pastoral transformations are also found in Eastern countries. Attending a Mass at St. Ignatius Church in Tokyo, the researchers could also observe how hundreds of Catholics, including a large number of children, filled the chapel with energy, the space echoing with laughter, crying, and the sounds of children running around, which may make traditional Catholic believers view the disruption as a loss of sacred decorum. One could not believe the presiding Archbishop of Tokyo just smiled and remarked differently, "Let the children be. That is their nature - and that is the future of the Church."

In general, what the researchers observed in Amsterdam, Tokyo, etc. was found to be aligned with recent literature that pastoral transformations in both the West and the East provoke a complex mix of cultural shock, theological discomfort, and existential reflection among those who tend to think it is not simply desacralization but re-inscription of the church into a secular cultural economy, and they may find themselves asking: what forces led to this transformation? The question was already answered, to some extent, by Kreutzmann (2004) who addresses recent changes which have affected all walks of life and consequently socio-economic transformations from the perspective of pastoral practice.

The experience prompts a deeper observation of the state of Catholicism, where secularization is no longer a peripheral trend but a structural condition. Many churches are now vacant, congregations aging, and vocations to priesthood and religious life dwindling. As reported in some cases, bishops struggled to find successors due to a shortage of willing clergy. Also, religious practices, once central to community life, were found to be increasingly displaced by consumerism, individualism, and privatized forms of meaning-making as already warned by many authors that "the public presence of religion continues to shrink - both spatially and symbolically" (Casanova, 1994; Taylor, 2007).

Most critically, three decades later, the Church in Vietnam is beginning to face new challenges not unlike those in the past. There are growing signs of spiritual disengagement among youth, a noticeable decline in religious vocations, and signs of stagnation in pastoral life - particularly in urban settings where secularization and modernity are advancing rapidly. These emerging issues raise a profound and urgent question: *What future awaits the Catholic Church in Vietnam? Could these challenges be turned into opportunities?*

This question is no longer a matter of private concern or theological speculation, it is an academic, pastoral, and societal inquiry that must be engaged critically. It demands a careful, grounded reflection that draws not only on lived experience but also socio-cultural analysis.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

This study employs an interdisciplinary approach that integrates historical and anthropological methods, with a particular emphasis on lived experience and socio-cultural analysis. The primary methodological framework is grounded in autoethnography, enabling a reflexive exploration of Catholic life in Vietnam from the perspective of the researchers like those actively engaged in the faith tradition with pastoral practices in historical contexts.

The data were primarily collected through observations by the researchers who are natives of Vietnam raised in the surroundings of a Catholic parish community base, where religious practices are deeply embedded in village structures, kinship networks, and ritual continuity, have been shaped by a liturgical and spiritual environment marked by a strong communal identity and historical memories. Specifically, academic and professional engagements with fieldwork across diverse ecclesial contexts in Vietnam were conducted, ranging from rural parishes to urban dioceses, from traditional Catholic village 'toan tong' (whole-village - 100% residents in the village are Catholic), which enclaves to newly established migrant chapels in metropolitan settings. The experience also extended to transnational Catholic communities in countries such as Japan and the Netherlands as mentioned above. These varied locations became both research sites and spaces of religious participation, offering a rich basis for reflexive inquiry from within.

In addition to observations, the research drew upon informal conversations and ethnographic interviews with bishops, priests, religious sisters and brothers, catechists, and lay Catholics across generations and geographic regions. These engagements were instrumental in uncovering not only practices and rituals, but also the emotional and theological grammars through which Vietnamese Catholics articulate faith, tradition, and community.

The empirical data gathered through these encounters is triangulated with historical documents, Church teachings (e.g., canon law and

pastoral letters), state religious policy texts, and relevant anthropological and sociological literature. This multi-source strategy allows for both descriptive and critical analysis, attentive to the tensions between continuity and change, authority and grassroots practice, and sacred tradition and contemporary reinterpretation.

Ultimately, this methodological design seeks to balance subjective immersion with scholarly distance, producing a mode of analysis that remains sensitive to both the inner logic of Catholic religiosity and the broader social transformations shaping the Church in contemporary Vietnam.

RESULTS

North Vietnam: From Village-Based Ecclesial Structures to Ritualized Religious Formalism

Through observations, informal interviews, and fieldwork conducted across case dioceses in North, Central, and South Vietnam, this study identifies a number of notable trends that reflect ongoing pastoral transformations in the life of the Vietnamese Catholic Church.

In North Vietnam, especially in historically Catholic provinces such as Nam Dinh, Thai Binh, Ninh Binh, and Ha Nam, the Church has long been closely integrated with village life and local sociopolitical structures. Parishes in these regions function not merely as religious units but as compact socio-cultural microcosms, where religious practice intersects with local customs, kinship systems, and communal hierarchies. The high degree of internal cohesion is evident in the widespread participation of parishioners in major liturgical events and the strong presence of lay associations such as *Legio Mariae*, the Sacred Heart League, Eucharistic Youth Movement, brass bands, and choirs. Rituals such as Eucharistic processions, liturgical dramatizations, and elaborate decorations for Christmas and Easter function not only as acts of devotion but also as public displays of communal identity and inter-parish competition.

However, the very stability and formalism of this system has, in the face of social modernization, led to a form of ritualized religious expression increasingly disconnected from personal spirituality. While young people often contribute enthusiastically to organizing liturgical performances, stage design, and decorations, there is a discernible decline in practices such as private prayer, catechetical learning, or theological

reflection. For many, religious participation is shaped more by inherited communal tradition than by personal conviction or interior commitment.

Parish structures in the region still operate according to hierarchical, premodern frameworks with clear lines of clerical and lay authority, but they often lack the flexibility to respond creatively to contemporary pastoral challenges. Catechetical instruction remains highly doctrinal, with minimal dialogical engagement - making it difficult for younger generations to find relevance or inspiration in their faith journey. As a result, Catholic life becomes a liturgical routine centered around the Church calendar, often devoid of inner renewal or spiritual introspection.

Moreover, internal migration and urbanization have further hollowed out the demographic structure of many parishes in North Vietnam. Youth traditionally the driving force of parish vitality, are increasingly absent, having relocated to cities for work or study. Many parishes are now sustained primarily by the elderly and children, creating a demographic imbalance and reducing the vitality of local pastoral life. This phenomenon echoes the demographic crisis observed in many rural dioceses globally, where religious institutions struggle to adapt to the outflow of their most active members (Orsi, 2005).

Considering these shifts, the Catholic Church in North Vietnam appears to be transitioning from a village-based ecclesial model, where religious and social institutions were deeply interwoven, toward a more ritualized and externally vibrant, yet spiritually superficial form of parish life. To avoid falling into the trap of becoming a 'festival church' (i.e., one focused primarily on spectacle and ritual display), there is a growing need for pastoral strategies that re-center personal faith, spiritual formation, and contemplative life within even the most tradition-bound communities.

Post-1954 Migrant Communities: Re-establishing Ecclesial Structures in New Territorial Contexts

The Catholic communities that migrated from North to South Vietnam following the Geneva Accords of 1954 represent a distinct socio-religious phenomenon - both historically significant and institutionally formative. Approximately one million Catholics, primarily from dioceses such as Bui Chu and Phat Diem, relocated to South Vietnam provinces under the auspices of anti-communist relocation policies.

These migrants carried with them not only devotional habits but also a tightly woven model of “village Catholicism” in which religious, cultural, and kinship systems were deeply integrated (Kleinen, 2007).

Upon resettlement in areas such as Gia Kiem, Ho Nai, Go Vap, Cai San, and Dai Hai¹, these communities rapidly re-territorialized their ecclesial structures, centering community life around the parish church. Unlike urban parishes formed through diverse migration and assimilation, these migrant parishes were characterized by ethnoreligious homogeneity - uniform in their devotional expressions, liturgical aesthetics, and moral codes. The desire to preserve traditional religious practices became a crucial means of maintaining identity and cohesion in an unfamiliar socio-political environment (Phạm, 2019).

These communities have since maintained a highly structured and stable ecclesial life. Parish-based associations such as processional groups, choirs, catechetical schools, and devotional societies remain vibrant. Liturgical feasts, particularly Eucharistic processions and Marian devotions, serve as expressions of both piety and communal solidarity. The economic stability of South Vietnam has enabled many of these communities to develop significant physical infrastructure - building large churches, pastoral centers, and schools with resources rarely available in their places of origin.

Beyond institutional robustness, these communities also exhibit considerable spiritual depth. Daily prayers, family rosaries, Eucharistic adoration, pilgrimages, and retreats remain integral to everyday religious practice. Furthermore, these communities have consistently produced vocations to priesthood and religious life, sustaining multiple religious congregations and seminaries in several case dioceses.

Nonetheless, the internal stability of these communities faces emerging generational ruptures. Younger members, born into modern urban environments and distanced from the collective memory of religious displacement, increasingly experience dissonance with inherited religious forms. For many, participation in parish life continues more as a cultural expectation than a freely embraced spiritual path. Religious practice,

in such cases, risks becoming a ritualized habitus devoid of personal theological reflection or spiritual interiority (Bourdieu, 1990; Orsi, 2005).

This generational shift signals a broader pastoral challenge: how to revitalize traditional parish structures without compromising their cultural integrity. Without intentional pastoral accompaniment and structural renewal, these communities risk becoming overly insular, conservative, and performative - gradually eroding the vibrancy that once made them paradigms of Catholic resilience in postcolonial Vietnam.

South Vietnam: Pastoral Flexibility and the Limits of an ‘Open Church’ Model

In contrast to the cohesive, tradition-bound character of many parishes, Catholic communities in South Vietnam, especially in major urban centers such as Ho Chi Minh City, Can Tho, and Vung Tau, reflect a more fluid and adaptable ecclesial model. Amid rapid economic development, many dioceses have cultivated an ‘Open Church’ ethos, characterized by institutional flexibility, pastoral experimentation, and cultural pluralism.

Urban parishes routinely offer pre-marital catechesis, life-skills workshops, parish fairs, musical performances, sports tournaments, and livestreamed liturgies. For example, Tan Phuoc Parish (District 11, Ho Chi Minh City) regularly hosts Bible study sessions, youth gatherings, and charitable outreach. Ba Chuong Parish (District Nhu Nuan, Ho Chi Minh City) pioneers digital pastoral engagement through online catechesis and livestreamed Masses. Religious orders active in education and social ministry, such as the Jesuits, Dominicans, and Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres, further enrich this urban ecclesial ecology with their theological resources and outreach programs.

Parishes operated by religious congregations are often especially well-structured. Equipped with clergy and religious trained in theology, pedagogy, and media, these parishes function as pastoral hubs where liturgy, intellectual formation, spiritual direction, and social justice ministries intersect. Here, spiritual depth is often more visible, with discernment practices, retreats, and lay formation more actively promoted.

However, the external dynamism of these communities often conceals a lack of spiritual interiority. Many urban Catholics participate in parish life as a form of cultural belonging or routine obligation rather than a personal vocation.

¹ The localities with parishes established by North Vietnam Catholic migrants during the 1954 migration.

The sacramental and devotional life risks becoming socialized religiosity - a set of public rituals detached from inward transformation. Individual prayer, spiritual direction, and theological curiosity are frequently underdeveloped, leading to a thin spiritual engagement vulnerable to secular distractions.

Moreover, the pace and pressure of urban life - long work hours, academic demands, and social competition reshape religious practice. Many Catholics attend Mass sporadically or prioritize professional success over sustained faith formation. In some Mekong Delta provinces, parishes exhibit a different challenge: liturgical quietism. Sparse participation, absence of youth ministries, and underdeveloped lay leadership reduce parish life to private religiosity, isolated from broader social influence.

In sum, case parishes embody a Church attempting to engage modernity with openness and creativity, but they also face critical limits in cultivating sustained spiritual maturity and communal rootedness. Without addressing these shortcomings, the Vietnamese Church's most dynamic dioceses may risk losing their capacity to foster spiritually vibrant and socially engaged Catholic communities in the face of mounting secularization (Taylor, 2007).

Catholic Youth: Identity Crisis and Intergenerational Tensions

One of the most discernible dynamics in contemporary Vietnamese Catholicism is the growing identity crisis and intergenerational disconnect among young Catholics. Increasingly, young people appear to be disengaging from traditional expressions of faith, with declining participation in Mass, weak catechetical knowledge, and a noticeable absence of private prayer or sacramental life. In an era shaped by the pervasive influence of social media, consumerist culture, and individualism, Christianity is often displaced to the margins of one's worldview (Taylor, 2007; McGuire, 2008). This disengagement is not merely a matter of diminishing religious practice but signifies a deeper existential dislocation: many young Catholics no longer know *what* they believe, *why* they believe, or *how* faith is relevant in a rapidly transforming society.

Generational tensions within the Church exacerbate this crisis. The older generation often relies on rigid, one-way modes of catechesis and

moral instruction, with little room for dialogue, empathy, or contextualization. Many young Catholics report feeling unheard, judged, or marginalized by ecclesial authority figures - leading to alienation from both parish life and religious identity (Cavadini, 2010).

Yet, within this broader landscape of crisis, there are signs of a spiritually resilient and consciously chosen faith emerging among smaller groups of young people. Catholic student groups in major cities such as Ha Noi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang continue to meet regularly for a Bible study, communal prayer, theological discussion, and charitable outreach. Weekend retreats, online catechetical programs, and Ignatian spiritual exercises (*linh thao*) have gained traction among youth seeking deeper engagement with faith on their own terms.

Particularly noteworthy is the emergence of young priests and religious figures on social media, who have begun to serve as relatable spiritual guides in a digital context. These individuals combine theological depth with cultural fluency, helping to bridge the gap between institutional authority and youth culture - what Berryman (1992) termed the "pastoral imagination".

Rather than viewing youth disengagement as definitive decline, it may be more appropriate to frame it as a reconfiguration of religious subjectivity. Young Vietnamese Catholics are not abandoning faith altogether but are instead reconstructing it in ways that resonate with their social, intellectual, and spiritual needs. If the Church can shift from authoritarian instruction to genuine accompaniment, the current crisis could become an opportunity for ecclesial renewal and the emergence of a new generation of Catholic believers - autonomous, mature, and socially engaged.

Vocations and Clergy: A Growing Pastoral Concern

Alongside youth disengagement, the Vietnamese Catholic Church now faces an urgent challenge in the form of declining vocations to priesthood and religious life. What was once considered a localized concern has now become a widespread phenomenon across multiple dioceses. Recent reports indicate that some seminaries particularly in case dioceses of Thai Binh and Lang Son - are receiving only a handful of applicants each year, with some years falling below the minimum threshold for opening new classes (*Công giáo &*

Dân tộc, 2022). In the diocese of Hai Phong, vocations to the priesthood and clergy and members of religious institutes, especially those belonging to male congregations, have become increasingly rare. The diocese now relies heavily on personnel support from neighboring dioceses such as Bùi Chu and Phát Diem to sustain its pastoral activities. This situation is unprecedented in the past three decades. Women's religious congregations face similar difficulties. Orders that previously welcomed dozens of postulants annually now struggle to attract even two or three, leading some communities to consider merging or halting new admissions altogether (Phụ nữ TP.HCM, 2023).

Concurrently, the existing clergy are burdened with unsustainable workloads, especially in densely populated urban dioceses such as Ho Chi Minh City, Xuan Loc, and Ha Noi. Many young priests report celebrating up to five Masses a day, in addition to catechetical teaching, youth ministry, funeral rites, and administrative responsibilities. Several priests described feelings of isolation, spiritual exhaustion, and a lack of support networks, increasing their risk of burnout and disengagement from pastoral mission - an issue widely recognized in global studies on clergy well-being (Francis & Robbins, 2004; Tuổi Trẻ, 2023).

A deeper issue concerns the formation process itself. Most Vietnamese seminaries continue to emphasize traditional disciplines such as scholastic theology, canon law, and classical philosophy. While essential, this curriculum often fails to prepare clergy for the complex pastoral realities of modern life. Contemporary youth bring with them existential questions related to sexuality, social justice, identity, and digital culture - areas that many seminarians feel ill-equipped to address (Congar, 1967; Groome, 1998). As one young priest responded, "We are trained to teach doctrine, but not to accompany. Most of the communication, counseling, and pastoral psychology skills we need - we must teach ourselves after ordination" (Tuổi Trẻ, 2023).

This mismatch between theological formation and ministerial demands risks turning clergy into legalistic functionaries rather than spiritual companions. In the context of growing secularism, consumerism, and digital hyperconnectivity, such a model is unlikely to sustain meaningful engagement. Seminaries and religious houses must recalibrate their pedagogy, integrating pastoral

theology, human development, and interdisciplinary knowledge as part of core ministerial training.

Without such reform, the Vietnamese clergy, already numerically strained, may struggle to act as mediators of grace and community in a society increasingly defined by fragmentation, skepticism, and spiritual pluralism.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, this study argues that the Catholic Church in Vietnam is undergoing a critical period of reconfiguration. Rather than a crisis in the conventional sense, it is a moment of renegotiation in which traditional, modern, local, and global forces intersect and open paths for renewal. Following the *Đổi Mới*, the Church experienced substantial growth in vocations, infrastructure, and lay participation (Kleinen, 2007; Nguyễn, 2018). However, younger generations raised in market-driven, globalized, and urban environments now place new demands on the Church's pastoral and institutional models.

A key dimension of this transition is regional differentiation. Case parishes in North Vietnam and migrant parishes in South Vietnam retain a village-church model marked by communal cohesion and ritual continuity, but risk becoming overly formalistic (Durkheim, 1995; Orsi, 2005). By contrast, many urban parishes in South Vietnam emphasize openness and pastoral flexibility, embracing technology and social outreach. Yet without strong theological grounding or spiritual formation, this approach often yields sociologized religiosity, where faith is expressed socially rather than spiritually (McGuire, 2008).

Youth disengagement represents another challenge, reflecting not apathy but a generational shift in meaning-making. As communal moral frameworks give way to individualized worldviews, many young Catholics struggle to integrate faith into daily life (Taylor, 2007). Nonetheless, grassroots signs of renewal, Bible study groups, Ignatian retreats, and digital evangelization, suggest a movement toward lived religion (Ammerman, 2014), where faith is personalized, intentional, and socially relevant.

A third structural concern is the decline in religious vocations and increasing strain on clergy. Many dioceses struggle with seminary admissions, while overextended priests report burnout and inadequate support (Công giáo & Dân tộc, 2022; Tuổi Trẻ, 2023). Seminary formation, still rooted

in scholastic theology and canon law, often lacks engagement with pastoral psychology, digital literacy, or contemporary ethical issues (Groome, 1998; Congar, 1967). This results in clergy more suited to doctrinal instruction than spiritual accompaniment.

Anthropologically, the Vietnamese Church is shifting from a communitarian-institutional model to one shaped by individual religious subjectivity. The challenge is to reimagine traditional rituals and structures in ways that foster personal transformation and contextual relevance. This does not mean abandoning tradition, but integrating it with digital tools, interdisciplinary formation, and cultural responsiveness.

Rather than viewing these shifts as signs of decline, Church leaders should recognize them as a call to synodal and pastoral transformation. This involves rethinking leadership, empowering youth and laity, and fostering spaces where faith can be lived, questioned, and deepened. If embraced wisely, this moment offers not only institutional survival but also the possibility of a spiritually generative and culturally engaged Vietnamese Church.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on an autoethnographic lens grounded, this study offers a situated and reflexive account of the Vietnamese Catholic Church at a historical crossroads. It suggests that the Church in Vietnam is not simply confronting isolated institutional challenges, but rather navigating a deep structural transition shaped by urbanization, globalization, secularization, and a generational crisis of religious identity. What once served as the Church's enduring strengths - communal cohesion, clerical vocations, and ritual regularity - is now being eroded by sociocultural dynamics that demand adaptive change.

Based on immersion in diverse ecclesial settings - from traditional parishes to migrant communities and digital pastoral platforms - this research affirms that while signs of pastoral fatigue and institutional inertia such as declining vocations, weakened parish engagement, shallow catechesis, etc. are undeniable, these conditions should not be interpreted solely as indicators of irreversible decline. Rather, they open up new possibilities for ecclesial renewal and structural reconfiguration.

The Vietnamese Church now faces a critical imperative: to move beyond inherited operational models and undertake foundational reforms -

including more holistic formation of clergy and laity, democratization of parish governance in the spirit of synodality, and the meaningful integration of technology in liturgy, catechesis, and evangelization. These are not merely managerial adjustments, but theological and cultural shifts that reflect the Church's ongoing conversation with modernity.

Ultimately, this study contends, through the prism of insider ethnographic insight, that the future of the Vietnamese Catholic Church will depend on its ability to balance fidelity to tradition with imaginative adaptation. If approached with humility, courage, and theological creativity, this moment of tension can become a generative space for rediscovering the Church not only as an institution of continuity, but as a dynamic community of faith, capable of enriching the moral and spiritual fabric of Vietnamese society.

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