



**THE LITURGICAL
INCULTURATION OF
THE CULT OF
ANCESTORS IN
VIETNAM**

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1. THE INCULTURATION OF THE CULT OF ANCESTORS IN VIETNAM - HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Vietnam, along with other Asian countries such as Korea and Japan, has been heavily influenced by China, especially its Confucian culture.¹ This influence is most visible in certain funerary rites and especially in the cult of ancestors. According to Rev. Peter Phan, a theologian at Georgetown University, the Chinese Rites Controversy and Rome’s ensuing prohibitions against the cult of ancestors affected Vietnamese Catholicism profoundly.

In 1964 the Vietnamese Bishops Conference applied to Rome for permission to implement the 1939 decree of Propaganda Fide permitting ancestor veneration.

On June 14, 1964 the Vietnamese bishops issued a letter "The Veneration of Ancestors, National Heroes, and War Dead" spelling out the concrete norms to apply Propaganda Fide’s instruction. In general, the bishops distinguished three kinds of acts, attitudes, and rituals: those that are clearly secular, patriotic, and social expressions of piety toward the ancestors, national heroes, and war dead; those that are clearly religious in nature and contrary to Catholic belief, strike of superstition, and are performed in places reserved for worship; and those that are of an ambiguous nature. The ancestors are not only permissible but are to be encouraged and promoted; the national heroes are prohibited; and the war dead need to be examined according to the common local opinion: if they are generally thought to be of a nonreligious nature, they are permissible. If doubt

¹ Peter C. Phan, *In Our Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 122-129.

concerning their nature persists, it is permissible to act according to one's conscience. If possible, explanations of one's intention should be given with due tact, or one can participate in a passive manner.²

On April 12, 1974 the Vietnamese bishops issued another communication in which they specified a list of activities, attitudes, and rituals deemed permissible:

"1. An ancestral altar: dedicated to the veneration of the ancestors may be placed under the altar dedicated to God, provided that nothing smacking of superstition such as the 'white soul' [the white cloth representing the dead] is placed there.

2. Burning incense and lighting candles on the ancestral altar, and prostrating with joined hands in front of the altar or the repository of the ancestors are gestures of filial piety and veneration, hence permissible.

3. On death anniversaries: it is permissible to present the dead person with 'offerings of commemorative cult' according to local customs, provided that one eliminates things smacking of superstition such as burning paper money. It is also recommended that the offerings be reduced or changed to express more clearly their true meaning of respect and gratitude to the ancestors, for instance, flowers, fruits, incense, and lights.

4. During the marriage rites: the bride and groom are permitted to perform the 'ceremony of veneration toward the ancestors' in front of the ancestral altar or the repository of the ancestors. These rituals are expressions of gratitude toward, recognition of, and self-presentation to the ancestors.

5. During the funerary rites: it is permissible to perform prostrations with joined hands before the corpse as well as to hold burning incense sticks in joined hands according to local custom, as a way to express veneration for the dead person, just as the Church permits the use of candles, incense, and inclination before the corpse.

6. It is permissible to participate in the ceremonies venerating the 'lord of the place in the village community building, to express gratitude toward those whom history shows have earned the gratitude of the people, or the benefactors of the village, and not to express a superstitious belief in evil spirits and harmful ghosts."³

2. THE CULT OF ANCESTORS IN THE VIETNAMESE MASS

² See the Vietnamese text in *Sacerdos* 43 (July 1965), 489-92.

³ See the Vietnamese text in *Sacerdos* 156 (1974), 878-80.

In addition to the permission of these rituals of ancestor veneration outside of the liturgy, the Vietnamese bishops have introduced two properly liturgical innovations.⁴

The first is an expansion of the prayer for the dead in the Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass: In the second Eucharistic Prayer, instead of the simple formula "Remember our brothers and sisters who have gone to their rest in the hope of rising again," the Vietnamese memento of the dead reads: "Remember also the faithful, our brothers and sisters, who rest in peace in the expectation of the resurrection, and the dead who can only trust in your mercy. Remember in particular our ancestors, our parents and our friends who have left this world..."⁵ Obviously, the explicit mention of "ancestors" is an attempt at inculturating ancestor veneration into the liturgy, with significant theological implications which will be detailed below.

The second liturgical innovation is the Masses for the celebration of the lunar New Year or Tet: For the Vietnamese New Year is the most important cultural and religious feast, the equivalent of New Year, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas rolled into one. It symbolizes the total renewal of all things. All debts should be paid, all bad feelings set aside, and everything should be clean and new. On New Year's Eve, especially at midnight, there are various rituals to perform, the main of which is to "welcome the ancestors" to the home. Culturally, Vietnamese New Year is the celebration of the family: all members of the family are supposed to return to the ancestral home to show gratitude to their ancestors and to renew the family bond. Religiously, it is the occasion for the most solemn celebration of the cult of ancestors. Members of the family gather before the ancestral altar with the pictures of the dead ancestors displayed on it, make deep bows, burn incense, make offerings, and pray for their protection. Catholics say their prayers in front of the altar.

Vietnamese New Year is celebrated for at least three days:

the first is reserved for the cult of ancestors and the living parents,

the second for close relatives,

and the third for the dead.

Alexandre de Rhodes, a Jesuit missionary to Vietnam, had attempted to Christianize Vietnamese New Year by suggesting that its three days be dedicated to the Trinity:

"The first day in memory of the benefits of creation and conservation, which is dedicated to God the Father;

⁴ Peter De Vo, *A Cultural and Theological Foundation for Ancestor Veneration Among Catholics in Vietnam*, (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 1999), 22–29, 35.

⁵ Phan, *Popular Religion, The Liturgy, and The Cult of The Dead*.

the second in thanksgiving for the inestimable benefit of redemption, which is dedicated to God the Son; and the third in humble gratitude to the Holy Spirit for the grace of being called to be a Christian"⁶

In the 17 century and until even as recently as the 20th, as long as the monarchy lasted, on the first day of the year the emperor offered in the name of the nation the Nam Giao (south gate) sacrifice to Heaven, which de Rhodes interpreted as a "sacrifice offered to the heavenly King."⁷

Given the central position of Vietnamese New Year, it is not surprising that the Vietnamese bishops have undertaken to solemnize it with Eucharistic celebrations. Five Mass formulas have been composed to express the various meanings of Vietnamese New Year and are now in use:

the first for the end of the year in to give thanks and ask for forgiveness;

the second for New Year's Eve to celebrate the passage into the new year (giao thua);

the third for the first day of the new year to praise God and to ask for peace and prosperity;

the fourth for the second day to pray for ancestors, grandparents and parents;

and the fifth for the third day to pray for the sanctification of labor.⁸

3. SIGNIFICANT PRAYERS

a. COLLECT

Father of mercies, you have commanded us to practice filial piety. Today, on New Year's Day, we have gathered to honor the memory of our ancestors, grandparents and parents. Deign to reward abundantly those who have brought us into this world, nurtured us, and educated us. Help us live in conformity to our duties toward them....

b. PRAYER OVER THE GIFTS

⁶ Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 80-81.

⁷ Ibid., 92-3.

⁸ See the Vietnamese Roman Missal, 1035-47.

Lord, accept our offerings and bestow your graces abundantly upon our ancestors, grandparents and parents, so that we may in our turn inherit their blessings....

a. PREFACE

As we look at things in the universe, we clearly see that every being has an origin and principle: birds have their nests, water its source, and the human person coming into this world has a father and mother. Moreover, thanks to your revelation, Father, we recognize that you are the creator of all things that exist and that you are our Father. You have given life to our ancestors, grandparents and parents so that they may transmit it to us. You have also filled them with good things so we may inherit them by knowing you, adoring you, and serving you....

2. THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANTS

The inclusion of the veneration of ancestors in the Mass, and especially the mention of the term "ancestor" in the Eucharistic Prayer, mark a monumental step in liturgical inculturation in Vietnam. We have traveled a long way from the days of the Chinese Rites Controversy. Theologically, it is important, at least for two reasons.

First, in mentioning the ancestors explicitly in the Eucharistic Prayer and in praying for them, the Vietnamese text does not distinguish between Christian ancestors and non-Christian ones (among Vietnamese Christians attending Mass there are many whose ancestors did not receive baptism). In the cult of ancestors, the ancestors are venerated not because they have been saved or were holy but simply because they are ancestors. Simply in virtue of the physical bond with their descendants, the ancestors are bound to protect them, and the descendants to honor them. Furthermore, in describing the cult of ancestors, many Vietnamese bishops have used not only the word "to tien" (forebears) but also "thanh hien" (saint and sage) to refer to those who should receive this cult. Of course, they do not mean to say that these are "saints" in the Christian sense of being officially canonized, but clearly the old objection that the word "saint" should not be used for people like Confucius no longer holds, and of course there is no suggestion that the non-Christian ancestors have been damned simply because they were not Christian.⁹

⁹ Phan, *Popular Religion, The Liturgy, and The Cult of The Dead.*

Secondly, there is in the prayers cited earlier an affirmation that somehow the ancestors act as mediators of the blessings and graces that their descendants receive from God. The descendants are said to "inherit" them from their ancestors. Of course, in these prayers the ancestors are not directly asked to "intercede" with God for their descendants, since these prayers are not addressed to them, in contrast to those said in front of the ancestral altar at home. Theologically, of course, there can be no objection to ask someone, dead or alive, canonized or not, to intercede for oneself or others before God. The old objection that the cult of ancestors, in so far as they are invoked in prayer, is superstitious is a red herring, since no Asian who practices this cult believes that the ancestors are divine, in the strict sense of this term.