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Vietnamese Catholic Migrants and Their Missionary Identity: Historical and Contemporary Contributions

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Abstract. *The Catholic Church's history is deeply intertwined with migration, as Catholic migrants have carried their faith and religious practices to new homes. This has significantly contributed to the Church's development and growth over the last two millennia. Vietnamese Catholic migration, which dates back centuries, has been shaped by religious persecution, political upheavals, and economic opportunities. This paper situates Vietnamese Catholic migration within the broader narrative of global Catholic migration, examining its historical trajectories and contemporary realities. It highlights the contributions of Vietnamese Catholic migrants to the Church's growth in diverse contexts and their ongoing role in its evangelization mission. Furthermore, this paper argues that migrant missionary discipleship represents a distinct and vital expression of the universal call to missionary discipleship shared by all Christians.*

Keywords: *Catholic Church, migration, Vietnamese migrants, Christian discipleship, missionary discipleship*

The Catholic Church teaches that every Christian is a missionary disciple.¹ Missionary discipleship constitutes an intrinsic aspect of the Christian identity, where being a “missionary” and being a “disciple” of Christ are inseparable. According to Pope Francis, missionary discipleship defines the Christian life as a dynamic interplay of faith, witness, and mission, each inextricably woven into the other. Through the sacrament of baptism, the Christian is fully incorporated into the Body of Christ. This reality bestows upon the Christian the identity of disciple of Christ with the mandate to proclaim the Good News in the world. The Christian life is nourished and transformed by personal encounters with the love of God in Christ, and this transformation naturally overflows into mission.²

Because missionary discipleship is rooted in the sacrament of baptism, it does not exclude any Christian, no matter their life circumstances. Thus, Catholic migrants who move out of their homeland for any reason—economic, political, religious, environmental—are still called to live out this Christian vocation. Christian migrants, in fact, have been shown to be pivotal in the missionary efforts of the Church. Jehu Hanciles in his book *Christianities in Migration: A Global*

¹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 120.

Perspective, asserts, “Every Christian migrant is a potential missionary.”³ According to Hanciles, “Christianity is a migratory religion, and migration movements have been a functional element in its expansion.”⁴ Based on his research exploring crucial relationship between migration and mission in the historical development of Christianity, Hanciles argues that there is an “inextricable connection between migration and mission in the Christian experience.”⁵

This paper explores the Catholic identity of missionary discipleship in the context of Vietnamese Catholic migrants. Analysis of historical and contemporary realities of Vietnamese Catholics in diaspora reveals that the story of Vietnamese Catholic migration over the past several centuries have indeed contributed to the development and expansion of the Church in numerous places. This paper especially examines not only Vietnamese Catholics who migrated in the aftermath of the fall of South Vietnam to communism in 1975 but also waves of migration that began as early as the beginning of the 18th century as well as recent migrants. Thus, it attempts to provide a more comprehensive narrative of Vietnamese Catholic migration and its contribution to the mission of the Catholic Church around the world.

Early Development and Persecution of the Vietnamese Church

When examining the topic of Vietnamese in diaspora in general—and Vietnamese Catholic migrants in particular—many naturally take the year 1975 as their starting point. This is understandable, as the events of that year—the fall of Saigon and the rise of communism throughout Vietnam—triggered the largest exodus in the nation’s history. In 2025, the Vietnamese community in diaspora are commemorating the 50th anniversary of this dramatic event. However, this episode takes place within a much broader historical narrative in the history of Vietnamese Catholicism.

The phenomenon of Vietnamese Catholic migration abroad has taken place for hundreds of years. In the early stages, the migration of Vietnamese Catholics was primarily due to religious persecution. According to the historical record titled “*Khâm Định Việt Sử*” (33.6b), the anti-Christian edict of King Le Trang Ton mentioned a Western missionary named I-nê-khu, who secretly entered the country by sea and evangelized in the villages of Ninh Cuong and Tra Lu around the year 1533. After the initial period of establishment and growth, by 1802, during the reign of Emperor Gia Long, who unified Vietnam, the Catholic Church had established a significant presence across the country. In the Diocese of Dang Trong, which encompassed Southern Vietnam, the Church was led by one bishop and supported by five missionaries and fifteen priests, serving a community of approximately 60,000 Catholics. In the north, the Diocese of Western Dang Ngoai had a similar structure, with one bishop, four missionaries, and forty-one priests ministering to 120,000 Catholics. The Diocese of Eastern Dang Ngoai, also in Northern Vietnam, had the same clerical composition—one bishop, four missionaries, and forty-one priests—but served a larger Catholic population of 140,000.⁶ These figures reflect the remarkable expansion

³ Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 6, 296.

⁴ Jehu J. Hanciles, “Migration and Mission: Some Implications for the Twenty-first-Century Church,” *Missiology* 27, no. 4 (Oct 2003): 149.

⁵ Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 1.

⁶ Vietnam Bishops Conference, “Sứ Lược Giáo Hội Công Giáo Việt Nam,” October 15, 2017, <https://hdgmvietnam.com/chi-tiet/su-luoc-giao-hoi-cong-giao-viet-nam-25947>.

of Catholicism in Vietnam despite numerous challenges in the initial stages of proclaiming and planting the Church in the country.

However, the history of Christianity in Vietnam is closely linked with periods of persecution marked by waves of intense repression spanning centuries, as various ruling powers sought to suppress the faith.⁷ The earliest recorded persecution occurred under the Nguyen Lords in the South (1615–1778), who issued eight edicts banning Christianity. The most severe crackdown took place in 1665 when Christian imagery, particularly the Cross, was misinterpreted as an emblem of the Portuguese king, leading to the expulsion of missionaries and the execution of many Catholics under Lord Hien Vuong. In the North, the Trinh Lords (1627–1786) similarly sought to eradicate Christianity, issuing seventeen edicts against the faith. Jesuit missionaries, including Fathers Messari and Bucharelli, were among the many martyrs of this period.

The Tay Son Dynasty (1775–1800) continued this brutal legacy, enforcing six anti-Christian edicts and orchestrating one of the most infamous massacres in 1798, in which Catholics faced extreme torture and widespread destruction of their places of worship, forcing many to flee. Under Emperor Minh Mang (1820–1840), persecution intensified, with seven edicts issued against Christianity. This era is particularly remembered for the martyrdom of numerous clergy and lay believers. His successor, Emperor Thieu Tri (1840–1847), continued the repression with two additional edicts, followed by Emperor Tu Duc (1847–1883), who escalated the persecution with thirteen edicts, leading to some of the bloodiest episodes of violence, including the martyrdom of figures like Phan Thanh Nhan.

Following the death of Tu Duc, the Van Than Persecution (1885–1886) emerged as a nationalist movement resisting French colonial influence, with Catholicism targeted as a foreign-aligned faith. This period saw widespread massacres of Vietnamese Catholics, marking one of the final large-scale efforts to eradicate Christianity in the country. Despite these relentless waves of persecution, the Catholic faith in Vietnam endured, sustained by the resilience and sacrifices of the faithful, many of whom are now recognized as martyrs by the Church.

The history of Christian persecution in Vietnam is a tragic chapter that reflects the resilience and steadfast faith of Catholic believers. Vietnamese Catholic narratives of this experience always highlight that even in the most challenging times, facing brutal oppression and cruel punishments, Vietnamese Christians were unwavering in their faith in God and were willing to sacrifice their lives to defend their beliefs. They endured suffering, imprisonment, and even painful deaths, yet never renounced their convictions and love for God. Of the estimated 300,000 who lost their lives over several centuries of persecution, 117 have been canonized by the Catholic Church. For Vietnamese Catholics around the world, these martyrs are powerful symbols of faith and spiritual strength. They serve as a source of inspiration and pride for the community, and as shining examples for future generations of believers.

Early Waves of Catholic Migration Abroad

The history of religious persecution in Vietnam related above provides the backdrop for the waves of migration that followed. During periods of intense persecution, many Vietnamese Catholics were compelled to flee their homeland in search of refuge and the freedom to practice

⁷ Vietnamese Missionaries in Asia, “Giáo Hội Công Giáo Việt Nam,”
<https://vntaiwan.catholic.org.tw/ghvienam/ghvienam.htm>

their faith. One such case involved a group of Vietnamese migrants who settled in Chanthaburi province in Siam (now Thailand), near the Cambodian border.⁸ In 1707, during the reign of King Sanphet VIII (1703-1709), a group of 130 Vietnamese Catholics arrived in this area to escape religious persecution in southern Vietnam. This event coincided with the issuance of one of the eight royal edicts banning and attempting to eradicate Christianity, issued by the Nguyen Lords in the South (1615-1778).⁹

In Chanthaburi, the Vietnamese Catholics continued practicing their faith. They cleared a forested area and built their first small church in 1712 during the reign of King Sanphet IX (1709-1733).¹⁰ After four reconstructions to accommodate the growing Catholic community, in 1909, the Catholic community of the Diocese of Chanthaburi inaugurated the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. This Gothic-style Catholic architectural masterpiece is one of the largest and most beautiful churches in Thailand. In 2010, after the cathedral's restoration was completed, the Diocese of Chanthaburi organized a week-long grand celebration to mark the cathedral's centenary and the 300th anniversary of the Catholic community. On this occasion, the diocese invited a delegation from the Vietnamese Church, including Cardinal Pham Minh Man, then bishop of the Archdiocese of Saigon, several bishops, priests, and nuns. During the final day of the celebration, in the Marian procession around the church, many faithful wore Vietnamese *áo dài* to express their Vietnamese heritage.

Although the first group of Vietnamese Catholics arrived in Chanthaburi nearly 320 years ago, subsequent waves of migration continued due to ongoing Christian persecution in Vietnam. Notably, in 1833, during the reign of Emperor Minh Mang, Bishop Jean-Louis Taberd (1794–1840), a French missionary, had to flee Vietnam to Siam due to severe repression. However, he did not leave alone—Bishop Taberd brought many seminarians with him, intending to send them for training in Singapore or Penang (Malaysia). Shortly after, other French missionaries also fled to Siam along with a number of Vietnamese Catholics seeking refuge in Chanthaburi.¹¹

In the following years, some Catholic faithful from Chanthaburi were relocated to the former capital, Ayutthaya, where their descendants still reside today. Historical records mention a Vietnamese community within Ayutthaya's foreign quarter. In the ancient capital, Vietnamese Catholics worshiped at St. Joseph's Church, originally built of wood in 1666 by Bishop Pierre Lambert de la Motte (1624-1679, founder of the Lovers of the Holy Cross congregation in Vietnam and Thailand) during the reign of King Narai (1656-1688). However, this church, later rebuilt in European-style brick, was completely destroyed in 1767 when Burmese forces captured the city. In the 1830s, Vietnamese Catholics in Ayutthaya assisted a French priest in rebuilding the church, which still stands today.¹²

⁸ "The Ancient Riverside Community of Chanthaboon," <https://thailandfoundation.mfa.go.th/en/content/56362-the-ancient-riverside-community-of-chanthaboon?cate=5d83123615e39c1d34003a37>

⁹ Tha Mai Tales, "The Catholic Church of Chanthaburi," <https://www.thamai.net/2011/08/the-catholic-church-of-chanthaburi/>

¹⁰ Tha Mai Tales, "The Catholic Church of Chanthaburi."

¹¹ Historical Archives of Archdiocese of Bangkok, "วัดนักบุญฟรังซิสเซเวียร์ (วัดสามเสน)," [dhttp://catholichaab.com/main/index.php/1/church7/2/1256-2016-07-15-03-39-09](http://catholichaab.com/main/index.php/1/church7/2/1256-2016-07-15-03-39-09)

¹² Travel Fish, "St Joseph's Church," https://www.travelfish.org/sight_profile/thailand/bangkok_and_surrounds/ayutthaya/ayutthaya/178

While the first migration of Vietnamese Christians occurred in the early 18th century, in the 19th century, the Kingdom of Siam received additional waves of Vietnamese Catholics fleeing persecution.¹³ According to Thai Catholic sources, during the reign of King Rama III (King Nangklao), Siam engaged in conflicts with Vietnam from 1832 to 1846 over control of present-day Laos and Cambodia. In 1834, while Siamese troops were engaged in war on Vietnamese soil, they discovered 1,500 Vietnamese Catholics hiding in the forest near one of their military camps. These people were fleeing from the soldiers of Emperor Minh Mang (1820-1841). Upon seeing the Siamese troops, some leaders from the group approached them to seek help. The Siamese soldiers were willing to assist and invited the Vietnamese to leave the forest and stay with them. However, the Vietnamese Catholics hesitated, unsure whether to trust these foreigners. To assure them of their goodwill, the Siamese general asked a French priest named Clement, who had been assigned as an interpreter, to speak with the Catholic leaders and reassure them.

The reason a priest accompanied the Siamese military was that two high-ranking officers in their army were Catholic. Before their deployment, these officers had approached Bishop Taberd, requesting a priest to serve as an interpreter. However, Bishop Taberd feared that if this was discovered by the Vietnamese authorities, Catholics in Vietnam would face even harsher persecution. They then sought help from Bishop Florens, who assigned Father Clement to accompany the army. After meeting the priest and hearing him speak about Siam, most Vietnamese Catholics agreed to follow the troops. Once the Siamese military mission in Vietnam ended, they brought the group back to Krungthep (present day Bangkok) for resettlement.

According to Thai sources, King Rama III welcomed 1,350 Vietnamese Catholics who returned with the Siamese army from Vietnam. The king provided them with land, housing, and essential supplies.¹⁴ Additionally, he financed the construction of a temporary church, named St. Francis Xavier Church. When this church was destroyed by a storm three years later, another church was built to replace it. A school was also established to educate children in catechism and Vietnamese literacy. The community also included 15 nuns from the Lovers of the Holy Cross, who were granted a residence to live their religious life. These women religious played a crucial role in teaching catechism and caring for orphans.

Catholic Migration in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

The 19th and 20th centuries marked a turning point in Vietnamese Catholic migration. During the French colonial period (1887-1954), Christianity gained a stronger foothold, particularly in southern Vietnam. French missionaries actively spread the faith through schools and hospitals, attracting more Vietnamese to Catholicism. Although large-scale migration was not a defining feature of this era, some Vietnamese, including Catholics, left their homeland as a result of being recruited by the French colonial government to work in France as well as other French colonies.¹⁵

¹³ Historical Archives of Archdiocese of Bangkok, “วัดนักบุญฟรังซิสเซเวียร์ (วัดสามเสน).”

¹⁴ In addition to these people, there were an additional 1,500 Vietnamese who were captured by Siamese soldiers during their time in Vietnam.

¹⁵ See Nguyen Thi Trang, “Vietnamese Indentured Labourers: The Intervention of the French Colonial Government in Regulating the Flow of Vietnamese Labourers to the Pacific Islands in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Labor History* 63, no. 5 (2022): 584–603, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2022.2142541>; Nguyen Thi Hanh and Nguyen Thi Trang, “Colonial

For example, as early as 1891, Vietnamese Catholics had arrived in New Caledonia, a French territory in the South Pacific, east of Australia and north of New Zealand. This territory comprises the main island of Grande Terre, the Loyalty Islands, the Isle of Pines, and several smaller islands. The Vietnamese presence there resulted from French government encouragement for labor migration to Noumea, New Caledonia's capital, with promises of higher wages. Additionally, some Vietnamese prisoners were exiled to this island. Today, the Vietnamese Catholic community in Noumea numbers about 500 people and has preserved its faith across five generations. While younger generations primarily speak French, the elderly still use Vietnamese in daily communication.¹⁶ Notably, during major religious celebrations such as Holy Week, the Vietnamese Catholic community in Noumea invites Vietnamese priests from Australia to conduct Triduum services in Vietnamese.

In the 20th century, seeking to escape poverty and find better opportunities, many Vietnamese—both Catholic and non-Catholic—migrated to Laos and Thailand. This new wave of migration took place post-World War II due to France's efforts to reoccupy Indochina in 1945. Many crossed the Mekong River into Thailand, hoping for a more favorable environment and political sympathy from the Thai government, which had also fought against the French in the early 1940s.¹⁷ Most migrants came from central provinces (Quang Binh, Ha Tinh, Nghe An) and northern provinces (Nam Dinh, Thanh Hoa, Thai Binh). Although many initially planned to return home, they gradually adapted to their new lives and chose to stay, with only a small number returning as intended.¹⁸

Vietnamese Catholics in Laos and northeastern Thailand became integral to the local Church. In many parishes, Vietnamese Catholic families played a crucial role in parish life through active participation and support. A significant portion of Laos' 45,000 Catholics are of Vietnamese descent, as are many of Thailand's nearly 400,000 Catholics.¹⁹ Additionally, many priests and religious in these two countries are descendants of Vietnamese migrants from various historical periods. It is thus unsurprising that the Archbishop of Tharae-Nongsang in northeastern Thailand today is of Vietnamese descent. Archbishop Anthony Weradet Chaiseri traces his roots to Can Loc district, Ha Tinh province in central Vietnam. His predecessor, Archbishop Louis Chamniern Santisukniram, also had Vietnamese ancestry. Furthermore, the current archbishop of Bangkok, Bishop Francis Xavier Vira Arpondratana, was born in Samsaen, the area where Vietnamese Catholics fleeing Emperor Minh Mang's persecution first settled in Siam. In Laos, Bishop Anthony

Labour in French Policy: A Case Study of the *Linh Tho* Sent from Vietnam to France, 1939–1950s,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463424000286>

¹⁶ Society of the Divine Word, Australia Province, “SVD Reaches Out to Support Vietnamese Catholics in New Caledonia,” April 27, 2023, <https://www.divineword.com.au/itemlist/tag/vietnamese#:~:text=SVD%20reaches%20out%20to%20support,by%20Fr%20Viet%20Nguyen%20SVD>.

¹⁷ John Walsh, “The Vietnamese in Thailand: A History of Work, Struggle and Acceptance,” *Acta Universitatis Danubius Oeconomica* 1 (2011): 160–172.

¹⁸ The ones who returned mostly did so as a result of the propaganda by the northern Vietnamese government's propaganda urging them to return for a better life in their homeland due to restrictions imposed on the Vietnamese community by the Thai government wary of Vietnamese communist infiltration in Thailand.

¹⁹ Wikipedia, “Catholic Church in Laos,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church_in_Laos#cite_note-fr-1

Adoun Hongsaphong who became bishop of Vientiane in March 2025 is also of Vietnamese ancestry.

In Cambodia, Vietnamese Catholics make up a significant portion of the Catholic population. According to Vatican statistics, in 1953, there were about 120,000 Catholics in Cambodia, of whom 50,000 were Vietnamese.²⁰ In the following years, many Vietnamese returned to their homeland, particularly after Lon Nol's military government took power in 1970. The Khmer Rouge period (1975–1979) nearly eradicated Catholicism in Cambodia, with most local Catholics perishing in forced labor camps or being executed.²¹ The Catholic Church in Cambodia began to recover in the 1990s, and by 2015, the total Catholic population in the country was approximately 20,000. It is important to note that about two-thirds of Cambodia's Catholic population is of Vietnamese descent.²² This is the same with many priests and religious working in the country. Some Vietnamese have settled in Cambodia for a long time, while others migrated from southern Vietnam in recent decades.

Vietnamese Catholic Migration from 1954 to Present

The Vietnam War brought significant changes to the lives of Vietnamese Catholics. Between 1954 and 1975, following the Geneva Accords that divided Vietnam into two regions, approximately 800,000 to one million Catholics migrated from the North to the South. This was one of the largest migrations in Vietnamese history, as a significant portion of the Northern Catholic community left their homeland to escape the new communist-led government in the North.²³

The fall of South Vietnam in 1975 marked a decisive moment. The new communist government's policies and statements on religion created widespread concern among Catholics. Fearing persecution, imprisonment, and forced re-education, a large wave of refugees—many of them Catholic—fled the country. This is reflected in demographic data indicating that of the 2.1 million Vietnamese in diaspora in the United States, 700,000 are Catholic.²⁴ This represents a significantly higher proportion than in Vietnam, where Catholics constitute about 8 percent of the total population. A similar pattern is observed in Australia, where Catholics make up roughly 20 percent of the nearly 300,000-strong Vietnamese community.²⁵

²⁰ Wikipedia, "Catholic Church in Cambodia,"

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church_in_Cambodia#:~:text=Throughout%20the%20Church's%20history%20in,Catholics%20in%20Cambodia%20were%20Vietnamese.

²¹ Wikipedia, "Catholic Church in Cambodia."

²² UCANews, "In Cambodia, Khmer and Vietnamese Catholics Remain Disunited,"

<https://www.ucanews.com/news/in-cambodia-khmer-and-vietnamese-catholics-remain-disunited/68382#>

²³ Pham Duc Thuan and Pham Thi Phuong Linh, "Migration of Citizens of North Vietnam to South Vietnam After the Geneva Agreement on Indochina (1954–1955)," *Migration Letters* 20, no. 7 (2023): 395–401, <https://doi.org/10.59670/ml.v20i7.4314>.

²⁴ Susan Klemond, "From Surviving to Thriving: Once Refugees, Vietnamese Catholics Make Up Vibrant Part of US Church Today," NCR, August 25, 2022, <https://www.ncregister.com/news/from-surviving-to-thriving-once-refugees-vietnamese-catholics-make-up-vibrant-part-of-us-church-today>.

²⁵ This number only counts Vietnamese-born individuals. Department of Home Affairs, "Country Profile – Vietnam," <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/statistics/country-profiles/profiles/vietnam#>

After 1975, Vietnamese refugees sought shelter in various countries. Most fled to neighboring Southeast Asian nations such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia before resettling in Western countries like the United States, France, and Australia. In these new environments, Vietnamese Catholic communities were established to preserve their faith and cultural traditions. Today they and their descendants continue to practice their faith and, in many cases, contribute significantly to the local Church.

Vietnamese migration has not ceased with the refugee waves following 1975. In the new millennium, a different migration trend has emerged, including Vietnamese women marrying foreign husbands (especially in Taiwan and South Korea), international students, and migrant workers—both documented and undocumented. Vietnamese nationals constitute the largest group of foreign workers in Japan, with approximately 520,000 workers as of October 2023. This number has grown significantly in recent years, driven by Japan's need for labor in various sectors. Along with students, the Vietnamese numbers nearly 600,000.²⁶ Meanwhile, the Taiwan government reports that in 2023, there were 110,000 Vietnamese spouses of Taiwan natives, 100,000 children of such spouses, 250,000 Vietnamese on foreign worker visas, and more than 20,000 Vietnamese students.²⁷ Beside Japan and Taiwan, South Korea has also become a popular destination for Vietnamese nationals, resulting in a substantial community comprising migrant workers, students, and spouses. Presently Korea hosts nearly 300,000 Vietnamese,²⁸ making this community the largest expatriate population after the Chinese.²⁹

In Southeast Asia, Thailand is a popular destination for Vietnamese migrant workers because of favorable conditions such as convenience of travel back and forth between the two countries, and easy accessibility as citizens of ASEAN.³⁰ Almost all Vietnamese migrant workers enter Thailand as tourists, after which they proceed to find employment. While there are no official estimates due to the undocumented nature of Vietnamese migrant workers in Thailand, it is surmised that the number fluctuates between 30,000 and 50,000 depending on the time of year and the economic situation in kingdom. Beside the four Asian countries mentioned above, Vietnamese migrants are also present in other countries including China, Laos, Cambodia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Macao, and Singapore, albeit in much lower numbers. Unfortunately, there are no credible or updated statistics that could be found for these countries.

In addition to Asian countries, Vietnamese are migrating in large numbers to Western countries such as Germany, France, United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Some of the migrants even do so through treacherous means and with large sums paid to smuggling

²⁶ Islamuddin Sajid, "Foreign Workers in Japan Hit Record High," January 31, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/foreign-workers-in-japan-hit-record-high/3467838>.

²⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), "Growing Ties of Friendship—Taiwanese–Vietnamese Relations over the Years," November 30, 2023, <https://nspp.mofa.gov.tw/nsppe/news.php?post=244875&unit=410&unitname=&postname=Growing-Ties-of-Friendship%E2%80%94Taiwanese%E2%80%93Vietnamese-Relations-over-the-Years>.

²⁸ Korea Info, "Số Người Việt Nam Cư Trú Tại Hàn Quốc Khoảng 271.712 Người," October 21, 2024, <https://www.korea.info.vn/2024/10/so-nguoi-viet-nam-cu-tru-tai-han-quoc.html>.

²⁹ Ivan V. Small, "Assimilating Southeast Asian Migrants into South Korea: Expanding the Meaning of Being 'Korean'," *Fulcrum*, February 5, 2021, <https://fulcrum.sg/assimilating-southeast-asian-migrants-into-south-korea-expanding-the-meaning-of-being-korean/>.

³⁰ Anthony Le Duc, "The Role of Social Media in Community Building for Illegal Vietnamese Migrant Workers in Thailand," *Journal of Identity and Migration Studies* 10, no. 1 (2016): 4–21.

agents.³¹ In Germany alone, as of 2020, there were over 100,000 Vietnamese nationals residing in the country.³² The migration patterns of Vietnamese Catholics have changed significantly since the large-scale post-war exodus. Today, economic factors are dominant, as many Vietnamese seek better job opportunities and higher living standards abroad. Religion plays a less prominent role in migration decisions today. However, faith remains relevant. While religion is not the primary reason for migration, a significant proportion of migrants are Catholic. According to Vietnamese government statistics, there are currently about 6 million Vietnamese (including overseas Vietnamese) living and working in more than 130 countries and territories.³³ If we estimate that the U.S. has 700,000 Catholics and an additional 400,000 Catholics from the remaining 4 million overseas Vietnamese (10%), the total number of Vietnamese Catholics living in diaspora today is over one million.

Migrants as Missionary Disciples

From a religious perspective, Catholic migration is not only about survival or improvement in life situations but also a powerful means of evangelization. When Christians migrate to a new land, whether domestically or internationally, they do not only carry with them the aspiration for a better life, but also their culture and religion. The movement of people has played a crucial role in the growth of the Church since its earliest days. From the missionary journeys of the Apostles to mass migrations driven by political and social change, the spread of Christianity has been deeply tied to the movement of believers across nations, continents, and cultures. Throughout history, Catholic migrants have not only preserved their faith but have also actively contributed to the development and expansion of the Church in new lands. By bringing their traditions, beliefs, and communities with them, they have helped establish and strengthen Christian life wherever they have settled.³⁴

This reality calls attention to a fundamental claim: every migrant Christian is a potential missionary.³⁵ Migration offers immense opportunities for spreading the Gospel, as those who carry the faith into new environments become witnesses to Christ's presence. Christian migrants do not merely adapt to their host communities; they also enrich them spiritually, creating vibrant spaces for faith to take root and flourish. According to Pope Francis, "history teaches us that the contribution of migrants and refugees has been fundamental to the social and economic growth

³¹ Amelia Gentleman, "Essex Lorry Deaths: 39 Vietnamese Migrants Suffocated in Container, Court Hears," *Guardian*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/oct/07/essex-lorry-deaths-39-vietnamese-migrants-suffocated-in-container-court-hears>.

³² Anh Tuan Ho, "Hành Trình Đức Tin Của Cộng Đồng Công Giáo Việt Nam Tại Đức: Những Làn Sóng Di Cư Và Vai Trò Truyền Giáo," in *Di Dân Việt Nam Với Sự Mạn Loạn Bảo Tin Mừng* (Bangkok: ARC, 2025), 203.

³³ Duy Linh, "Việt Nam đang có khoảng 600.000 nhân lực chất lượng cao ở nước ngoài," *Tuổi Trẻ Online*, December 14, 2023, <https://tuoitre.vn/viet-nam-dang-co-khoang-600-000-nhan-luc-chat-luong-cao-o-nuoc-ngoai-20231214182037416.htm>

³⁴ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 16-25.

³⁵ Godwin Aturuchi Eche and Innocent Karibo, "Christianity and the Challenge of Migration in Time Perspective," *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* 2, no. (2019): 112.

of our societies. This continues to be true in our own day. Their work, their youth, their enthusiasm and their willingness to sacrifice enrich the communities that receive them.”³⁶

In the case of Vietnamese Catholics in diaspora, this missionary dimension is evident in their active participation in the Church in numerous ways. In various contexts, Vietnamese immigrants have contributed to developing and sustaining the local church. For example, countries like the United States and Australia have greatly benefited from vocations within the Vietnamese migrant community. Vietnamese currently make up 12 percent of seminarians in the United States.³⁷ This is remarkable considering Vietnamese American Catholics constitute less than one percent to the American Church. Moreover, individuals of Vietnamese background made up 4 percent of the 2024 ordinands to the priesthood in this country.³⁸ The Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement (VEYM), which has a membership of 25,000 youth and 2,500 youth leaders, is a source of tremendous spiritual and vocational formation for Vietnamese American youth. In Australia, the presence of Vietnamese Catholic migrants has contributed to the diversity within the Australian Church, numerous priests and religious, and even several bishops. Bishop Thanh Xuan Nguyen, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Melbourne was consecrated at St Patrick's Cathedral on February 1, 2025.³⁹

Recent Vietnamese Catholic migrants who go abroad as workers and students also have the potential to contribute to the evangelization mission of the Church, especially in countries where the Church is being negatively affected by the aging of the population and secularization. In Japan, Catholics comprise a small minority, estimated at approximately 431,100 individuals, representing roughly 0.34 percent of the population.⁴⁰ Taiwan's Catholic population, as of 2022, is 226,589, representing 0.7 percent of the total population.⁴¹ In Thailand, Catholics represent a small minority, with an estimated 388,000 members, constituting approximately 0.58 percent of the population.⁴² Compared to the other three countries, South Korea boasts a much larger Catholic community, estimated at around 5.9 million adherents, or approximately 11.3 percent of the total population.⁴³ However, by all standards, it is still a relatively small church.

³⁶ Pope Francis, Message for World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/20220509-world-migrants-day-2022.html>

³⁷ USCCB, “Vietnamese Vocations,” <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/vocation-directors/vietnamese-vocations#:~:text=Vietnamese%20men%20currently%20make%20up,Vietnamese%20priests%20in%20the%20US>.

³⁸ USCCB, “The Class of 2024: Survey of Ordinands to the Priesthood,” https://www.usccb.org/resources/Ordination%20Class%20of%202024%20-%20report_0.pdf.

³⁹ Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne, “Joy Overflows at Consecration of Melbourne's Newest Bishops,” February 1, 2025, <https://melbournecatholic.org/news/joy-overflows-at-consecration-of-melbournes-newest-bishops>.

⁴⁰ CBCJ, “Catholics in Japan,” <https://www.cbcj.catholic.jp/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/statistics2021.pdf>.

⁴¹ Pham Trong Quang, “Di Dân Với Sự Vụ Truyền Giáo Của Giáo Hội Công Giáo Tại Đài Loan,” in *Di Dân Việt Nam Với Sự Mộng Loạn Báo Tin Mừng*, ed. Anthony Le Duc (Bangkok: ARC, 2025), 230.

⁴² Asaree Thaitrakulpanich, “Here's Pope Francis' Schedule for His Thailand Visit,” *Khaosod English*, October 2, 2019, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/2019/10/02/heres-pope-francis-schedule-for-his-thailand-visit/>.

⁴³ ZENIT, “South Korea: Statistics Show Vitality of Catholicism, 11.3% of the Population,” May 7, 2024, <https://zenit.org/2024/05/07/south-korea-statistics-show-vitality-of-catholicism-11-3-of-the-population/>.

In addition to the small size, the churches in these countries are also dealing with an aging membership. The Catholic Church in Japan is experiencing a noticeable aging of its congregations, mirroring the country's overall demographic trends. This aging is coupled with a declining birthrate, which further exacerbates the issue. As older members pass away and fewer young people join the Church, the sustainability of local parishes and communities becomes a concern.⁴⁴

The Church in Taiwan faces a similar problem as Japan. Fr Pham Trong Quang, SVD reported that at Cathedral Parish of the Diocese of Chiayi (嘉義教區), where he used to serve, of the over 2,000 registered parishioners, only around 200 attend Sunday Mass. Pham commented, "A very common issue in Catholic churches in Taiwan today is that the majority of attendees are elderly, while there is a significant absence of young people."⁴⁵ This situation partially reflects the low birthrate in Taiwan. Data from the Department of Household Registration of Taiwan's Ministry of the Interior shows a consistent decline in Taiwan's total fertility rate for women aged 15-49, falling from 1.06 percent in 2018 to 0.865 percent in 2023.⁴⁶

While the Catholic Church in South Korea has seen growth in recent decades, it is not immune to the aging trend. As the population ages, the Church must find ways to engage younger generations and ensure their continued participation. This is crucial for maintaining the Church's vitality and its role in Korean society. Similar issues concerning aging within the church can be seen in South Korea, which reflects the overall trend in society. A CNA article in 2020 reported that about one in five South Korean Catholics are over the age of 65, and only 8.5 percent of Catholics are age 19 or under.⁴⁷ South Korea's 2023 fertility rate of 0.72 births per person is the lowest on record, well below Japan's 1.2 and the 2.1 replacement rate.⁴⁸ The situation in Thailand is equally worrisome. According to data from Chulalongkorn University's Sasin School of Management, Thailand's birth rate has experienced a significant decline of 81 percent over the past 74 years, placing it third globally in this metric. Only South Korea and China have witnessed steeper declines, at 88 percent and 83 percent, respectively, during the same period.⁴⁹

In addition to the problem of aging, the Church in the host countries is experiencing various degrees of secularization.^{50,51} In their book *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society*,

⁴⁴ Andrés Henríquez, "Archbishop of Tokyo: An Aging Society like Japan's Will Not Survive," *Catholic News Agency*, November 22, 2024, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/260647/archbishop-of-tokyo-an-aging-society-like-japans-will-not-be-able-to-survive>.

⁴⁵ Pham, "Di Dân Với Sứ Vụ Truyền Giáo Của Giáo Hội Công Giáo Tại Đài Loan," 241.

⁴⁶ Pan Tzu-yu and Wu Kuan-hsien, "Taiwan's Declining Birth Rate Difficult to Reverse: Official," *Focus Taiwan*, October 24, 2024, <https://focustaiwan.tw/society/202410240013>.

⁴⁷ Catholic News Agency, "Church in South Korea Growing, Slowly," April 27, 2020, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/44334/church-in-south-korea-growing-slowly>.

⁴⁸ Christopher Hamill-Stewart, "South Korea's Fertility Rate Should Be a Warning to the World," *Salzburg Global*, September 30, 2024, <https://www.salzburgglobal.org/news/latest-news/article/south-koreas-fertility-rate-should-be-a-warning-to-the-world#:~:text=South%20Korea's%20fertility%20rate%20hit,fertility%20replacement%20rate%20of%202>.

⁴⁹ Bangkok Post, "Don't Ignore Birth Rate Dip," editorial, December 23, 2024, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2925101/dont-ignore-birth-rate-dip>.

⁵⁰ UCA News, "Dealing with Secularization and Its Consequences in Japan," May 29, 2023, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/dealing-with-secularization-and-its-consequences-in-japan/101455>.

⁵¹ Pham, "Di Dân Với Sứ Vụ Truyền Giáo Của Giáo Hội Công Giáo Tại Đài Loan," 240-241.

Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan T. Cragun argue that while South Korea experienced a period of Christian growth intertwined with its rapid modernization and Westernization from the 1980s to the early 2000s, the country is now demonstrably experiencing secularization. Initially, this growth, particularly from 1982 to 2005, where religiously unaffiliated numbers decreased while Catholic and Protestant shares increased, was interpreted by some as contradicting secularization theory. The adoption of Christianity was, for some, linked to aspirations for Western prosperity. However, recent trends indicate a sharp decline in religiosity, especially among younger generations who find religious institutions ill-equipped to address contemporary issues. Among those born after 1990, only 17.6 percent attend religious services at least once a month. This decline is further evidenced by the stagnation of megachurches and diminishing trust in religious organizations following scandals. South Korea stands out globally with a high percentage of convinced atheists (54.9 percent in 2018) and those who do not believe in God (59.4 percent in 2018).⁵² Religious affiliation is not a central aspect of identity for many South Koreans, and belief in traditional religious concepts, such as life after death, has significantly decreased (from 52.2 percent in 1982 to 33.7 percent in 2018). The initial rise of Christianity appears linked to the desire for a Westernized identity during modernization, and with widespread modernization achieved, Christianity is now in decline.⁵³ The assertions made by the authors have also been corroborated by the research of Sam Hyun Yoo and Victor Agadjanian, noting that “since the 2000s, those with no religious affiliation tend to be younger, male, and urban residents typically embracing individualistic lifestyles.”⁵⁴ This reality of secularization has been cited as a reason for observed declines in religious vocation in South Korea in recent years.⁵⁵

While Kasselstrand et al. do not discuss the case of Japan extensively, they assert that “secularization occurs when people simply stop being religious of their own volition. And that is exactly the kind of secularization we now see taking place the world over, from Canada and Uruguay to Germany and Japan.”⁵⁶ It must be noted that the phenomenon of secularisation in the case of Japan is a highly contested issue with scholars such as José Casanova arguing against the standard secularization theory, which predicts a decline in religion in modern societies. While acknowledging that Japan is secular in terms of the separation of church and state, and its education system, Casanova contends that Japanese society remains receptive to various religions. This challenges the Enlightenment-era assumption that modernization inevitably leads to the demise of religion.⁵⁷ Rodney Stark is also another scholar who has denied that Japan is undergoing secularization, citing the popularity of Shinto rituals in the modern day.⁵⁸ Going deep

⁵² It must be noted that in the Asian spiritual milieu, atheism, or not believing in a monotheistic God does not necessary mean that there is lack of spirituality and religiosity. Asians who practice Daoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, and Buddhism often declare that they do not follow a religion or believe in God.

⁵³ Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan T. Cragun, *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2023).

⁵⁴ Sam Hyun Yoo and Victor Agadjanian, “The paradox of change: Religion and fertility decline in South Korea,” *Demographic Research* 44, Article 23 (2021): 541.

⁵⁵ UCA News, “Korean Religious Blame Secularization for Vocation Decline,” January 26, 2024, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/korean-religious-blame-secularization-for-vocation-decline/103953>.

⁵⁶ Kasselstrand et al., *Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society*, 113.

⁵⁷ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11-12.

⁵⁸ Rodney Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.,” *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999): 8.

into secularization theories is beyond the scope of this paper. What cannot be denied is that in Japan, church attendance is observably seen to be among the older people, and many are dying. Without young people entering the Church, the number of native Japanese in the Church is steadily decreasing. In reality, the majority of Catholics in Japan today come from the immigrant community.⁵⁹

The case of Thailand is slightly different from the East Asian countries. Thailand is still overwhelmingly religious with 90 percent of the population adhering to Buddhism,⁶⁰ oftentimes intermixed with local animistic beliefs in gods, spirits, and ghosts. Muslims and Christians make up the majority of the rest. While it is possible to argue for the greater prominence of secular values in Thai society, it would be incorrect to claim that it is a secular culture. Therefore, the Church in Thailand is not so much affected by secularism as by the non-Catholic religious milieu, which presents a challenge for Catholics, especially the youth, to remain faithful to their religious tradition. While no official statistics exist, empirical observations indicate that nowadays a majority of Thai Catholics marry outside of their faith, which makes it difficult to maintain traditional Catholic households. And many of them already come from mixed-faith families themselves. Many young people, once they move away from the home to study or work also tend to drift away from the Church. This is the primary reason why all the dioceses in Thailand as well as many religious congregations insist on maintaining minor seminaries accepting students who have completed primary school to ensure that there is a cohort of young people being trained in the Catholic environment on an ongoing basis. Despite the extremely low success rate of minor seminarians eventually becoming priests and religious, many Church leaders remark that at least the ones who benefit from seminary life will have a better chance of holding on to their faith than their peers.⁶¹

As we can see, the already small churches in Asia are experiencing multiple challenges in maintaining the number both in terms of adherents and vocation. Facing this reality, the presence of Vietnamese Catholic immigrants can help to sustain the Church in numerous ways. The new wave of Vietnamese Catholic migrants possesses several characteristics that enhance their missionary potential. Primarily, they are young, mostly in their 20s and 30s. This youthful demographic is more adaptable to new languages and cultures. This can be seen with Vietnamese migrants in Thailand, where many are able to speak Thai fluently due to daily interactions with local people, even without formal language training. Many Vietnamese migrants come from rural areas, especially in the northern provinces, where strong religious practices are maintained, particularly in Catholic villages. While Mass attendance statistics in Vietnam are not available, empirical observations reveal that rural areas still show high participation, even on the weekdays. Furthermore, the Catholic faith remains central to many Vietnamese migrants' lives abroad, with numerous Vietnamese Catholic groups meeting for monthly or weekly Mass in the churches of their host countries. Thus, with their youthfulness and relatively high level of religiosity,

⁵⁹ UCA News, "The Fading Japanese Church, the Growing Church in Japan," May 2, 2023, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/the-fading-japanese-church-the-growing-church-in-japan/101175>.

⁶⁰ US Department of State, "2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Thailand," <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/547499-THAILAND-2023-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>.

⁶¹ Information presented here comes from the author's experience working in the Thai Church and conversations with various individuals in the Church.

Vietnamese Catholic migrants can help to renew the local churches facing decline if provided adequate support, guidance, and formation by church leaders and pastoral agents.

Conclusion

Missionary discipleship is a vocation that belongs to all Christians and Catholic migrants are not excluded from this calling. In fact, history demonstrates that the Church has largely developed and expanded as a result of various waves of migration in history. In this vein, Vietnamese Catholic migrants since the 18th century has also contributed to the development of the Church in many contexts. Moreover, they have the potential to continue to help develop and sustain the Church today, especially in places where the local church is experiencing a decline in membership due to aging and secularization. This essay demonstrates that despite their relatively small numbers in global migration, Vietnamese Catholic migrants have significantly contributed and will continue to contribute to the Church's mission as missionary disciples, fulfilling Pope Francis's call for a Church that goes forth and actively engages with the world.

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