

What's Really Going On in Vietnam

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The Archbishop of Hué discusses the incident that touched off the religious crisis in South Vietnam: he maintains the issue is political, not religious

I have been asked by Catholics of Europe, Asia and America, who are grievously troubled by reports of the international news services, why it is that in Vietnam, Catholics are today persecuting their Buddhist brethren. In the face of so much dismay and confusion on the part of well-intentioned people, I believe it to be my duty as an Archbishop of Vietnam to make a simple presentation of the facts, allowing each person of good will to judge freely who are the persecutors and who the persecuted, who are the calumniators and who the calumniated.

What follows is, in my humble opinion, the immediate cause of the Buddhist disorders and how they have developed.

1) Every year the birthday of Buddha (falling this year on May 4, 1963) is celebrated for three days—according to a program drawn up by the Committee of Celebrations and which is submitted for approbation to the Provincial authorities. Two years previously the Minister of the Interior had twice prescribed that *all* denominations should reserve the first place for the national flag, when flags are flown during a religious celebration.

Two days before May 4, 1963, a telegram from the President's cabinet contained an even stricter reminder of these instructions for all religions. I myself had the Vatican flag taken down, on the occasion of the consecration of the Redemptorist church in Hué, in keeping with the instructions of the Government. This then was a general ordinance, one passed two years ago. Attention was called to it two days before the Buddhist feast, but this also served as a reminder to Catholics two weeks before the Feast of the Ascension. The police therefore requested the non-Catholics, who had decorated their garden

gates along the public road, to conform to the ordinance. This led to a protest by the bonzes. The Provincial administration of Hué, yielding to their demands, ordered the police not to upset the people. Therefore all the Buddhist flags flew during the three days of the celebration. The bonzes, who had been encouraged by the concession made by the Administration, demanded that the presidential ordinance be withdrawn for the future.

Bonzes Shift Blame

2) In this emboldened mood, instead of following the program for the celebration approved by the authorities, they organized a mass meeting at the national radio station and demanded the broadcast of their insulting, anti-Government protestations in place of the broadcast of the program for which they had already obtained authorization. Meanwhile, the crowd of demonstrators, crying out loudly against the Government, had invaded the courtyard of the

radio station. The police and a group of soldiers of the regular army arrived with fire hoses and tear gas bombs to try to control the manifestation. While the head of the province, who had arrived at the radio station, was conferring with the chief bonze, part of the demonstrators, along with some passers-by, went up the steps of the radio station, throwing rocks and breaking down the doors. At this moment an explosion (believed due to a plastic bomb) occurred on the steps, killing seven persons, among whom were two Catholic catechumens and four others, sons of policemen or of public officials.

The bonzes profited from this tragic event by pinning the responsibility on the forces of order and by canonizing the unfortunate victims—in spite of protests from the families of those who had been killed, except for two families who cooperated with them.

3) Next the bonzes presented their famous five requests to the Government; this signaled the beginning of the dispute between the General Buddhist Association of Vietnam and the Central Government.

Here is a summary of these five requests:

1) "That the Government repeal definitively the official telegram banning the religious emblem of Buddhism."

2) "That Buddhism benefit from the same special treatment granted to the Catholic missions according to ordinance No. 10."

3) "That the Government stop arresting and persecuting the Buddhists."

4) "That the bonzes and the Buddhists be granted freedom of worship and freedom to propagate their faith."

5) "That the Government indemnify equitably the victims, who



were unjustly assassinated, and punish in a fitting manner those responsible."

Then was established the United Committee for the Defense of Buddhism (representing various sects), to obtain satisfaction for these claims by peaceful means, that is, by manifestations on the public street, fasting in the Buddhist manner, and human sacrifices.

To help you understand what follows, I add these remarks: The struggle is being led by the General Buddhist Association of Vietnam, which was founded some five years ago and which is the best organized among the other autonomous Buddhist sects. This association claims to number one million members: it is the most numerous, but it is far from making up 85 per cent of the population of South Vietnam, which has a population of 15 million, most of whom belong to ancestor worshiping sects, as in China. For a Buddhist, Buddhism is only a more or less thick veneer applied to this basic ancestor worship. What we have, therefore, is a fight against the Government by certain leaders of the General Buddhist Association, not by all those who belong to the Association. A few other Buddhist sects—not all of them—have joined with the Association for this campaign.

4) The Government named a ministerial commission presided over by the Vice President of the Republic (a non-Catholic) to meet with the Committee for the Defense of Buddhism in order to satisfy as much as possible what was legitimate in the five requests.

Preposterous Proposals

First of all, the Buddhists were granted what they sought with reference to their flag. They also demanded that the other Buddhist sects, which had not taken part in the dispute, be allowed to enjoy the same privilege. The Government agreed to this request.

Strengthened by their success, they sought the punishment of the officials who were said to have mistreated the Buddhists in the past. The Government proposed that the Committee for the Defense of Buddhism take part in a joint committee made up of several government

ministers which had been established to investigate these persecutions. The investigations were to be public and open to the press. The Buddhist Association laid down as a preliminary condition for cooperation that the Government assume responsibility for the deaths in Hué. The Government replied that it was precisely to determine the responsibility of the events in Hué that the joint investigatory committee was being set up. The bonzes continued

designate certain individuals hidden under Buddhist robes?

There are two categories of bonzes. The first comprises those who officially practice celibacy and live in community. Formerly, the Vietnamese, a people easily given to scoffing, used to say that only the lazy and the incompetent became bonzes, because their upkeep was and is assured by the income of the pagodas. Their instruction, with the exception of a few men of letters, was almost



to insist on their preliminary condition, and collaboration became impossible.

Meanwhile, the human sacrifices began. Here is how the bonzes worked: They chose three good old bonzes, and drew lots to see which should be burned. They drugged him and covered him with gasoline to burn him. In Hué we heard the screams of the bonze destined to be burned at the Tu-Dam pagoda, the center of the General Buddhist Association. The bonze refused to die and the other bonzes overwhelmed him with hammer blows—this was the reason for the terrifying screams. At Hué, likewise, a young bonze, who is said to have died of natural causes, was burned, and the bonzes refused to allow an autopsy—this they also refused in the other case just described when the authorities wanted to determine the cause of death. The authorities had to give in so as not to appear to be provoking these fanatics.

Why use the word "fanatic" to

nil. They learned by heart liturgical prayers in Pali which they recited without understanding, as our little altar boys do today with their Latin. The saffron yellow habit distinguished them from laymen. Therefore, anyone who wished entered and may still enter, and they may as easily leave, if they wish. What an organization to serve as a refuge for our friends the Communists, protected from the police by the right of asylum given to the pagodas.

The other category comprises married bonzes who care for the small Buddhist sanctuaries scattered throughout the villages.

The fact that bonzes are chosen in a loose and superficial manner explains the behavior of certain individuals who wear the monastic habit without a vocation: they are the shame of the authentic bonzes who are highly respectable.

The presence of Communists among the bonzes is very probable since they have infiltrated even the Legion of Mary; by means of hypocritical