

**A THEOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL FOUNDATION
FOR VENERATION OF ANCESTORS
AMONG VIETNAMESE CATHOLICS
AND
ITS LITURGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

By

Peter Tuyen Nguyen, B.A., M.Div.

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of McMaster Divinity College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master's Christian Studies

McMaster Divinity College,
Hamilton, Ontario
2007

M.A. in Christian Studies

McMASTER DIVINITY COLLEGE

Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE:

A Theological And Cultural Foundation For
Veneration of Ancestors Among Vietnamese
Catholics and Its Liturgical Implications

AUTHOR

Peter Tuyen Nguyen

SUPERVISOR

Dr. Joyce Bellous

NUMBER OF PAGES

Vii, 204



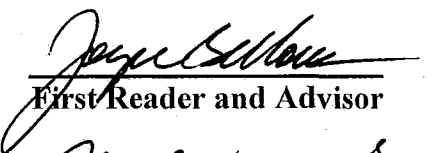
McMASTER DIVINITY COLLEGE

Upon the recommendation of an oral examination committee, this thesis-project by

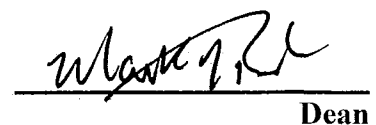
PETER NGUYEN

is hereby accepted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Christian Studies


First Reader and Advisor


Second Reader


Dean

Date: 8 March 2007

ABSTRACT

A Theological And Cultural Foundation For Veneration of Ancestors Among Vietnamese Catholics and Its Liturgical Implications

Peter Tuyen Nguyen

McMaster DIVINITY COLLEGE

Masters of Arts in Christian Studies 2007

The practice of ancestral veneration is an integral part of Vietnamese culture and extremely popular among the Vietnamese. Most Vietnamese families, rich or poor, have in their homes an altar specifically designated for this purpose. The altar is a rallying place - a symbol of family solidarity. Around the altar, in the presence of the familial ancestors, all discord is expected to be put aside. It is also before these altars that all major family decisions are made.

For those Vietnamese who are Catholics, these displays are often created beneath altars dedicated to Jesus, Mary, or favoured saints. The cult of ancestors plays a significant role in the social lives of Vietnamese families. The practice exhibits qualities of religious dogma and may, in fact, be regarded as a form of national religion. In Vietnam the practice is referred to as *Đạo thờ ông bà*, which literally means, religion that worships the ancestors.

Catholic missionaries from the West first came to Vietnam in the sixteenth century. However, the Christian beliefs they brought with them clashed with Vietnamese culture, especially with the cult of ancestors. The idea of worshipping other human beings was regarded as heretical by Christian missionaries. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese devotion to the cult of ancestors has died hard. In spite of the Christian opposition to it, the practice continues to be extremely popular. This is so much the case that in some circles churches are being urged not to try to stamp out ancestral worship, but to make an effort to incorporate it into Christian liturgy and worship, a practice known as inculturation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank my professor and thesis supervisor, Dr. Joyce Bellous, for her tireless support and guidance throughout my research process. I am extremely grateful for her encouragement and knowledge, without which I would not have gained so much from this program. Thanks to Dr. Michael Knowles, my second reader. His critique was very much appreciated; his advice and helpful comments shaped this thesis into a sound contribution to scholarly knowledge. Also, thank you to Dr. Mark Boda, Advanced Degree Director, for serving as chair during the defense process.

I would very much like to express my sincere thanks to Dr. Bernadette Lynn for her tremendous help in the fulfillment of this thesis. My gracious thanks to Dr. Dorothy Pawluch and Louise-Ann Caravaggio for their kind support.

Finally, I would like to thank my Bishop, His Excellency Anthony Tonnos, for both his spiritual and financial support. Sincere thanks to all my priest friends for their encouragement.

This thesis is written in honour of my ancestors, especially my Mother Anna Trần and my god-mother Maria-Teresa Phạm. I like to dedicate this work to my god-children: Minh Lâm, Anh Tú, Lan Trâm and Tú Duyên.

CONTENTS

Summary	ii
Approval	iii
Abstract	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Table of contents	vi
 INTRODUCTION	 1
Veneration of Ancestors: A Brief Cultural Description	4
Veneration of Ancestors: Its Relation to Christian Controversy	6
The Inculturation of The Veneration of Ancestors	9
Scope and Limitations	11
 CHAPTER ONE: THE VIETNAMESE - THEIR ORIGIN AND IDENTITY	 16
Vietnam and Its People	17
Language	26
Vietnamese Culture Under Confucian Tradition	30
The Five Virtues	51
 CHAPTER TWO: VENERATION OF ANCESTORS IN CIVIC LIFE	 56
The Veneration of Ancestors in Vietnamese Celebrations	63
Veneration of Ancestors and Filial Piety	82
 CHAPTER THREE: CHRISTIANITY IN VIETNAM IN THE CONTEXT OF OTHER RELIGIONS	 87
Vietnamese Religions	87
Chinese Rites	94
Christianity in Vietnam	102
Being a Vietnamese Confucian and a Vietnamese Christian	110

Vietnamese Images of Jesus	115
Ancestral Veneration and Catholic Practice in Vietnam.....	119
CHAPTER FOUR: THE VENERATION OF ANCESTORS IN THE VIETNAMESE TRADITION AND THE VENERATION OF SAINTS IN THE CATHOLIC TRADITION	125
The Communion of Saints: a Vietnamese View	126
The Communion of Saints in Catholic Teaching	129
Veneration of Saints From a Biblical View	134
History of the Veneration of Saints in the Catholic Church	138
The Language Conflict: Worship of Saint – Worship of Ancestor.....	140
Intercessions of the Saints – Ancestors	147
The Communion of Saints: Christocentric and Theocentric	152
Biblical Veneration of Ancestors and Confucian Veneration of Ancestors in Vietnamese Culture	156
CHAPTER FIVE: LITURGICAL IMPLICATIONS	163
Basic Guidelines for Incorporation of the Veneration of Ancestors Into the Liturgy	168
Veneration of Saints in the Framework of the Liturgical	
Celebration of Eucharist	176
Veneration of Ancestors in the Vietnamese liturgy of The Eucharist	179
Liturgy of Marriage	187
Baptism and Confirmation Liturgies	188
Sacrament of Holy Orders: Rite of Ordination	189
Funeral	190
Conclusion	192
BIBLIOGRAPHY	196
APPENDIX	203

INTRODUCTION

Tolerance for cultural differences is a noble attribute but difficult to instil in people. History has offered numerous examples where intelligent individuals or governments (especially during European colonization in the sixteenth to twentieth centuries) should have understood that they were dealing with sets of cultural mores that were foreign to them, but instead acted according to their own Western beliefs. For instance, disruptions in India in the nineteenth century arising from the British insensitivity to the differences between Hindu and Muslim dietary rules are telling.¹ Indeed, religion is often at the heart of many such cultural misunderstandings. This is illustrated poignantly in the long road which the Eastern custom of veneration of ancestors has travelled when confronted by Western beliefs, especially Christian ones. Veneration of ancestors, which is a sense of respect for one's elders and the honouring

1 'Indian Mutiny', 1857-1859: The 1850s saw a deterioration in relations between the British officers and the Indians of other ranks in the East India Company's Bengal Army. Many Indians believed that the British were seeking to destroy traditional Indian social, religious and cultural customs, a view shared by the sepoys of the Bengal Army, a substantial number of whom were high-caste Brahmins. Discipline, administration and command in the Bengal Army had for some time been inferior to that in the Company's other two armies and matters were brought to a head by the introduction of the Pattern 1853 Enfield Rifle. The rumour spread that its cartridges were greased with pig and cow fat, thus offending both Moslems and Hindus. In February 1857 the 19th (Bengal Native) Infantry refused to use the cartridges. They were quickly disbanded but their actions were to spark a chain of similar events through central and northern India. November 17, 2006, http://www.educationforum.co.uk/KS3_2/mut.htm.

of the dead, is a key facet of the Confucian tradition and a central tenet of Eastern cultures dominated by the Chinese Empire over the last two millennia.

One of these cultures, namely the Vietnamese, has been infused with the Confucian principles of respect for one's elders and ancestors, and filial piety that provide a social structure to the country. Vietnam has also been influenced by the presence of Christian missionaries, principally Roman Catholic, for three centuries (from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century.) How does or should Roman Catholic Christianity interpret the veneration of ancestors? The concept at first glance is totally foreign. While Westerners respect and memorialize their dead forebears, they do not usually venerate them with an altar, incense and anniversary celebrations on their death or name day. Indeed, most Christians would see such veneration as superstitious and blasphemous. But is it? This thesis will explore the way in which the Vietnamese veneration of ancestors is compatible with Christian belief. A simple anecdote from my early life in Canada may help to illustrate the potential Western misunderstanding of the practice of the veneration of ancestors.

I was in the seminary of Christ the King in Mission, B.C. in 1987 with several Vietnamese seminarians. We invited a fellow Canadian seminarian, Joe Remidios, to join us for a visit to a Vietnamese family who lived in Vancouver on the occasion of the anniversary of the death of a family member. Before the meal, as is Vietnamese tradition, we all gathered in front of their ancestral altar to pray, burning incense, and reciting the Holy Rosary and other traditional prayers to venerate the ancestors.

Following this ceremony, as a common ritual in Christian Vietnamese homes, we enjoyed a sumptuous meal. On the way back to the seminary, our friend Joe voiced his disquiet at what had happened, accusing us (Vietnamese people) of using Christianity in a superstitious practice. The mistake we Vietnamese seminarians had made was that we had not prepared our Western friend for what for us was part of our tradition, namely the veneration of ancestors. From a Vietnamese perspective, Joe, an otherwise tolerant individual, misunderstood and misjudged.

Ancestral veneration is an integral part of Vietnamese culture that is extremely popular among Vietnamese people. In fact, all Vietnamese, if asked, would confess that they believe in Heaven and practice ancestral veneration.² Like our friends in Vancouver, most Vietnamese families, rich or poor, have a home altar specifically designated for this purpose. In some cases these altars are richly adorned; in other cases, they consist of a simple wooden table, often painted white. Whatever their appearance, these altars are places where the family gathers on all major feast days. The altar is a rallying place. It is a symbol of family solidarity where, in the presence of the familial ancestors, all discord is expected to be put aside. It is also before these altars that all major family decisions are made and where marriages are consecrated. For those Vietnamese who are Catholics, these ancestral displays are found beneath altars dedicated to Jesus, Mary, or favoured saints.³

² Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics* (Mahwah, New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 49.

³ Ibid., 51.

In this chapter, I will first briefly describe the custom of veneration of ancestors, which is basis of this thesis and will be discussed more fully in later chapters. I will then present a brief introduction to the controversy over accommodation of the veneration of ancestors in Christian practice. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of the thesis and outline the chapters of the thesis. At its root, the veneration of ancestors in Vietnam is a core value in religious, social and political life that drives not only decisions, choices and action but also the way in which these choices are reached. We will next look at the practice of ancestral veneration in general.

Veneration of Ancestors: A Brief Cultural Description

After a family member's funeral, Vietnamese families set up a home altar for the purpose of ancestral veneration. The ancestors are believed to dwell in commemorative tablets. Ancestral tablets are pieces of wood inscribed with the name and dates of the deceased. They are kept in a small shrine at home and in the clan ancestral temple. Incense is lit before the tablets daily and necessities for the afterlife are also placed on or near the altar. Family members also bow in respect before the altar. According to the Eastern tradition of veneration of ancestors, individuals and families are expected to pay homage and make offerings to their own ancestors. The practice is based on the belief that ancestors are active members of the family and are still interested in the affairs of their living relatives. Other individuals may also be acknowledged or represented in these places of honour. For example, the pictures of

prominent former leaders or beloved benefactors within the local community, region or even the nation may be displayed. Other honourees include famed rulers and generals who saved the nation from foreign invasion, great scholars, and men and women who have shown unusual courage or who have died in the name of honour and virtue. The veneration of ancestors preserves the memory of such individuals, treating them as guardian spirits and venerating them both in private homes and in temples built in their honour. This honouring of dead ‘heroes’ is part of the cult of ancestors, a cult which plays a significant role in the social lives of Vietnamese families. The practice exhibits qualities of religious dogma and may, in fact, be regarded as a form of Vietnamese national religion. In Vietnam the practice is referred to as *đạo thờ ông bà*, which literally means, religion that worships the ancestors.⁴ However, the word *thờ* (worship) does not have the same meaning as worshipping God. This concept will be explained in detail in Chapter Four. To avoid confusion, the word ‘veneration’ will be used instead of ‘worship.’

A primitive form of ancestral veneration has existed in Vietnam since the formation of the country.⁵ It was reinforced by Confucian philosophical beliefs. Confucius was a Chinese philosopher who lived from 551 to 479 B.C. In the midst of social upheaval, he tried to bring peace and civic order. An important element in Confucian philosophy is the belief that in order to achieve human perfection, one must

4 Ibid., 51.

5 Hoàng Quốc Hải, *Văn Hóa Phong Tục* (Hà nội: Nhà Xuất bản Phụ nữ, 2005), 10-11.

follow the established codes of behaviour within Confucianism, which includes reverence for one's ancestors. China, which occupied Vietnam for more than a thousand years, heavily influenced Vietnamese culture, spreading its Confucianism as part of its imperialism.

The Veneration of Ancestors and Its Relation to Christian Controversy

For centuries, then, veneration of ancestors has been one of the most influential systems of thought in Vietnam and remains even today an important aspect of Vietnamese culture. All aspects of life celebrations, marriages, births, and deaths, are part of ancestral veneration for all faiths from Buddhist to Christian. To examine Vietnamese veneration of ancestors thoroughly, we need to explore its original sources, not merely relying on second-hand materials available in North America, but also consulting original Vietnamese sources, i.e., old texts written in Vietnamese and Vietnamese folklore and sayings. Both English and Vietnamese texts are equally important and references will be made to both throughout the thesis.

Besides these primary sources, the thesis will analyse a range of data including secondary sources on Vietnamese culture and history, as well as religious texts including the new Catholic Catechism and Holy Scriptures. This analysis of both indigenous Vietnamese sources and secondary sources which discuss the country and its culture will help to draw the connections between the veneration of ancestors and the Christian belief in the Communion of Saints, which is the subject of Chapter Four.

Throughout the history of Vietnam, the practice of ancestral veneration has adapted itself to new political, social and religious demands, and these changes are as important as its traditions. Christianity's introduction into Vietnam has helped reform and renew the cult of ancestors. Nevertheless, the cult of ancestors has been and continues to be a contentious issue of doctrine, having ramifications for evangelization and church life in Vietnam, a fact that the so-called "Chinese Rites Controversy" has made painfully clear.⁶

The Chinese Rites Controversy, a heated debate among Catholic missionary orders in seventeenth century China, was about whether participation in ancestral veneration and other Confucian rituals should be permitted by the Church. The debate culminated in 1742 with the publication of the papal bull *Ex Quo Singulari* which decreed that Catholic participation in such rituals was not allowed, a decision rescinded only in 1939 when the papal bull *Plane Compertum Est* lifted the ban among Catholics of Chinese ancestry. Following up *Plane compertum est* of *Propaganda Fide*⁷ issued in

6 Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 109.

7 *Propaganda Fide* is the Department (Congregation) of the Holy See founded in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV with the double aim of spreading Christianity in the areas where the Christian message had still not arrived and of defending the patrimony of faith in those places where heresy had caused the genuineness of the faith to be questioned. *Propaganda Fide* was therefore, basically, the Congregation whose task it was to organize all the missionary activity of the Church. Through a provision of John Paul II (in order to better define its tasks), since 1988 the original *Propaganda Fide*

1939, Vietnamese Archbishop *Nguyễn Văn Bình* enthusiastically endorsed the veneration of ancestors for Vietnamese Catholics in the following words:

Today is the historic day because it is a new event for the church of Vietnam....That the veneration of ancestors and saints and sages, long rooted in the sentiments as well as the customs of the Vietnamese people, will help each Vietnamese Catholic increase familial piety....This veneration will also help family members to grow in love and unity with each other, religious groups and the general population to grow in deep affection for one another, and especially, everyone to recognize the supreme Origin, the creator of our ancestors and ourselves and our descendants, namely, God. He is our common Father in whom all humanity will meet at all times and places. 'Our Father who art in Heaven.'⁸

From this statement, one can clearly see that the Church of Vietnam emphasized the importance of the veneration of ancestors in the Vietnamese culture and its role in the life of Vietnamese Catholics. My concern in this thesis is to provide a way for Vietnamese Catholics to retain their cultural practice of veneration of ancestors and at the same time be faithful to Scripture. How then, can the veneration of ancestors be reconciled with Catholicism?

In comparison with other religious traditions in Vietnam, including Confucianism, Christianity has a much more recent history. When Catholic missionaries from the West first came to Vietnam in the sixteenth century, Christian

has been called the "Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples." Official Propaganda Fide website: <http://www.fides.org/ita/index.html>.

8 *Sacerdos* #36 (December 1964): 891-892. *Sacerdos* is Archbishop's periodical letter circulating within the Archdiocese of Saigon before 1975. The letter is in Vietnamese, translated by Fr. Peter Phan. For more detail see Peter Phan, *In Our Own tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 123, footnote # 47.

beliefs clashed with Vietnamese culture, especially the cult of ancestors. The idea of worshipping other human beings was regarded as heretical by Christian missionaries. In spite of Christian opposition, the Vietnamese devotion to the cult of ancestors has not been eliminated and the practice continues to be extremely popular. This is so much the case that in some circles churches are being urged not to try to stamp out ancestral veneration, but to make an effort to incorporate it into Christian liturgy and worship, a practice known as inculturation.

The Inculturation of The Veneration of Ancestors and Roman Catholicism: Purpose of the Thesis

Since Vietnamese Christians have insisted that they have the right to practise their faith in the context of their own culture, they have looked for ways to incorporate their culture into their liturgy and worship. In light of inculturation, my aim is to speak to Vietnamese Catholics who are struggling to reconcile the cult of ancestors embedded in their culture with their worship of God as taught by Jesus in the Holy Scriptures. I will seek to explain how Vietnamese Catholics can celebrate their Catholic faith without dishonouring their ancestors. To the extent that these divergent elements in their traditions and beliefs can be brought together rather than pitted against each other, new possibilities are created for a deepening and strengthening of faith. I believe that faith and cultural identity can be brought together in ways that enhance rather than diminish both. It is my goal in this thesis to contribute towards the reconciliation of the worship of God and the veneration of ancestors. On another level,

I hope my thesis will show how Vietnamese Catholics celebrate their faith within the context of their rich cultural traditions.

I also hope that this work will promote communion in the church, a communion that recognizes and celebrates the diversity of God's people in all their ethnic, racial and cultural richness. In fact, the church of God is an intercultural one:

From one ancestor He made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and He allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for Him and find Him - though indeed He is not far from each one of us. For 'In Him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring'.⁹

From one man, Adam, God created all peoples and ethnic groups. Ethnicity is God's creation. Since God is the author of all languages and cultures, He cannot be restricted to one language or culture. The beauty of the Christian faith is that we can all speak our own tongues, practise our own traditions, and maintain our own cultures. Indeed, the Church is an "institution of immigrants" composed of many racial and ethnic groups with diverse religious and cultural traditions. The Christian Church in Canada is an example of such diversity.

This thesis will lay out a conceptual argument for the inclusion of ancestral veneration in the liturgical celebrations of the Vietnamese Catholics. Using an inductive approach where generalizations are grounded in observations and an analysis of Vietnamese celebrations, I will examine the Vietnamese veneration of ancestors

⁹ Acts 17:26-28.

and present it primarily as a philosophical and religious tradition surrounding festivals, weddings, funerals, and holidays to see how the cult of the ancestors is embedded in the lives of Vietnamese people. I hope to give readers a deeper understanding of the veneration of ancestors by investigating how ancestral veneration functioned in the past and how it is applied in the present in liturgical celebrations with special focus on its modern relevance in light of the doctrine of the Communion of Saints in Catholic tradition.

Scope and Limitations of the Analysis

Similar to studies of any tradition, where numerous interpretations create both depth and confusion, a study of ancestral veneration reveals many differences among various Confucian-based cultures and Christian denominations. This thesis has to be content to limit itself to what is generally recognized as the Vietnamese version of this tradition and with what the Magisterium (the teaching of the Catholic Church) teaches in the doctrine of the Communion of Saints. While taking into account the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, I will not look at all the current debates between different Christian denominations. Throughout the thesis, I will focus specifically on Vietnamese ancestral veneration and its connections to Catholic liturgical celebrations.

Having said this, there will be certain parameters around and limitations to the thesis of which readers should be aware:

- My thesis focuses primarily on Vietnamese culture. Though Vietnamese culture is heavily influenced by Chinese culture, especially its Confucian ethic, it is not identical to Chinese culture or other Confucian-based cultures such as Japanese or Korean culture.
- There is much diversity even among the Vietnamese themselves that I do not fully address. There are millions of Vietnamese, for example, in the diaspora, Vietnamese who fled their country after the war in 1975. These Vietnamese people and their children have made their homes in countries across the world. Since culture is not a static but constantly evolving process, it is natural that their experience of Vietnamese culture would be different from the experience of those who continue to reside in Vietnam. I will focus on Vietnam itself.
- There are certain rituals and practices in the veneration of ancestors as they are practised by non-Christian Vietnamese that contradict Gospel values. Among these are the burning of paper money and spirit calling (*gọi hồn*). Similarly, there are differences between Vietnamese Catholics and Vietnamese of other Christian denominations in how the cult of the ancestors is practised. Since my focus will be specifically on Vietnamese Catholics, I will not be considering these variations.
- It is not easy to describe clearly and precisely the Vietnamese worldview. Part of the problem lies in the fact that Vietnam does not have a literary and philosophical canon of its own comparable to China's Five Classics and Four Books. The traditional

Vietnamese worldview is expressed primarily in oral folk literature consisting of myths and legends, proverbs and folksongs and ethical and religious practices.¹⁰

- Some Vietnamese terms and phrases are so complicated in meaning and application that it would be impossible to find English equivalents for them, while others have so wide a range of meanings that no one English term or phrase could capture its meanings. In these cases, I will choose English words that are close to the original meanings of the Vietnamese term.

Structure of the Analysis

This thesis will be comprised of an introduction and five chapters. Chapter One describes the key features of the Vietnamese culture and identity. It will address the predominant values of the culture and the distinct ways in which the Vietnamese see themselves.

In Chapter Two, I will turn my attention to the Vietnamese tradition of the cult of ancestors, describing its origins, its evolution and the ways in which the tradition is practised today. Chapter Two will explain how ancestral veneration is rooted in a deep sense of gratitude to those who sacrificed their lives for family and country. It will also describe the sacred obligation that the Vietnamese feel to love and respect their ancestors.

10 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 24.

Chapter Three will outline the history of Christianity in Vietnam, looking at the way in which the Christian faith was first brought to Vietnam and how it has clashed with the cult of ancestors. Having described the history and nature of the problem of the clash between Western and Eastern cultures over the cult of ancestors in Chapters One to Three, Chapters Four and Five will look at theological ‘solutions’ that may be considered so that Roman Catholic Christianity can accommodate an essential part of Vietnamese culture, namely the cult of ancestors.

Chapter Four will explore the relationship between the Catholic tradition of “the Communion of Saints” and the cult of ancestors. This chapter will ask whether it is plausible and reasonable to argue that the extremely high regard that the Vietnamese have for the dead can be seen as an expression of the doctrine of the “Communion of Saints.” In chapter Four, I will explore the meaning of the veneration of ancestors in the lives of Vietnamese Catholics from a biblical point of view, focusing on the doctrine of the Communion of Saints.

Finally, drawing on the Chinese Rites Controversy and under the liturgical guidance of Vatican II, Chapter Five will offer basic guidelines as to how ancestral veneration can be integrated into the liturgy, worship and religious celebrations of Vietnamese Catholics in a way that enhances rather than diminishes the Vietnamese celebrations of their Christian faith. Furthermore, this chapter will make a case for considering the incorporation of ancestral veneration into the practice of Christian faith in Vietnam as an example of liturgical inculturation.

Veneration of Ancestors is a fundamental part of the Vietnamese culture and belief system. Any call to abandon such reverence for the dead and for the elders would be a significant attack on the nation's psyche. As we shall see in Chapter Three, the Roman Catholic hierarchy in the West, not the missionaries in the field in Vietnam, tried to obliterate the veneration of ancestors without much success. As the earliest missionaries saw and as the modern church recognizes, the veneration of ancestors needs to be accommodated within Christian practice. The veneration of ancestors can be a potent way to allow the Vietnamese both to retain their cultural identity and to develop a solid Roman Catholic religiosity.

CHAPTER ONE

THE VIETNAMESE - THEIR ORIGIN AND IDENTITY

The veneration of ancestors has been one of the most influential systems of thought in Vietnam for centuries and remains an important aspect of Vietnamese civilization. It is reflected in the rituals and traditions of Vietnamese of all faiths. As mentioned earlier, the practice of ancestral veneration in Vietnam was reinforced by Confucian philosophical beliefs. Confucius was a Chinese philosopher who lived from 551 to 479 B.C.¹¹ who wished to create a righteous society; Confucius promulgated rites for the dead as expressions of filial piety, and deep and sincere love for one's forebears.¹²

To understand the Vietnamese veneration of ancestors as a fundamental value, we have to trace the tradition back to its source, exploring both how it came into being and how it was transformed. The Vietnamese people boast a long-established, unique culture that has arisen from their history, and from the formation and development of their nation. Since Vietnamese culture is so closely tied to the nation's history, it is imperative to review the development of Vietnam as a nation. Comprehending Vietnam's past will help to elucidate the inherent connection between culture and religious beliefs in Vietnamese Christians today, especially the ingrained practice of ancestral veneration.

11 Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism: Origins-Beliefs-Practices-Holy Texts-Sacred Places* (Oxford: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2002), 52.

12 Ibid., 86.

This chapter will briefly review the history of Vietnam, a history rooted in its occupation by its neighbour China as well as by Western colonialists. It will then discuss the basic dimensions of Vietnamese culture including language, philosophy and its social relationships so as to provide an underpinning to the significance of the Vietnamese tradition of ancestral veneration. As we shall see in this chapter, the Vietnamese are immersed in a conservative belief in the natural hierarchy of the family embodied most prominently in the concept of filial piety. Filial piety and ancestral veneration as part of the culture emerged naturally from the historical experience of the Vietnamese people and need to be considered in relation to Christian ministry because of their significance in the life of Vietnamese Catholics.

Vietnam and Its People

Vietnam, with an area of 329,560 square kilometres, is a long, narrow Southeast Asian country. It is shaped like a big “S”, and located along the Pacific Ocean. It is bordered on the north by China, south by the Gulf of Siam, east by the Pacific Ocean and west by Cambodia and Laos. Vietnam has a total population of approximately 80 million. While it is not multi-racial, it is multi-ethnic with 54 ethnicities living within the country, each with its own culture. The “*Kinh*” group, comprising 85 percent of the population, is by far the largest ethnic group, and these are the people usually referred to as Vietnamese.¹³

13 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 4.

The Vietnamese people are proud of their 4,000 years of history and their age-old culture which is closely attached to the history and development of Vietnam. Therefore, to present the Vietnamese Confucian tradition is to divide its history into significant periods. In this way, ancestral veneration becomes part of history, and we can see its general changes in relation to political, social, economic, religious and cultural life. Also an outline of its history is a prerequisite to an understanding of how the Vietnamese think, live and worship. For the sake of simplicity, Vietnam's history can be divided into six eras:

- First establishment of the nation: 2879 B.C.E - 111 B.CE.¹⁴
- Chinese domination: 111 B.C.E. - 939 C.E.¹⁵
- The great national dynasties: 939-1883.¹⁶
- French Administration: 1883-1954.¹⁷
- Division into South and North: 1954 – 1975.¹⁸
- Republic of Vietnam: 1975- to the present.¹⁹

14 Trần Trọng Kim, *Việt Nam Sử Lược* (Sketch of the History of Vietnam), 2 vols. (Sàigòn, Việt nam: Bộ Giáo Dục, Trung Tâm Học Liệu, 1971), 23-44.

15 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 10.

16 Ibid., 14.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 16.

19 I single out this era because there are significant cultural changes which affect younger Vietnamese generations.

First Establishment of the Nation: 2879 B.C.E - 111 B.C.E.

All Vietnamese people know their national myth of origin. According to an ancient myth, the Vietnamese are descendants of the dragon Lord of the Lac (*Lạc Long Quân*)²⁰ and the fairy Princess *Au Cơ*, known as “*Con Rồng Cháu Tiên*.” *Lạc Long Quân* and *Âu Cơ* had 100 sons, the eldest of whom became the first of the lines of early Vietnamese kings, collectively known as *Hùng Vương*.²¹ Under the *Hùng* kings, the civilization was called *Văn lang*.²² The area became known as the Kingdom of Nam-Viet, derived from the words *Nam*, meaning south, and *Viet*, meaning crossing the border; consequently, Nam-Viet means crossing the southern border. In other words, immigrants crossed the southern border of China into what is now known as Vietnam. During this embryonic period, Vietnam was composed of village communities that arose to resist invaders and to build and maintain dykes for rice cultivation. From this early beginning, primitive tribes grew into a nation.²³

20 The ascending dragon that was born in the water is a meaningful and special symbol of the Vietnamese nation.

21 Phạm Văn Sơn, *Việt Nam Sử Lược*, vol I: 72-73. *Hùng Vương* was the first emperor of *Văn Lang* or *Lạc Việt* as Vietnam was known at the time. According to legend, he came to power in 2879 BC, ruling an area covering what is now Vietnam and part of China. The National Founders' Day or *Hùng Kings Day* commemorates the historic founding of Vietnam by the *Hùng* Kings, on the tenth day of the third lunar month, around April 19.

22 Trần Trọng Kim, *Việt Nam Sử Lược* [Sketch of the History of Vietnam] (Sàigòn, Việt nam: Bộ Giáo Dục, Trung Tâm Học Liệu, 1971), 24.

23 For more detail see Phạm văn Sơn, *Việt Sử Tân Biên*, Volume I, Chapter I.

Chinese Domination: 111 B.C.E - 939 C.E.

Vietnam fell under the domination of its neighbour China in 111 B.C.E, a period which continued until 939.C.E. During the approximately one thousand fifty years of Chinese domination of Vietnam, much of Chinese culture was absorbed by the Vietnamese nation, including “all aspects of society, administration, education, culture, and religion, so that Vietnam can be said to be... the ‘Small Dragon,’ a replica of the ‘Great Dragon’ that is China.”²⁴ Therefore, “to understand the Vietnamese national character and culture, it is essential to grasp the ambivalent relationship between Vietnam and China.”²⁵ The Confucian code introduced in Vietnam at the beginning of the third century²⁶ dominated Vietnamese life in the past and will, without a doubt, continue to do so for centuries to come.

The Great National Dynasties: 939-1883

In 939, Vietnam became independent of China when *Ngô Quyền* defeated the Chinese armies on the *Bạch-Đằng* River. He became emperor of a free Vietnam the next year and reigned until 967. *Ngô-Quyền* was succeeded by eight different royal dynasties: *Đinh* Dynasty, 967-968; *Lê* Dynasty, 980-1009; *Lý* Dynasty, 1010-1224; *Trần* Dynasty, 1225-1400; *Hồ* Dynasty, 1400-1407; Posterior *Lê* Dynasty, 1428-1788;

²⁴ Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 12.

²⁵ Ibid., 10.

²⁶ Peter Phan, *Christianity With an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 128.

Tây-Son Dynasty, 1788-1802; and *Nguyễn* Dynasty, 1802-1945. The last nine successors in the *Nguyễn* dynasty were “little more than puppets of the French government. Thus began Vietnam’s second longest period of domination by a foreign power.”²⁷

French Administration: 1883-1954

During the nineteenth century, Vietnam came into contact with the West, especially France. During the *Nguyễn* dynasties, the Vietnamese were dominated by the French. Vietnam became a French colony in 1883. The West came to know Vietnam not by its own official name, but by the names the French gave to its three parts: Cochin China²⁸ for the south, Annam for the central part of the country, and Tonkin for the north.²⁹ After nearly 100 years of French administration, one can easily see its influence in Vietnam: the streets of the larger cities were built like those in France and along them are many buildings constructed during the French administration. Architectural style also reflected a nostalgia for France because French

27 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 16.

28 Roland Jacques, *Les Missionnaires Portugais et les Debuts de l’Église Catholique Au Viet-nam*. Tome 1 & 2. Bilingual: French-Vietnamese (Reichstett, France : Dinh Huong Tung Thu, 2004), 56-57. (La terme portugais de « Cochinchine » du nom Malais et Japonais du Viêt-nam : « Kochi », avec l’ajout de « chine » pour le distinguer de « Cochim », la ville de Cochin en Inde.

29 Cochin-China for the south in 1962; Annam, which became a French protectorate in 1883, for the centre; and Tonkin, also a French protectorate in 1883, for the north. Vietnam was made part of French Indochina, comprising Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

officials who came to far-off Vietnam often preferred to live in houses that reminded them of their home towns. These historic French houses bear witness to a period that the Vietnamese sometimes want to forget. A Vietnamese saying summarizes the mixture of cultures in Vietnam, “*ăn cơm Tàu, ở nhà Tây*” which literally means ‘eat Chinese food, live in French house.’ In Saigon, one can trace the architectural structures to Parisian styles that often lead to the description of Saigon as the “Paris of the Orient.”

Division into South and North: 1954 – 1975

During World War II Vietnamese refugees in China formed an organization to seek independence for Vietnam, naming themselves the ‘League for the Independence of Vietnam’ or “*Việt-nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh*” known as ‘*Việt-minh*’. This was used as a front organization for the communists. *Nguyễn ái Quốc*, one of the leaders of *Việt-minh*, changed his name to *Hồ Chí Minh* (1890-1969) to conceal his communist past. He knew that the Vietnamese had little interest in communism but wanted national independence.³⁰ On September 2, 1945, *Hồ chí Minh* proclaimed the independence of Vietnam under the name of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. His declaration opened with words taken from the American Declaration of Independence: “All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights;

30 Phạm văn Sơn , *Việt Sử Tân Biên*, VII: 309.

among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”³¹ Drawn by his rhetoric, if not necessarily his communist politics, many Vietnamese supported *Hồ chí Minh* and his goal of ridding Vietnam of French administration forever. In 1954, French forces were defeated at *Điện Biên Phủ*, ending French domination.

In 1954, under the terms of the Geneva treaty, which officially ended the Franco-Vietnam conflict, Vietnam was divided into South and North. The northern part of Vietnam came under communist control with *Hà-nội* as its capital. The South became free and the Emperor *Bảo Đại* became the head of its government at the time. One particular clause in the Geneva Treaty provided that people in either zone could move freely to the other if they so desired. Approximately one million refugees, most of them Catholics, including my grandparents and my parents, moved to the South in 1954 because they did not wish to live under communist rule. Emperor *Bảo Đại*, last emperor of the *Nguyễn* Dynasties, was deposed in 1955 and the first President, *Ngô đình Diệm*, was installed by referendum in the South. President *Diệm* declared the South to be the Republic of Vietnam on October 26, 1955³² with its capital at *Sài-Gòn*. Despite the supposed settlement of the treaty, the communists continued their efforts to topple the government in South Vietnam. In 1963, American military aid was greatly increased in the Republic of Vietnam, which was followed in 1965 by The United States engagement in Vietnam for the following ten years.

31 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 17.

32 Ibid.

From this brief synopsis of Vietnamese history, one can readily discern that Vietnam's story is one of oppression and struggle for liberation.³³ A contemporary Vietnamese songwriter, *Trịnh công Sơn*, summarized the history of Vietnam in his song, which every Vietnamese person knows by heart: "A thousand years of Chinese domination, a hundred years of French rule, twenty years of daily war (between North and South)."³⁴

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam Since 1975

With the defeat of the Americans on April 30, 1975, the communists took over South Vietnam. Vietnam as a whole became a communist state now known as The Socialist Republic of Vietnam³⁵ with *Hà-nội* as its capital. *Sài-gòn* was renamed *Hồ chí Minh* city after the communist leader. The decade immediately following the reunification of Vietnam was an extremely difficult period for the Vietnamese people. The Northern group retaliated against the South and forced many southerners to leave their hometowns for "new economic zones."³⁶ Those involved in any way with the former government were confined to so-called "re-education camps."³⁷ Farmers were

33 Ibid., 9.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 18.

36 Many of southerners were forced to offer their houses to the government and leave for far-off wild jungle which they were forced to cultivate. Many people died of diarrhoea and other diseases.

37 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 18.

heavily taxed and businesses were closed. Many Vietnamese fled the country to find freedom in other countries.

The Vietnamese in the Diaspora

The first few weeks following Saigon's fall saw the emergence of the first wave of Vietnamese refugees as thousands of Vietnamese people fled their country. The second wave of refugees began in 1977 when more people fled Vietnam to Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines. The exodus from Vietnam continued with subsequent waves of people into the 1980s. (I escaped in 1984). The United States and Canada are two of the many countries that provided homes to Vietnamese immigrants. There are now over one million Vietnamese living in the United States, over 300,000 of whom are Catholic. They form 150 Catholic communities or missions, 35 parishes, and 10 quasi-parishes with more than 600 priests, 50 permanent deacons, 700 religious sisters, and a large number of candidates to the priesthood and religious life.³⁸ There are hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese in Canada, thousands of whom are Catholics. There are currently about 70 Vietnamese priests serving in different parishes and dioceses across Canada. Many Vietnamese people have successfully adapted to Western values, beliefs, and customs while at the same time retaining their own values, beliefs, and customs at least within their own community.

³⁸ Ibid., xi.

With the return of the Vietnamese in the diaspora to Vietnam, some for visits, others to live there permanently, a way has been paved for Vietnam to open itself to the outside world and to re-enter the international community after a long period of isolation. The return of Vietnamese in the diaspora has led to the reins being loosened, and to the flourishing of several traditional and new forms of cultural expression. Tourism, television and the internet have helped speed the rate of change. However, Confucian tradition has helped to insulate the Vietnamese people from some of the more pernicious and unhealthy features of globalization.

The next section will discuss the basic elements of Vietnamese culture, language, philosophy and social structure.

Language

In Vietnam each ethnic group speaks a different language, but the main common language is Vietnamese. Vietnamese is far too complicated a language to be thoroughly treated in a thesis of this type, but I will review the three systems of writing in Vietnamese to give a flavour of the complexity of the language.

Chữ Nho

Vietnamese was first written using the Chinese writing system called *chữ Nho*. Beginning around the ninth century, following the period of Chinese domination, all government and official transactions, education, correspondence and literature used

Chinese characters. This *chữ Nho* system was still used by scholars until a few decades ago, and in fact, Vietnamese people still request the services of scholars skilled in *chữ Nho* for lettering the banners and placards which are traditionally used for weddings, funerals, and festivals.³⁹

Chữ Nôm

Vietnamese writers strongly desired a language of their own, independent from the Chinese language, in which to transcribe their national history and literature. Gradually, a new writing system known as *Chữ Nôm* emerged in which Chinese characters were borrowed and altered; *Chữ Nôm* resembled Chinese characters, but were unreadable to the Chinese people. In *Chữ Nôm*, two Chinese characters were usually combined, one of which indicated the meaning of the Vietnamese word, while the other indicated pronunciation.⁴⁰ The *Chữ Nôm* system, however, was too complicated for most people and was therefore never recognized as an official language. Currently, there are only a handful of Vietnamese scholars in Vietnam who can write *Chữ Nôm*.

³⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 5-6.

Chữ Quốc Ngữ

During the sixteenth century, Catholic missionaries began to arrive in Vietnam from Portugal.⁴¹ The missionaries needed a linguistic tool to convey their ideas to the people and to translate their prayer books and catechisms. These missionaries romanized the *Chữ Nôm* by using the Roman alphabet to record the Vietnamese language. It took them nearly half a century to complete this work, known as *Chữ Quốc Ngữ*.⁴² Although the invention of *Chữ Quốc Ngữ* was the product of the collective efforts of many missionaries, it was attributed to a well-known Catholic priest, Father Alexandre de Rhodes.⁴³ While this romanization of national writing was not welcomed in China and Japan, it achieved an extraordinary success in Vietnam. At the beginning of the twentieth century, *Chữ Quốc Ngữ* was adopted as the official system of writing and became known simply as the Vietnamese language. There is no doubt that *Chữ Quốc Ngữ* is one of the lasting contributions of the Catholic Church to Vietnamese culture.⁴⁴

With respect to the spoken Vietnamese language, it is basically monosyllabic with each syllable having six tones, which gives the language its singsong effect. A word can be spoken in any one of six tones to indicate six different meanings. For

41 Ibid. 84-85.

42 Roland Jacques, *Les Missionnaires Portugais et les Debuts de l'Église Catholique Au Vietnam*, 159, footnote 118.

43 Ibid., 169.

44 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 6.

example, the word “ma” has six different meanings according to the tone in which the word is spoken: ghost, cheek, but, tomb, horse, or young rice seedling.⁴⁵ Vietnamese has three basic dialects – northern, central and southern, all of which are generally understood by most Vietnamese speakers. Vietnamese is very different from English: verbs do not change form, nouns do not have plural endings, nor are there prefixes or suffixes. Its complex vocabulary reflects basic cultural values. For example, there are three forms of the verb “to eat”, used for people of higher or lower status (*Dùng bữa, ăn, or nhậu*).

When speaking with a Vietnamese individual whose English is a second language, one must be careful in asking questions. Answers to “yes-no” questions by a Vietnamese person can be confusing. In answering to negative questions, “yes” can sometimes mean “no”; and “no” can often mean “yes.” In Vietnamese culture, the answer to a negative question is based on the correctness of the one who asks the question; whereas, in Western culture, one answers negative questions factually. Take for example the statement – “It is raining now.” Posed as a negative question, one would say: “It is not sunny, is it?” A Vietnamese person would answer, “Yes” indicating that the speaker is correct as he or she has characterized the weather - it is not sunny. However, to the same question, a Canadian would respond with the answer “No”, indicating that, indeed, it is not sunny and verifying the accuracy of the fact. It

45 Ibid., 16.

has been said that a Vietnamese lady had a wrong tooth pulled because she was asked a negative question by her dentist.

It is important to understand the Vietnamese language because it reflects the family structure and its hierarchy. Family members are often referred to according to their relationships to others rather than by their given names. For example, a Vietnamese man talking about his eldest sister in the family might call her "sister 2."⁴⁶ Terms of address can be a way of showing respect, as this Vietnamese saying illustrates: "If you meet an elder, call him grandfather; if he is a little bit younger, call him uncle; and if he is about your age, call him older brother." This statement reflects the sense of respect for elders and ancestors. While language is an integral part of shaping and reinforcing culture, the belief system of a country, its philosophy is also a major part of culture.

Vietnamese Culture⁴⁷ Under Confucian Tradition

Vietnamese national culture emerged from a tropical country with high humidity, water-flows, and water-rice agriculture. These features of the land exert a remarkable impact on the material and spiritual life of the nation, and on the characteristics of the Vietnamese people. Social and historical conditions have also

46 The oldest sister in a family is called 'sister 2', the oldest brother is 'brother 2.' They are second to parents.

47 In this thesis, I am using "Vietnamese Culture" to refer to the culture of the *Kinh* ethnic group, since it makes up 85 percent of the current population of Vietnam.

had a great influence on culture, creating profound cultural differences between Vietnam and other water-rice cultures like Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Though sharing the same Southeast Asian geography, the Vietnamese culture is unique. National philosophy is basic to any culture, and it is especially intrinsic to the way in which Vietnamese people view the conduct of their lives, as we shall see.

The Vietnamese's Worldview - Harmony

As mentioned earlier, it is very difficult to describe the Vietnamese philosophy of life in precise terms, because Vietnam does not have its own literary and philosophical canon. Therefore, knowledge of Vietnamese oral folk literature, myths, legends, proverbs, folksongs, and ethical and religious practices is useful in characterizing the Vietnamese philosophy of life and worldview. The Vietnamese worldview can be expressed as harmony on three levels: harmony in nature, harmony in family and harmony in society.

The Vietnamese word for harmony is '*hòa hợp*' literally meaning joining together peacefully or peaceful union.⁴⁸ According to the Vietnamese worldview, this harmony must be achieved at three levels: Heaven, Humanity and Earth and is thus referred to as a three-level philosophy, *triết lý tam tài*. This three-level philosophy is expressed in a common Vietnamese expression: *Thiên thời, địa lợi, nhân hòa*, which literally means heaven-given time, nature fit, good interpersonal relationship or human

⁴⁸ Ibid., 25.

harmony. These three elements together constitute the whole of reality.⁴⁹ This concept of harmony is expressed in the Book of Means:⁵⁰

Only those under heaven who are sincere will fully realize their nature. Fully realizing their nature, they attain what is best humanly speaking. Attaining what is best human speaking leads to the full expression of things. The full expression of things is in praise of the transfiguration of heaven and earth. The transfiguration of heaven and earth is shared by all.⁵¹

In the early history of Vietnam, the emperor was seen as the nexus between Heaven, earth, and humanity. His timely sacrifices ensured that the cosmos and humanity remained in proper balance.⁵² The Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, in its lengthy 1995 study entitled "Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony", recognizes that harmony constitutes "the

49 Ibid., 24-27.

50 At the heart of the Confucian tradition are its scriptures, especially the 'Five classics': the Classic of Changes, the Classic of Documents, the Classic of Poetry, the Record of Rites and the Spring and Autumn Annals. And the 'Four Books': The Analects of Confucius, the Mencius, the Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean. For more detail, see Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism: Origins-Beliefs-Practices-Holy Texts-Sacred Places*, 34-38; or see Xinzhong Yao, *Introduction to Confucianism*, 57-67.

51 Peter K.H. Lee, *Confucian-Christian Encounters In Historical And Contemporary Perspective* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 144.

52 Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism: Origins-Beliefs-Practices-Holy Texts-Sacred Places*, 81.

intellectual and affective, religious and artistic, personal and societal soul of both persons and institutions in Asia.”⁵³

The Vietnamese concept of three-level philosophy is compatible with Biblical values. For example, in the book of Genesis 2 and 3, God (Heaven) created Adam at a desert oasis as the first living being (human being), and planted a garden (earth) in the East for his dwelling. Thus, the three-level harmony, Heaven-humanity-earth, was established. As long as this harmony was respected, Adam was happy. Unfortunately, Adam corrupted the harmony by disobeying God and as a result, was ejected from the garden and was not to see God again. This story reinforces the Vietnamese’s worldview, *triết lý tam tài*. As Paul Sih said:

The Christian joy springs from three-level harmony: God, human being and nature, with God as the Ultimate Source. For example, Saint Francis of Assisi loved and enjoyed nature with the liberty of spirit characteristic of the children of God. He had all the joys known to the pantheists and more, and at the same time he did not have to regard himself as a cosmic ganglion.⁵⁴

Family teachings, folktales, proverbs, and popular literature instil in Vietnamese children an implicit belief in the workings of this principle of harmony.⁵⁵ Heaven refers to the Creator of human beings and nature. He is full of mercy for humankind and all beings created by Him, providing for each a share of food and happiness. This

53 Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For all the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, Documents from 1992 to 1996*, vol. 2 (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian, 1997), 232.

54 Paul K.T. Sih, *Chinese Humanism And Christian Spirituality* (New York: St. John’s University Press, 1965), 49.

55 Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 22.

philosophy is expressed in a proverb ‘*Trời sinh voi, Trời sinh cỏ*,’ meaning literally if God creates an elephant, He will also make grass for it. Earth refers to material reality and humanity refers to human beings. Heaven gives birth, earth nurtures, and humanity harmonizes. Consequently, all human actions, to be successful and virtuous, must be governed by three principles, carried out in accord with Heaven’s will, with the propitious favour of earth, and for the harmony of humanity. In the Confucian world, “success and good fortune are contingent upon a person’s ability to align his or her actions with cosmic forces, discerning and responding to temporal patterns are therefore essential to auspicious behaviour and the timely fulfillment of obligations.”⁵⁶ The Vietnamese people believe that joy arises from interior harmony. If there is deviation from natural harmony, nothing can survive.⁵⁷

Harmony does not just happen. One must work to achieve it through Heaven, earth and other human beings. In other words, harmony means the development of one’s humanity and one’s human personality. If one does not find happiness within oneself, one will not find it anywhere. If the kingdom of God is within us, then,

It is here that the oriental ideas of harmony and joy have value, for Gospel means Joyful News. It is only when we appreciate and radiate from ourselves the joy embodied in the Christian gospel that we can effectively work as missionaries. Too many Christians fail to reflect this Divine joy. They live as though Christ had never been born, crucified, and risen from the dead, and yet they talk about “Christianizing” others!⁵⁸

56 Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism: Origins-Beliefs-Practices-Holy Texts-Sacred Places*, 73.

57 Xingzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, 176.

58 Paul K.T. Sih, *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality*, 50.

It is the aim of the Christian apostolate⁵⁹ to preserve and to perfect, not to destroy the truth it finds in this world view of harmony.⁶⁰

As stated earlier, from the earliest time of Chinese occupation, Chinese rulers attempted to impose their culture and customs upon the Vietnamese. Confucianism achieved a prodigious expansion and infiltrated into every level of Vietnamese life from the family to the village to the nation, the three basic structures of Vietnamese society.⁶¹ Let us briefly look at these three levels.

Harmony in the Vietnamese Family as a Unique Social Relationship

My own story will help express how harmony is sought and secured in the Vietnamese family.

My family

My father's father, Paul Nguyen, was born in 1906 and my father's mother, Lau Nguyen, was born in 1908. Both were from the north of Vietnam. They were married in 1933. My father was born in 1934. Not long after the Communists took over the North in 1945, they immigrated to the south of Vietnam, leaving in 1954. Since my

59 Apostolate means the work of an apostle, not only of the first followers of Christ but of all the faithful who carry on the original mission entrusted by the Saviour to the twelve to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). The apostolate belongs essentially to the order of grace. Its purpose is not temporal welfare, however noble, but to bring people to the knowledge and love of Christ and, through obedience to his teaching, help them attain life everlasting.

60 Paul K.T. Sih, *Chineses Humanism and Christian Spirituality*, 50.

61 Peter Phan, *Christianity With an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making*, 128.

father was the oldest son, my grandparents spent a lot of time with our family. In the Vietnamese tradition, the oldest son is considered to be the heir of the family. My grandfather was well respected by my father, uncles and aunts.

I have vivid memories of my grandfather, Paul. Paul was a very humble person. He never talked about himself, but always spoke well of others. As one of the respected elders in the community, people would come to him for advice. Paul was always ready to lend a hand when he was needed, but he never liked to be recognized in public. He was well respected and well liked by others in the parish community. Although not trained as a family counsellor, Paul helped to counsel couples and families in conflict. He never started or ended a day without praying at home or attending Mass at Church. As a farmer, he always quit work early to spend time with God in church, rarely missing daily Mass. His pious life influenced my oldest brother and me to become priests. His advice to us was very simple, "whatever you do, do it not only for your own sake but especially for the sake of the family." Thus, the idea that family takes precedence over the individual is integral. Family needs and wants supersede individual needs and wants - a belief and practice which is contrary to Western philosophies and politics grounded in the primacy of the individual.

In Vietnamese society, any misconduct on the part of an individual is attributed, not only to the individual, but also to his or her parents, siblings, relatives, and ancestors. Likewise, any success or fame achieved by an individual brings honour and pride to all members of the family. Vietnamese children are taught from early

childhood to readily forget themselves for the sake of their family's welfare and harmony. Central to the concept of family is the obligation of filial piety, which is considered the most essential of all virtues in Vietnamese society. Every child, simply by virtue of being alive, is indebted to his or her family, no matter how much they might have accomplished or no matter how wretched they might be. They are obliged to thank their parents for the food they eat, the house they live in, their spouses, land and most of all for life itself.⁶² A well-known Vietnamese proverb says, "*Công cha như núi Thái sơn, nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra,*" meaning the father's merit is as high as Mount *Thái Sơn*; the mother's love is comparable to water flowing out unceasingly from its source.

Children are expected to be grateful to their parents for the gift of birth, upbringing and education. They are taught to think of their parents and ancestors first, even at their own expense, to make sacrifices for their parents' sake, to love and care for them in their old age. A Vietnamese saying relates: "*Phụ mẫu tại đường, bất khả viễn du,*" which means literally if the parents are in old age, children must not be abroad. Jamieson draws attention to the significance of this norm in pointing out that

any blatant breach of filial piety was, in fact, illegal and would be severely punished by the authorities should it come to their attention. Even worse, to be found guilty of such behaviour in the court of public opinion would bring a heavy burden of shame for the rest of one's life."⁶³

62 Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 22-23.

63 Ibid., 23.

A Vietnamese individual who lacks filial piety is looked down upon and ostracized not only by his own family but also by the community. Traditionally, the three most serious breaches of the norm of filial piety to ancestors are: not obeying or taking care of parents' needs while they are alive; doing something to shame them after they have died; and, not having a male heir. Of these, the last is of greatest importance for there is no one to tend to the needs of deceased ancestors.⁶⁴

What Westerners consider 'nuclear families' are embedded in the Vietnamese extended family, and the sense of family includes the deceased (ancestors) and those not yet born in a single fabric of spiritual unity and material well-being.⁶⁵ Generally speaking, the Vietnamese family structure is more complex than that of the Western family. Hence, relationships in Vietnamese culture are also complicated. The complexity of the Vietnamese concept of family is reflected in the complex terminology designating kinship. For example, my father's younger brother is called 'chú', and his older brother is called 'bác'. When one hears the greeting, one understands the individual's precise relationship within the family. Each member of an extended family has a particular designation according to their relative position and their role in the family structure. A member of the family is referred to by the kinship

64 Toan Ánh, *Nếp Cũ: Tín ngưỡng Việt Nam* [Old Tradition: Vietnamese Beliefs] 2

vols. (Viet Nam: No date), I: 55 "Bất Hiếu hữu tam, vô hậu vi đại."

65 Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 22. Please note that in Vietnam, there are two kinds of age: Oriental age (*tuổi Ta*) and Occidental age (*tuổi Tây*). *Tuổi Ta* is considered from the moment of conception, and *tuổi Tây* is from the date of birth.

term rather than by any given name. The centrality of relationships in a Vietnamese family reflects respect for elders and ancestors.

The Vietnamese household traditionally follows the extended multi-generational pattern. The parents, their sons and their wives, their children, and unmarried siblings usually constitute a Vietnamese household. In this structure, frequent contact is maintained. This closeness to family is emphasized from childhood and continues to be important to the Vietnamese throughout their lives. In this extended family, the most important expectation is respect for the elders and veneration of ancestors.

It may therefore be said that the primary nexus in the Vietnamese value system is the family. Family is meant to provide the image of harmony and order where parents preside over their children, furnishing a living image of the idea of order and hierarchy. The family is the school in which the child learns to respect rules of both behaviour and linguistic response. The family is both the centre and the backbone of Vietnamese society. There are two different circles of family in Vietnamese tradition. The first refers to immediate family. It is not unusual to have three generations living in the same house (*nhà*).⁶⁶ Therefore, all of those who live in the same house are considered as immediate family or *nhà*, which literally means house or home. The bigger circle of family is the extended family. Extended family or *Họ* is more

66 Toan Anh, *Nếp Cũ: Con người Việt-Nam* [Old Tradition: Vietnamese People], Reprint in Vietnam, (Hồ chí Minh city: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2005), 7-8.

complicated and could include many generations. It includes everyone who is related by blood or marriage.

Village

The profound love for and attachment to the family extends to the physical setting in which the family is located: the native village. On account of veneration of ancestors, the Vietnamese people are attached to their native homes. Family loyalty and ties among people of the same homeland run deep. The dearest wish of a Vietnamese person, as a proverb puts it, is to die in their own native village in the presence of their own folk, that is, to be connected with their relatives and ancestors and to be: "A leaf which falls from its branch to the ground at the foot of the tree." (*Lá rụng về cội*). The native village is not only the place where one is born and raised and where one's parents and family live, but also a place where one's ancestors are buried. Many Vietnamese, especially people in the rural areas, never move beyond their native villages. Vietnamese weddings, funerals, holidays and rituals are all attached to village community life. Even today, some old Vietnamese people in Canada wish to be buried in their home village in Vietnam.

Each village has its own unwritten customs and traditions (*Hương Ước*).⁶⁷ These customs and traditions govern all aspects of the lives of the members of the village.

67 Toan Anh, *Nếp cũ: Làng Xóm Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Neighborhood). Việt nam, n.p., 1968; reprint Lancaster, PA: Xuân Thu (1980), 225-226.

They are also respected by national law.⁶⁸ There is a saying in Vietnamese: “A king’s laws are subordinate to one’s village customs.”⁶⁹ Each village is completely self-sufficient and independent from the others in regard to its governance.⁷⁰ As mentioned earlier, each village has its own founders or benefactors who become the village ancestors.⁷¹ Ancestral veneration tends to reinforce and transmit the potency of family-community solidarity. For the Vietnamese people, to be is to-be in-relationship and to live morally is to determine one’s position in this web of relationships and perform well the duties deriving from one’s position.⁷²

Nation

The whole country of Vietnam is referred to as the Great Vietnamese Family (*Đại gia đình tổ quốc Việt-nam*), and every Vietnamese individual is called ‘*đồng bào*’, literally, ‘the same womb’. Everyone belongs to this same great family or Vietnamese society.

Besides the three basic structures in Vietnamese society, family, village and nation, in the Vietnamese patriarchal tradition, the following five duties of universal

68 Ibid., 225.

69 Đào duy Anh, *Việt Nam Văn Hóa Sử Cương* [General History of Vietnamese Culture] (Huế: Việt Nam, 1938), 127 Every Vietnamese person knows this saying: “*Luật vua thua lệ làng*.”

70 Ibid., 125-128.

71 Phan Kế Bính, *Việt Nam Phong Tục* [Vietnamese Traditions] (Việt Nam, n.p., 1915 Reprint in Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam: Nhà xuất bản thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1990), 75-76.

72 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholic*, 31.

obligation are also emphasized: those between the king and his subjects, those belonging to the interactions between friends, between husband and wife, between elder brother and younger, and between parents and children.

The King and His Subject

A king had an absolute right over his subjects.⁷³ He could order death as a penalty for his subjects without question. Jamieson, in his *Understanding Vietnam*, says: "Traditional Vietnamese accept the principle of social hierarchy and care passionately about face and relative status."⁷⁴ The traditional Vietnamese model of life is the way of filial piety in the large family, as typified by loyalty to the king. Implicit in filial piety is the concept that fulfillment or failure in meeting the requirements of loyalty and obedience will be rewarded or punished, respectively, by heaven on high.⁷⁵ To show respect for a superior, a Vietnamese person will bow one's head. When a Vietnamese Catholic addresses Jesus, she or he may say: "*Lạy*⁷⁶ *Chúa Giêsu*", which

73 On Như Nguyễn văn Ngọc, *Tục Ngữ Phong Dao*, (Folk sayings), 2 vols. (Hà-nội, Vietnam: No date), vol II: 121. "*Làm người phải biết ngũ thường,*

Xem trong ngũ đẳng, quân vương đi đầu."

74 Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 31.

75 Peter K.H. Lee, *Confucian-Christian Encounters in Historical and Contemporary Perspective*, 165.

76 To show respect when addressing some one who is in a position of power or status, the word '*lạy*' is placed before the title of that person. See Roland Jacques, *Les missionnaires portugais et les débuts de l'Eglise catholique au Viêtnam*, 330-331: "Que l'adjonction de la particule "*Lạy*" rend le vocatif latin, et que son absence indique un simple énoncé.

translates loosely, “Very Dear Lord Jesus!” They would not address the Lord directly by name, “Jesus!”

Friends

Friends play an important role in Vietnamese culture. A friend is always there to share joy and sorrow and is expected to be loyal.⁷⁷ A Vietnamese proverb says, “*gặp nạn mới biết bạn hay*”, meaning loosely that “a friend in need is a friend indeed.” For Christians, the Supreme Friend whom we can trust absolutely is Christ: ‘No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.’⁷⁸

Husband and Wife⁷⁹

A traditional Vietnamese marriage, like any traditional Asian marriage, is “a social contract that highlights the different roles husbands and wives play. It often functions like a performance contract. Typically, ‘inside the home’ is considered the wife’s domain, whereas the husband’s is ‘outside the home’.”⁸⁰ The traditional Vietnamese family is patriarchal. The father is the head of the family. He has ultimate

77 See On Như Nguyễn văn Ngọc, vol II: 121 “*Bạn bè cho thực, dưới trên đừng thường.*”

78 John 15:13.

79 See On như Nguyễn văn Ngọc, Folk sayings, Vol. II: 121 “*Vợ chồng đạo nghĩa cho bền.*”

80 Peter Cha et al, *Following Jesus Without Dishonoring Your Parents* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press. 1998), 91.

responsibility and authority and acts as a leader, delegating tasks and involving others in decision-making. The father also leads the family in ancestral veneration.

In Vietnam, the father often works outside the home, while the mother is considered the home minister (*nội tướng*). She is in charge of cooking, sewing, managing the workers for the family, the family budget, and family schedules. She is responsible for family harmony. The mother also teaches all her daughters about proper etiquette for a young woman. In addition to this, the mother also takes care of her children. Women do not shake hands with each other or with men. Physical contact between males and females is not a common sight in Vietnam. Every Vietnamese woman knows the statement "*Tam tòng, tứ đức*", which means three submissions and four virtues. According to the Three Submissions, an unmarried girl submits to her father's wishes, a married woman to her husband's, and a widow to her eldest son's.⁸¹ This Three Submission concept is a component of Orientalism as it developed in the nineteenth century. As Said relates: "Orientalism was an exclusively male province."⁸²

A respectable Vietnamese woman should have four basic virtues (*công, dung, ngôn, hạnh*).⁸³ She is considered "virtuous" if she is a good homemaker (*công*), if she has the appearance of modesty coupled with feminine grace (*dung*), if she is soft

81 Đào Duy Anh, *Việt nam Văn Hóa Sử Cương*, 109-110; also, Toàn Ánh. *Nếp Cũ: Con Người Việt Nam*. 205.

82 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 207.

83 Đào Duy Anh, *Việt nam Văn Hóa Sử Cương*, 267.

spoken with verbal charm (*ngôn*), and if she has good moral conduct/behaviour (*hạnh*).⁸⁴ A well known poem called "Song of Family Education" (*Gia huấn ca*), a work usually attributed to *Nguyễn Trãi* in the fifteenth century, mentions the Four Virtues (*tứ đức*) for women. Here is an excerpt offering advice on a woman's role:

Be sure to listen to the old stories.
 Observe how the virtuous daughters-in-law of the past behaved.
 Follow the four virtues: appearance, work, correct speech, and proper behaviour.
 Work means cooking rice and cakes.
 How neatly the virtuous woman sews and mends!
 Appearance means a pretty face and dignified demeanour.
 Not careless and sloppy, everything in place.
 Correct speech is to know how to use the polite phrases;
 Proper behaviour means to be loyal, filially pious respectful and trustworthy. Proper in appearance, work, speech and behaviour rose above their earthly existence.⁸⁵

This excerpt explains the Confucian 'four virtues' or precepts that were supposed to govern the behaviour of women. Most Vietnamese young girls know this saying by heart. Many Vietnamese parents still use this "four virtue" principle as a guide in helping their sons choose their future spouse. The next important relationship in a Vietnamese family is that between parents and children.

84 Toan Ánh, *Nếp Cũ: Con Người Việt Nam*, 204.

85, Nguyễn Trãi, *Gia Huấn Ca*, *Cổ Văn Việt Nam* (Vietnam, Hà Nội: Sách Giáo Khoa, Tân Việt, 1952), bài thứ 3: "*Dạy Con Gái Phải Có Đức Hạnh*", 26.

Parents-Children⁸⁶

The primary relationship in East Asian society is that between parents and children.⁸⁷ There is little stated about the parent's duty towards child.⁸⁸ Influenced by Confucian ethics, the first priority of parents is to teach their children filial obedience and respect, the second is to provide them with as many educational opportunities as possible. The emphasis in this ethic is more on children's duties towards their parents. Traditionally, children owed their parents absolute loyalty and obedience.⁸⁹ In Vietnam, corporal punishment is the norm for inappropriate behaviour. A Vietnamese proverb says: "*Thương cho roi cho vọt, ghét cho ngọt cho bùi*", literally love is shown in beatings (spankings), hatred in sweet words. This concept is also stressed in the book of Proverbs: "Or whom the Lord loves He reproves, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights."⁹⁰ Peter Cha observes: "Affirmation for the young would come from others in the extended family. Mom and Dad did not have the job of affirming the children. They reasoned that if they did too much of that, the children might end up spoiled."⁹¹ In the Vietnamese context, harsh discipline and beatings do

86 See On Như Nguyễn văn Ngọc, *Folk sayings*, vol II: 121 "*Thờ cha kính mẹ trước sau*."

87 Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism: Origin-Beliefs-Practices-Holy Texts-Sacred Places*, 98.

88 Paul K.T. Sih, *Chinese Humanism & Christian Spirituality*, 175.

89 Ibid., 98.

90 Proverbs 3:12. Cf. Proverbs 15:5; 23:22-25.

91 Peter Cha et al, *Following Jesus Without Dishonouring Your Parents*, 34.

not necessarily mean abuse of a child. On the contrary, they mean loving care, concern and attention.

At an early age, children are taught by their parents to behave according to the principle of filial piety, which means loving, respecting, and obeying one's parents. Talking back or acting contrary to the wishes of one's parents is evidence of a lack of filial piety. For the Vietnamese, the obligation to obey parents does not end with the coming of age or marriage. Filial piety also means solicitude and support of one's parents, chiefly in their old age. When parents grow old, children are expected to take care of them to compensate for the gift of birth and upbringing. Elderly parents are supported by married or unmarried children until death. Elderly Vietnamese parents never live by themselves or in nursing homes, but with one of their children, usually their eldest son. This obligation continues even after the parents' death, surviving in the form of the ancestral cult and the maintenance of ancestral tombs. Ancestral veneration is practised in most, if not all, Vietnamese homes, even in the homes of Vietnamese people living overseas. "Vietnamese are taught that '*Một lòng thảo kính mẹ cha, cho tròn chữ hiếu mới là đạo con*', meaning respect and honour your mother and father, thus you will fulfill the obligations of filial piety derived from the way of being an offspring."⁹² In other words, the obligation of being a son or a daughter is to fulfill filial

92 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 34.

piety towards one's parents and ancestors.⁹³ When asked how one should treat one's parents, Confucius replies: "Never disobey!" and then adds: "While they are alive, serve them according to ritual. When they die, bury them according to ritual and sacrifice according to ritual."⁹⁴ In Confucian tradition, filial piety is the foundation and root of all virtues. Filial piety takes precedence over public service. When questioned why he was not in government service, Confucius replied: "Be filial, only be filial and friendly towards your brothers, and you will be contributing to government."⁹⁵

This filial piety is expressed in Vietnamese literature. For example, in Nguyễn Du's *The Tale of Kiều* of the eighteenth century, the heroine was led on a series of wild misadventures after choosing to help her father rather than stay with her one true love; that she would leave her lover for the good of her father is not a complicated decision for *Kiều*, as she unquestioningly follows this Vietnamese concept of filial piety:

Kiều brushed aside her solemn vows to Kim,
she'd pay a daughter's debt before all else.
Resolved on what to do, she spoke her mind:
"Hands off my father, please!
I'll sell myself and ransom him."⁹⁶

93 Đào Duy Anh, *Việt nam Văn Hóa Sử Cương*, 112: The Vietnamese attach great importance to three traditional family obligations: to care for parents while they are alive, arrange a good funeral when they die and worship them after their death.

94 Analects, XI, 5. Also see Peter Phan, *Christianity With an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making*, 131.

95 Peter Phan, *Christianity With an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making*, 131.

96 Nguyễn Du, *The Tale of Kieu*. 1800, 22 October 2006.

<http://vnthuquan.net/truyen/truyen.aspx?tid=2qtv3m3237nvn1n2n31n343tq83a3q3m3237nvn>.

The old standard of filial piety is certainly exemplified by this work. Although written in 1800, the social relevance of Confucianism and especially of filial piety over romantic interest remains important themes in Vietnamese literature and culture. Next to parents, an elder brother holds a very special place in a family.

The Elder Brother and Younger Siblings

In Vietnamese culture, the relationship between siblings is determined by the principle of seniority, which requires younger siblings to respect and obey older ones. The elder brother normally exercises a protective love over his younger brothers and sisters. In turn, younger siblings look to the elder siblings with deferential affection. There may be minor quarrels among siblings, but on the whole there is a great sense of solidarity.⁹⁷ The eldest brother in particular is entrusted with the heavy responsibility of substituting for parents in their absence. He is considered by his siblings as their leader, as reflected in a Vietnamese saying, '*quyền huynh thế phụ*,'⁹⁸ meaning that the older brother replaces the father of the family. Concord and love among siblings reflects a happy and virtuous family.

To sum up, family is the most basic structure of Vietnamese society with family roles clearly defined. Children must honour and obey their parents. As a Vietnamese

97 See On Như Nguyễn văn Ngọc, vol II: 121: "*Anh em hòa thuận mới hầu làm nên*." Also Paul K.T. Sih, *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality*, 180.

98 Toan Ánh. *Nếp Cũ: Con Người Việt Nam*, 12.

proverb says, "Children sit where their parents place them." Children have responsibility to maintain the "good name" of the family. They make great efforts to avoid situations that lead to their families losing face. Vietnamese people believe that children who cannot play the role of good sons and daughters at home will not be good citizens in society, nor will they be loyal friends or true lovers of humankind. Filial piety therefore begins at home by showing respect to one's parents and elder brother. This affection among family members and blood relations becomes the basis for extending oneself, honouring others as one would honour one's family members, until one reaches the idea of "*tứ hải giai huynh đệ*" which means 'within the four seas all people are brothers and sisters.'⁹⁹

Extended Family Relationships

As stated earlier, the extended family or *Họ* is a more complex structure than one typically finds in North America and could extend over many generations. It includes everyone who is related by blood or marriage. Although not all members of the extended family reside together, they tend to cluster around in the same village or small town. All members of the Vietnamese extended family are closely bound in a strong sense of collective responsibility and mutual obligation. The notion of the blood relationship is always present in the mind of the Vietnamese. In honour or in disgrace, members of the extended family share the same fate as do members of the immediate

⁹⁹ Ibid., 143.

family. They are expected to give one another moral and material assistance, especially in times of trouble. Extended family members are expected to work and behave for the good of the group. Uncles and aunts must be treated with the respect given one's own parents. In addition to the consciousness of blood and linguistic ties that reinforce kinship and age, members of the Vietnamese extended family are closely bound by the common veneration of ancestors.

The Five Virtues

Central to a Confucian socio-political ethic is the concept of the cultivation of virtue. No matter what the external and internal politics of a changing nation, harmony both in the family and society are governed by these five virtues, taught to every Vietnamese child even before he or she reaches school age: Compassion (*nhân*), Social appropriateness (*Lễ*), Righteousness (*Nghĩa*), Knowledge (*Trí*) and Loyalty (*tín*):

- **Compassion (*nhân*):**¹⁰⁰ The virtue of passion and desire, *Nhân*, sometime referred to as *Tình*, which is about feelings. It entails going beyond rules and guidelines to do good. This is similar to the Gospel values, “Jesus goes beyond the law of Sabbath to cure the sick.”¹⁰¹

100 *Việt Nam Tự Điển* [Vietnamese Dictionary] (Hà Nội, Việt Nam: Trung Bắc Tân Văn, 1931; reprint Los Angeles, CA: Nguyễn San Ngày Ve), 406-407: *Nhân* means human being and all virtues proper to being a person, i.e., humanity, mercy, love charity, forgiveness and the like.

101 Matthew 12:1-12.

- **Social appropriateness (*Lễ*):**¹⁰² Individuals are graded by their social appropriateness in showing respect to people who are senior to them in age, status, or position. Respect is part of the concept of filial piety. Outside the family, respect should be paid to elderly people, teachers, clergymen, supervisors and employers, and people in high positions. Every Vietnamese person knows “*Tiên học lễ, hậu học văn*” which means first you must learn social appropriateness then you may learn the arts. The value that the Vietnamese place on the concept of a "good name," or more precisely a "fragrant name" (*danh thơm*), cannot be underestimated.¹⁰³ To the Vietnamese, a good name is better than any material possession. A rich and powerful person with a bad reputation is looked down upon, while a poor man with a good name is respected. It is believed that the best thing that a person can leave behind once departing from this world is a good reputation by which one will be remembered. A Vietnamese proverb says, "As a tiger leaves behind his skin, a man his reputation."
- **Righteousness (*Nghĩa*):**¹⁰⁴ This virtue refers to the possessions of a code of conduct and a keen sense of duty, justice and obligation. It calculates the willingness to

102 *Việt Nam Tự Điển*, 303: Underlying the concept of *Lễ* is the belief in the ordered universe. Each person has a proper place in the universe, society and family. *Lễ* includes the principles, rules and rites which govern the role attitude of an individual toward another being.

103 Cf. Ecclesiastes 7:1

104 Ibid., 386: *Nghĩa* is the practical application of *Lễ* and is the responsibilities and conduct arising from one's relationship with others.

do what one must to fulfill one's social obligations.¹⁰⁵ Children are taught '*nhĩa*' towards ancestors. They owe all that they are and all that they have to parents, grandparents and their ancestors, a belief which underlies the veneration of ancestors.

- **Knowledge (*Trí*):** Vietnamese people regard education highly, seeing it as a way for family advancement and rating it higher than material wealth. Parents encourage their children to study and excel in their education. The learned person enjoys great prestige in Vietnamese society. The Vietnamese believe that knowledge and virtue are two complementary aspects of the ideal person. People associated with knowledge and learning (scholars, writers and teachers) have always been highly respected, not only by students but also by parents and people from all walks of life.
- **Loyalty (*tín*):**¹⁰⁶ This virtue is associated more with 'faithfulness'.¹⁰⁷ It is an extension of filial piety. The child who lacks filial piety is rejected and ostracized by other members of the family and community. The worst insult which a Vietnamese can receive, and by which he is deeply wounded, is the expression "a child without filial piety" (*Con bất hiếu*).

Vietnamese people put a remarkable emphasis on these virtues. Though talents and other gifts are valued highly in Vietnamese culture, they do not matter nearly as much as virtues. A Vietnamese saying observes that a talented person without virtues

105 Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 19.

106 Ibid., 524: *Tín* means faithful, loyal.

107 Julia Ching, *Confucianism And Christianity: A Comparative Study* (New York & San Francisco: Kodansha International, 1977), 195.

is useless, “*cái nết đánh chết cái tài*,” literally, virtues defeat talents. Talents are demonstrated in work, but virtues are exemplified in a way of life, mainly in filial piety and veneration of ancestors.

In conclusion, in Vietnamese culture, an individual lives in harmony with himself, his family and humanity and nature at large. Every action is undertaken out of consideration for the welfare of the family, rather than for oneself. The importance of harmony is expressed in the Vietnamese proverb: “*Thuận vợ thuận chồng tát biển Đông cũng cạn*” meaning literally “In harmony, husband and wife can even drain the Pacific Ocean.”¹⁰⁸ In Vietnamese culture, harmony is seen as playing an essential role in the nature of Heaven and the nature of humanity. Without this harmony, no one can survive. As Paul K.H. Lee puts it: “These two natures are univocal and the way of humanity and the way of heaven are in union. Persons exist in the universe and in society and do not live in isolation.”¹⁰⁹

Vietnam has undergone incredible change since its inception as country, from breaking free of Chinese domination to becoming a French colonial power, fighting a devastating war with the Americans and falling under communist rule. Throughout its history, Vietnam also struggled to find a path through its own cultural development. Recently, Vietnam has opened up to Western culture especially with the help of the influence of millions of Vietnamese people in the diaspora since 1975. These

108 Nguyễn Du, *Truyện Kiều*, 65-66.

109 Paul K.H. Lee, *Confucian-Christian Encounters in Historical and Contemporary Perspective*, 144.

Vietnamese and their children have made their homes in countries across the world, but most retain their ties with Vietnam in one way or another. Many Vietnamese people eagerly want to learn more about the West, leading to a growing interest, among other things, in Christianity, which is seen as one of the important roots of Western culture. In recent years, Western culture has begun to permeate Vietnam. Customs, beliefs and traditions have gradually evolved over the years. However, the traditionally strong focus on family life, the virtue of filial piety, and especially veneration of ancestors, has not lost its force in the lives of the Vietnamese of all faiths. In the next chapter, we will explore how the cult of ancestors is embedded in all Vietnamese celebrations.

CHAPTER TWO

VENERATION OF ANCESTORS IN CIVIC LIFE

In Chapter One, I described the key features of Vietnamese culture and identity, and the distinct ways in which the Vietnamese see themselves. This chapter will focus specifically on the Vietnamese tradition of ancestral veneration, describing its origins, its evolution and the ways in which the tradition is practised today. The chapter will explain how ancestral veneration is rooted in a deep sense of gratitude to those who have sacrificed their lives for family, village and country. Veneration of ancestors is not a religion in and of itself, but a facet of religious expression which recognizes a reverence for the dead. Understanding the ways in which ancestral veneration is carried out in Vietnam will help to explain why accommodating this tradition is so important in bringing the Vietnamese into the Christian faith.

As stated in the introduction, Vietnam was heavily influenced by China, especially its Confucian tradition. The practice of ancestral veneration in Vietnam was transformed by a Confucian philosophical belief that to achieve human perfection, one must follow the established codes of behaviour, which include the veneration of ancestors. In Vietnam, “there was also a temple of Confucius in the capital and in every province. Twice a year, in spring and fall, Confucius was ritually honoured. The King presided over these rites in the capital as provincial officials imitated his actions

throughout the land. There were similar shrines in many cantons and some villages where local scholars replicated these rites.”¹¹⁰

Today, the Vietnamese people do not venerate Confucius as they used to, however, they still practise the veneration of ancestors. The veneration of ancestors is not understood as being religious in nature; it is a custom which expresses morality and filial piety. The veneration of ancestors is carried out on three levels: Country (*nước*), village (*làng*) and family (*gia đình*). Historically, at the country level, the emperor who was considered ‘Son of Heaven’ (*Thiên tử*) offered sacrifices every year to his royal predecessors and country’s ancestors.¹¹¹ On the village level, the local authorities and notables or the actual village head (the village’s oldest male citizen) offered sacrifices in elaborate rituals in a public building called *đình* to legendary figures who were national heroes, founders or famous benefactors of the village.¹¹² Presently, under the influence of the Communist government, such rituals are diminishing. This means that ancestral veneration is now primarily performed at the family level. In Vietnamese

110 Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 38.

111 The sacrifice is called *Tế Nam Giao*, the most solemn act of public worship of Vietnam. The Vietnamese people themselves do not practise a regular cult of Heaven. There is no temple in which they offered sacrifice to him. Only the emperor, the son Heaven is worthy to offer sacrifices to him in the name of his people. This took place during spring. In elaborate rituals with precisely dictated rubrics, the emperor presented an offering of food and drink to heaven, earth, spirit, and imperial ancestors. For more detail see Peter Phan, *Christianity With an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making*, 133.

112 Peter Phan, *Christianity With an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making*, 133.

culture, family members include the ancestors as well as the living. The elder members control the juniors as the forebears controlled them. The basis for such control is the continuity of family ties.

As mentioned earlier, most Vietnamese families have in their homes an ancestral altar for the purpose of veneration of ancestors. The practice is referred to as *đạo thờ ông bà*, which literally means religion that worships the ancestors. The use of expressions such as religion and worship in connection with ancestral veneration was scandalous to early Christian missionaries, since they represented what appeared to be at once superstition as well as sacrilege.¹¹³ For the Vietnamese, the word *thờ* (used in the expression noted above) does not have the same meaning as adoration which is reserved only for God. The word *thờ* is often related to the word *kính*, which literally means respect. Therefore the word *thờ-kính* means venerate-respect.¹¹⁴ The meaning of *đạo thờ ông bà* will be explored further in Chapter Four. For now, suffice it to say that from a Vietnamese perspective ancestral veneration is not related to ghosts, spiritism or even the supernatural as these terms are understood in a Western sense; rather it emphasizes filial piety, or *đạo hiếu*. The concept captures the love, honour and respect that children are to give to their parents, grandparents. Jenifer Oldstone-Moore clarifies the practice by saying:

Early Confucians assumed the existence of an afterlife, but the few comments made by Confucius on the subject indicate a reluctance to

113 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 51.

114 Ibid.

discuss such matters. He spoke of respecting spiritual beings while at the same time keeping one's focus firmly on the human realm and performing filial duties on behalf of humankind.¹¹⁵

As this statement makes clear, Confucius placed emphasis not on the spirits but on the duties of gratitude to, and remembrance of, ancestral spirits. Veneration of ancestors has no formal doctrines and is ordinarily an aspect of a larger religious system. In Vietnam, the main importance of this veneration is the continuity of the family and reverence for elders. Even for a hardened sinner, to lack respect for one's ancestors is the worst transgression.

The cult of ancestors holds an important place in families and their social life. If religion is the spiritual bond which unites human beings to supernatural forces, the cult of ancestors is the demonstration of the relationship which exists between the world of the living and that of the dead. In Vietnamese tradition, the living and the dead are equally honoured: "The ancestors are addressed and treated as close family members and are informed of family news such as births, deaths, engagements, travel and business plans."¹¹⁶ The Vietnamese people believe that ancestors, though not physically present, remain active participants in family life, sharing in joys and sorrows, admonishing wickedness, watching over and assisting their descendants. Ancestors can assist and sometimes punish their descendants, always in the interests of

115 Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism: Origins-Beliefs-Practices-Holy Texts- Sacred Places*, 87.

116 Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism: Origins-Beliefs-Practices-Holy Texts- Sacred Place*, 89.

the good of the family.¹¹⁷ Therefore, prior to taking any action or decision, the individual is mindful of whether or not the action is pleasing to one's ancestors.¹¹⁸ Some Vietnamese people practise ancestral worship for fear of offending their ancestors or damaging their reputations, with practices to conciliate them. Propitiation, supplication, prayer, and sacrifice are various ways in which the living can venerate their ancestors. Whatever the reason, these are sources of inspiration, which guide the actions of descendants.

Veneration of Ancestors in Vietnamese Civic Life

Ancestral veneration lies at the very heart of the family and is a dominant characteristic of traditional Vietnamese society. Ancestral veneration is rooted in a deep sense of gratitude to those who, with immense sacrifice, have given life to their children and nurtured them. Vietnamese children feel the sacred obligation to love and respect their parents in return.¹¹⁹ Therefore, veneration of ancestors is central to Vietnamese culture. Ancestors are considered to be part of a living family. The Vietnamese see death as a gate through which the deceased are welcomed into the community of ancestors who continue to live in another realm. It is therefore the duty of the living to respect and venerate their deceased forebears. In return, the ancestors

117 Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 24.

118 Toan Anh, *Nếp Cũ: Tín Ngưỡng Việt Nam*, 1:122-130

119 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 51.

will intercede to bring good fortune to the living. Ancestral veneration periodically generates important and solemn rituals in which many people participate with deep emotional involvement. A Vietnamese woman explains:

One has to attend one of these family gatherings to understand the intense emotional attachment the Vietnamese feel for their families. In this atmosphere composed of memories, traditions, and habits, with common points of reference, family hierarchy is strictly observed. A member, whatever his social status, finds his place in front of the ancestral altar and at the feasting table determined on the one hand by the place he occupies in the order of generation; and on the other by the order number he holds in his own family. In this ambience, the individual loses himself and feels at ease and is really at ease there only. It is also there, in the community of life and thought, that he finds the strength of the group to which he belongs. The person would not exchange his place in this group for any other, however exalted the new one might be.¹²⁰

Though all ancestors are worthy of respect and reverence, regardless of their behaviour in life, the misdeeds of a wicked family ancestor will result in bad luck for his or her children and grandchildren. This belief is expressed in a folk saying, “*Cha ăn mặn, con khát nước*” which means if the father eats salty food, his child is thirsty.¹²¹ This is a powerful influence upon the behaviour of the Vietnamese people, encouraging everyone to behave well and to perform good deeds while they are living so that they might endow their children with good fortune in the future. Another Vietnamese saying points out: “*sống để phúc cho con*”, which means, live in a way that will benefit your child. Most Vietnamese people believe that the past and present exist

¹²⁰ Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 23-24.

¹²¹ Cf. Jeremiah 31:29-30; Ezekiel 18:2.

simultaneously and that each individual's behaviour in life has a direct impact upon the quality of the lives of his or her children and grandchildren. A Vietnamese person believes that one is never alone – his or her family is always present, family not only in the traditional western sense but also in the sense of the whole community.

Personal Ancestors and Communal Ancestors

In practicing ancestral veneration, individuals and families are expected to pay homage and present offerings to their own ancestors: parents, grandparents, and so on. Making offerings to ancestors who are not of your own family, is considered rank flattery.¹²² There is room, however, to honour non-family members by placing their pictures on or around the family altar. For example, pictures of prominent former leaders or a beloved benefactor within the local community, region or even nation may be placed at the family shrine. Nationally, the Vietnamese recognize a number of famed rulers and heroes. Most notable are the supreme ancestors *Hùng Vương*,¹²³ the *Trưng* sisters,¹²⁴ and generals like *Trần Hưng Đạo*¹²⁵ who have liberated the country from foreigners. These figures are venerated as guardian spirits, recognized both in private homes and temples built in their honour. This too is part of the cult of the

122 Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism: Origins-Beliefs-Practices-Holy Texts- Sacred Place*, 87.

123 Phạm văn Sơn, *Việt Sử Tân Biên*, I: 72-73.

124 Ibid., I: 169-171.

125 Ibid., II:155-259.

ancestors and furthermore reinforces the strong patriotism which is a central tenet of the Vietnamese belief system.

As discussed previously, the whole nation is regarded as a family. The national bureaucracy is organized around the metaphor of family. The king became a personification of the moral order in Vietnamese society. His primary responsibility was to exert spiritual leadership through ritual and personal example.¹²⁶ When the king and other national heroes are honoured, this may be considered as an expression of filial piety on a national scale.

The Veneration of Ancestors in Vietnamese Celebrations

The effect of ancestral veneration upon Vietnamese society is profound. Veneration takes place regularly, on designated days such as festivals, days on which there are new and full moons, the anniversary of the death of one's ancestors, and on any day of celebration, either national or private.

Vietnam is a country of many festivities. These take place all year round, but especially in the spring when there is little farming to do. Visitors to Vietnam often marvel at the great numbers of festivals not only at the national but also the local level.¹²⁷ Each region celebrates its own holidays, the most important of which centre around agricultural rituals, such as praying for rain, getting down to the rice field, and

¹²⁶ Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, 38.

¹²⁷ Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 56.

planting new rice. There are several national holidays and religious feasts which are celebrated annually. There are also days dedicated to national heroes, as well as to religious and cultural rites. The following celebrations are directly involved with the cult of ancestors: Vietnamese New Year (*Tết*), the Clear and Bright Festival (*Thanh Minh*), the Hungry Ghost festival (*Vu lan*), Mid-Autumn festival (*Trung thu*), All Saints (*Lễ Các Thánh*), All Souls (*Lễ Các Linh Hồn*). In addition, marriages, funerals, births, and anniversaries become occasions to celebrate the cult of ancestors. Let us review these to see what role ancestral veneration plays in each.

Vietnamese New Year – *Tết*

For the Vietnamese, the most important celebrations is *Tết*, the Vietnamese New Year. It is celebrated on the first day of the first month on the lunar calendar, usually between January 21st and February 19th. Historically, *Tết* is both a traditional and religious holiday.¹²⁸ For the Vietnamese people, it is the equivalent of Thanksgiving Day, Remembrance Day, New Year's Day, and birthdays all combined into one massive celebration.¹²⁹ All family members, regardless of where they are, make the effort to return home for *Tết*. New Year symbolizes new beginnings. It is an ancient belief in Vietnam that fortune or misfortune occurring on New Year's Day sets

128 Paul James Ruthledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1992), 136.

129 Ibid.

the pattern for the rest of the year. Therefore, before *Tết*, debts are paid and quarrels settled. Seasonal foods are prepared and the house is thoroughly cleaned. Most families save throughout the year to be able to celebrate *Tết* extravagantly and to ensure that the new beginning is a positive one.

New Year's eve in Vietnam is very special: each home is brightly lit and the ancestral altar is resplendent with flowers, fruits, cakes and sweets. Firecrackers are usually exploded¹³⁰ at midnight, as is the custom in many Western countries. In Vietnam, fireworks serve an additional purpose - to chase away evil spirits. The morning of *Tết* is of particular importance. The first visitor to the home is believed to leave his imprint on the family for the rest of the year, an ancient custom, called *xông nhà*, literally meaning 'incensing the house'. If the visitor is good, kind and honest, the family is in luck, but if he or she is a shady type, the year is off to a bad start.

Another important aspect of *Tết* is a family visit to a pagoda or church to pray for good fortune and happiness. The remainder of the holiday is filled with visits to friends and relatives, family games and simple relaxation. *Tết* celebrations are augmented with various rituals added by different religions. Buddhists in rural areas erect bamboo poles and drape them to repel evil spirits. Catholics have transformed this national event into a religious celebration with a penitential service on New Year's Eve to ask for forgiveness for sins of the past year and to thank God for blessings

130 Firecrackers have recently been forbidden by the government due to security concerns in large cities.

received. On New Year's Day, Catholics go to church to ask God for blessings in the New Year, and then go from house to house offering good wishes to clergy, family and friends.

The *Tết* celebration lasts three days,¹³¹ beginning at home where the first day is spent with family paying respect to ancestors. At dawn, the family sits down to a banquet in honour of the ancestors to whom they pay their respects with ritual bows before the family shrine. When the meal is over, it is time to dress in one's finest clothing and meet parents and grandparents to offer them best wishes and happiness in the coming year. The youngsters especially look forward to this ceremony as each of them receives a small sum of money wrapped in the traditional 'red envelope',¹³² called '*lì xì*'. The second day honours teachers, and the third day relatives and friends. Ancestral veneration, it should be pointed out, is reserved for the first day of the three-day celebration of the New Year, underscoring its significance to the Vietnamese.

The Clear and Bright Festival (*Thanh Minh*)

Vietnamese *Thanh minh* is a civic festival dedicated specifically to the deceased. It takes place in the spring on the ninth day of the third month of the lunar

131 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 56.

132 Ibid., 57.

calendar. On this day, the entire family gathers to tend the family gravesite,¹³³ removing weeds and sprucing the site up. This ritual is known as ‘*tảo mộ*’,¹³⁴ meaning, cleaning the grave. Once the cleaning is completed, the deceased’s favourite foods are offered and the family shares a picnic. *Thanh minh* is a means of demonstrating family unity to outsiders while at the same time ritually remembering the dead and reinforcing family bonds.¹³⁵ The day is therefore not only for the dead but also for the living.

Ancestral veneration is a bridge between the dead and the living, and a strong tie among members sharing the same ancestry. This day of the dead is not considered a gloomy one. It takes place at one of the prettiest times of the year. All members of the extended family are expected to attend. The ties which bind the Vietnamese to other members of his family are once again reinforced. Catholics do not celebrate this festival as a community, though many Catholics take time off to visit their ancestors’ gravesites.

The Hungry Ghost Festival (*Vu Lan*)

Like *Thanh Minh*, the festival of *Vu Lan* is on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Lunar calendar. It is a Buddhist festival of Ullambana (Ancestor Day) dedicated to wandering and hungry souls. On this day, prayers and offerings of foods

133 The national law severely punished one who defaced a gravesite. For more details see: Toan Anh, *Nếp Cũ: Con Người Việt nam*, 381-382.

134 Toan Anh, *Nếp Cũ: Con Người Việt-Nam*, 383.

135 Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism: Origins-Beliefs-Practices-Holy Texts- Sacred Place*, 77.

and gifts are made at home and in the temples for the wandering souls of those who died tragically or those who died without any one to remember them. For the Vietnamese, the greatest misfortune conceivable is to die without a male descendant to maintain the cult of the ancestors.¹³⁶ A folk tale relates that “the gates of Hell are opened during the seventh month; ghosts must be propitiated with offerings of food to avert danger and they are exhorted in formal Buddhist and Daoist ceremonies to turn from their evil ways.”¹³⁷ Food offerings on this day are carefully prescribed: “Ghosts are fed ‘at the back door’...Ancestors, on the other hand, are offered carefully prepared dishes since they are honoured members of the family who are tended at their burial sites and in the home.”¹³⁸ In other words, ancestors are treated like the living members of the family. They are worthy of reverence and care. Though this festival is mainly celebrated by the Vietnamese Buddhists, many Catholic friends are invited to celebrate with them, since Buddhist or not, all Vietnamese value ancestral veneration however it might be practised or contextualized.

136 Toan Anh, *Nếp Cũ: Con Người Việt Nam*, 154.

137 Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism: Origins-Beliefs-Practices-Holy Texts- Sacred Place*, 79.

138 Ibid.

Mid-Autumn Festival (*Tết Trung Thu*)

Vietnamese *Tết Trung Thu* is a civic festival. It falls on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month at the time of the full moon.¹³⁹ Non-Christian Vietnamese people believe that it is at this time of year that the souls of the deceased wander the earth and so offerings are made to ancestors to give them comfort during their travels. On this day too ceremonies are held at the family altar to commemorate ancestors. Vietnamese people celebrate the harvest at this festival and also the full moon, which appears at its largest and brightest at this time of the year.

To the Vietnamese the full moon signifies completeness. The entire family gathers together in happiness. This is a delightful festival for children and most pleasant for the adults to watch. Many weeks before the festival, bakers are busy making hundreds of thousands of moon cakes of sticky rice filled with unusual fillings such as peanuts, sugar, or lotus seed. They are baked and sold in colourful boxes. Expensive moon cakes in ornate boxes are presented as gifts. On the festival night, children form a procession, known as the dragon dance, and make their way along streets holding their lighted lanterns and performing the dances of the unicorn accompanied by drums and cymbals. Some local Catholic churches celebrate a special Eucharist for children on this night and organize games for them.

139 Ibid.

Feast of all Saints (*Lễ Các Thánh*)

Lễ Các Thánh is a Catholic feast, celebrated on November 1st in the Western calendar. Besides the feast of individual saints like Saint Peter, or Saint Matthew, and a group of canonized saints like the Vietnamese Martyrs,¹⁴⁰ Catholics also celebrate the feast of All Saints. On this day, the Church honours its saints as exemplary models of faith and discipleship throughout its history. As Catholics reflect on role models in their own lives, it is expected that they might well discover a saint or two in their midst—perhaps a beloved grandparent who has entered into eternal glory. As Cunningham relates:

There are many who live quiet lives of unstinting service, who suffer at the hands of hostile regimes, who risk their lives to comfort the afflicted, who love not an abstract humanity but his own or another's suffering with AIDS or a mentally handicapped child or a street person sprawled in a doorway. What makes them all saints is their capacity to do the ordinary in an extraordinary fashion.¹⁴¹

These un-canonized saints give Catholics strength and comfort through their prayers and their support during the time they are physically present. The lives of saintly men and women through the ages are seen as examples of faith, hope and love, worthy of imitation as individuals journey in faith. The saints are reminders of individuals' heavenly goal and destiny in God. They are examples for all to follow on their faith

140 Vietnamese Martyrs will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

141 Lawrence S Cunningham, *A Brief History of Saints* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 145-146.

journeys to God as they are all called to holiness of life, to greater love and witness to Christ.

In liturgical feasts and prayers, Catholics ask Mary and the Saints to intercede to God on their behalf. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that:

Since Abraham, intercession - asking on behalf of another - has been characteristic of a heart attuned to God's mercy. In the age of the church, Christian intercession participates in Christ's, as an expression of the communion of saints. In intercession, he who prays looks 'not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others,' even to the point of praying for those who do him harm.¹⁴²

The feast of All Saints reflects for Vietnamese their belief in the power of intercessory prayer. The concept of the intercession of saints will be further addressed in Chapter Four.

Feast of All Souls (*Lễ Các Linh Hồn*)

Following the feast of All Saints is the feast of All Souls (*Lễ Các Linh Hồn*). On this day, Catholics throughout the world observe the commemoration of the faithful departed, all those who still groan in Purgatory, so that they may join as soon as possible the inhabitants of the heavenly city. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains this feast:

In full consciousness of this communion of the whole Mystical body of Jesus Christ, the Church in its pilgrim members, from the very earliest days of the Christian religion, has honoured with great respect the memory of the dead; and 'because it is a holy and a wholesome thought to pray for

¹⁴² *The Catechism of The Catholic Church*, 2635; see also Philippians 2:4, Acts 7:60.

the dead that they may be loosed from their sins' she offers her suffrages for them.¹⁴³

Catholics pray for the deceased at every Mass, but on All Souls Day, prayers and thoughts are directed towards them in a particular fashion. The day before All Souls Day, Vietnamese Catholics go to visit their ancestors' gravesites to clean and prepare them, and then to repaint and decorate them with flowers. Family members light joss stick incense in front of the gravesites and pray for their ancestors. Almost every parish community has its own cemetery and the priest celebrates Mass at the cemetery on this day.

The feast of All Souls crosses the cultural line and recalls both the dead and membership within the Communion of Saints. This feast is pivotal in connecting the day of the dead as it is celebrated by Catholics over the world and the veneration of ancestors as it is celebrated in Vietnam. Besides the feast of All Souls, there exist several national memorial days celebrated on different days depending on the particular country and culture. For example, in Japan, August 15 is chosen as the "Day of the Dead", recalling the bombing of Hiroshima in August and also venerating the beloved dead within a particular family. Japanese children and relatives return home on August 15 from different parts of the country to venerate the deceased.¹⁴⁴

143 Ibid., 958.

144 Peter Phan, ed. *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005), 96.

Marriage and Ancestral Veneration

Many aspects of the traditional Vietnamese wedding celebration are unfamiliar to Westerners. Parents and the eldest son play prominent roles in celebration.¹⁴⁵ In Vietnam, a wedding not only fulfills the lovers' desire but also has to meet the interests of the country,¹⁴⁶ the village¹⁴⁷ and most importantly, the family (the three basic structures of Vietnamese society). In fact, "the ceremony of marriage was intended to be a bond of love between two families with a view to secure the services in the

145 Toan Anh, *Nếp Cũ: Con Người Việt Nam*, 192.

146 Since Vietnam was occupied by its neighbour China as well as by Western colonialists, the Vietnamese people are wary of marriage with foreigners for fear of compromising national resolve. A well-known Vietnamese legend tells *Trọng Thủy*, son of The Chinese king *Triệu Đà*, marrying *Mỵ Châu*, the daughter of the Vietnamese king *An Dương Vương*. *An Dương Vương* had a magical triggered cross bow which allowed him to shoot multiple arrows, thus protecting Vietnam from Chinese invasion. Unfortunately, *Mỵ Châu* told her husband of the secret and *Trọng Thủy* stole the trigger device. The Vietnamese were defenceless when the Chinese army arrived. Thus began the first period of Chinese domination over Vietnam. This story runs deep within the Vietnamese psyche, creating a suspicion toward those who marry foreigners. Women who marry foreigners are ostracized by the community. For full detail of this story, see Trần Trọng Kim, I:18-20; Phạm văn Sơn, I: 96-102. This concept is not unfamiliar to Christians, since it is also expressed in the story of Samson from the book of Judges (chapters 14-16).

147 With respect to the village, their independence calls for the discouragement or outright prohibition of intermarriage between villagers for various reasons. One of the reason is pride i.e. to protect the men of a village from rejection by the women of their own village. This is expressed in a Vietnamese saying: "*Lấy chồng khó giữa làng, còn hơn lấy chồng sang thiên hạ*" meaning literally it is better to marry a poor husband in one's village than to marry a rich one elsewhere." See Ôn Như [Nguyễn Văn Ngọc], 200.

ancestral temple, and the continuance of the family line.”¹⁴⁸ In other words, one of the purposes of marriage for the Vietnamese people is to ensure the continuity of ancestral veneration. The choice of a person’s spouse depends primarily on the similarity of the status between the two families, as well as on the personality and background of the prospective spouse.¹⁴⁹ The type of ancestors from whom the person comes is also very important,¹⁵⁰ as expressed in a Vietnamese saying: “*Lấy vợ xem tông, lấy chồng xem giống*” which literally means the choice of a future bride or bridegroom depends on the character of their ancestors. This decision must be made carefully and has to go through many formalities from the pledging ceremony to the official proposal to the bride’s family.¹⁵¹ Wedding ceremonies have three stages: a formal rite of engagement, the solemn celebration of the wedding and the newly-weds’ first visit to the bride’s family.¹⁵²

The formal engagement happens when both families officially meet.¹⁵³ The future couple express their commitment to marriage before the ancestral altar. Phan briefly explains:

148 Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study*, 174. See also Đào duy Anh, *Việt Nam Văn Hóa Sử Cương*, 114-115.

149 Nhất Thanh (Vũ văn Khiếu), *Đất Lề Quê Thói* [Vietnamese Traditions] (Sài Gòn, Việt Nam: Sống Mới, 1968), 332.

150 Ibid., 332-333 “*Lấy vợ xem tông, lấy chồng xem giống.*”

151 Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study*, 174.

152 For more details, see Toan Anh, *Nếp Cũ: Con Người Việt-Nam*, 153-204.

153 Toan Anh, *Nếp Cũ: Con Người Việt Nam*, 168.

The future groom goes to the bride's home along with his parents or a distinguished elder of his family, or even a matchmaker, bringing gifts such as foods and jewelry. He is officially and formally introduced to the bride's parents and family, and the bride is formally and officially introduced to the groom's parents and family, even though both sides may already know each other well. His parents make a formal request for the consent of marriage, and negotiations about the marriage take place in which the future bride and groom do not normally take part. Most often the whole ceremony has an air of solemn play-acting...since the decision about the marriage has already been made, but the ritual must be performed in all seriousness for the sake of propriety and tradition. The ceremony is concluded with a sumptuous dinner.¹⁵⁴

The second stage is the most important one: the wedding itself. On this day,

the groom's family marches in procession to the bride's home, followed by his parents, the best man and the men in the wedding party, and all the members of his extended family. They bring gifts such as betel leaves and areca nuts (which are symbols of marital love and fidelity), foods, usually a roasted pig, bottles of alcohol, and boxes of tea and sweets, all wrapped in red paper, the colour of good luck. The family is met at the door and led to the living room where an ancestral altar has been set up. The two families line up on either side of the altar. Once again, the groom's parents make a formal request to the bride's parents for their consent in marriage, to which the latter give a rather formal agreement. Then the bride, who stays with the bridesmaids in a nearby room, is brought in and is formally introduced to the groom's family. The groom's mother and her mother then give her jewellery of various kinds, accompanied by tearful promises to be a good daughter-in-law and wife. Next, each member of the two families is introduced to the bride and groom, who are told how to address them correctly (e.g., uncle, aunt, brother, sister, etc.).¹⁵⁵

After all the rituals are completed, there follows the most sacred part of the wedding. Traditionally, a marriage becomes official when the couple bow before the

154 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 59.

155 Ibid., 59-60.

ancestral tablets of the groom, introducing the bride to her husband's forebears.¹⁵⁶ Then the bride and groom hold several burning joss sticks¹⁵⁷ in both hands, and make three deep bows to the ancestors in prayerful silence.¹⁵⁸ This ritual reflects the importance of the cult of ancestors, it also makes clear that the bride and groom are not simply marrying each other, but each other's family, both living and dead.¹⁵⁹ The service maintains the link between the living and the dead and represents the proper filial behaviour, thus ensuring the blessings of the ancestors on the family.

After the ceremony at home, Catholics go to the local church for a wedding Mass, where the sacrament of marriage is celebrated and the covenant of marriage is sealed. Buddhists go to the pagoda for the monk's blessing. After the religious blessing, a sumptuous banquet follows. Then the couple move to the husband's father's household. From that time on, the bride keeps her maiden name legally but uses her husband's name informally.

The third stage of the wedding celebration is the newly-weds' first visit to the bride's family. This ritual is called *lại mặt*, which means literally returning to show face. The couple return to the home of the bride's parents for a visit for the first time after the wedding. This ritual marks the completeness of the wedding celebration.

156 Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism: Origins-Beliefs-Practices-Holy Texts- Sacred Place*, 80.

157 Long incense sticks.

158 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 60.

159 Ibid., 58.

The Vietnamese people stress these complex and solemn rituals as a way of impressing upon newly weds the significance of forming a family. Some parts of the Marriage Rite of the Catholic Church have been adapted to Vietnamese customs, enabling them to preserve the family spirit and to be more closely united. There are variations in wedding rituals, but the invoking of ancestors remains an essential part of the celebration.

Funerals and Veneration of Ancestors

Vietnamese funerals are an important time for expressing filial love for parents and grandparents. My own story will help to illustrate this concept.

My Mother's Funeral

In July 1998, my mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. My father called my brother and me in Vancouver to share the bad news. We both quickly flew to Vietnam to join with sisters and brothers – ten of us - to stay with our mother. After accepting the nature of the sickness, with no hope of cure, we took mother home. As her days were numbered, the family took turns so that someone was always with her. My sisters and brothers sent word to all those who were special to her to come and say goodbye. All my brothers and sisters remained at mother's home.

Close friends, relatives, and neighbours came and went frequently during this last week. We all did our very best to serve mother both spiritually and medically. My

brother's friend who is a doctor came daily to give medical advice. Grandchildren showed her how well they did in school. The youngest ones showed her the newest "tricks" that they had learned. My father was with mother at all times. We spent most of the time with each other.

On July 23, 1998, at around 1:00 a.m. when mother took her last breath, the crying gradually began as reality sank in. All manner of grief was shown: weeping, crying, sobbing and screaming. The only thing not acceptable was laughing. All the grandchildren were present and they all cried. After a time, the children were taken away. The family bathed mother's body and dressed her in her best clothes. Much love and care was put into ensuring that she looked her best. This provided another chance for us to say goodbye. Mother laid in state at home for several hours to wait for other close friends and relatives to arrive. The family took turns keeping a vigil over the body at all times. An altar was set up with a photograph, candles, and incense. Relatives and friends who came to pay their respects stood in front of the altar, burned incense, and quietly said a prayer for mother or said goodbye, or had whatever private conversation they wished to have with mother at that moment.

Before the body was placed into the coffin, a prayer service was held. Before closing the lid of the coffin, the family had another opportunity to see mother for the last time. Another outpouring of grief occurred since this was the last opportunity to see her. The coffin remained in the family home for a day, and relatives, in-laws, neighbours, and cousins came and paid their respects. Monetary offerings, flowers, and

wreaths were donated according to the guest's means and closeness to the family. Food and drinks were served to all who came. Most stayed at least long enough to express their condolences. Close friends and relatives spent hours or days with the family, helping to cook, organize, direct the flow of visitors, or just chat about good and bad times, about mother, and about each other. A family member kept vigil over the coffin at all times. A nice picture of mother was placed on the coffin.

Removing the coffin from the home was another emotional peak in the ebb and flow of grief. Mother would be leaving home for the last time. A prayer service was held before we removed the coffin. When this ended, family and relatives cried and called out for mother again, saying goodbye yet once more.

In church, another beautiful service, that of the funeral Mass, was celebrated. My brother, Fr. Joseph, was the main celebrant. I, along with thirty-nine other priests, concelebrated the Mass. At the Eucharist, we celebrate Jesus' life, death and resurrection. I have a feeling that to a degree we can experience the fact that mother died for my father, my brothers and sisters. The sentence "Christ died for us," an abstract idea to me up until that point, touched me in its full significance. My mother's death gave me a new insight into this central mystery of our faith.

At the gravesite, the last service was held. The coffin was lowered into the grave and buried. Emotions, which had calmed during the service, rose again. Here was yet another chance for us to say goodbye, and another outpouring of grief occurred. Most guests left shortly after the burial to return to our home for a feast. The

closest friends and relatives remained with the family for a quiet time of prayer and contemplation. Just before leaving the gravesite, the family again became very emotional. My father, brothers and sisters, and my nieces and nephews sobbed bitterly and were reluctant to leave the gravesite. We all said goodbye for the last time. Before leaving the cemetery, some of our relatives burned incense and paid their respects at the graves nearby of our grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. As they went from grave to grave, they felt more at peace with the thought that mother would be in good company, so to speak.

Back at home, a feast prepared by relatives and neighbours was served. The whole community, family, relatives, friends and neighbours got together and renewed ties. From the moment of imminent death until the end of the funeral, we were surrounded by relatives and friends helping, organizing, cooking and preparing mourning clothing, and arranging. By the time the funeral was over, family members were physically and emotionally spent. But we had ample opportunities to grieve privately during the vigil and publicly with other loved ones. Now we were all "grieved out." We needed time for ourselves.

Three days after the funeral, the closest relatives and family returned to the cemetery to bring flowers and incense to the gravesite, to pray and to clean up the site. We wept and cried and talked to mother in private. At home, incense was burned on the altar every day to remember and venerate mother. After the funeral, we wore a small piece of black or white fabric on our clothing everyday to signify that we were in

mourning. Seven days after interment, we had a memorial Mass of the Seventh Day. Subsequent Masses were arranged at forty-nine days and one hundred days. A year later, another ceremony marking the first anniversary of the death was held. Finally, after three years of mourning, a very special memorial Mass was offered for mother, a "completion of mourning" (*Lễ mãn tang*). After this Mass, all mourning clothing was burned or discarded to signify that the mourning period was over.¹⁶⁰ However, mother is forever remembered as long as we live. Any time we commemorate her death, it gives us a sense of continuity, and a feeling that mother is actually among other loved ones. She is in the company of the ancestors, such as our grandparents who have gone before us. We continue to pray for her and ask her to pray for us.

Variations on Funeral Rites

My mother's funeral is in no way representative of Vietnamese funerals. Most Vietnamese funerals are expensive, because the family and friends of the deceased put on an extravagant display in the person's honour. The funeral service provides an occasion to express the grief of the living and to mark the journey of the deceased to join the ancestors. The family of the deceased does not have to take care of the service themselves; they are helped by neighbours. Funeral rituals within the Vietnamese culture vary depending on regions, religious affiliations, and ethnic backgrounds. Nevertheless, two principles are always observed. First, the Vietnamese people attach

160 Toàn Anh, *Nếp Cũ: Con Người Việt-nam*, 332-333.

great importance to two traditional family obligations: care for parents in their old age and veneration after death. The Vietnamese feel these filial duties so strongly that they are considered sacred. Arranging a proper funeral for a loved one is one of the most important filial duties. Secondly, when a Vietnamese person dies there is intensive and extensive family and community involvement throughout the whole process of mourning. In a very real sense, the elaborate details of death rituals require whole-hearted involvement of the family social network as well as the community. These rituals thus express the social values of communal responsibilities and the importance of family and village community.

Veneration of Ancestors and Filial Piety

Ancestral veneration is not only the religious bond that binds the Vietnamese together but it is one of the most difficult concepts for Westerners to understand. Very often the Vietnamese people take pictures and videos at a funeral. It has been said that 'the Orientals believe in the dead, while the Occidentals believe only in death.'¹⁶¹ Phan puts it well, saying: "Perhaps no other religious practice unites the Vietnamese people, irrespective of their faiths, more than ancestral veneration or worship."¹⁶² Though this cult is seen as a sequence, a sort of continuation of the respect owed to the parents beyond their physical existence, many Vietnamese view it as a substitute for

¹⁶¹ This is a common saying among Vietnamese.

¹⁶² Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 51.

religion. In fact, veneration of ancestors is often referred to as the religion of ancestral worship (*đạo thờ ông bà*). Filial piety and the cult of the ancestors are two aspects of a single obligation. Filial piety stems from the idea that a child is indebted to his parents for all the sacrifices they made for his upbringing and education. The child thus owes his parents many favours and kindnesses beyond gratitude for the greatest kindness of all: the gift of life. Consequently children owe submission to the authors of their existence, regardless of their age. In the words of a Vietnamese folk song:

The father's merits are comparable to the Thai mountain.
Those of my mother, to a perennial Spring.
Respect and venerate father and mother
In order to fulfill the obligations of filial piety as a pious son.¹⁶³

In every Vietnamese family, as a rule, a portion of the inheritance is set aside for use in the cult of the ancestors to assure the perpetuation of the rites. This part of inherited property is called worship property *hương hỏa*,¹⁶⁴ which literally means incense and fire. It is spent to maintain the altar and cover the cost of the rituals. This inherited property is entrusted to the most worthy of the heirs, frequently the eldest son, who receives a life annuity from this source.¹⁶⁵ To many Vietnamese people, the greatest misfortune conceivable is to die without leaving a male descendant to

163 Every Vietnamese individual knows this folk song by heart.

164 Đào Duy Anh, *Việt Nam Văn Hóa Sử Cương*, 118.

165 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 54.

perpetuate the cult of the ancestors,¹⁶⁶ as mentioned in the feast of *Vu lan*. In cases where there is no male descendant, this rule is relaxed to permit daughters to carry on the cult.¹⁶⁷

One can clearly say that Vietnamese people have high respect for the deceased ancestors. Phan observes that:

The presence of the ancestors is particularly felt, of course, on the anniversaries of their death. It must be said, however, that there is not a single important event in the life of the Vietnamese family to which the ancestors are not invited, from the celebrations of the New Year to the birth of a child, the death of a member of the family, the celebration of longevity, the earning of an academic degree, and celebration of an engagement or wedding...Similarly, after candidates earn a degree, especially the doctorate, they are required to return to the native village to pay respect to their ancestors.¹⁶⁸

As this statement attests, almost every celebration in Vietnamese culture involves in one way or another the veneration of ancestors. This statement also helps us understand the Vietnamese belief that the dead always participate in the lives of the family of their descendants. One calls on them for all solemn occasions, such as births, marriages, funerals and festivals and so on. In many cases, some Vietnamese people

166 Đào Duy Anh, *Việt Nam Văn Hóa Sử Cương*, 115. Mạnh-Tử: “Bất hiếu giả tam, vô hậu vi đại” – Nghĩa vụ của người ta đối với gia tộc và tổ tiên là phải truyền giống về sau để vĩnh truyền tông tộc, cho nên luân lý cho người vô hậu là phạm điều bất hiếu rất to.

167 Đào Duy Anh, 111: “Vô nam, dụng nữ.” If there is no son in the family, a daughter takes on the responsibility of the worship of ancestors.

168 Peter Phan, *Christianity With an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making*, 141.

will go to great lengths to try to commune with the dead. They believe that a hint of advice from the dead is worth more than anything the living have to say.

Ancestral veneration persists in Vietnamese society because it is embedded in social and religious beliefs, and popularly expressed in folk tales and poetry. In other words, the souls of ancestors live in the memory of the Vietnamese, in their interests and in their dreams of life. The life of the spirits, the souls of the departed ancestors, never completely die. It is, therefore, one's duty to connect with the dead so that the dead may always participate in the lives of the family of their descendents. This ritual is demanded by filial piety. One can see how much the idea of the cult of ancestors is enmeshed with the Vietnamese culture. It is one of the most profound beliefs of the Vietnamese.

Vietnamese Catholics have a popular tradition of having Mass offered for the unknown souls all year round especially in the month of November. Non-Catholic Vietnamese seek answers through *gọi hồn* which literally means calling the spirit. For example, *gọi hồn* is involved when an elderly woman wants to ask her son where his remains are because he has been missing in action during the war; or when a young woman wants to ask her firstborn why she died when three days old. Many rituals and practices added to the veneration of ancestors as practised by non-Catholic Vietnamese people contradict Gospel values. Christians have challenged Confucian rites since the Jesuit missionaries in the sixteenth century questioned whether ancestral veneration was merely memorial or spirit-worship. The current position of the Catholic Church

allows the rituals so long as they are for purposes of remembrance only. Protestant interpretations vary. Regardless of official Church positions, most Vietnamese people practise the cult of ancestors. It is practised both in social life and at the ecclesiastical level. In the following chapter, I will discuss the impact of Christianity on ancestral veneration.

CHAPTER THREE

CHRISTIANITY IN VIETNAM IN THE CONTEXT OF OTHER RELIGIONS

Chapter One and Two revealed that the Vietnamese practice of venerating ancestors is an outgrowth of their history and their philosophy of life. While some may think of it in these terms, the veneration of ancestors is not a religion *per se* but rather an expression of the love, honour and respect that children are bound to express towards their ancestors. This practice thus underlies *đạo hiếu*. *Đạo* may be translated as the way, but *hiếu* is not directly translatable into English. The closest meaning of the phrase *đạo hiếu* is filial piety. As we have seen filial piety, *đạo hiếu*, is an integral part of Vietnamese culture and its faiths. In this chapter, I will describe the way in which the Western missionaries viewed the veneration of ancestors and how the Confucian monarchy, in turn, viewed the Christian faith. I will demonstrate that the veneration of ancestors is highly compatible with Christian values and that therefore, Vietnamese Confucians can be Vietnamese Christians without dishonouring their ancestors. Since Christianity is a recent arrival compared with other religions in Vietnam, however, it is essential to explore briefly other religions that existed in Vietnam before Christian missionaries made their appearance in the sixteenth century.

Vietnamese Religions

In Vietnam, religion is generally understood as a way of life, not so easily separated from other aspects of living. Indeed, the Vietnamese word for religion is

đạo, meaning road or way. The original inhabitants of Vietnam had a primitive religion which included worship of spirits and natural forces, as well as ancestral worship, all laden with superstition. Superstitions continue to have a presence in Vietnamese life. For example, by the time a boy is old enough to marry, he may not be able to wed the girl he loves because she was born in the wrong year. In the 12-year lunar calendar commonly used throughout Eastern Asia, some years are considered incompatible with others. Improper matching of year is believed to lead to misfortune. To conservative relatives, the tiger and horse are incompatible and sure to bring bad luck to a marriage. Thus a young man born in "the year of the tiger" cannot marry his beloved from "the year of the horse" unless he wants to risk a break with his family. This example also illustrates the fact that filial piety is deeply rooted in the respect of parents and ancestors.

The Cult of Heaven (*Đạo Ông Trời*)

Most Vietnamese people believe in one Supreme Being who controls the entire universe. According to custom, "the supreme being, called *Trời* (Heaven), governs the universe and directs all his affairs with absolute wisdom. Although nobody can see him, he sees everything and knows everything, as expressed in a saying: "*Trời có mắt*"¹⁶⁹ which literally means 'Heaven has eyes.' Nobody can deceive him or conceal anything from him since he sees both the visible and the invisible and knows the past as well as

169 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholic*, 37.

the future. As the creator of human beings and nature, he is full of mercy, providing food and happiness for each. It is said in Vietnamese, “*Trời sinh Trời dưỡng*” meaning literally Heaven creates, Heaven nurtures.¹⁷⁰ As the judge of the universe, *Trời* rewards virtue and punishes sin according to his laws of justice.

During the millennium of Chinese domination, Vietnam adopted the Chinese practices of Confucian ethics, Taoism, and Buddhism. It made them into its indigenous Vietnamese beliefs and traditions and thus contributing to the development of Vietnamese culture and religion.

Vietnamese Confucianism (*Nho Giáo*)

Confucianism was introduced to Vietnam during the period of Chinese domination. Confucius stressed “social harmony and responsibility above individual freedom and rights.”¹⁷¹ Filial piety and obligation are paramount in Confucianism, as are respect for authority and social rites. Confucianism maintained that in order to have a harmonious society and effective government, the primary relationship of parent and child must be in order.¹⁷² As stated in Chapter One, to rule the world well, one must first rule one's country well; in order to rule the country well, one must rule one's family. It is no stretch then to conclude that in order to rule the family well, one must

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 36.

¹⁷¹ Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism: Origins-Beliefs-Practices-Holy Texts- Sacred Place*, 25.

¹⁷² Ibid., 14.

first control oneself.¹⁷³ This concept is expressed in Vietnamese saying: “*tu thân, tề gia, trị quốc, bình thiên hạ*” meaning literally cultivate oneself, control one’s family, govern one’s country and one can reconcile the world. However, to cultivate oneself is to practise filial piety first, respecting the elders and ancestors.

Confucianism is more a code of behaviour than it is a religion.¹⁷⁴ It has no church, no clergy, and no Sacred Scriptures. As part of this code, Confucius included the cult of the ancestors, placing the deceased forebears in the very heart of the household. Thus the Confucian tradition of ancestral veneration reinforces the Vietnamese tradition of ancestral veneration. Since its introduction, the Vietnamese family has respected this tradition, since no one would dare to offend or provoke the souls of the dead. During the thousand years of Chinese domination in Vietnam, Vietnamese culture was permeated by these Confucian philosophical beliefs.

Vietnamese Buddhism (*Phật Giáo*)

Buddhism is considered to be the predominant religion in Vietnam. Buddhism originated from the sayings and life of the Indian prince Siddhartha Gautama, also

173 Ibid., 60-61.

174 For more about Confucianism in Vietnam, see Đào Duy Anh, *Việt Nam Văn Hóa Sử Cương*, 239-244. Fr. Phan relates that “If religion is understood as a social and bounded organization with a creed, cult, code, and community of its own, as is often the case today in academic studies of religion, many Asian religious traditions such as Confucianism and Taoism would not qualify as religion.” See Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 21.

known as Sakyamuni (560-480 BC).¹⁷⁵ For the Buddhist, life is seen as a vast sea of suffering, in which the human being wallows hopelessly in the vicious circle of existence renewed in an endless series of reincarnations. Buddha himself taught that all the pain that we suffer is caused by desire: desire for life, happiness, riches, power, and so on. If this desire were suppressed, the cause of pain would be eliminated.¹⁷⁶

The essence of Buddhist teaching is contained in the concept of Karma which represents the law of causality: the present existence is conditioned by earlier existences, and will condition those to follow. Thus, the virtuous person should strive constantly to improve the self by doing good deeds, and by renouncing sensual pleasures, so that one can become conscious of the existence of Buddha, who is present in every living being. Consequently, desire must first be overcome so as to develop the pure heart necessary to break the chains binding oneself to earthly existence. The path leading from ignorance to enlightenment, from suffering to liberation or Nirvana, is the Eightfold Path. This Eightfold Path can be divided into three categories: moral conduct (right speech, right action, right livelihood), mental discipline (right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration), and intuitive wisdom (right understanding and right thought).¹⁷⁷

175 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 42.

176 Ibid., 42-43.

177 Ibid.

Among contemporary Buddhist monks, *Thích Nhật Hạnh* (1926 -) is the most well known. He has lived an extraordinary life in an extraordinary time, having survived persecution and more than thirty years of exile. He makes his home at Plump Village in southern France.¹⁷⁸ It can be said that Buddhism remains the most widespread of all Vietnamese religions.

Vietnamese Taoism (*Lão Giáo*)

Another religion that has had a deep impact on the Vietnamese way of life is Taoism, founded by a Chinese philosopher, Lao-tzu.¹⁷⁹ This religion teaches that the goal of becoming an 'ultimate' and 'unconditioned' being can be achieved through thrift, humility and compassion. It advocates avoiding confrontation and strives for harmony both between human beings and between human beings and nature.¹⁸⁰ Phan explains briefly:

Taoism espouses non-action or non-contrivance (*Vô vi*) on the personal and social levels, which does not mean doing nothing but rather following the Tao, that is, acting according to the inclination of nature, as spontaneously as water flowing downward and fire rising upward.¹⁸¹

178 Thích Nhật Hạnh, *Going home: Jesus and Buddha As Brothers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 203.

179 Đào Duy Anh, *Việt nam Văn Hóa Sử Cương*, 249.

180 Ibid., 252.

181 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 41.

Taoism emphasizes the duality of nature (yin-negative and yang-positive). Every living being originates from God and is in God but also arises through the natural process of a union between the male and female. God intended existence to follow this path when he created the world. The male-female, Yin-Yang, body-soul, father-mother and matter-spirit are to be united and made harmonious so as to bring balance and peace.¹⁸² Taoism can be summed up by this statement: do nothing and everything will be accomplished simultaneously.

The bedrock of religious practice in Vietnam is an amalgam of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. The major religious inheritances from China, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, have coalesced with the ancient Vietnamese cult of spirits to form a single entity *tam giáo*, the triple religion. Each religion exists in a pure form in Vietnam, and there are sects and cults that adhere to a single set of beliefs, but the great majority of people describe themselves as Buddhist, a portmanteau term for the *tam giáo*. Whatever religion a Vietnamese person claims to be, the cult of ancestors is part of that religion.

When the Christian missionaries entered Vietnam in the sixteenth century, they had to confront the cult of ancestors, just as they did in China. To these missionaries, the idea of worshipping other human beings, even honouring the dead, was heretical. In China, the cult of ancestors became a painful episode in the country's history, known

¹⁸² Unknown author, the special Vietnamese magazine: *The Church of Our Lady of Vietnam: Its Architecture and Meanings in Vietnamese Culture*, Silver Spring, MD: No date, 60.

as the Chinese Rites Controversy, already mentioned. It is worthwhile to understand the nature of the Chinese Rites Controversy before we look directly at the history of Christianity in Vietnam since these two are closely related.

Chinese Rites

Catholicism arrived in China with the first Westerners, the Portuguese based in Macao. The greatest progress was made by the Jesuits, especially Father Matteo Ricci (1522-1610), an Italian Jesuit, who went as a missionary to China during the Ming dynasty (1368-1643). Imperial China then possessed an ancient and sophisticated culture, articulated in the Confucian philosophy which had already absorbed and transformed the Buddhist faith.¹⁸³ Because of vast differences between the Chinese culture and that of the West, the Jesuit missionaries decided to familiarize themselves with the Chinese culture before evangelizing the Chinese. In other words, the strategy was to evangelize from within.

Ricci first tried to adopt the dress and style of life of a Buddhist monk, since Buddhists tended to be less critical of Christian teaching than Confucianists. Unfortunately, Buddhism was not a dominant religion in China at this time, so Ricci decided to adopt the identity of a Confucian scholar in an effort to win over the intellectuals in a society dominated by Confucian ideas.¹⁸⁴ Ricci devoted his time to the

183 Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 157.

184 Ibid., 158.

study of the Confucian classics and to the translation of the Confucian Four Books into Latin. He focused his efforts on Confucian literati and officials, and deliberately adapted Christian teachings to Chinese customs and culture. He also introduced the Chinese to Western science and technology, including astronomy, mathematics, geography and mechanics. In these ways he earned a good reputation at court and amongst the upper classes.

Ricci learned Chinese and translated many science and mathematics books into the language. He saw no conflict between the veneration of Confucius and the cult of the ancestors and the Catholic faith.¹⁸⁵ As a result, Christianity became popular among the country's leaders. The converted Christians interpreted their new faith in the light of their Confucian understanding. During his time in China, Ricci faced three distinct though related issues. The first issue concerned the understanding and translations of terms such as Heaven (Tian) and Lord of Heaven (Tian Zhu) from the Latin term for God, Deus.¹⁸⁶ The second issue concerned the nature of ancestral worship, including sacrifices to Heaven and the public rites directed to Confucius as well as other officials and ancestors.¹⁸⁷ The third issue involved the question of who had jurisdiction over

185 John Young, *Confucianism And Christianity: The First Encounter* (Kowloon: Hong Kong University Press, 1983), 26.

186 Aylward Shorter, *Toward a theology of Inculturation*, 241. See also Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: a comparative Study*, 20.

187 Xinzhong Yao, *An introduction to Confucianism*, 241.

mission activities in China.¹⁸⁸ It is the second issue, the veneration of ancestors which is of central importance to this thesis, since it is the only issue that poses a serious challenge to liturgical inculturation. The fundamental question then and now is whether the sacrifice offered and the honour paid to ancestors have a religious character and are hence tainted with superstitions, or whether they are simply a civil and political rite that does not impact negatively on Christianity.

The Chinese celebrate with ritual offerings to ancestors in the presence of ancestral tablets at funerals as well as on the anniversaries of deaths and births. According to this tradition, as soon as a person dies, after washing and making up the body, a piece of white cloth with the name of the deceased is placed in front of the coffin and is carried to the cemetery. After the burial, this piece of cloth is carefully brought home and placed on the family altar to receive prayers and acts of piety from family members. This piece of cloth is eventually replaced with a wooden tablet, called an ancestral tablet. On this tablet are written the name, date of birth, the status of the deceased and the date the person died. It is believed that the soul of the deceased resides in this tablet. On the anniversary of the individual's birth and death or on important feasts, family members gather in front this tablet to perform an act of filial piety, an act of veneration. Joss-stick incense is lit, candlesticks are lit, and fruit is placed before the altar of ancestors.¹⁸⁹

188 Ibid.

189 Peter Phan, *In Our Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 111.

The missionary Ricci saw these rites as nothing more than social customs; he understood them as non-religious characters and, therefore, accepted them. Ricci addressed the cult of ancestors to the higher ranks of diplomats and bureaucrats and succeeded in creating interest in Christianity in the imperial city at Peking. Later in his mission, he made a huge contribution to Chinese scholarship and was the author of more than twenty works in Chinese.¹⁹⁰ Needless to say, Ricci and his fellow Jesuit missionaries, having realized that the Gospel cannot exist without a contingent cultural expression, became involved in a profound dialogue with the Chinese about their religious faith. In fact, the Chinese appreciated and accepted Ricci and his fellow missionaries.

Suspecting that Chinese culture might reject the Gospel as foreign, Ricci attempted to develop a Christian interpretation of Chinese culture which would, in turn, provoke a Chinese interpretation of Christianity presented in this sympathetic Chinese form.¹⁹¹ The Jesuit missionaries began evangelization of the Chinese from within their culture, accepting the veneration of ancestors as well as the cult of Confucius as legitimate, except when any of these rites blatantly became superstition. For example, with regard to ancestor worship, Ricci wrote in his memoir:

The most solemn thing among the literati and in use from the king down to the very least being is the offering they annually make to the dead at certain times of the year of meat, fruit, perfumes, and pieces of silk cloth – paper among the poorest – and incense. And in this act they make the fulfilment of their duty to

190 Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 158.

191 Ibid.

their relatives, namely, “to serve them in death as though they were alive.” Nor do they think in this matter that the dead will come to eat the things mentioned or that they might need them; but they say they do this because they know of no other way to show their love and grateful spirit toward them [the dead]. And some of them told us that this ceremony was begun more for the living than for the dead, that is, to teach children and the ignorant ones to honour and serve their living relatives, since they [the children] see serious people doing the offices for the relatives after their deaths that they were wont to do to them when they [the relatives] were alive. And since they do not recognize any divinity in these dead ones, nor do they ask or hope for anything from them, all this stands outside of idolatry, and also one can say there is probably no superstition, although it will be better for the souls of these dead ones, if they are Christians, to change this into almsgiving to the poor.¹⁹²

The Dominicans, Franciscans, Augustinians and other religious orders who entered China after the Jesuits did not accept the rites of ancestors as the Jesuits did. After much debate and disputation, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, with approval of Pope Innocent X, condemned the Jesuit Chinese rites. The first condemnation came in 1704 when Pope Clement XI decreed that the veneration of ancestors and the use of the ancestral tablets were forbidden among Christians. The final and most forceful condemnation occurred on July 11, 1742 with Pope Benedict XIV’s Apostolic Constitution *Ex quo singulari* (From that extraordinary moment), which reviewed the history of the Chinese Rites Controversy from its inception in 1645 and quoted in full the various papal interdictions against the Chinese Rites. Benedict XIV then ordered *Ex illa die* (From that day) to be observed “exactly, integrally, absolutely, inviolably, and strictly” under pain of automatic excommunication reserved to the pope. The Pope wanted to settle the Chinese rites controversy once and for all,

¹⁹² Peter Phan, *In our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 112.

proclaiming that his edict was to “remain in force, all of it for all time to come.”¹⁹³ This created a split between the Chinese court and the Roman Church, which led the Qing Emperor, Kang Xi (1660-1720), to reverse his policy in regard to the activities of the Christian missionaries.¹⁹⁴ This response marked the end of the encounter between Confucianism and Christianity.

The Chinese Rites controversy began as intermissionary debates and transformed itself into mutual recriminations between Rome and the Chinese emperors. Rome’s decision was quick to ignore the interpretation that the Chinese gave to the rites: that Confucius was honoured as a teacher, not a god, that sacrificial offerings to dear ones were intended as memorial services not worship, that ancestral tablets represented a focus for filial attention and devotion, and no more.¹⁹⁵ It is clear that:

The Jesuit effort to bring Christianity to China in the seventeenth century came to grief over the “Rites Controversy.” The missionaries were troubled over whether the ritual acts addressed before images of heroes, before grave and ancestral tablets were directed to actual entities believed to be efficacious in their own right, and therefore acts of idolatry, or whether they were to imply acts of respect and veneration directed towards an overarching beneficent will. But for the Confucian this was not an issue at all. The issue was not what was believed but what was done. These were acts that moulded the community into a whole that differentiated the living from the dead, heaven from earth, the human from other realms of reality, the responsible from those to whom responsibility was held in trust and in so doing bound them together in mutual obligation and harmony. In short, these were acts incumbent upon the

193 Ibid.

194 Ibid., 113-115.

195 For detail see Julia Ching, *Confucianism And Christianity: A Comparative Study*, 23.

community because they constituted the community for what it was. What particular individuals may or may not have believed was a decidedly secondary matter. The Confucian was concerned for worldly relevance, not the ecstasies of faith.¹⁹⁶

Two hundred years later, the Church reconsidered the Chinese rites and adopted a more flexible stance in *Propaganda Fide*, which tried to distinguish between the religious and secular aspects of culture. Secular culture was not to be ignored, but whatever did not conform to Catholic faith and morals must be uprooted. The document recommends:

Do not make any effort or use any argument in favour of forcing the people to change their customs or traditions, as long as these are not clearly opposed to religion and morality. What could be more absurd than to import France, Spain, Italy, or any other country of Europe into China.¹⁹⁷

Propaganda Fide, issued on December 8, 1939, with Pope Pius XII's approval, carried the instruction *Plane compertum est* (It is clear) which stated that:

(1) it is lawful for Catholics to participate in public honours paid to Confucius; (2) the image or name tablet of Confucius may be placed in Catholic schools and saluted by a head bow; (3) if Catholics are required to assist at public functions that appear to be superstitious, they should maintain a passive attitude; and (4) bows of heads and other marks of respect in front of the deceased or their images or name tablets are lawful and honourable. In addition, the requirement of the oath was abolished.¹⁹⁸

196 Peter K.H. Lee, *Confucian-Christian Encounters In Historical And Contemporary Perspective*, 101.

197 Sacred Congregation de *Propaganda Fide* (Collectanea, Rome 1907, Cap. X, No. 300), 103.

198 Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 113-115.

In 1939, Pope Pius XII issued his *Instructio Circa Quasdam Caeremonias Super Ritibus Sinensibus* (Instruction on Certain Ceremonies of the Chinese Rites) which approved traditional Chinese funeral rites and the cult of the familial dead. Within a few years, China became Communist, and Catholics were persecuted largely because of their foreign characteristics and connections. In Taiwan, after the Second Vatican Council, the Catholics of Nationalist China were able to celebrate their ancestral cult in the context of the Christian liturgy itself. One cannot help wondering what the history of the church in mainland China would have been if the Catholic authorities had been sufficiently mature theologically in the eighteenth century to accept Matteo Ricci's experiment.¹⁹⁹

The Rites controversy has remained an emotional issue among missionaries in China and in Asia. The condemnation of ancestral veneration was a tragic mistake and a disaster for the Church in Asia, as many Asians, especially the eldest sons, refused to convert to Christianity because it was seen as a foreign religion that prohibited what was most honourable, sacred and religious in their cultures. Since the Chinese Rites Controversy has had a great effect on the development of Christianity in Vietnam, it is to the place of these debates in the conversion of the Vietnamese and the communication of the Christian message in Vietnam that we must now turn.

199 Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 159.

Christianity in Vietnam

In comparison with the other Vietnamese religions described earlier, Christianity was introduced relatively recently. When one says Christianity in Vietnam, one means Catholicism, as most Vietnamese Christians are Catholics. Historically, the first Western missionaries to Vietnam were Portuguese Franciscan missionaries,²⁰⁰ followed by Spanish Dominicans, the Jesuits, the Augustinians and the Barnabites.²⁰¹ These missionaries spread their message in a practical fashion, touching many fields. From 1613 to 1645, Portuguese Jesuit missionaries based in Macau (China) came to Vietnam.²⁰² One of the most famous French Jesuits to work in Vietnam in the mid-seventeenth century was Alexandre de Rhodes (1593-1660)²⁰³ whom Vietnamese Catholics still regard highly.

De Rhodes arrived in Vietnam in December 1624.²⁰⁴ After a few months of language study, De Rhodes traveled extensively from South to North opening missions, training lay catechists and prayer leaders for each mission. One of his Vietnamese catechists, Brother Andrew *Phú Yên*, was arrested and put to death in 1644, the first

200 Roland Jacques, *Les missionnaires Portugais*, 31, footnote 7: "*Quelques Franciscains espagnols qui s'égarèrent sur les côtes du Viêt-nam dès 1583-1584, mais disparurent sans guère laisser de traces et sans jamais avoir appris les rudiments de la langue locale.*" See also p. 52, note 23.

201 Phan Phát Huân, *History of The Catholic Church in Vietnam*, Tome I:1533-1960 (Long Beach, Ca: Cứu Thế Tùng Thư, 2000), 37.

202 Ibid., 12-13.

203 Ibid., 27.

204 Ibid., 27.

Vietnamese martyr. De Rhodes also began the formation of a native clergy since he realized the need for the evangelization of Vietnam through its own people. Father de Rhodes continued the work of the invention of the *Quốc Ngữ* script, a translation of the Vietnamese language using the Roman alphabet as mentioned in Chapter One. With this new *Quốc Ngữ* script, more and more Vietnamese Catholics were able to read Scripture. De Rhodes also worked out a plan to persuade the king of France as well as the French elite to establish the Paris Foreign Missionary Association.²⁰⁵ Unfortunately, on July 3, 1645, De Rhodes was accused of being a Western spy and was expelled permanently from Vietnam. While in Rome, he continued to lobby to have Vietnam brought into the Catholic administrative hierarchy. Following his request, in 1659 Pope Alexander VII appointed the first two Bishops to Vietnam, Lambert de la Motte for the South and François Pallu for the North²⁰⁶ despite the persecution that the Catholic Church faced at the hands of the traditional Vietnamese.

The Catholic Persecution

The Catholic Church in Vietnam was persecuted for many reasons, one of which was the political situation. Since 1532, Vietnam had been ruled by two clans,

205 Ibid., 32-33: “J’ai cru que la France, étant le plus pieux royaume du monde, me fournirait plusieurs soldats qui aillent à la conquête de tout l’Orient, pour l’assujettir à Jesus-Christ, et particulièrement que j’y trouverais moyen d’avoir des évêques, qui fusent nos pères et nos maîtres en ces Églises...”

206 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 85.

the Trinh in the North and the Nguyen in the South. Military conflicts between these two families erupted in 1627 and war was waged until 1672, without decisive victory for either side. The rivalry between the North and the South greatly complicated missionary work. In fact, all missionaries were suspected and accused of being spies for the other side by both clans.²⁰⁷ Although the missionaries never collaborated with colonial powers, the Vietnamese judged the religion they preached to be associated with Westerners. Another source of Christian persecution was “the Chinese Rites” Controversy. When news that China had banned Christianity spread to Vietnam, expulsion and persecution of Catholic missionaries followed in Vietnam as well. The influx of Catholicism was linked to Western barbarian invasions.²⁰⁸ One historian wrote:

The kings in Vietnam prohibited Catholicism not because they were fanatic, but because they wanted to preserve the unity of the country, maintaining the national spirit and political stability. The Catholic’s denial of ancestral worshipping had degraded the efforts of such a unity.²⁰⁹

This statement underlies the resistance to Catholicism in Vietnam. It was the perceived threat posed by Christianity to the ancient tradition of ancestral veneration that made the seventeenth-century Chinese reluctant to embrace the new religion; it was the same threat that led to more than 100,000 Vietnamese Christians being put to

207 Đào Duy Anh, *Việt Nam Văn Hóa Sử Cương*, 329.

208 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-Americans Catholics*, 87-88.

209 Phan Phát Huân, *History of The Catholic Church in Vietnam*, 375.

death in the nineteenth century.²¹⁰ The fact that the Catholics did not venerate their ancestors did not mean that they did not respect their forefathers or parents. Unfortunately the Catholic Church did not understand the nature of the veneration of ancestors, considering it as atheism,²¹¹ and prohibiting its practice. Christianity failed in Vietnam because of the human factor, not because Christian doctrines were alien to the Vietnamese mindset. It was not until 1964 that Vietnamese Catholics were allowed to practise the cult of ancestors but the damage of the earlier cultural missteps of the Church has been incalculable.

Missionaries were divided in their attitudes about the cult of ancestors. Bishop Alexander (d. 1738) excommunicated Charles de Flory, superior of the French missionaries in South Vietnam, for allowing these culturally adapted rites.²¹² Many Vietnamese Catholics left the Church because they were not allowed to carry out the sacred duties of filial piety. Most Vietnamese became hostile to Christianity. During the persecution of Vietnamese Catholics in the nineteenth century, there was a slogan to rally the people “*bình Tây, sát tả hịch*”²¹³ which means literally destroy the West and kill the evil religion (that is, Christianity). Christianity was viewed as evil precisely because it prohibited ancestral veneration.²¹⁴ In the eighteenth century, the

210 Peter Phan, *Christianity With an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making*, 135.

211 Phan Phát Huồn, *History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam*, 376.

212 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 88.

213 Phan Phát Huồn, *History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam*, 690.

214 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 52.

Vietnamese persecutions of Christians became even more severe, because Confucian monarchists believed that:

Since Christianity came to Vietnam, with its doctrine of praising the Lord of the universe, and saints, many ignorant people of ours have ignorantly joined them, and neglected in fulfilling their duties as children in the family as well as citizens in the nation....These people have destroyed the framework of morality, causing a chaotic situation all over the country as if the sea is under a roaring storm....Where is the root of these troubles if it is not because of the Christians?²¹⁵

In the middle of seventeenth century, many foreign missionaries were expelled from Vietnam at the same time. During the persecutions following the Chinese rites controversy, many Catholics went into hiding in the remote area of *La Vang* in the centre of Vietnam, but they were encircled by soldiers bent on exterminating them. It is said that during the battle, the Virgin Mary appeared to the faithful to help calm their fears and strengthen their faith. In gratitude, they built a church in her honour, which later was expanded to become a basilica.²¹⁶

215 Phan Phát Huân, *History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam*, 690.

216 This event helped foster a tremendous devotion in Vietnamese Catholics to the Mother of God under the title "Our Lady of *La Vang*." Daily recitation of the rosary and observance of Marian feast days are cherished family devotions of Vietnamese Catholics. In Carthage, Missouri, the Vietnamese Congregation of The Mother Co-Redemptrix, a group of Catholic brothers and priests, organize an annual devotion to Mary referred to as Marian Days. The Marian days celebration attracts tens of thousands of Catholics of Vietnamese descent from all over the United States and Canada. Estimates of crowds for Marian Days vary between 30,000 and 60,000 from year to year. The festival is a way for people to worship God and honour the Virgin Mary, and provides a chance for Vietnamese Catholics to explore not only their faith but also their culture.

With *Gia Long's* accession to power in 1802, the Church enjoyed a period of relative peace. The Catholic Church was granted privileges of all kinds, which were used vigorously to expand its influence.²¹⁷ As in so many other instances however, the privileges quickly gave way to abuse. In no time the Catholic communities came to exercise such a disproportionate religious and cultural domination in Vietnam, that reaction became inevitable. Reaction turned into ostracism, and eventually into the persecution of anything European which, more often than not, meant anything Catholic. Notably, the reign of *Tự Đức* (1848-1883) resumed the persecution of Catholics since this Confucian monarch feared that the new religion would undermine the traditional family and social order. It is estimated that 130,000 Catholics were killed for the last four decades of nineteenth century, 117 of whom were canonized as Holy Martyrs by Pope John Paul II in 1988.²¹⁸ The feast day of the Vietnamese Martyrs is November 24th.

During the nineteenth century, as mentioned in Chapter One, Vietnam came into contact with France. In 1883, Vietnam became French colony, which brought Vietnamese independence to an end.²¹⁹ With French domination of Vietnam, Catholic missionaries were given special privileges throughout the new Vietnamese regions. Catholic missionaries not only had power in religious and cultural matters, but also in

²¹⁷ Ibid., 333-336.

²¹⁸ Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 88-89.

²¹⁹ Trần Trọng Kim, *Việt Nam Sử Lược*, 577-579.

social, economic and political affairs. Through this period, the Catholic Church again expanded. Many churches were built and prestigious schools were opened. Religious brothers and sisters worked in schools and hospitals and through these institutions, the Catholics, while a distinct minority, developed a pervasive influence on Vietnamese society. In 1933, the Vietnamese clergy saw the consecration of its first Bishop, Msgr. Nguyen Ba Tong.²²⁰ From that point, the Vietnamese vicariates were gradually placed under the jurisdiction of native Bishops.

After undergoing 300 years of oppression and persecution, the Catholic Church enjoyed a peaceful existence in Vietnam, starting from 1888 until 1960. For more than half a century, friars, priests, nuns, bishops and French military and civil governors set to work to implant Catholicism throughout Vietnam. The original native Catholics were regrouped into special villages and intensive mass conversion to Catholicism was undertaken everywhere.²²¹ On December 8, 1960, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Pope John XXIII established the Vietnamese Catholic hierarchy. Thus, after four hundred years of mission, the Vietnamese Catholic Church became a fully-fledged Church with its own hierarchy.²²²

There was, however, a major set back on the horizon in Vietnam. As mentioned in Chapter One, in 1954, Vietnam had been divided into South and North. The

220 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 89.

221 Phan Phát Huân, *History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam*, 771.

222 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 90.

Communist leader *Hồ chí Minh* and his followers blindly applied the Marxist doctrine in Vietnamese society in the North. *Hồ* and his communist party adopted Lenin's policy in the former Soviet Union to extirpate all religions in Vietnam, forcing the Vietnamese people to deny their religious beliefs. The Vietnamese Communists believed that:

Religion is a form of mental oppression, and it is present everywhere, imposing on the mass with miseries, forcing them to work all their life for others' sake.... Religion is a hypnotic drug that lulls people to sleep. Religion is an alcoholic drink that turns people into slaves of the capitalist, that degrades human beings' dignity. Religion weakens people's will to fight for a genuine life.²²³

Under the Communists, the North Vietnamese Catholic Church and its institutions were quickly suppressed. When, in 1975, Communist North Vietnam conquered the South, the Vietnamese Catholic Church once again faced a severe challenge. All of its educational and social institutions as well as its seminaries were confiscated, many priests were incarcerated, and churches closed. Despite these external difficulties, however, the Vietnamese Catholic Church remained vibrant and strong.

It is obvious that the dominant Christian influence in Vietnam has been Catholicism. Protestant denominations started much later in Vietnam, and as a result have not achieved the same popularity as the Catholic Church. Since the end of World War II, however, Protestant missionaries have taken an increasing interest in Vietnam,

²²³ Phan Phát Huồn, *History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam*, 805-806.

and their influence has steadily, if slowly, increased. Protestant Christianity in Vietnam is known as *Tin Lành* (Good News). It was introduced to Vietnam under the auspices of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church by Robert A. Jaffrey in 1911. By 1975, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam had 510 churches with 54,000 members and 900 laypeople theologically trained. When the Communists took over the South in April 1975, 90 pastors were sent to re-education camps, and 3 were executed in 1978. Despite extreme difficulties, however, Protestant churches, like the Catholic Church, are currently experiencing a healthy revival.²²⁴

Being a Vietnamese Confucian and a Vietnamese Christian

As discussed in Chapter One, a major tenet of Vietnamese belief is the harmony of *tam tài*: Heaven, Earth and Humanity. These three are intrinsically related and interdependent.²²⁵ From this tripartite harmony, a Vietnamese Christian can correlate the Christian doctrine of the Trinity: God, the Father relates to Heaven, (*ông Trời*) who, according to the Vietnamese belief, is the supreme Being, who gives birth and directs the world through his will. God, the Son, relates to Humanity, whose function is to harmonize and reconcile his brothers and sisters with Heaven, God the Father. Finally, God the Holy Spirit relates to Earth, whose function is to nurture with

224 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 94.

225 Ibid., 103.

his gifts.²²⁶ One can discern that Christian faith in the Holy Trinity is not totally alien to Vietnamese belief in the harmony of *Tam tài*. Vietnamese Catholics live within a cultural framework undergirded by Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist values and moral norms. They are socialized into these values and norms through popular proverbs, folk sayings, songs, family rituals and cultural festivals. Scratch the surface of every Vietnamese Catholic, and you will find a Confucian, a Taoist, and a Buddhist, or, more often than not, an indistinguishable mixture of the three.²²⁷

The concept that successful individual human relations form the basis of society is at the heart of Confucianism. As mentioned earlier, Confucius believed that to bring order to society, one must first bring order to the family which ultimately brings order to the community, and finally to the government. In other words, family is the centre of society. Within the family, filial piety is considered to be the most important belief: children must honour their parents, putting their parents' comfort, interests and wishes above their own. Like Confucianism, Christianity recognizes that children are duty bound to honour and respect their parents, which is part of the Ten Commandments.

Confucianism also values social hierarchy. Like Confucianism, Christianity recognizes that when primary relationships, such as those within the nuclear family, are correct and appropriate, the larger society benefits and prospers. Like Confucianism,

²²⁶ Ibid., 103-105.

²²⁷ Peter Phan, *Christianity With an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making*, 234.

Christians are called by God to put the desires of others above their own (1 Corinthians 10:24; Philippians 2:3-4).²²⁸

Vietnamese Filial Piety (*đạo hiếu*) From Christian Perspective

According to Vietnamese belief, there are two familial relationships that underlie filial piety. The first one is *hiếu*, which represents the vertical relationship of parent-child, and the second one is *Đễ* literally brother, which represents the horizontal line, which emphasizes brotherly and sisterly love and responsibility.²²⁹ Both arise from blood relationships. It is both God's law²³⁰ and Vietnamese tradition upon which the family-ancestry relationship is built. Filial piety is highly compatible with Christian values. Filial piety, the relationship between children and parents is compared to the relationship between God and human beings, as Peter Lee explains:

God's love for us is like the love of parents for their children. Parents first build the house and prepare land, furniture and other household things, and then have the children live in it. Likewise, God first made the heavens to cover, the earth to hold, the sun and moon to give light, the five kinds of grains and hundred fruits to nourish; and then finally God made human beings.²³¹

228 Peter Cha, et al, *Following Jesus Without Dishonouring Your Parents*, 21.

229 For more details about "hiếu-đễ", see Đào Duy Anh, *Việt Nam Sử Cương*, 241.

230 Exodus 20:12: "Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." And Luke 10:27.

231 Peter K.H. Lee, *Confucian-Christian Encounters in Historical and Contemporary Perspective*, 201.

This statement emphasizes the parallel relationships between God-humanity and parents-children. Therefore, our love for God can be explained in the Vietnamese concept of 'filial piety.' Vietnamese children are taught from an early age that they, simply by virtue of being alive, are indebted to their parents for the food they eat, the house they live in, and most of all for life itself. As children must have an obligation of filial piety towards their parents, so human beings have the same obligation towards God, their creator.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Vietnamese belief emphasizes the immortality of the soul and as a consequence people set up altars in their homes for the veneration of their ancestors. The Vietnamese people are mindful of their ancestors not only in their daily lives but also, as we have seen in Chapter Two, in Vietnamese feasts and celebrations which are manifestations of this relationship. Ancestral celebrations represent a time for family members to gather for prayers in memory of the deceased and show support for each other. Also, on these occasions, family issues are discussed and resolved, kinfolk acknowledge each other, and the young and old share their dreams and successes. Each family member is reminded forcefully that they are connected by a special ancestry, and consequently should enhance their family fame and influence, and reaffirm their efforts in life.²³² This ancestral devotion is not a superstitious belief but rather an expression of respect, a grateful remembrance of the

232 *The Church of Our Lady of Vietnam: Its Architecture and Meanings in Vietnamese Culture* (Silver Spring, MD: No date), 28.

ancestors' sacrifices for their children, a fulfillment of the promise to carry on the legacy of their lives and works, and a manifestation of obedience to their parents' wishes. "*Hiếu*" is thus the guiding light for their personal and interpersonal life, the inner peace for life in this world and in the next.²³³

A simple way of explaining of the concept of Christian filial piety is to look at the example of the spiritual childhood of Saint Theresa of Lisieux, who adapted the filial piety of a child towards its parents as her starting point, and applied it, as a child born of the spirit, in her relations with God. The most Reverend Luis M. Martinez has illustrated this point:

The gift of piety inspires us with sentiments of confidence, and prompts us to give ourselves to Him. A child trusts its father, and gives him its heart; a soul under the influence of the gift of piety has complete confidence in God and gives itself wholly to Him. For more than nineteen centuries we have had this sublime thought from the Gospel: "Unless you...become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:3. Yet no one before saint Theresa of Lisieux so perfectly understood, expressed, and practised the way of spiritual childhood.²³⁴

If one studies carefully how Theresa served God and her parents, one must acknowledge that she exemplifies how the precept of filial piety should be practised. What makes her the epitome of the virtue of filial piety is that she was a living example of the divine filial piety that Christ showed his Father. As Paul Sih relates:

When the love of a filial son goes really deep, he will naturally possess a spirit of harmony; when he has the spirit of harmony, he will naturally shed an atmosphere of gladness; when he has the atmosphere of gladness,

²³³ Ibid., 24.

²³⁴ Paul K.T. Sih, *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality*, 97.

his countenance and manners will radiate a spontaneous charm and grace.²³⁵

The teachings of Christ and Saint Paul subordinate filial piety on the natural plane to that of a higher filial piety, which we owe to the Father of all. Christ's filial love for His Mother lasted until the very end of His life on earth, when he transferred it to his apostle John: "Behold, thy Mother" and to his Mother: "Behold, thy son."²³⁶ As the first-born son and as eldest brother, Jesus offers his perfect sacrifice of filial obedience to God, His Father and ours.²³⁷

We have seen filial piety as it expresses itself from both Vietnamese and Christian perspectives. It is clear that filial piety, though it is experienced and practised in different ways, crosses cultural lines and is compatible with Christian values.

Vietnamese Images of Jesus

It is helpful to see how filial piety is exemplified in the person of Jesus from a Vietnamese perspective. Producing a boy in a Vietnamese family is a "must" because it is the eldest son who assumes the duties of his father when the latter dies. The first-born son is considered the heir of the family; the eldest brother is expected to fulfill the duties and obligations of filial piety. Given this central place and responsibility, the

235 Ibid., 179.

236 Jn 19:26-27.

237 Heb 1:5; 12:1-11, also see Peter Phan, *Vietnamese American Catholics*, 105-106.

place of Jesus in the blessed Trinity is especially important and unique among the Vietnamese.

Jesus as the Eldest Son and Model of Filial Piety²³⁸

In the Gospel, Jesus is described as the firstborn Son: “And she gave birth to her firstborn son.”²³⁹ As the first-born Son, Jesus is also the eldest brother. We have been adopted by God as God’s children. We have a share in Jesus’ unique Sonship and become his sisters and brothers: “Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.”²⁴⁰ Because Jesus is the Firstborn Son and the Eldest Brother, we are permanently adopted into God’s family; and Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters.²⁴¹ Furthermore, Jesus is ‘firstborn of all creation’ and ‘firstborn from the dead,’ therefore He is ‘eldest brother’ not only of the human race, but also of old and new creation alike.²⁴²

After the incident in the Temple, Jesus returned home with his parents and was obedient to them as Luke recounts: “He went down with them and came to Nazareth,

238 Xinzhong yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, 242; also see Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 105; and Peter Phan, *Christianity With an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making*, 136.

239 Luke 2:7.

240 Romans 8:29.

241 Cf. Hebrews 2:11.

242 Cf. Colossians 1:15-18

and was obedient to them."²⁴³ Jesus was always respectful towards his mother. For example, He praised her for doing God's will: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."²⁴⁴ Not the only interpretation of that verse, Jesus carried out her wishes,²⁴⁵ and looked after her well being.²⁴⁶ In the gospels, Jesus is depicted as the model of filial piety, particularly in his obedience to his Father's will: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work."²⁴⁷ Jesus obeyed his Father's will even accepting death: "Father! If this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done."²⁴⁸ In obedience, He offers his perfect sacrifice of filial obedience to God.²⁴⁹ In other words, God's love for us was demonstrated through the obedience of His Son Jesus (cf. 1John 4:10). Furthermore, fatherly love in the church is represented by the Christian's submission to God the Father. Jesus is the Eldest Son and Mary, his Mother, submits to him: "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"²⁵⁰ Our compliance to the Father's known will reveals how deeply we care about Him.

²⁴³ Luke 2:51.

²⁴⁴ Luke 8:21.

²⁴⁵ John 2:1-12.

²⁴⁶ John 19:26-27.

²⁴⁷ John 4:34.

²⁴⁸ Matthew 26:42.

²⁴⁹ Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 106.

²⁵⁰ Luke 2:49.

Jesus can be seen as the epitome of filial piety. A belief in Jesus thus complements rather than threatens Vietnamese concepts of the expression of correct family relations. The view of Jesus as God the Son is naturally accommodated by Vietnamese filial piety.

Jesus as the Ancestor²⁵¹

In addition to being the Firstborn Son and the Eldest Brother, Jesus is also an Ancestor. By his death and resurrection Jesus became an ancestor: he is no longer dead but is alive among his brothers and sisters. The New Testament repeatedly presents Jesus as the new Adam, at once precursor and ancestor of the new human race. Luke's genealogy of Jesus explicitly links him to Adam.²⁵² Mark describes how, like the old Adam, Jesus dwelt among the animals.²⁵³ Behind the pre-Pauline hymn in Philippians 2, there is an implied contrast between the old Adam, who sought to make himself equal to God, and Jesus the new Adam, who did not jealously cling to his life.²⁵⁴ Besides these implicit references, texts such as 1 Corinthians 15:45-49 and Romans 5:12-21 explicitly contrast the first Adam with Christ as new Adam: the former marked by filial impiety (disobedience) and the latter by filial piety (obedience); the

²⁵¹ Peter Phan, *Vietnamese American Catholics*, 107. Also see Peter Phan, *Christianity With an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making*, 140-143.

²⁵² Luke 3:23-38.

²⁵³ Mark 1:13.

²⁵⁴ Philippians 2:2-11.

former a wicked and disobedient ancestor who brought death and condemnation, and the latter a pious and obedient ancestor who restored life and justification. Lastly, as Proto-Ancestor,²⁵⁵ Jesus is now object of the worship of his spiritual descendants. As Paul K.T. Sih explains:

As Christians, we believe that Christ is the light of all the whole world, from East to West. Whatever differences there may be between East and West can only be in the accidentals, not in the essentials; and we may be sure that such differences and varieties as we can find are permitted to exist that they may express the infinite glory of God to the fullest extent possible on earth.²⁵⁶

There cannot be a perfect comparison between Jesus and any familial ancestor, since Jesus is God. Nevertheless, from a Vietnamese perspective of ancestral veneration, the accommodation of traditional Vietnamese ancestral veneration arises naturally from this representation of Christ as Ancestor.

Ancestral Veneration and Catholic Practice in Vietnam

As stated in Chapter Two, the veneration of ancestors is embedded in Vietnamese celebrations. It is integral in Vietnamese culture and the most popular belief of Vietnamese people. After carefully studying the cult of the ancestors, the Vietnamese bishops were able to distinguish the core or original impulse behind the rite of ancestors and what has been added later. On June 14, 1965, the Vietnamese bishops, in a communication entitled "The Veneration of Ancestors, National Heroes,

²⁵⁵ Cf. Colossians 1:15-18

²⁵⁶ Paul K.T. Sih, *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality*, 158.

and War Dead” spelled out the concrete norms to apply to *Propaganda Fide*’s instruction.²⁵⁷ 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, that appear to be superstitious, and are performed in places reserved for worship; and those that are of an ambiguous nature. The first type of act is not only permissible but also encouraged and promoted, the second is prohibited, and the third needs to be examined according to the common local opinion. If the third type of act of veneration is considered to be of a non-religious nature, it is permissible. If doubt concerning its nature persists, however, it is permissible to act according to one’s conscience, but possible explanations of one’s intention should be given with due tact, or one can participate in a passive manner.²⁵⁸

On April 12, 1974 the Vietnamese bishops issued another communication in which they specified a list of activities, attitudes, and rituals deemed permissible.²⁵⁹ First of all, according to the communication, an ancestral altar dedicated to the veneration of ancestors may be placed under the altar dedicated to God, provided that nothing superstitious such as the “white soul” [the white cloth representing the dead] is

257 For full text in Vietnamese see Appendix 1.

258 *Sacerdos* # 43 (July 1965), 489-492.

259 January 19, 07, <http://e-cadao.com/phongtuc/Cacnhatruyengiao.htm> or see Appendix 1.

placed there.²⁶⁰ Today, the picture of the deceased is commonly placed on the ancestral altar. As signs of respect and reverence, burning incense and lighting candles are permitted 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. On special occasions, such as on anniversaries of death, it is permissible to present the dead person with offerings of commemorative cult according to local custom, provided that one eliminates superstitions such as burning paper money. Burning paper money in non-Catholic culture is an offering of money to the dead because it is believed that the dead still require money for their needs. The Vietnamese bishops 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.²⁶¹

During 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. As mentioned in Chapter Two, these rituals are expressions of gratitude toward, recognition of, and self-presentation to the ancestors. During 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 of expressing veneration for the dead person, just as the Church

260 Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 123-124.

261 Ibid., 124.

permits the use of candles, incense, and inclination before the corpse. The Vietnamese bishops also encouraged Catholics to participate in 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. However, they forbade Catholics from expressing a superstitious belief in evil spirits and harmful ghosts.²⁶²

Vietnamese Catholics can practise this cult of ancestral veneration in all sincerity, then, without superstition or fanaticism. It must be noted, however, that the veneration of ancestors still shocks Western Catholics. This is clear in the following anecdote:

After the fall of South Vietnam, on April 30th, 1975, there was exodus of refugees from Vietnam with waves of people fleeing the country and risking their lives for freedom. As was said earlier, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese families immigrated to North America, with about five hundred Vietnamese Catholic families settling in Hamilton and surrounding areas. In 1984, the Vietnamese Catholics in Hamilton were invited to worship at St. Ann church located at Barton Street and Sherman Avenue in Hamilton city, a parish which had about six hundred families.

After few years, Reverend O'Brien, pastor of Saint Ann Parish noticed a growing division between the Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese parishioners. Initially, the division was only apparent at social events like the annual bazaar weekend. The division grew, however, and began to influence the community dynamics. When approached, the Vietnamese felt bothered, even intimidated by some of the parishioners of Saint Ann community. One of the key differences of the Vietnamese culture that fed the conflict at Saint Ann parish was the veneration of ancestors. The Vietnamese liked to use stick incense and offer fruits as gifts, which was

262 *Sacerdos* # 156 (1974), 878-880. For more detail, see Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 124.

foreign to the original parish members. The parishioners of Saint Ann's were worried about the church building and what might be taking place inside the church. My impression as pastor for two years is that a general sentiment can be summarized in the following idea, that, for example: *"I do not like those Vietnamese practicing that funny tradition in our church. I know there is going to be some trouble if they keep that up. I just do not like them doing funny stuff in our church."*

The St. Ann's group expected the Vietnamese to assume their Western culture, values, and behaviour in the church community. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese retained many of their important cultural characteristics and performed traditional rituals in liturgical celebrations in their new Western church. As a result, cultural conflict developed, even though the two groups share a common belief and faith. Sadly the conflict was so great that Vietnamese Catholics decided to leave the Saint Ann Community in 1998.²⁶³

This example shows that cultural distrust, especially between two groups with vastly different backgrounds such as Western Catholics and South Eastern Catholics, in this case Vietnamese, can create a chasm so deep that it is difficult to broach. It is interesting that in Canada, which considers itself to be a tolerant society, a breakdown such as that seen in the Saint Ann's example can so easily occur. Ironically, Western Catholics, and particularly Canadian Catholics, do remember and revere their ancestors, memorializing them throughout the year, though they may not do so in the overt and ritualistic ways that Vietnamese do. In other words, the differences between the veneration of ancestors among the Westerners and among the Vietnamese "can be characterized as exclusively manifest differences, differences in form and personal

263 I had privilege to serve the Vietnamese Catholic Community at Saint Ann's Church for two years (1994-1996).

style, rarely in basic content.”²⁶⁴ Thus the exodus of Vietnamese Catholics from St. Ann’s was a product of ignorance and misunderstanding on both sides. On the one hand is the Canadian ignorance of Vietnamese custom, and on the other hand is the Vietnamese misunderstanding of the Canadian suspicions. Dialogue and education never happened.

Ancestral veneration is a tradition in human belief systems while veneration of saints is a part of a revealed religion, especially Catholicism. They are interconnected in that both relate to the veneration of respected deceased individuals. Both veneration of ancestors and veneration of saints have had a decisive influence in shaping the beliefs, moral code and behaviours of the Vietnamese Catholics. In the next chapter, I will describe this relationship between the Catholic doctrine of the Communion of Saints and the veneration of ancestors so as to suggest ways in which each of the two traditions might be better understood in light of the other.

264 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 206.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE VENERATION OF ANCESTORS IN THE VIETNAMESE TRADITION AND THE VENERATION OF SAINTS IN THE CATHOLIC TRADITION

The veneration of ancestors is an integral facet of Far Eastern culture especially in China and in countries, like Vietnam, that have been dominated or influenced by Chinese Confucian ideas. Respect for elders and ancestors as well as the dictum of filial piety are ingrained in Eastern peoples by their cultures. Catholicism does not have a direct parallel to the veneration of ancestors; however, it does have a related belief in the communion of saints, a broader concept that ties living and dead believers together in the community of the blessed. Understanding this relationship between the veneration of ancestors in Vietnamese tradition and the veneration of saints in the Catholic tradition will help to promote communion in the church, a communion that recognizes and celebrates the diversity of God's people in all their ethnic, racial and cultural richness. Let me be clear that I am not trying to persuade other Christians to follow these practices; rather, I am affirming and clarifying faithful Roman Catholic practice and its reliance on Scripture.

This chapter will review the meaning of the Catholic concept of the Communion of Saints from the perspective of Catholic teaching and Biblical sources. By doing so, one can deduce the close relationship between the veneration of ancestors in the Vietnamese tradition and the veneration of saints in the Western Catholic tradition. Since the Communion of Saints is linked to belief in the Mystical body of Christ, the connections between the saints both living and dead are paramount in

Christian belief, a fact that makes the acceptance of the proper veneration of ancestors even more compatible with Christian practice.

The Communion of Saints: a Vietnamese View

My own story provides an example of the way in which the Vietnamese memorialize their namesakes and their ancestors. After the Communist takeover of Vietnam in 1975, many Vietnamese people fled their country. I escaped from Vietnam in October 1984, and after six days and six nights on the ocean, we arrived in a small Indonesian island together with thirty other people. Every refugee was documented. Since I did not remember my date of birth, (the Vietnamese do not celebrate their birthday), I had to make up a birthday. I chose as the day of my birth the date that I landed safely from my ocean voyage, October 12. Even though the Vietnamese do not celebrate their day of birth,²⁶⁵ Vietnamese Catholics celebrate their feast day, or name day. My name day (Peter) is June 29, the feast of Saint Peter in the Roman Catholic calendar. Beside their name day, Vietnamese Catholics also celebrate feast days of national saints and local patron saints. A Vietnamese discerns that Vietnamese celebrations focus more on death than birth.

²⁶⁵ In Vietnam, most people do not celebrate the anniversary of their births. However, the Western customs of celebrating birthdays in gaining favour, particularly among the young and expatriates. See Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 54.

It is probable that none of my brothers or sisters would remember my mother's birthday, but we never forget the day of her death, July 23rd, which has now become a very special day for my family, the anniversary of our mother's death. I believe that when my resurrection day comes, I will see my mother again. In fact, the doctrine of the Communion of Saints becomes more immediate and real to me after my mother's death. Every July 23, my brothers and sisters in Vietnam go to my father's home to celebrate the anniversary of my mother's death. On this memorial day (*ngày giỗ*),²⁶⁶ all direct family members as well as their families, relatives and friends are invited to attend a memorial Mass for our mother. When we pray for those who have died and pray with the saints, we are strengthening and deepening these spiritual relationships. To a Vietnamese individual, this is just the way our time and effort spent with those we care about here and now strengthens our human relationships. We all then go to our father's place to share a meal with the family. In this way, we all honour the mother as ancestor.

Thus, Vietnamese Catholics celebrate a name day for the living and the anniversary of death for the deceased. In this way, they link the living and the dead in the Communion of Saints and carry out the veneration of ancestors in line with both traditions. As stated in Chapter One, all members of the Vietnamese extended family are closely bound by the common veneration of the dead. For Vietnamese Christians, the Communion of Saints is comparable to their extended family, i.e., the family of

²⁶⁶ Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 54.

God, because every member is related to one another by faith and all members are bound by the common veneration of the same Ancestor, Jesus.²⁶⁷

The Gospel of Matthew also reveals the importance of ancestors when it describes the genealogy of Jesus.²⁶⁸ Essentially, this genealogy places Jesus within his extended family and delineates his place among his own ancestors. The list contains a mixture of saints and sinners, some of whom are both – such as king David, who is at once a great ancestor of Jesus and a man who committed serious sin.²⁶⁹ The genealogy of Jesus tells us how we are all an important part of God's plan. Looking at this genealogy from a Vietnamese perspective, the list of related individuals belongs to an extended family. Jesus' ancestors ultimately lived and worked to bring forth Jesus, the Messiah, even if they did not realize at the time the importance of their role in salvation history. Similarly, each person has ancestors who help define who we are in the here and now. The veneration of saints becomes even more meaningful and wonderful when one realizes that through venerating the saints one is participating in a relationship with God and at the same time with other members of the Christian family. This link transcends one's own lifetime and connects one with good and holy men and women over the ages. Therefore Vietnamese people do not see death as the end, but as a part of life.

267 Cf. Romans 14:9, or see 'Jesus is Seen as the Ancestor' in Chapter Three. For more detail see Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 107.

268 Matthew 1: 1-16.

269 2 Samuel 11:11-27.

The Vietnamese accept death with composure.²⁷⁰ Indeed, it is common, especially in rural areas, for older Vietnamese to have their coffins ready in their homes as a preparation for death.²⁷¹ For example, my own grandparents had everything ready for their funeral while they were still living. Moreover, rich Vietnamese families build their own tombs before their death.²⁷² The Vietnamese believe that the spirit continues to live after death,²⁷³ a belief in survival of the soul that forms the spiritual basis for ancestral veneration, while the feeling of gratitude and affection for one's ancestors forms its moral foundation. Thus, ancestral veneration has a twofold focus: one is a concern for the dead, the other for the living. From a Vietnamese perspective, the Communion of Saints is at once the communion of the immediate and the extended families, the living and the dead.

The Communion of Saints in Catholic Teaching

According to Catholic theology, the Communion of Saints is the spiritual solidarity which binds together the faithful on earth, the souls in purgatory, and the saints in heaven in the organic unity of the Mystical body that has Christ as its head.²⁷⁴ The participants in this solidarity are called saints by reason of their destination in

270 Toan Anh, *Nếp Cũ: Con Người Việt Nam*, 294-295.

271 Ibid., 294.

272 Ibid., 295.

273 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 54.

274 *The Catechism of The Catholic Church*, 954.

heaven and of their partaking of the fruits of the Redemption.²⁷⁵ The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains the Communion of Saints in the following way:

When the Lord comes in glory, and all his angels with him, death will be no more and all things will be subject to him. But at the present time some of these disciples are pilgrims on earth. Others have died and are being purified, while still others are in glory, contemplating in full light, God himself triune and one, exactly as he is.²⁷⁶

This teaching provides a central concept in the understanding of who and what constitutes the Church. As members of God's family, the dead and the living, we are all bound by our Ancestor Jesus: "For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living."²⁷⁷ Jesus' resurrection shows us that this earthly life is only the entryway into an even fuller kind of living.²⁷⁸ This is the unbelievably good news about saints who have died before us: those who were close to us in life continue to share a spiritual bond with us after death. Our purpose in life is to become more and more deeply united with God and one another. It makes sense, then, that this process would continue after death. As Paul Molinari explains:

Death marks the end of their being part of the church on earth, but this does not mean, of course, that they are cut off from communion with Christ and all those who belong to Him. On the contrary, precisely in death the Christian who has lived in accordance with his calling, is incorporated indefectibly into the Mystical Body of his risen Lord, shares therefore in a

²⁷⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:2.

²⁷⁶ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 54; cf. Mt 25:31.

²⁷⁷ Romans 14:9.

²⁷⁸ John 12:24.

much deeper way in His eternal life and is thereby united in a new manner to all his brethren in the Lord.²⁷⁹

Vatican Council II described the Communion of Saints as three distinct but related states: the Church triumphant, suffering and militant.²⁸⁰

The Church triumphant is made up by those who have completed their earthly lives and now are fully in the presence of God.²⁸¹ St. Paul describes this community as "gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord."²⁸² And the Catholic Church honours these saints on November 1, the feast of All Saints.

The Church suffering is made up by those who, after death, for one reason or another, have not attained the wholeness and fullness of life that God intends for them. They need our prayers in order to complete their spiritual journey into heaven.²⁸³ As stated in Chapter Two, the Catholic Church commemorates and prays for all these faithful departed on All Soul's day (November 2). St. John Chrysostom (A.D. 392) explains this concept:

279 Paul Molinari, S.J., *Saints: Their Place in the Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 166.

280 Ibid., 16.

281 *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 954, 962 or See Canon George D. Smith, *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, II, 1264.

282 2 Corinthians 3:18.

283 Cf. Romans 11:22 and 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; for an expanded discussion of the biblical evidence for purgatory, see Patrick Madrid, *Where Is That In The Bible?* (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2002.)

Let us help and commemorate them. If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice,²⁸⁴ why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolations? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayer for them.²⁸⁵

The Catechism of the Catholic Church elaborates further:

In full consciousness of this communion of the whole Mystical Body of Jesus Christ,²⁸⁶ the Church in its pilgrim members, from the very earliest days of the Christian religion, has honoured with great respect the memory of the dead; and 'because it is a holy and a wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins' she offers her suffrages for them. Our prayer for them is capable not only of helping them, but also of making their intercession for us effective.²⁸⁷

The Church Militant is the Church's people here on earth. As disciples of Jesus, the Church militant walks along the paths in life to which God calls us, journeying in union not only with one another but also with our brothers and sisters who have passed away from this life. These three distinct states of the same church are in communion. The Church clarifies this in the following way:

Until the Lord shall come in his majesty, and all the angels with him (Mt. 25, 31) and death being destroyed, all things are subject to him (1 Cor. 15, 26-27), some of his disciples are exiles on earth, some having died are being purified, and others are in glory beholding 'clearly God himself triune and one, as he is,' but all in various ways and degrees are in communion in the same charity of God and neighbour and all sing the same hymn of glory to our God. For all who are in Christ, having his Spirit, form one Church and cleave together in him (Eph. 4, 16). Therefore the union of the wayfarers with the brethren who have gone to sleep in the peace of Christ is not in the least interrupted, but on the contrary,

284 Cf. Job 1:5.

285 Patrick Madrid, *Why is That in Tradition?*, 93-94.

286 Cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. See also Pope Pius XII's Encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*.

287 *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 958.

according to the perennial faith of the Church, is strengthened by a communication of spiritual goods.²⁸⁸

Moreover, all members of the Church constitute one family with God as the Father. As the Catholic Church teaches:

For all of us who are sons of God and constitute one family in Christ (Heb. 3,6), as long as we remain in communion with another in mutual charity and in one praise of the most holy Trinity, are corresponding with the intimate vocation of the Church and partaking in foretaste the liturgy of consummate glory. For when Christ shall appear and the glorious resurrection of the dead will take place, the glory of God will light up the heavenly city and the Lamb of God will be the lamp thereof (cf. Apoc. 21,24). Then the whole Church of the saints in the supreme happiness of charity will adore God and 'the Lamb who was slain' (Apoc.5, 12), proclaiming with one voice: 'To him who sits upon the throne and the lamb blessing, and honour, and glory, and dominion forever and ever.'²⁸⁹

The Communion of Saints is composed of all Christians, whether on earth, in heaven, or in purgatory.²⁹⁰ As the Catechism of the Catholic Church puts it:

After confessing 'the holy catholic Church,' the Apostle's Creed adds 'the communion of saints.' In a certain sense this article is a further explanation of the preceding: 'What is the Church if not the assembly of all the saints?' The communion of saints is the Church.²⁹¹

Finally, the Catechism of the Catholic Church summarizes this doctrine of the Communion of Saints, saying:

288 Lumen Gentium, VII: 49.

289 Ibid., VII: 51.

290 Augustine: "Neither are the souls of the pious dead separated from the Church which even now is the kingdom of Christ. Otherwise there would be no remembrance of them at the altar of God in the communication of the Body of Christ." (The City of God 20:9:2 [A.D. 419].)

291 *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 946.

Since all the faithful form one body, the good of each is communicated to the others....We must therefore believe that there exists a communion of goods in the Church. But the most important member is Christ since he is the head....Therefore, the riches of Christ are communicated to all the members, through the sacraments. As this Church is governed by one and the same spirit, all the goods she has received necessarily become a common fund.²⁹² And it is not merely by the title of example that we cherish the memory of those in heaven; we seek, rather, that by this devotion to the exercise of fraternal charity the union of the whole Church in the Spirit may be strengthened. Exactly as Christian communion among our fellow pilgrims brings us closer to Christ, so our communion with the saints joins us to Christ, from whom as from its head issues all grace, and the life of the People of God itself. We worship Christ as God's Son; we love the martyrs as the Lord's disciples and imitators, and rightly so because of their matchless devotion towards their King and Master. May we also be their companions and fellow disciples! (Martyrium Polycarpi, 17:Apostolic Fathers II/3, 396.)²⁹³

Thus, we see in these writings of the Catholic Magisterium that the concept of Communion of Saints is as an integral part of communion with the living and the dead.

Veneration of Saints From a Biblical View

Not only official Catholic dogma describes the Communion of Saints, but so also does the Bible itself. Indeed, both the Old and the New Testaments mention the 'Communion of Saints'. For example, in the Deuterocanonical Second Maccabees,

²⁹² Ibid., 947.

²⁹³ Ibid., 957.

Jeremiah the prophet prays for the Jews centuries after his death along with the deceased high priest Onias.²⁹⁴ The book of Revelation relates:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.²⁹⁵

In Catholic tradition, these deceased saints are praying for believers on earth, and, by logical extension, one can ask them for their intercessions. The deceased are described as being aware of earthly events,²⁹⁶ are more alive and unfathomably more righteous and obviously closer to God than we are.²⁹⁷ Thus, there is a sound biblical

294 See: 2 Maccabees 15:11-16. Please note: First and Second Maccabees are among those books found in the Catholic Bible but not in many of the Protestant Bibles. They are called the Deuterocanonical or Apocryphal books of the Bible. The Books of Maccabees tell us that it is a good thing to pray for the dead. During the Month of November, we pray for our loved ones that they might be healed of the effects of sin in their lives and be admitted into the eternal love of the Lord. And so we pray in beautifully poetic language: Eternal Rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.

295 Revelation 6:9-11, also see Revelation 7:9-17.

296 Hebrews 12:1.

297 Gregory of Nazianzus: "Yes, I am well assured that [my father's] intercession is of more avail now than was his instruction in former days, since he is closer to God, now that he has shaken off his bodily fetters, and freed his mind from the clay that obscured it, and holds conversation naked with the nakedness of the prime and purest mind . . ." (Orations [18:4] (A.D. 380.)

basis for praying to deceased saint ancestors, a veneration which spans many centuries of Judeo-Christian tradition.

Veneration of Ancestors in Western Culture

Remembrance of dead relations is a tradition within Western culture as well. For example, on the night his father died, Brett Favre, Green Bay Packers' quarterback, addressed the players in an emotional team meeting. He said he had no intention of leaving his football family, even at one of the lowest points in his life. Brett's father, Irvin Favre, had died of a heart-attack Sunday night while driving near his son's hometown of Kiln, Mississippi. The next day, Favre played his heavy heart out, inspiring his teammates to do great things. Favre passed for 399 yards and four touchdowns the day after his father's death, moving into second place in National Football League (NFL) history for career touch-down passes. He led the Packers to a 41-7 victory over the Oakland Raiders on Monday night. After the game he told reporters, "I knew that my Dad would have wanted me to play. I love him so much, and I love this game. It is meant a great deal to me, to my dad, to my family, and I did not expect this kind of performance, but I know he was watching tonight." Brett Favre admitted that he had never performed such a spectacular play before and he credited his dead father for the extra boost. Did the deceased Irvin contribute to the Packers' success that day in 2003? In all probability, he served only as an inspiration. As one of

Packers players, Wesley Walls, said of Irvin: "I think it is fair to say we were inspired by Irvin."²⁹⁸

This story illustrates well the relationship between the living and the dead. It helps understand the concept of the Communion of Saints and the way in which it affects real lives. It is a secular Western version of the veneration of ancestors, which I would argue is not unlike the love we are to express for the Communion of Saints. Brett Favre is not the only Western person to have this view of his father's death and of the continuation of his father's influence on him. The holy women and men who have gone before us continue to be with us. Their prayers and presence can give us the extra motivation we need to make the leap of faith into the arms of God. If we honour the memory of national heroes such as Terry Fox, or political heroes like Sir Alexander Mackenzie we can also honour the great Christian saints such as St. Peter, St. Matthew, St. Mary and the righteous men and women of the Old Testament such as Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob. This activity is a direct expression of the love reflected in ancestral veneration, or in Catholic terms, the Communion of Saints. If people should be honoured in general, God's special friends should be honoured even more. Affording honour to worthy individuals is a natural and accepted sentiment in Western culture and as we shall see has been part of Catholic belief for many years.

298 Favre, Packers Top Raiders 41-7 In Oakland, November 2, 2006, Packers.com at www.packers.com/news/stories/2003/12/22/2.

History of the Veneration of Saints in the Catholic Church

While the Communion of the Saints is terminology of a later date, the veneration of saints has been part of Christianity from the very beginning. Indeed, this practice arose from a long-standing tradition in the Jewish faith of honouring prophets and holy people with shrines. The Church's veneration of the saints began with the remembrance of the martyrs. Catholics remembered a certain martyr on the anniversary of his/her martyrdom. This annual and local veneration consisted essentially in the celebration of the Eucharist,²⁹⁹ and in due time, this was broadly applied to veneration of all the saints, including non-martyrs.³⁰⁰ Kelly, a Protestant historian, comments on this development:

A phenomenon of great significance in the patristic period (i.e., during the time of the Fathers of the Church; from the apostolic era to, roughly, the eighth century) was the rise and gradual development of veneration for the saints, more particularly for the Blessed Virgin Mary....The earliest in the field was the cult of martyrs, the heroes of the Faith whom Christians held to be already in God's presence and glorious in his sight. At first it took the form of reverent preservation of their relics and the annual celebration of their 'birthdays' (i.e., the date of their martyrdoms on which they were reborn into eternal life). From this it was a short step, since they (the martyrs) were now with Christ in glory, to seeking their help and prayers.³⁰¹

299 Paul Molinari, *Saints: Their Place in the Church*, 98.

300 Patrick Madrid, *Why Is That in Tradition?*, 87.

301 J.N.D. Kelley, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper Collins, 1978), 409; see also Patrick Madrid, *Why Is That in Tradition?*, 88.

St. Cyprian said of the martyrs: "You know that we offer the sacrifice in their memory every year when we commemorate the day of their passion."³⁰² The meaning of these rites is that we remain in communion with the saints, and that this communion is realized pre-eminently in the liturgical action, particularly in the celebration of the sacrifice of the Mass.³⁰³ In the Eucharist, Jesus offers thanks to God on our behalf as the head of the Mystical Body and as the eldest Son. Therefore the Mass is the meeting place par excellence between the Church on earth and the Church in heaven.³⁰⁴

Vietnamese tradition offers a parallel to this Christian belief: the head of the family is responsible for the proper veneration of ancestors. On the anniversary of the death of each ancestor, special rites are performed, consisting of making offerings, burning incense, bowing and praying before the altar. This is an occasion for members of the family, relatives, and even close friends to gather together to share a memorial meal. As stated in Chapter Two, whenever there is an occasion of family joy or sorrow, weddings, births, promotion, or funerals, rites are performed to honour ancestors.

302 Paul Molinari, *Saints: Their Place in the Church*, 98.

303 St. Augustine: "At the Lord's table we do not commemorate martyrs in the same way that we do others who rest in peace so as to pray for them, but rather that they may pray for us that we may follow in their footsteps." (Homilies on John 84 [A.D. 416].)

304 Paul Molinari, *Saints: Their place in the Church*, 98.

The Language Conflict: Worship of Saint – Worship of Ancestor

Language and its connotations often create clashes between cultures not only due to difficulties of translation but because of nuances of the language itself. This is especially true when we look at something as charged as differing religious practices and interpretations found in the Communion of Saints versus veneration of ancestors. There are two levels of cult in Confucian tradition: the cult of Heaven and the cult of ancestors.³⁰⁵ To understand the cult of ancestors we must first understand the cult of Heaven. Most Vietnamese believe in one Supreme Being, *Ông Trời*, who controls the entire universe. *Ông Trời* (Mr. Heaven) is regarded as the supreme deity, over and above the host of other spirits, especially the ancestors. Therefore, the cultic offerings to the spirits inferior to Heaven represent veneration rather than worship.

There is a parallel in Vietnamese culture between worship of *Ông Trời* and the honour offered to the host of other spirits just as for Christians there is a distinction between worship of God and honour offered to the all other saints who are with God. In this regard, one sees clearly that the Confucian rite of ancestors can be interpreted as veneration of ancestors, a belief that is compatible with Christian belief.

In technical liturgical language, the honour offered to the host of saints is called *dulia*, and is subordinate to that offered to Christ and to God, because in turning to the saints as human creatures, we pay tribute to a greatness which, though personal,

305 Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, 196-204.

nevertheless derives from Christ.³⁰⁶ As the terminology of Christian theology developed, the Greek term *latría* came to be used to refer to the honour that is due to God alone. And the term *dulia* came to refer to the honour that is due to human beings, namely, the saints. As Paul Molinari relates:

It is certain, then, that the Catholic Church honours the Saints with acts of cult and that she praises, honours, thanks and petitions both God and the Saints. But it is equally certain that in each instance her acts are motivated by a profoundly different spirit: we turn to God because of His transcendent, uncreated, infinite excellence; we address the Saints because of their participated, created, and limited excellence. Accordingly, through the same words of praise, honour, supplication and cult are used in each case; they are employed not in a univocal but in an analogous sense. In our encounter with God, our attitude is one of adoration, or the cult of *latría* – of one total submission and absolute dependence; in our associations with the Saints, our attitude will be one of *dulia* – of reverent supplication dynamically subordinated to the worship of God.³⁰⁷

A special term *hyperdulia* (beyond *dulia*) is employed to refer to the special honour given to the Virgin Mary because of her position. As Christ's Mother, Mary is more than the *dulia* given to other saints.³⁰⁸ Although the honour is greater, it is still of the same kind as that of the saints, since Mary was human and therefore limited. Unfortunately, these terms -*latría*, *dulia*, *hyperdulia*- were not clearly distinguished. More recently, Catholics have chosen to use the word 'adore' to describe the total and absolute submission to God and the word 'honour' for that due to the saints. One now

306 Paul Molinari, *Saints: Their Place in the Church*, 63.

307 Ibid., 131.

308 Ibid., 8.

says, typically that, one adores God and honours saints. Knowledge of this substantial difference in language and of the total dependence of the Saints on God in Christ not only helps avoid confusion but also aids our understanding of the doctrine of the Communion of Saints.

In Vietnam, the cult of ancestors is often called *đạo thờ ông bà*, which literally means religion that worships the ancestors.³⁰⁹ The expressions 'religion' and 'worship,' however, were unacceptable to Christian missionaries.³¹⁰ The same problem of language obtains in Vietnamese. Most people are confused about the word *kính thờ*. The word worship in Vietnamese is *kính thờ*, which means honour and respect. It is a word used to ascribe honour, worth, or excellence to anyone, whether a sage, a magistrate, or God. As Father Phan explains:

The word "*kính-thờ*", literally "venerate-adore", is a compound word; it may be used together, or singly, or in the reverse "*thờ-kính*" for living parents, dead ancestors, Christian saints, or God. The old objection that the cult of ancestors, insofar as they are invoked in prayer, is superstitious is a red herring, because no Vietnamese who practises this cult believes that the ancestors are divine, in the strict sense of this term.³¹¹

Likewise, in Western culture, the term worship simply means showing respect or honour. For example, British subjects refer to their magistrates as "Your Worship," although Canadians would say "Your Honour." In Christian tradition, the term worship used to have a similarly broad meaning, but in the early Christian centuries,

309 Peter Phan, *Vietnamese-American Catholics*, 51.

310 Ibid., 51.

311 Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 126.

theologians began to differentiate worship from honour. It is helpful also to clarify the way Vietnamese people use pictures in their veneration of ancestors and Catholics use statues in their veneration of saints.

Use of Pictures and Statues

One of the major areas of distinction between Catholic Christianity and other Christian denominations is the use of statues, icons or other representations of saints, the Blessed Mother and angels. For Catholics, another way of honouring saints, beside direct intercessions, is by wearing medals with their images and displaying statues and pictures of them in their homes. Catholics do these things as visual reminders of these saints who are waiting for us to call upon them for their powerful intercession. For example, when we display a small statue of Saint Michael the Archangel on an altar or in a child's room, we are reminded of his courage in rejecting Lucifer and fighting the good battle for Christ.³¹² Any type of picture or image of the saints, angels, Blessed Mother or Christ serves as a way to bring our hearts, minds and thoughts to God. Most people have pictures of family members and loved ones around their homes, which are visual reminders of those whom they love. With holy pictures or statues, we do not worship the actual stone from which the statue is made, nor the actual paper and frame from which a picture is made. Rather, we love and honour the saint in the same way that we cherish the friend or relative in the picture.

³¹² Revelation 12:7.

The veneration of the representation of holy ones is a tradition that can be traced back to the time of Old Testament. The use of statues and icons for liturgical purposes (as opposed to idols) also had a place in the Old Testament. As God commanded:

And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end; of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be.³¹³

God told Moses to 'make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.' So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live."³¹⁴ This shows the actual ceremonial use of a statue, looking to it to receive the blessing of healing from God. And again, Jesus tells us that he himself is what the bronze serpent represented, so it was a symbolic representation of Jesus.³¹⁵ There is no problem with statues—God had commanded them to be made—so long as people did not worship them. When they did, the righteous King Hezekiah had it destroyed,³¹⁶ which clearly illustrates the difference between the proper religious use of statues and idolatry.

³¹³ Exodus 25:18–20.

³¹⁴ Numbers 21:8–9.

³¹⁵ John 3:14.

³¹⁶ 2 Kings 18:4.

The proper use of statues and pictures was clarified in the eighth and ninth centuries A.D. during the controversy known as iconoclasm.³¹⁷ The iconoclastic controversy was so heated and divisive that an ecumenical council was convened in 787 at Nicaea.³¹⁸ The conciliar documents affirmed the legitimacy of painted representations because they reminded people of the truths of the Bible and inspired people to greater piety, while reminding people that such persons as those depicted are not mythical or fictive but real personages who lived and live.³¹⁹ Lawrence notes that “the one who venerates the image, venerates the person represented in that image.”³²⁰ This clarification developed in response to iconoclasm has a broader implication with regards to praying through the saints. Saints are seen as intercessors before God and as exemplars for us to model our lives upon. That role is clearly defined in the liturgy of the Church. For example, on the feast of the Vietnamese Martyrs, November 24, the opening prayer for the Mass reads:

O God, the source and origin of all fatherhood, you kept the blessed martyrs Andrew and his companions faithful to the cross of your Son even to the shedding of their blood. Through their intercession enable us to spread your love among our brothers and sisters, that we may be called and may truly be your children. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ,

317 The iconoclasts, people who engage in "image-breaking" in the eighth and ninth centuries, tried to remove religious art that sought to represent God and the saints. However, the Church decided that such art could be permitted. See, The Council of Nicaea (7th Ecumenical, 787 AD).

318 Lawrence S. Cunningham, *A Brief History of Saints* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 52.

319 January 07, <http://www.answers.com/topic/second-council-of-nicaea>

320 Lawrence S. Cunningham, *A Brief History of Saints*, 52-53.

your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, forever and ever. Amen.³²¹

Statues, paintings or pictures serve only as devices to recall the person or persons depicted.³²² Sacred objects have been used to facilitate communication with God and the saints and to transform an ordinary setting into a sacred space. Such devotions can be effective in a practical way. Unfortunately at times we come across Catholics who carry out their daily practices of devotions to certain Saints scrupulously, perhaps never turning their thoughts to the Lord. For example, a Catholic may pray to Saint Anthony when searching for lost items, but forget that Saint Anthony is only an intercessor. This kind of devotion could cause Catholics to stray from the genuine spirit of the cult of the Saints. As Paul Molinari expressed his regrets:

When these people enter the Church, they plant themselves in front of an image or a statue of a saint, without even adverting to the fact that there dwells in the Tabernacle God Himself, the Giver of life and grace, the fount of holiness - before whom they should kneel in adoration.³²³

The saints, by their prayers and example in life, help us develop and deepen our relationship with God. Most emphatically the saints are not to be idolized in and of themselves, but are conduits for our adoration of God. Similarly, in the Vietnamese

321 A Supplement to the Sacramentary for the Dioceses of Canada, National Liturgical Office, Feast of Vietnamese Martyrs, November 24. St. Andrew Dung Lac, priest and martyr and Companions, Martyrs.

322 See The Catholic Answers tract: 'Do Catholics Worship Statues?' November, 2006, http://www.catholic.com/library/Do_Catholics_Worship_Statues.asp for further information.

323 Paul Molinari, *Saints: Their Place in the Church*, 141-142.

tradition of ancestral veneration, members of the family gather before the ancestral altar with pictures of the deceased ancestors displayed on it, make deep bows, burn incense, make offerings and venerate their ancestors whom the pictures represent.

Intercessions of the Saints - Ancestors

As Christians, we believe this world is not our permanent home, that we are merely pilgrims on a long journey of redemption, seeking God's goodness and being a part of his work to bring others into the kingdom. Therefore to ask the prayers of our brothers and sisters who have gone before us to heaven is not only conformable to Christian faith, but prompted by the instincts of our nature.³²⁴ The Catechism of The Catholic Church states:

Being more closely united to Christ, those who dwell in Heaven fix the whole Church more firmly in holiness...they do not cease to intercede to the Father for us, as they proffer the merits which they acquired on earth through the one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus....so by their fraternal concern is our weakness greatly helped.

Do not weep, for I shall be more useful to you after my death and I shall help you more effectively than during my life. (Saint Dominic, dying, to his brothers.)

I want to spend my heaven in doing good on earth. (Saint Theresa of Lisieux).³²⁵

324 Cyprian of Carthage: "Let us remember one another in concord and unanimity. Let us on both sides [of death] always pray for one another. Let us relieve burdens and afflictions by mutual love, that if one of us, by the swiftness of divine condescension, shall go hence first, our love may continue in the presence of the Lord, and our prayers for our brethren and sisters not cease in the presence of the Father's mercy." (Letters 56[60]:5 [A.D. 253].)

325 *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 956.

We believe that the angels and saints in Heaven not only pray with us, but also for us. The saints in Heaven have the ability to offer the prayers of the faithful on earth to God. The Book of Revelation expresses this well: "The twenty four elders³²⁶ fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full on incense, which are the prayers of the saints."³²⁷ The saints and angels lay the prayers of the Christians on earth at the feet of God; that is, they are praying for them and acting as intercessory intermediaries. Thus, the propriety of invoking them logically follows from the plain fact of their intercession. The angels are also mentioned as doing essentially the same thing:

An angel came and stood at the altar in heaven with a golden censor; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne; and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God.³²⁸

Saint Paul refers to Jesus as the only Mediator between human beings and God,³²⁹ but this does not mean that we are precluded from asking our fellow Christians to pray both for us and with us,³³⁰ including both our fellow Christians in heaven and in

326 The elders are regarded as the leaders of the people of God in Heaven.

327 Revelation 5:8.

328 Revelation 8:3-4.

329 1 Timothy 2:5.

330 1 Timothy 2:1-4. See also Origen: "But not the high priest [Christ] alone prays for those who pray sincerely, but also the angels... as also the souls of the saints who have already fallen asleep." (Prayer 11 [A.D. 233].)

Purgatory,³³¹ who are all a part of the body of Christ: the Church.³³² In fact, Christians often ask a priest or a minister to pray for them. If that priest or minister is a mere person, and is asked to intercede in prayer for them, it makes more sense to ask a saint in heaven who is already purified and perfected and sees the face of God to pray for us.³³³ The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains:

331 A priest friend of mine was asked: "Do you believe in purgatory?" He answered, "Not only do I believe in purgatory, I'm counting on it." We need healing from the results of our sins, even if these sins are forgiven. The results of sin do not just go away because the sin is forgiven. For example, a man is addicted to gambling, wasting the family money. His wife might be near a nervous breakdown. His children in turmoil. If ten years later he seeks forgiveness for his actions, he can be forgiven not just by God but also by his wife. But, the results of his sins remain. The children grew up devastated. The sin is forgiven, but the effects of the sin remains. During our lives we approach the Lord seeking the healing for the results of our sins. When our lives on earth have ended we depend on the prayers of those still living here to continue to ask God to heal the results of sin in our lives. We are seeking healing from the community for the effects of our own sins.

332 Some of Protestant Churches are also beginning to examine the question of devotion to Mary and the saints. This topic has also been part of the ecumenical dialogue between the Roman catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). This has led to the publication of a joint statement issued by both entitled *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary* (1992). For a discussion of this and more on the devotion of saints from a Lutheran perspective, see Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Virgin of Guadalupe: Theological Reflections of an Anglo-Lutheran Liturgist* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 5-15.

333 Ephraim the Syrian: "Remember me, you heirs of God, you brethren of Christ; supplicate the Savior earnestly for me, that I may be freed through Christ from him that fights against me day by day" (*The Fear at the End of Life* [A.D. 370]). See also "The Liturgy of St. Basil": "By the command of your only-begotten Son we communicate with the memory of your saints . . . by whose prayers and supplications have mercy upon us all, and deliver us for the sake of your holy name." (*Liturgy of St. Basil* [A.D. 373]).

The witnesses who have preceded us into the kingdom, especially those who the Church recognizes as saints, share in the living tradition of prayer by the example of their lives, the transmission of their writings and their prayer today. They contemplate God, praise Him and constantly care for those whom they have left on earth. When they entered into the joy of their Master, they were put in charge of many things. Their intercession is the most exalted service to God's plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world.³³⁴

The Church has always believed that the apostles and the martyrs, who had given the supreme witness of faith and charity by the shedding of their blood, are closely joined with us in Christ, and she has always venerated them with special devotion, together with the Blessed Virgin Mary and the holy angels. The Church has piously implored the aid of their intercession.³³⁵ As St. Cyril of Jerusalem (A.D. 350) relates: "We mention also of those who have already fallen asleep: first, the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, that through their prayers and supplications God would receive our petitions."³³⁶ Since the Church recognizes the necessity and the importance of the cult of the Saints, it invites and encourages all members to practise this devotion, especially in the liturgical celebrations.³³⁷ Madrid puts it this way: "This

334 *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2683.

335 *Lumen Gentium*, VII: 50.

336 Patrick Madrid, *Why Is That in Tradition?*, 89.

337 Augustine: "Christian people celebrate together in religious solemnity the memorials of the martyrs, both to encourage their being imitated and so that it can share in their merits and be aided by their prayers." (*Against Faustus the Manichean* [A.D. 400].)

tradition of honouring the saints and asking for their intercession manifested itself in the Church's liturgies, artwork, prayers, feast day celebrations, etc."³³⁸

Even though veneration of the saints is encouraged by the Catholic Church, the proper place of this veneration is crucial. It is one thing to unite our prayers with those of the saints in order to worship God or to offer our prayers for the sake of those souls who are in need of them, but it is very different to try to manipulate this connection for our own purposes, even if those purposes seem harmless. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains it this way: practices of spiritism "conceal a desire for power over...other human beings.... They contradict the honour, respect and loving fear that we owe to God alone."³³⁹

As stated in Chapter Two, ancestral veneration in Vietnamese culture is not related to spiritism or even the supernatural as these terms are understood in a Western sense; rather it emphasizes filial piety. Similarly, the veneration of the saints is not a spiritualist doctrine, which tries to reach the spirit of a saint *per se*, but rather the saints are intercessors and examples by which to live, never objects of superstitious worship. In other words, saints and ancestors are intercessors and providers of models for a good life. Here, once again, it is helpful to recall the all-important distinction between *latria* and *dulia*.

338 Patrick Madrid, *Why Is That in Tradition?*, 88.

339 *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2116.

The Communion of Saints: Christocentric and Theocentric

The Communion of Saints as we have spoken of it in this chapter is a belief in the oneness of the family of God. It is our relationships with one another that give our lives meaning. God did not create us to be alone. "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."³⁴⁰ He created us as a family with Adam and Eve as our parents and our ancestors. This family was later described by Saint Paul as the "Body of Christ,"³⁴¹ by which Paul wanted us to understand that we are intimately related to one another and to Jesus. He explained that the Church functions as a human body with every Christian a member of this body. We all depend on each other like parts of the body do. Our connectedness begins in Baptism and continues into eternity. This communion between the Church on earth and in Heaven is Christocentric, a perspective illustrated in *Lumen Gentium*:

When we look at the lives of those who have faithfully followed Christ, we are inspired with a new reason for seeking the city that it is to come (cf. Heb. 13, 14; 11, 10), and at the same time we are shown a most safe path by which among the vicissitudes of this world, in keeping with the state in life and condition proper to each of us, we will be able to arrive at perfect union with Christ, that is, effect holiness. In the lives of those who, sharing in our humanity, are, however, more perfectly transformed into the image of Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 3, 18) God vividly manifests his presence and his face to men. He speaks to us in them, and gives us a sign of his kingdom, to which we are strongly drawn, having so great a cloud of witnesses over us (cf. Heb. 12, 1) and such a witness to the truth of the Gospel.³⁴²

340 Genesis 2:18.

341 Romans 12:4-8.

342 *Lumen Gentium*, VII: 50.

This statement suggests that the ultimate object of the veneration of saints is the glory of God and human sanctification. The saints are examples, drawing all to the Father through Christ and interceding for the Church. It is true that Christ must be the centre of our prayer and beliefs so that we come to the Father 'through, with and in Him.' It is equally true that, if we wish to realize fully the relationship existing between Christ and ourselves by reason of our incorporation into His Mystical Body, we must realize our relationship with the other members of this Body, especially its pre-eminent members.³⁴³

Indeed, in the lives of all the saints we find this ardent desire for union with Christ. In the life of every Saint there is a strong emphasis on the need for a noble, unconditional self-surrender to Christ motivated by deep personal love. In every saint, one finds a deep sense of responsibility for building up the Body of Christ, which is the Church.³⁴⁴ In a different formula, St. Paul explains the mystical Body of Christ saying, "It is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me."³⁴⁵ If the cult of the veneration of saints is practised in the true spirit advocated by the Church, it does not impede christocentrism and theocentrism; it even enriches and amplifies it.³⁴⁶ For example, Saint Thomas More, before he was executed, spoke his last words on the scaffold and

³⁴³ Paul Molinari, *Saints: Their Place in the Church*, 110.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 13.

³⁴⁵ Galatians 2:20.

³⁴⁶ Paul Molinari, *Saints: Their Place in the Church*, 111.

told his listeners that they should pray for him in this world, and he would pray for them, protesting that he died the King's good servant, but God's first.³⁴⁷

For Christians, there is no way of loving God other than by loving Jesus his Son, through whom God has revealed Himself to human beings.³⁴⁸ The incarnation of the Word (Christ's Humanity) humanized the relation between the Creator (Heaven) and the creature (earth) as stated in *Triết lý tam tài* in Chapter One. God is our Friend, our Brother, our Sister, our Spouse, our Lord, our Teacher. He is our Father, and our Mother. Indeed, He is our all.³⁴⁹ His relation with us is so all-embracing that it includes all five relations described in Chapter One: Parent-child, husband-wife, eldest and siblings, king-subject, and friends. And the love of God is found in all Saints.³⁵⁰ Paul K.T. Sih relates that:

Some love Him primarily as their Father, some as their Lord, some as their Friend, some as their Brother, and some as their Lover. From these initial differences in their ways of loving Him arise different types of saints...In the home in Bethany, for instance, Martha loved Him in one way, while her sister Mary loved Him in another way. Both Martha and Mary are saints, but the former served Jesus as her Lord, while the latter loved Him as her heart's adored.³⁵¹

The church on earth commemorates and unites itself to the Church in Heaven by mutual communication among the individual persons who as such are the members

347 Paul K.T.Sih, *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality*, 194.

348 Ibid., 205.

349 Ibid.

350 Ibid., 206.

351 Ibid., 206-207.

of the People of God and of the Mystical Body of Christ.³⁵² In brief, when one honours a saint, one knows that one is in the presence of a person whose greatness and excellence evoke an expression of admiration. At the same time, however, one knows that the excellence of a saint is a supernatural and shared greatness, and therefore of itself mirrors back all honour and glory to its ultimate source, Christ and the Father.³⁵³

There is a relationship between the Church, Christ and God the Father. As in his book, *Culture and Liturgy*, Wicker explains:

The Church plays an essential role in regard to fatherly love. Father love in the Church is mainly represented by the Christian's submission to God the Father. The Church is a family of sons. But for the Catholics, this submissive love can never be separated from the motherly love of the Church. She presents us through Christ to the Father and intercedes for us to him.³⁵⁴

From this statement, one clearly sees the important role the Church plays in the relationship between God and human beings. As it is argued that the Church is a family of the living and the dead, this statement makes us aware of how much love surrounds us from those we can see (the living) and those we cannot (the deceased). Our own prayer becomes even more meaningful and powerful when we realize that through prayer we participate in a relationship with God and other members of our Christian family. This link goes beyond our own lifetime and connects us with holy men and women of all ages. In the end, the teaching of the Communion of Saints

352 Paul Molinari, *Saints: Their Place in the Church*, 171.

353 Ibid., 129.

354 Brian Wicker, *Culture and Liturgy* (New York: sheed and Ward, 1963), 55.

expresses the fundamental Christian belief that God is love, a love that reaches beyond the limits of our earthly lives.

Biblical Veneration of Ancestors and Confucian Veneration of Ancestors in Vietnamese Culture

As we have argued, the veneration given to angels and saints is essentially different from the worship offered to God. To God alone belongs the adoration of the whole person, but God's glory is also reflected in His children. They are venerated because God is present in them, and they are imitated because God is present in them. There are many parallels between biblical references to honouring one's parents and ancestors and those advocated in the Eastern veneration of ancestors in Vietnam tradition. For example, like Confucianism, the Bible calls us to honour our parents: "Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you."³⁵⁵ God considered this command so important that He repeated it multiple times in the Bible.³⁵⁶ Moreover, it was also considered to be important to honour one's elders in general: "You shall rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord."³⁵⁷

³⁵⁵ Exodus 20:12.

³⁵⁶ For examples see Leviticus 19:3, Deuteronomy 5:16, Proverbs 6:20-23, Matthew 15:4, Luke 18:20, and Ephesians 6:2-3.

³⁵⁷ Leviticus 19:32.

Finally, it was important to specially honour religious leaders: "Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron [the high priest], to give him dignity and honour."³⁵⁸

The New Testament stresses the importance of honouring others no less than the Old Testament. For example, St. Paul tells us to honour and imitate the "heroes of the faith."³⁵⁹ Honouring heroes of faith in God is honouring God himself. One of the most important passages on imitation is found in Hebrews 11, the Bible's well-known "hall of fame" chapter, which presents numerous examples of the Old Testament saints for our imitation. It concludes with the famous exhortation: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,"³⁶⁰ the race that the saints have run before us. If it is true that one is seeking to imitate a pious fellow human being here on earth, how much better is it that one is seeking to imitate a saint in heaven.³⁶¹ St. Theresa of Lisieux relates: "Most of all do I imitate the behaviour of Magdalene, for her amazing -or rather I should say her loving – audacity, which delighted the Heart of Jesus, has cast its spell upon mine."³⁶² That is the reason behind a common practice that parents give their children names of saints

358 Exodus 28:2.

359 Hebrews 6:12; 13:7.

360 Hebrews 12:1.

361 Jerome: "If the apostles and martyrs while still in the body can pray for others, at a time when they ought still be solicitous about themselves, how much more will they do so after their crowns, victories, and triumphs?" (*Against Vigilantius* 6 [A.D. 406].)

362 Paul K.T. Sih, *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality*, 207-208.

with the hope that the very appellation would provide the child with a saintly guardian spirit.³⁶³ *Lumen Gentium* briefly explains:

For just as Christian communion among wayfarers bring us closer to Christ, so our companionship with the Saints joins us to Christ, from whom as from its fountain and head issues every grace and the very life of the People of God. It is supremely fitting, therefore, that we love those friends and coheirs of Christ, who are also our brothers and extraordinary benefactors, that we render due thanks to God for them and 'suppliantly invoke them and have recourse to their prayers, their power and help in obtaining benefits from God through his Son, Jesus Christ, who is our redeemer and Saviour.' For every genuine testimony of love shown by us to those in heaven, by its very nature tends toward and terminates in Christ who is the 'crown of all Saints,' and through him, in God who is wonderful in his Saints and is magnified in them.³⁶⁴

Under the influence of Matteo Ricci, many a Confucian scholar took the view that the Christian teaching was one with that of Confucius. Among the ideas shared by Confucian and Christian faiths that they believed to be exactly those of our Confucianism, was that "one must serve and fear Heaven."³⁶⁵ On one occasion, Confucian scholars even stated that: "by coming to China the doctrine of the Master of Heaven teaches men to act rightly and thus causes each person to imitate Confucius."³⁶⁶ Confucianism does not, however, teach that there is a saviour or a Messiah. Confucianism stresses the importance of the good teacher, Confucius being a supreme example. In this sense, then, Confucius is not Master of Heaven but his

363 John Stratton Hawley, *Saints and Virtue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 189.

364 *Lumen Gentium*, VII: 50.

365 Zinzong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, 240.

366 *Ibid.*

disciple, i.e., Confucius did not claim equality with Heaven, as Jesus did. Confucius then is just like Paul, a disciple of Jesus, who urged Christians, not to follow but to imitate him.³⁶⁷

Although he was not influenced by Confucian ethics, Paul wrote extensively about the importance of spiritual imitation. He stated: "I urge you, then, be imitators of me. Therefore I sent to you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church."³⁶⁸ Later, Paul urged the same group, saying: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you."³⁶⁹ Paul commanded: "Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due."³⁷⁰ And "Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honour, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be defamed."³⁷¹

Furthermore, Paul spoke of the need to give special honour to religious figures: "Let the presbyters [priests] who rule well be considered worthy of double honour,

367 Christ urged his disciples to follow him (Matthew 4:19; Luke 9:59; Mark 10:21; John 21:22), but Paul urged fellow Christians to imitate him.

368 1 Corinthians 4:16-17.

369 1 Corinthians 11:1-2.

370 Romans 13:7.

371 1 Timothy 6:1.

especially those who labour in preaching and teaching."³⁷² Christ himself promised special blessings to those who honour religious figures: "He who receives a prophet because he is a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward, and he who receives a righteous man [saint] because he is a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward."³⁷³ Perhaps the broadest command to honour others is found in 1 Peter: "Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor."³⁷⁴ Veneration of ancestors in Confucianism is thus compatible with Christianity in so far as it relates to this right honour paid to those who have earned it by means of their dedication to Christ.

In Vietnam, reverence and glorification of one's ancestors is seen not only as one's greatest duty but also one's greatest honour. Through veneration of ancestors, the past and the present are reunited and communicated: the dead and the living are supporting each other. For Vietnamese people, ancestral veneration is not the same as the worship of the gods. The purpose of ancestral veneration is to do one's filial duty.³⁷⁵ Therefore, for a Vietnamese, this act of veneration does not confer any belief that the departed ancestors have become some kind of deity. Rather the act is a way to respect, honour and look after ancestors in their afterlives. It is in that sense that the

372 1 Timothy 5:17.

373 Matthew 10:41.

374 1 Peter 2:17.

375 Ancestor Worship, January 07, <http://www.answers.com/topic/ancestor-worship>.

translation ancestral veneration may convey a more accurate sense of what the Vietnamese Catholics see themselves as doing.

Generally speaking, the veneration of saints and that of ancestors have four things in common: first, there is a special visit to the shrine or the tombs; second, offerings are brought to the shrine; third, a prayer is recited before the shrine; and fourth, the offerings are partly appropriated by the guardians of the shrine, while the rest is used by the faithful who thus participate in the sacrifice, or for the maintenance of the shrine.³⁷⁶ In light of Catholic faith, the Vietnamese tradition of the veneration of ancestors can be interpreted as the veneration of saints, which remains a model for behaviour and a source of inspiration. However, this veneration is only secondary to that of Jesus Christ, whose life and teachings are normative for all forms of Christianity.³⁷⁷ The veneration of ancestors stands midway between the speculative insights of the theologians and the purely practical problems facing an average Vietnamese individual. A Vietnamese Christian does not have to abandon the veneration of ancestors to be true to the dictates of the faith. The veneration of ancestors can act as powerful means for mediating between the one and the other.

As discussed in previous chapters, the veneration of ancestors has been one of the most influential systems of thought in Vietnam since the formation of the country

376 Stephen Wilson, *Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 296.

377 Julia Ching, *Confucianism And Christianity: A Comparative Study*, 6.

and remains an important aspect of Vietnamese civilization. It is reflected in all aspects of life and in the celebrations of all faiths. Since Vietnamese Christians want to practise their faith in the context of their own culture, they have insisted on inculturating ancestral veneration into their liturgy and worship. In light of inculturation, my aim is to speak to Vietnamese Catholics who are struggling to reconcile the cult of ancestors embedded in their culture with their worship of God. I will seek to demonstrate ways to think about and celebrate their Catholic faith without dishonouring their ancestors. The liturgy is the supreme example of such a concept of culture of veneration of ancestors. This is a central argument of next chapter, Liturgical Implications.

CHAPTER FIVE

LITURGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The seventeenth century Catholic missionary Matteo Ricci and his companions advanced ideas about the attitude which their missionaries should adopt towards indigenous cultures, recommending evangelization from within those cultures. According to this idea, if the veneration of ancestors is compatible with Christian faith and biblical teachings, then it should be advocated as part of liturgy. As Chapter Three showed, however, the early efforts at inculturation of Roman Catholicism were thwarted by the Chinese Rites Controversy. Fortunately, since Vatican II Council (1965) Roman Catholicism has not only accepted vernacular language for its liturgies, it has also made efforts to accommodate local custom in its religious practices.³⁷⁸

Learning from the Chinese Rites Controversy, the Church in Vietnam is committed to liturgical inculturation. This chapter will offer guidelines as to how local custom, specifically the veneration of ancestors, can be integrated into the liturgy, worship and religious celebrations of Vietnamese Catholics in a way that enhances rather than diminishes the Vietnamese celebrations of their Christian faith, while respecting the official liturgy of the Church. Furthermore, this chapter will propose specific ways in which ancestral veneration can be incorporated into the practice of Christian faith in Vietnam. In this fashion the incorporation of the veneration of

378 See Constitution on the Liturgy '*Sacrosanctum Concilium*', Lumen Gentium, Gaudium et Spes, Vatican Council II.

ancestors into liturgy provides an added dimension to worship recognizing always their connection with the Communion of Saints in the Mystical Body.

It is obvious that in any given culture, public rituals play an important role in religious life, expressing faith and beliefs whether in Confucianism or in Catholicism. The Catholic Church recognizes seven sacraments for those who are living as well as the rites dealing with the dead, such as the funeral liturgy and memorials. As mentioned in Chapter Four, according to the Confucian tradition in Vietnamese culture, there are two basic cults: cult of Heaven (*đạo Ông Trời*) and cult of the deceased ancestors (*đạo thờ ông bà*). The cult of Heaven is directed to the service of The Lord-On-High, and is superior to the cult of ancestors, which is directed to the deceased.³⁷⁹ There is a parallel in Vietnamese culture between the worship of *Ông Trời* and the veneration offered to the ancestors, just as for Christians there is a distinction between the worship of God and the veneration offered to all other saints who are with God. In this regard, one sees clearly that the Vietnamese cult of Heaven can be interpreted as worship of God, and the cult of ancestors as veneration of saints, a belief that is compatible with Christian belief.

Given this historical understanding of the cult of ancestors, practicing Vietnamese rites for dead ancestors poses a problem for Roman Catholics. Are these rites associated with any religious beliefs or are they simply a social duty? The Chinese Rites Controversy has taught the Vietnamese Catholic Church a number of

379 For more detail see Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study*, 170.

lessons. In the first place, some of the early missionaries did not sufficiently understand the inclusive patterns of Chinese religious life, the most important of which is ancestral veneration, in which families participated in a range of religious activities cutting across denominational and religious boundaries. Moreover, in the past, for a Chinese or Vietnamese to become a Christian did not mean that they had to renounce their culture or country. Ricci and his fellow missionaries, for example, pointed out that veneration of ancestors was not incompatible with Christian practice. Ricci concluded that the rites to ancestors were simply pious, not superstitious, ceremonies and should therefore be encouraged.

Another lesson learned through the Chinese Rites Controversy was that to evangelize is to dialogue. For example, Ricci and the Jesuits, through their method of accommodation, selected Chinese words to express the Christian faith according their understanding of the meaning of those words. In the spirit of Vatican II, the Catholic Church has worked to promote dialogue with all people and religions. In meaningful dialogue people do not relinquish their own beliefs, nor do they hold that their beliefs are the only true beliefs. Rather, in dialogue, we must maintain an open mind, not assuming that one's religion has a monopoly on truth, so that we can mutually cooperate for the spiritual enrichment of all humanity.³⁸⁰ Wicker makes an important observation about this process of inculturation within Catholic practice, saying:

³⁸⁰ Peter K.H. Lee, *Confucian-Christian Encounters in Historical and Contemporary Perspective*, 7.

To be cultured, it is not enough just to be aware of one's heritage through a passive acceptance and understanding; it is also necessary to be an active contributor to its formulation and growth. In a Catholic context this surely means, before all else, a participation in the renewed theological and liturgical insights which have been given to the Church in the past half-century. This is the fundamental basis for the personal formation of culture which an apostolic Catholic needs.³⁸¹

The presence of dialogue and mutual respect thus means that the Christian mission must be a two-way street with Christian believers speaking the gospel message of salvation to non-believers and listening to non-believers' expression of their culture. Inevitably, there will be conflicts, but there can be confluences too.³⁸² Finally, to understand the liturgy in any country is to be inculturated. Wicker explains this concept in the following words:

Our commitment to full understanding of the Liturgy, and to participation in it, is, then, a commitment to the growth within us of a cultural awareness. To be a Catholic is necessarily to try to be, in the true and un-snobbish sense, a cultured person. Any impoverishment of this awareness or absence of understanding ... is an impoverishment of his religion, as well as of his enjoyment. It is an impoverishment of his apostolate, an absence of Christ.³⁸³

Having learned these lessons of open-mindedness, dialogue and mutual respect, the Church of Vietnam is committed to the inculturation of liturgy. The Vietnamese Bishops, seeing that the veneration of ancestors helps lead Vietnamese Catholics into the celebration of the liturgy itself, affirmed the relationship between the liturgy of the

381 Brian Wicker, *Culture and Liturgy*, 48.

382 Peter K.H. Lee, *Confucian-Christian Encounters in Historical and Contemporary Perspective*, 125.

383 Brian Wicker, *Culture and Liturgy*, 47.

Church and popular piety; in this case, the veneration of ancestors. If the veneration of ancestors helps Vietnamese Catholics in celebrating the liturgy then, whether one is a priest or liturgy planner, one can help each individual worshipper feel involved and connected with the entire congregation by adapting the Roman rites to satisfy the needs of the particular community, in this case, the Vietnamese community. Nevertheless, both priest and participants must recognize that the main goal of the Liturgy is “the presentation to us of the mystery of Christ, and has as its object the accomplishment in us of what was accomplished in Christ. It is not, therefore, something which has to be gone through just because rituals and ceremonies are natural to the human consciousness, and are particularly apt means for bringing Christ’s earthly life and death to mind.”³⁸⁴

It must also be noted that the quality of the liturgy, reflected by the quality of the cultural milieu, affects our religious life.³⁸⁵ And that liturgical action must be intelligible, both to those outside and those within.³⁸⁶ Here one discerns that liturgy is a participation in the paschal Mystery of Christ as well as human activity, “whereby the faithful may express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church.”³⁸⁷ An understanding of what Liturgy should accomplish and the role of Roman Catholic Liturgy in the Church today, makes

384 Ibid., 63.

385 Ibid., 82.

386 Ibid., 186.

387 *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 2.

liturgical inculturation imperative. Before we attempt to inculturate the veneration of ancestors into the Vietnamese liturgical celebration, it is helpful to set up guidelines so that the liturgy of the Catholic Church as a whole is respected.

Basic Guidelines for Incorporation of the Veneration of Ancestors Into the Liturgy³⁸⁸

In all, the liturgy must conserve the authentic theological understanding of the Christian faith. The history of the saints has also engendered piety but has not always been part of the formal liturgical life of the ancient church. Instead reverence for the saints grew alongside, and not always in harmony with, the official liturgy.³⁸⁹ As we have argued the cultural aspects of each country should also have a place in liturgical celebrations, since the Church is not only divinely created people of God but also a cultural phenomenon.³⁹⁰ Moreover, the liturgy is seen as the Body of Christ in action in the world. Developing appropriate and meaningful liturgies which are at once in line with Catholic dogma and attuned to the needs of a country, culture or specific occasion is a difficult task. There are many concerns that must be taken into account in reforming liturgy, not the least of which is maintaining the “oneness” and solidarity of the Church throughout the world.

388 For a commentary on these detailed guidelines, see Peter Phan, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines*.

389 Lawrence S. Cunningham, *A Brief History of Saints*, 31.

390 Brian Wicker, *Culture and Liturgy*, 38-39.

To understand proper reform, guidelines of liturgical inculturation must be considered. In the first place, to reform a given liturgy for a specific country, all rituals and practices of a certain tradition must be examined carefully to see what is not compatible with Gospel values. Fr. Phan explains it in the following words:

Liturgical inculturation is never a simple matter of appropriating rituals, sacred texts, and religious symbols of non-Christian religions for Christian use. These elements cannot be uprooted from the religious soil in which they grow and by which they are nurtured in order to be grafted onto Christian worship.³⁹¹

Furthermore, pastoral care must be taken in consideration. The Vatican Council II shows a familiarity with the pastoral problems concerning the cult of the saints, which exists in the Church today. Vatican II wished, in a special way, to promote Catholic life and piety. Thus it takes care to invite all involved to remedy the problem. Regarding instances of the veneration of saints: “in conformity with our own pastoral interests, we urge all concerned, if any abuses, excesses or defects have crept in here or there, to do what is in their power to remove or correct them, and to restore all things to a fuller praise of Christ and of God.”³⁹² The council speaks here explicitly of two types of abuses, namely of “excesses” and of “defects.” And we must look at these items more closely.

391 Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 127-128.

392 Lumen Gentium, VII: 51.

Regarding “excesses”, for example, there might be a tendency to exaggerate the cult of the saints over the worship of Christ. The Church specifies its teaching, saying:

Let them therefore teach the faithful that the authentic cult of the saints consists not so much in the multiplying of external acts, but rather in the greater intensity of our love, whereby, for our own greater good and that of the whole Church, we seek from the saints example in their way of life, fellowship in their communion, and aid by their intercession.³⁹³

This is not to say that belief in the power of the saints is useless or trivial. Rather, to those who belittle the cult of the saints, the Church says:

On the other hand, let them teach the faithful that our communion with those in heaven, provided that it is understood in the fuller light of faith according to its genuine nature, in no way weakens, but conversely, more thoroughly enriches the latreutic worship we give to God the Father, through Christ, in the Spirit.³⁹⁴

In these teachings of the Church, one sees that the important pastoral consideration is to ensure the right and proper veneration of the saints, not its precedence or subservience to all other beliefs.

Liturgical inculturation does not suggest that any local secular custom be applied mindlessly. Indeed, liturgical rites should not be completely identified with any one certain culture in the broadest sense, because not every practice may be compatible with Christian values. For example, in the Vietnamese veneration of

393 Ibid.

394 Ibid.

ancestors, the rite of burning paper money is not a Christian act. Wicker explains this concept in the following words:

Because the church is a human society directly gathered together by God, and since the liturgical assembly is what makes this society encounterable in the world, it follows that we must take the liturgical assembly as the prototype, or model, for any human organization which is to approximate itself to Christian ideal. For a Christian, the society brought into organic community by God must take precedence over any purely human and secular model.³⁹⁵

Another important guideline which must be considered is that liturgical inculturation must not be carried out apart from interreligious dialogue and the work for integral liberation, especially in Asia.³⁹⁶ As Pope John Paul II says in his Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*:

Liturgical inculturation requires more than a focus upon traditional cultural values, symbols and rituals. There is also a need to take account of the shifts in consciousness and attitudes caused by the emerging secularist and consumer cultures that are affecting the Asian sense of worship and prayer. Nor can the specific needs of the poor, migrants, refugees...be overlooked in any genuine liturgical inculturation in Asia.³⁹⁷

This statement illustrates the importance of the pastoral approach to culture. The primary task of liturgical inculturation is to inject the lifeblood of the Gospel into cultures to renew them from within.³⁹⁸ Liturgical Inculturation cannot simply be applied

395 Brian Wicker, *Culture and Liturgy*, 185.

396 Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 128.

397 *Ecclesia in Asia*, n. 22.

398 Pontifical Council for Culture, *Toward a Pastoral Approach to Culture*, no. 27-28.

to any culture as something being added on. Shorter explains the concept further, saying:

Interculturation ultimately means: facing up to the total reality of the present Mission situation, which includes elements like: the fundamental change in Mission thinking, return to the Bible and early Christianity, development of ecclesiology, search for spiritual values, the reality and appreciation of pluralism and of human community, an increasing sense of history, the recent historical facts of colonisation and decolonisation, secularization, the recognition of Non-Western cultural values, etc.³⁹⁹

This statement acknowledges the reality of human community and its culture.

In other words, every culture has its own religious symbolization that takes place in two parallel forms: popular religion and organized world religions, each with its own official liturgy and worship.⁴⁰⁰ In this case, Vietnamese culture has its own popular devotion of veneration of ancestors and Catholicism. Thus, in liturgical inculturation, there needs to be by necessity a close collaboration between the local churches (Church of Vietnam) and the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (Rome). Again *Ecclesia in Asia* reinforces this important element, saying: "Such cooperation is essential because the sacred liturgy expresses and celebrates the one faith by all and, being the heritage of the whole church, cannot be determined by the local churches in isolation from the universal church."⁴⁰¹ In the liturgical inculturation of the cult of ancestors in particular, it seems that in order for it

399 Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 29.

400 Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 122.

401 *Ecclesia in Asia*, n. 22.

to be genuine and effective, on the one hand, a simple adaptation envisaged by congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in the Roman Liturgy and Inculturation would not be appropriate; because its understanding of popular devotion is seriously inadequate.⁴⁰² On the other hand, the veneration of ancestors, a natural religious expression that leads people to the official liturgy, must not be in conflict with the official liturgy of the church. It must be inspired by doctrines of the Catholic Church, such as the immortality of the soul, the communion of saints, and the eternal life. However, divination of ancestors must be avoided.⁴⁰³

One of the major pitfalls in attempting any liturgical reform is that rituals in the liturgy can be problematic both with cultic offerings and sacraments and ceremonies. They can become an end in themselves, instead of a means of self-transcendence, of pointing the way to God, as authentic expressions of communal faith. This is the reason for the incessant efforts at liturgical renewal, at simplification of ritual and enriching symbols. This is done to prevent cultic and ritual practice from becoming mere formalism where the heart and the meaning of the ritual are no longer present. This is important for all the world's religions. Confucius has asked: "Do rites refer merely to jade and silk...? Does music refer merely to bells and drums? And, "If a man is lacking in the virtue of humanity, what can the rites do for him?" (Analects:3:3)⁴⁰⁴ This

402 Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 129.

403 Peter Phan, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines*, 138.

404 Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study*, 176.

is not to suggest that there is no need of signs, symbols or rituals, but these external rituals must not be done in such a way that they become an end in themselves.

Finally, it must be remembered that cultural pluralism is not a scandal to the church, but a challenge. Becoming a truly multicultural church is not a question of resolving cultural differences or ironing out diversities. Multiculturalism constitutes a challenge to the contemporary Church. Plurality and unity do not annul each other; rather, they come to be by means of each other. The Church's unity grows out of and depends upon the plurality of its constitutive dimensions; conversely, the plurality of its dimensions is resolved into and at the same time retains its plural character in the unity of the one being.⁴⁰⁵

For any Roman Catholic, the most immediate and visible impact of Vatican II was its liturgical reforms, promoting "a full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgical celebrations"⁴⁰⁶ by encouraging the use of the vernacular language and the new rites in the liturgy. Moreover, the most important impact of the liturgical reforms was the Roman Catholic effort to inculturate liturgies by bringing elements of local cultures into sacramental and liturgical celebrations, including the use of local music, vestments, gestures, rituals, sacred objects, and architecture.⁴⁰⁷ In Vietnam, the devotion to the cult of ancestors continues to be so popular that the Catholic Church has

405 Peter Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives On Interfaith Dialogue*, 271.

406 Constitution on the Liturgy. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 14.

407 Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 205-206.

made an effort to incorporate it into Christian liturgy and worship, especially the liturgy of Eucharist, since Eucharist is the most important sacrament in Catholic Church. The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests affirms this primacy of the Eucharist, saying:

The other sacraments, as well as with every ministry of the Church and every work of the apostolate, are tied together with the Eucharist and are directed toward it. The Most Blessed Eucharist contains the entire spiritual boon of the Church, that is, Christ himself, our Pasch and Living Bread, by the action of the Holy Spirit through his very flesh vital and vitalizing, giving life to men who are thus invited and encouraged to offer themselves, their labours and all created things, together with him. In this light, the Eucharist shows itself as the source and the apex of the whole work of preaching the Gospel.⁴⁰⁸

The reason for the supreme excellence of the Eucharist, then, lies in the special presence of Christ in 'the Eucharistic species'. This 'real presence' is also to be understood with Christ's presence in the person of his minister, the word of God, and the assembly of the worshipping faithful.⁴⁰⁹ With that in mind, it is possible to consider the incorporation of ancestral veneration into the practice of Christian faith in Vietnam especially in the liturgy of Eucharistic celebration as an example of liturgical inculturation. Before we directly link veneration of ancestors to the Eucharist, we need to first understand the role that the veneration of saints plays in the Eucharistic celebration.

408 Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (PO, n. 5.)

409 Peter Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives On Interfaith Dialogue* (MaryKnoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 261-262.

Veneration of Saints in the Framework of the Liturgical Celebration of Eucharist

By the end of the fourth century A.D., the saints were recalled by name in the central act of Christian worship, the Eucharistic liturgy. In the Catholic liturgy of the Mass, the celebrant asks God to remember those who stand in the church who are in fellowship with and venerating the memory of “the glorious and ever Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ our Lord and God and Joseph her husband...also your apostles and martyrs (here the apostles and the martyrs are called by name) and all your saints. May their merits and prayers gain us your constant help and protection.”⁴¹⁰ After the consecration of the bread and wine, the celebrant continues to pray that those who celebrate the liturgy will be granted “some part and fellowship with your holy apostles and martyrs, with John the Baptist, Stephen, Matthias, Barnabas...and with all your saints.”⁴¹¹ The excerpt of the Eucharistic prayer illustrates the centrality of the veneration of the saints to Eucharistic celebration. It is obvious from its place in the Catholic celebration that the Christian Church believes the saints, named and unnamed, to be part of the larger company of the Holy Ones linked in history to the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Old Testament.

Moreover, the liturgy sees the company of the saints as part of the whole church made vibrant within the worship of the church itself. Furthermore, the liturgy

410 Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Sacramentary* (Ottawa: Publications Service, 1983), Eucharistic prayer I, 590.

411 Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Sacramentary*, Eucharistic Prayer I.

expresses an apparent ranking of the saints in terms of the honour given them: first, the Virgin Mary, then St. Joseph, John the Baptist, the apostles followed by the martyrs, confessors, ascetics, and so on. Finally, one can detect in the language of the liturgy the theological understanding that the church expresses in its official liturgy that the saints are signs of hope for Christians who will some day join them with God, that they are part of the fellowship of all who are in the church, and that finally through their prayers, the saints are intercessors before God in heaven.⁴¹² Thus the veneration of the saints represents a major part of Catholic eschatology, providing exemplars of the Church Triumphant. As the veneration of saints helps Catholics to better celebrate the Eucharist, the veneration of ancestors will help the Vietnamese Catholics celebrate the Eucharist in their culture. As a Vietnamese Archbishop relates, the veneration of ancestors will help the Vietnamese Catholics grow in love and unity with each other and to recognize God, the creator of all ancestors.⁴¹³

The veneration of the saints is not the only link to Confucian rites. In fact, the link between the two can be seen at another level as well, namely the Confucian rite of Heaven and the rite of the Eucharist. The word 'Eucharist' is derived from the Greek word meaning thanksgiving. The Eucharist is an act of thanksgiving initiated by Jesus at the Last Supper (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24; Mark 14:23; Matthew 26:27.) In Confucian rite, the cult of Heaven is celebrated in a manner similar to the Eucharist.

412 Lawrence S. Cunningham, *A Brief History of Saints*, 30-31.

413 *Sacerdos* # 36 (December 1964), 891-892.

The offering in the Confucian rite was an animal victim, a bullock of one colour, without blemish, presented as a burnt offering and accompanied by other oblations and invocations as well as by solemn music. Just as the whole service of the cult of Heaven was a thanksgiving to the Lord-on High (Shang-ti),⁴¹⁴ the Eucharistic celebration too is a thanksgiving to God and an assertion of faith in Him.

Furthermore, in Confucian tradition, the ancestral cult is a memorial service celebrated in front of the ancestral altar at home or at the temple where the tablets, engraved with the names of the ancestors. Silent prostrations are made in front of the tablets, following which the family partakes of the meal in which both the living and the dead take part; the bond of family is renewed and strengthened.⁴¹⁵ The consciousness of the cult of ancestors and its significance remain in the living memory of the people, continuing to maintain and strengthen the family bonds.⁴¹⁶ Similarly, at Eucharist, the whole family of God is taking part in the meal. This 'sacrificial meal' is to remain in the living memory of all Christians, "do this in memory of me."⁴¹⁷ Therefore, it is reasonable and plausible to incorporate the veneration of ancestors into the Eucharist.

In Vietnam, as mentioned in Chapter Two, the rituals of the cult of Heaven are diminishing under the Communist government. However, the veneration of ancestors

414 Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study*, 172.

415 Ibid., 173.

416 Ibid.

417 Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25.

still finds an important place among its people of all faiths. The Church of Vietnam, seeing the veneration of ancestors as compatible with the church teaching, has tried to give people a means of expressing their own culture in liturgical celebrations. Even though the cult of ancestors has been recognized and accepted by the Church, it has not been fully incorporated into all of the liturgy but has been allowed to be practised as an adjunct to liturgy. The task of the next discussion is to try to develop a way to incorporate the veneration of ancestors into the liturgy of the Eucharist itself.

Veneration of Ancestors in the Vietnamese liturgy of The Eucharist⁴¹⁸

To set a framework for veneration of ancestors in the liturgy, the Vietnamese bishops have introduced two properly liturgical innovations of the Eucharist within Vietnamese traditions. The first innovation 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

418 Most of my work on incorporation of the veneration of ancestors into the liturgy of *Tết* is based on Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 122-129.

our ancestors, our parents and our friends who have left this world...”⁴¹⁹ Obviously, the explicit mention of ancestors is an attempt at inculturating ancestral veneration into the liturgy.

The second liturgical innovation in the Vietnamese liturgy is the Mass for the celebration of the lunar New Year or *Tết*. As discussed in Chapter Two, for the Vietnamese *Tết* is the most important cultural and religious feast of the year. On New Year’s Eve, especially at midnight (*Giao thừa*), there are various rituals to perform, the main one being is to “welcome the ancestors” (*ruốc ông bà*) to the home. Culturally, *Tết* 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. 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 deceased ancestors displayed on it, make deep bows, burn incense, and pray for their protection. Catholics performing this ritual say their prayers in front of the altar.

The *Tết* celebration lasts at least three days: the first is reserved for the cult of ancestors and the living parents, the second for near relatives, and the third for the dead. Alexandre de Rhodes had already attempted to Christianize *Tết* 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; the second in

419 The second edition of the Roman Missal in Vietnamese, published in 1992. In the Eucharistic Prayer # 2, the word ancestor means *Tổ Tiên*.

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.”⁴²⁰ Despite De Rhodes’ efforts trying to Christianize the meaning of *Tết*, the Vietnamese, both Christians and non-Christians, have maintained their tradition of venerating their ancestors during the *Tết* celebration.

Recognizing the importance of *Tết*, the Vietnamese bishops have undertaken to solemnize it with Eucharistic celebrations. Five Mass formulas have been composed to express the various meanings of *Tết* and are now in use: the first for the end of the year is to give thanks and ask for forgiveness, the second for New Year’s Eve is to celebrate the passage into the New Year (*Giao thừa*), the third for the first day of the New Year is to praise God and to ask for peace and prosperity, the fourth for the second day is to pray for ancestors, grandparents and parents, and the fifth for the third day is to pray for the sanctification of labour.⁴²¹

For our current purpose of attempting to accommodate the veneration of ancestors into liturgy generally, the fourth formula developed by the Bishops is of special interest. Here are some of its significant prayers:

Opening prayer: Merciful Father, you have taught us to practise filial piety. Today, on New Year’s Day, we have gathered to honour the memory of our ancestors, grandparents and parents. Deign to reward abundantly those who have brought us into

⁴²⁰ Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 125.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 126

this world, nurtured us, and educated us. Help us live in conformity with our duties toward them...

Prayer over the Gifts: 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...

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...

These excerpts show that the memory of the ancestors is invoked in various prayers of the Mass. The inclusion of the veneration of ancestors into the language of the Mass, and especially the mention of the term 'ancestor' in the Eucharistic Prayer, mark a phenomenal step in liturgical inculturation in Vietnam. The Church has traveled a long way from the days of the Chinese Rites Controversy. This is important theologically for at least two reasons.

First, by mentioning the ancestors explicitly in the Eucharistic Prayer and by 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. By virtue of their physical bond with their descendants, the ancestors are bound to protect their descendants, and the descendants to honour them. Furthermore, in describing the cult of ancestors, many Vietnamese bishops have used not only the word *tổ tiên* [forebears] but also *thánh hiền* [saint and sage] to refer to those who should receive this attention. Of course, they do not mean to say that these are saints in the Christian sense of being officially canonized. Clearly the old objection that the word saint should not be used with regard to 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.⁴²² Thus, the incorporation of the popular devotion to ancestors, not only the dead in general, into the liturgy has enriched the Eucharistic celebration for the Vietnamese Catholics.

The second important theological advance found in the *Tết* special liturgy is in the prayers cited above. There is an affirmation that somehow the ancestors act as mediators of the blessings that their descendants receive from God. The descendants are said to inherit these blessings from their ancestors. Of course, in these prayers the ancestors are not asked to intercede directly to God for their descendants, since these prayers are not addressed directly to them, as they are in prayers said in front of the home ancestral altar. Theologically, of course, there can be no objection to ask

⁴²² Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 125-126.

someone, dead or alive, canonized or not, to intercede on one's behalf before God. The old objection that invoking ancestors in prayer in the cult of ancestors is superstitious is a red herring because no Vietnamese practicing this cult believes that the ancestors are divine, in the strict sense of this term.⁴²³

The Vietnamese liturgists also carefully chose the scripture readings for the second day of *Tết* to fit the theme of honouring ancestors. The first reading is from the book of Sirach.⁴²⁴ The second reading is taken from Ephesians.⁴²⁵ The gospel reading is from Matthew.⁴²⁶

⁴²³ Ibid., 127.

⁴²⁴ Sirach 44:1,10-15: Let us now sing the praises of famous men, our ancestors in their generations. But these also were godly men, whose righteous deeds have not been forgotten; their wealth will remain with their descendants, and their inheritance with their children's children. Their descendants stand by the covenants; their children also, for their sake. Their offspring will continue forever, and their glory will never be blotted out. Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name lives on generation after generation. The assembly declares their wisdom, and the congregation proclaims their praise.

⁴²⁵ Ephesians 6:1-4, 18-23: Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honour your father and mother"--this is the first commandment with a promise: "so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth." And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak. So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus will tell you everything. He is a dear brother and a faithful minister in the Lord. I am sending him to you for this

Thus far we have seen some daring efforts in liturgical inculturation in Vietnamese liturgy, mainly that of the Eucharist: the prayers for the dead in the Eucharistic Prayers and the liturgical celebrations of the Vietnamese New Year, *Tết*. The Catholic Church in Vietnam has tried to make an effort to incorporate the veneration of ancestors into Christian liturgy and worship, namely the Eucharistic celebration. The Vietnamese Catholics hope to see the veneration of ancestors remaining as an important component of mainstream of Vietnamese culture and a model for Vietnamese life. Since religion cannot exist independently of cultural expression,⁴²⁷ it must be part of the interpretation of life that a culture offers its adherents. It must operate in and through culture. In other words, the beliefs and practices of religion must themselves form a cultural system.⁴²⁸ Liturgical inculturation in the Vietnamese liturgy represents a partial attempt to make worship culturally and

very purpose, to let you know how we are, and to encourage your hearts. Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

426 Matthew 15:1-6: Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honour your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' But you say that whoever tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not honour the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.

427 Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 26.

428 Ibid., 40.

religiously meaningful to the Vietnamese.⁴²⁹ The Catholic Liturgy is the public official service of the Church, which has many facets: the sacraments, rites and rituals, prayers, funerals, to name a few. Thus, in the remainder of the chapter, I will attempt to show how the veneration of ancestors can be incorporated into other facets of the liturgy.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the solemn annual celebration of the Vietnamese Martyr Ancestors is on November 24th. Vietnamese Catholics use this feast to show, in a very festive way, their great devotion to their ancestors, especially their Ancestor Saints. At this celebration, many Catholic communities have a huge picture of the Vietnamese Martyrs placed near the altar. Before the Eucharist, the main celebrant and other elders of the community move in procession from the back of the Church to this picture. They incense it as a sign of respect and veneration. They may offer a prayer asking the Martyr Ancestors to intercede to God for the community as they are celebrating the official liturgy (the Eucharist). After venerating the Vietnamese Martyr Ancestors, the main celebrant (priest) and other ministers of the Mass move to their places, and Mass continues as usual. Here we see the harmonization between the veneration of ancestors (popular piety) and the liturgy of the Eucharist. The veneration of ancestors can be incorporated into the liturgy provided that it does not become a substitute for it.

Furthermore, most Vietnamese Catholics venerate ancestors on important occasions, birth, marriage and death, but this veneration takes place at home, not in

⁴²⁹ Peter Phan, *Christianity With an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making*, 246.

church. Nevertheless, the liturgical rites for Vietnamese funerals and weddings try to reflect the family spirit. The family bond is strengthened through liturgical rituals of veneration of ancestors, especially in funerals, weddings, and memorial anniversaries. Consequently, the veneration of ancestors should be incorporated in the liturgical celebrations in church.

Liturgy of Marriage

One of the places where the veneration of ancestors could be incorporated into the liturgy is in marriage. Marriage existed long before Christianity: it is a natural phenomenon which was later raised to a sacramental state in the Church by our Lord Jesus. As mentioned in Chapter Two, in Vietnam, the non-Christian wedding takes place before the ancestral altar where the bride and groom stand, holding three joss sticks in both hands, and make three deep bows to the ancestors in prayerful silence. In Vietnam the good wishes of friends at a marriage are expressed in this way, “Wish you two to live long enough to see gray hairs on each other’s head⁴³⁰ and grow old together until your teeth are loosening.” Or “Wish you to live 100 years of happiness.”⁴³¹ These sentiments are embodied as well in the Catholic liturgy.⁴³² The two wedding partners are “to live together in sickness as in health, for better for worse, for richer for poorer,

430 Paul K.T. Sih, *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality*, 183. Most Vietnamese people do not have grey hairs until they are really old.

431 In Vietnamese culture, eternity is symbolized by number 100.

432 Paul K.T. Sih, *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality*, 183.

till death us part.” It is appropriate, then, to incorporate the veneration of ancestors into the Christian rite of marriage. If the couple venerates their ancestors at home, they should likewise venerate their ancestors in Church at the liturgy of the wedding as intercessors for the couple to God.

In Vietnamese Catholic tradition, after the church wedding, the newlywed couple, together with their family members, walks to the statue of Mary, which is normally placed off to the side of the sanctuary. There they sing thanks to Mary for their union and ask her to bless and continue to pray for their marriage. From a Vietnamese cultural perspective, the newlywed couple has asked their saint ancestor to intercede for their new state of life. Therefore, the veneration of ancestors can play an important role in the wedding ceremony for Vietnamese Catholics. It should be incorporated more firmly into the liturgical celebration of the marriage.

Baptism and Confirmation Liturgies

Another liturgy that fits well with the veneration of ancestors is the liturgy of baptism and confirmation. Through baptism we are reborn in Christ and receive a character in our souls, which marks us as children of God. This character is perfected through confirmation, which strengthens us in our expression and profession of faith as Christians. In the Catholic tradition, parents often choose a saint’s name for their children at baptism, hoping that they will imitate their namesake. The same is true of confirmation; those who are to be confirmed choose a name for themselves, a

confirmation name. This is typically the name of a saint whose example the candidates hope to follow and through whose intercessions they may be protected. However, the name need not be a saint's name. Today, one is increasingly seeing parents choosing the name of a Vietnamese Martyr as their child baptismal name. Similarly, with confirmation candidates for confirmation can be encouraged to choose the name of a much beloved ancestor whom they admire and wish to model their lives upon. In this way, the veneration of ancestors can be incorporated both in the liturgy of the baptism and confirmation.

Sacrament of Holy Orders: Rite of Ordination

Another sacramental celebration in the Catholic Church in which the intercessions of the saints play an important role is the liturgy of the ordination to the priesthood. Before candidates are called to ordination, they prostrate themselves on the floor of the Church in front of the altar as a sign of their total surrender to God. They remain prostrate while the whole community is chanting the litany of the saints over the candidates, asking the saints to pray to God for them. First, there are petitions to God in these words: "Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy..." Then the intercessory petitions of Mary and the saints follow; here the names of other saints are added. The whole community prays to God through the intercessions of Mary and other saints. In a special way, they pray that God will bless these candidates, making them holy, consecrating them for their sacred duties. In other words, the ancestor saints are called

upon for their intercessions. From the perspective of Vietnamese culture, the whole community is invoking their ancestors for their prayers to God for the candidates. It is appropriate to incorporate the veneration of ancestors into the liturgy of the Holy Orders for the Vietnamese Catholics.

Funeral

As is the case with other liturgies, the veneration of ancestors can be incorporated into the liturgy of a funeral. The funeral liturgy is an opportunity for us to encounter Christ in silence, word, symbol, and gesture.⁴³³ The mourners and the congregation pray and ponder how our funerals and memorial services can be sensitive to the grief of those who mourn while affirming the Good News in ways that offer abiding hope and transforming faith.⁴³⁴ The liturgy of a funeral must express the sense of belonging: in life and in death, we belong to God.⁴³⁵ We are members of Christ's own body and the Communion of Saints, which is the communion of the living and the dead. The veneration of ancestors in funeral rites reaffirms the bond that binds the family, social group, and church together in moments of profound anguish and crisis. It also reiterates God's love, the hope of resurrection and the comfort of fellow

433 John McFadden and James Donohue, *Christian Funeral Practices in a Changed Time and Culture* (Eugene, OR: The Ekklesia Project, 2005), 12.

434 Ibid., 20.

435 Ibid., 21.

believers.⁴³⁶ Thus, the Church seeks to make funerals meaningful in the context of its member's culture. The documents of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments explains it in the following words:

Among all peoples, funerals are always surrounded with special rites, often of great expressive value. To answer the needs of different countries, the Roman ritual offers several forms of funerals. Episcopal Conferences must choose those which correspond best to local customs. They will wish to preserve all that is good in family traditions and local customs, and ensure that funeral rites manifest the Christian faith in the resurrection and bear witness to the true values of the Gospel. It is in this perspective that the funeral rituals can incorporate the customs of different cultures and respond as best they can to the needs and traditions of each region.⁴³⁷

In Vietnamese tradition, family members use joss sticks to cense the casket as a sign of respect, an action which should be carried out in the midst of a caring community. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Vietnamese funerals are an important time for children to express their filial love for parents and grandparents. In the Catholic Church, the rites of commendation and committal provide the opportunity to acknowledge the reality of separation and to welcome the deceased into the community of ancestors, i.e., the Communion of Saints.

These are some of the ways the veneration of ancestors can be incorporated into the liturgical celebrations for Vietnamese Catholics, recognizing the Communion

⁴³⁶ Peter Phan, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines*, 150.

⁴³⁷ See the document of Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *The Roman Liturgy and Inculturation: fourth Instruction for the Right Application of the Conciliar Constitution on the Liturgy* (Rome: Edizione Vaticana, 1994), n. 58.

of Saints, the communion between the living and the dead, especially their ancestors, between the church in Heaven and that on earth. There is no doubt that the incorporation of the veneration of ancestors into the liturgical celebrations must be done carefully by the liturgists.

Conclusion

The liturgy must respect cultures, but at the same time invite members of the community to purify and sanctify themselves.⁴³⁸ To include the veneration of ancestors in the liturgy for the Vietnamese Catholic is a daring effort to adapt the Vietnamese tradition of religious thought to a Catholic theological framework of interpretation in order to better understand Christian faith in the Vietnamese context. On the one hand, the liturgy of the Church must not be foreign to any country, people or individual.⁴³⁹ On the other hand, the liturgy of the Church must not be replaced or pushed aside by the popular devotion of a particular country.⁴⁴⁰ We have argued that the veneration of ancestors is compatible with the Christian faith. It is not a magic rite, nor is it spiritism, or superstition. The incorporation of this tradition in the liturgy will make it easier to evangelize non-Christian Vietnamese, since the Vietnamese people have a high regard

438 Inculturation, 19.

439 Inculturation, 18.

440 Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*, 122.

for the dead, as according to pure Confucianist doctrine, one must honour the dead on a par with the living.

Furthermore, not only is the veneration of ancestors in Vietnamese liturgy not in conflict with the official liturgy of the Church, it is also a cultural religious expression that may lead people to the official liturgy as it is officially practised. Thus, a Vietnamese liturgical celebration should begin with the invocation of ancestors. The main celebrant may invite the congregation to unite with their ancestors to give praise to God. This will reinforce the purpose of the liturgy, that it is the meeting place between God and Church, between the Creator, ancestors and the living members. Incorporation of the veneration of ancestors into the liturgy is commendable and will serve as bridge between the Western Church and the Church in Asia, especially those in Confucian-based cultures.

The Liturgy is comprised of the words, the rubrics and items used in its performance. Liturgy must be celebrated in such a way that faith in Jesus Christ may continue to offer meaning and guidance to contemporary men and women. The liturgy can be compared to an orchestra. The brass section is perhaps the loudest section, helping define what the official Catholic liturgy is. However, a gentle sound of the bamboo⁴⁴¹ flute in the background, which represents the veneration of ancestors, adds a beautiful melody.

441 The bamboo tree is the national symbol for the Vietnamese and richly symbolic. Vietnamese villages are typically surrounded by high rows of bamboo bonding the villagers with one another and

Culture plays an important role in liturgical celebrations. Faith and cultural identity can be brought together in ways that enhance rather than diminish both. It was my goal in this thesis to contribute towards the reconciliation of the worship of God and the veneration of ancestors. On another level, I hope my thesis showed how Vietnamese Catholics celebrate their faith within the context of their rich cultural traditions. To the extent that these divergent elements in their traditions and beliefs can be reconciled rather than pitted against each other, new possibilities are created for a deepening and strengthening of faith. As *Toward a Pastoral Approach to Culture* puts it:

The primary objective of the pastoral approach to culture is to inject the lifeblood of the Gospel into cultures to renew from within and transform in the light of revelation the visions of men and society that shape cultures, the concepts of men and women, of the family and of education, of school and university, of freedom and of truth, of labour and leisure, of the economy and of society, of the sciences and of the arts (nos. 27-28)

The veneration of ancestors is often regarded as outmoded and quaint, especially by those who lack the requisite knowledge of the Vietnamese culture to understand the meaning and the ritual of this tradition.⁴⁴² Imagine if God is excluded

shielding them from natural disasters and human invaders. Bamboo shoots provide poor people with nourishing food. Bamboo canes are used to build houses and bamboo leaves are used for roofing. Bamboo is woven into the most common utensils. Above all, bamboo is extremely resilient; it bends but cannot be easily broken, like the Vietnamese spirit during centuries of oppression and colonialism. For more detail, see Peter Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making*, 246.

⁴⁴² Peter Phan, *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines*, 149.

from culture. Then faith in Him would not be possible, since He would become a stranger, superfluous. Pope Benedict has said that our Christian attitude must never be one of refusal and closure. Christianity must be open to everything that is just, true and pure in cultures and civilizations. The Disciples of Christ, then, recognize and welcome the true values of the culture of our times, such as technological knowledge and scientific progress, human rights, religious freedom, and democracy. However, with their awareness of human frailty, they cannot overlook the interior tensions and contradictions of our age.⁴⁴³ Hence evangelization is never a simple adaptation to cultures, but always involves purification, a courageous break that leads to maturity and renewal.

A distinctly Vietnamese form of Christianity has not yet fully emerged. I hope with inculturation of the veneration of ancestors, we will begin to see the beginning of this movement. And it is a most welcome one.

⁴⁴³ Pope Benedict XVI addresses Italian Ecclesial Congress at Verona on Oct 19, 2006.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Berthrong, John. *All Under Heaven: Transforming Paradigms In Confucian-Christian Dialogue*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Bocock, Robert. *Ritual In Industrial Society: A sociological Analysis of Ritualism In Modern England*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1974.
- Bouyer, Louis. *The Liturgy Revived: A Doctrinal Commentary of the Conciliar Constitution on Liturgy*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964.
- Brown, Peter. *The Cult of The Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Cha, Peter. Yep, Jeanette, Cho Van Riesen, Susan; Jao, Greg and Tokunaga, Paul. *Following Jesus Without Dishonouring Your Parents*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press. 1998.
- Ching, Julia. *Confucianism And Christianity: A Comparative Study*. New York & San Francisco: Kodansha International, 1977.
- Cunningham, Lawrence S. *A Brief History of Saints*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005.
- Cunningham, Lawrence S. *The Meaning of Saints*. San Francisco: Harper And Row, publishers, Inc, 1980.
- Davies, Douglas. *Death, Ritual and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*. New York: Continuum, 2002.
- Delehaye, H. *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography*. London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1961.
- Dolan, Timothy. *Priests For The Third Millennium*. Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 2000.
- Driver, Tom F. *The Magic of Ritual: Our Nedd For Liberating Rites That Transform Our Lives And Our Communities*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991.

- Grimes, Ronald L. *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory*. South Carolina: University of South Carolina, 1990.
- Hawley, John Stratton. *Saints and Virtues*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- Jacques, Roland. *Les Missionnaires Portugais et les Debuts de l'Eglise Catholique Au Viet-nam*. (Bilingual: French-Vietnamese) Tome 1 & 2. Reichstett, France : Dinh Huong Tung Thu, 2004.
- _____. *Portuguese Pioneers of Vietnamese Linguistics* (Bilingual: English-French). Thailand, Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2002.
- Jamieson, Neil L. *Understanding Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Kamps, Charles Jr. *The History of the Vietnam War*. New York: Aerospace Publishing, 1988.
- Kelley, J.N.D. *Early Christian Doctrines*. New York: Harper Collins, 1978.
- Lee, Peter K.H. *Confucian-Christian Encounters in Historical and Contemporary Perspective*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991.
- McFadden, John and M. Donohue, James. *Christian Funeral Practices in a Changed Time and Culture*. Eugene, OR: The Ekklesia Project, 2005.
- Madrid, Patrick. *Why is That in Tradition?* Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2002.
- Molinari, Paul, S.J. *Saints: Their Place in the Church*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965.
- Oldstone-Moore, Jennifer. *Confucianism: Origins-Beliefs-Practices-Holy Texts-Sacred Places*. Oxford: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2002.
- O'Meara, Thomas Franklin. *Theology of Ministry*. Ramsey, New York: Paulist Press, 1983.
- Phan, Cho Peter. *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives On Interfaith Dialogue*. MaryKnoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004.

- _____. *Christianity With an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003.
- _____. *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines*, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005.
- _____. *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003.
- _____. *Vietnamese-American Catholics*. Mahwah, New York: Paulist Press, 2005.
- Reid, David. *New Wine: The Cultural Shaping of Japanese Christianity*. Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991.
- Rutledge, Paul J. *The Vietnamese Experience in America*. Blooming and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1992.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.
- Sheffield, Dan. *The Multicultural Leader: Developing a Catholic Personality*. Toronto, Ontario: Clements Publishing, 2005.
- Shorter, Aylward. *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988.
- Sherley-Price, Leo. *Confucius And Christ: A Christian Estimate of Confucius*. Westminster: Dacre Press, 1951.
- Sih, Paul K.T. *Chinese Humanism And Christian Spirituality*. New York: St. John's University Press, 1965.
- Taylor K.W. And Whitmore, John K. *Essays Into Vietnamese Pasts*. New York: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1995.
- Thich Nhat Hanh. *Going home: Jesus and Buddha As Brothers*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1999.
- Weiming, Tu and Tucker, Mary Evelyn. *Confucian Spirituality*. Volume I, II. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004.
- Wicker, Brian. *Culture and Liturgy*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963.

Wilson, Stephen. *Saints and their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Yao, Xinzong. *An Introduction to Confucianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Young, John D. *Confucianism And Christianity: The First Encounter*. Kowloon: Hong Kong University Press, 1983.

Catholic Church Documents:

Canadian Sacramentary, Ottawa: Publications Service, 1983.

Constitution on the Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium, Lumen Gentium, Gaudium et Spes VATICAN COUNCIL II. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1983.

Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines, Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. Vatican City, December 2001.

Inculturation and The Roman Liturgy, Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Varietates Legitimae, March 29, 1994.

Ecclesia in Asia, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, John Paul II, Given at New Delhi, India, on the sixth day of November in the year 1999.

The Liturgy Constitution: A Chapter-by-Chapter Analysis of The Constitution On The Sacred Liturgy, With Study-Club Questions. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1964.

Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture, Pontifical Council For Culture, Vatican City, 23 May 1999.

Scriptures:

All Scriptures references are from *New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1993.

Vietnamese Texts:

Đào, Duy Anh. *Việt Nam Văn Hóa Sử Cương*. [General History of Vietnamese Culture]. Huế: Việt Nam, 1938.

Hoàng, Quốc Hải. *Văn Hóa Phong Tục*, Hà nội: Nhà Xuất bản Phụ nữ, 2005.

Lê, Văn Siêu. *Truyền Thống Dân Tộc*. (National Traditions). Vietnam: Sống Mới. No date.

_____. *Văn Minh Việt Nam*. Vietnam: Nam Chi Tùng Thư, 1964.

Nguyễn, Văn Ngọc (Ôn Như). *Tục Ngữ Phong Dao* (Folk sayings). 2 vols. Vietnam: Hà-nội, No date.

Nguyễn, Trãi. *Gia Huấn Ca*. Cổ Văn Việt Nam, Vietnam, Hà Nội: Sách Giáo Khoa, Tân Việt, 1952.

Nhất Thanh (Vũ văn Khiếu). *Đất Lề Quê Thói*. Sài Gòn, Việt Nam: Sống Mới, 1968.

Phạm, Văn Sơn. *Việt Sử Tân Biên* (Newly Written History of Vietnam). 7 Volumes, Sài Gòn, Việt Nam: Đại Nam, 1959.

Phan, Bính K. *Việt Nam Phong Tục* (Vietnamese Traditions). Việt Nam, n.p., 1915
Reprint in Ho chi Minh City, Việt Nam: Nhà xuất bản thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1990.

Phan, huồn Phát. *History of The Catholic Church in Vietnam*, Tome I (1533-1960). Long Beach, Ca: Cứu Thế Tùng Thư, 2000.

Toan Ánh. *Nếp Cũ: Con người Việt-Nam*. (Old Tradition: Vietnamese) Reprint in Vietnam, Hồ chí Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2005.

_____. *Nếp cũ: Làng Xóm Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Neighborhood). Reprint in Vietnam, Hồ chí Minh city: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2005.

_____. *Phong Tục Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Traditions), Đại nam: No Date.

_____. *Nếp Cũ: Tín ngưỡng Việt Nam*. (Old Tradition: Vietnamese Beliefs) 2 vols. Vietnam: No date.

_____. *Nếp Xưa* (Old Traditions): Tale of Traditions. Vietnam: No date.

_____. *Nếp Cũ: Hội Hè Đình Đám* (Old Tradition: Gatherings and Weddings). 2 vols: Quyển Hạ- Quyển Thượng. Reprint, Vietnam, Hồ chí Minh city: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2005.

Trần, Kim Anh. *Tales and Legends of The Women in Vietnam*. Ho chi Minh City, Vietnam: The Art of Publishing House, 1994.

Trần, Kim Trọng. *Việt Nam Sử Lược*. (Sketch of the History of Vietnam). 2 vols. Sài Gòn, Việt nam: Bộ Giáo Dục, Trung Tâm Học Liệu, 1971.

Special Magazine. No Author. *The Church of Our Lady of Vietnam: Its Architecture and Meanings in Vietnamese Culture*. Marineland, Silver Spring. No date. (Address: 11814 New Hampshire Ave., Silver Spring, MD 20904).

Việt Nam Tự Điển (Vietnamese Dictionary). Ha noi, Vietnam: Trung Bac Tan van, 1931: reprint Los Angeles, CA: Nguyen San Ngay Ve, n.d.

Sách Lễ Rôma (Vietnamese Sacramentary). Vietnam: 1992.

Sách Lễ Rôma (Vietnamese Sacramentary). Vietnam: 2005.

Internet Sites:

<http://www.answers.com/topic/ancestor-worship>.

<http://www.secondexodus.com/html/vaticandocs/volumedirectories/worshipandsacraments.htm>.

<http://www.secondexodus.com/html/vaticandocs/centralvaticandocs.htm>.

<http://www.ewtn.com/library/COUNCILS/V2ALL.HTM>. .

http://www.educationforum.co.uk/KS3_2/mut.htm.

<http://www.vietcatholic.net>.

<http://www.deanza.edu/faculty/swensson/kieu.html>.

For Vietnamese text of The Tale of Kieu see Vietnam's Epic National Poem (1766-1820),

<http://vnthuquan.net/truyen/truyen.aspx?tid=2qtqv3m3237nvn1n2n31n343tq83a3q3m3237nvn>.

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia_en.html (Post-Synodal apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Asia)

Appendix 1

Các vị TG tại Trung Hoa và Việt Nam, trong những thế kỷ XVI và XVII, đã hiểu lầm, và cho việc hiểu kính Tổ tiên theo văn hóa Dân tộc là Tôn giáo, nên đã báo cáo sai về Tòa Thánh. Lỗi lầm này đã gây nên không biết bao tai hại, ngăn cản hàng triệu người không theo Đạo Công giáo! Thật vậy, các vị hiểu lầm nên báo cáo sai, nên mới có hai (2) Tông huấn: Đức GH Clementê XI, ngày 20-11-1704, với Tông Huấn "Ex Illa Die", cấm Kitô hữu không được phép tổ chức hay tham dự Lễ nghi đối với người quá cố, không được dâng lễ vật trong Miếu đường hay trong gia thất, vì những lễ nghi này liên hệ tới mê tín. Và ngày 11-1-1742, Đức Benedictô XIV lại ban hành Tông huấn "Ex Quo Singulari" cấm ngặt lễ nghi đối với Tổ Tiên. Điều đáng tiếc là các Thừa sai đã thi hành Tông huấn đúng như các ngài đã tâu trình, nên các ngài đã đánh mất hàng triệu người không chấp nhận tin theo Công giáo. Thực ra, ngày 10-11-1659, Thánh Bộ Truyền giáo đã trao Huấn Dụ về việc tôn trọng những tập tục, phong hóa và nghi thức của các dân tộc cho hai vị Giám Mục tiên khởi các Giáo phận Đàng Trong và Đàng Ngoài (Bắc Việt và Nam Việt), Đức cha Francois Pallu và Lambert de la Motte. Trong Huấn dụ đó, Bộ Truyền giáo đã nhấn nhủ hai Ngài: "Các vị đừng có tìm cách, tìm lý lẽ để thuyết phục các dân tộc thay đổi Nghi thức, Tập tục và Phong hóa của họ, trừ khi tất cả các điều đó rõ ràng là trái ngược với tôn giáo và luân lý" (bài giảng của ĐTGM Huế, khai mạc cuộc Tọa Đàm về việc Tôn kính Tổ Tiên - Huấn dụ Plane Compertum Est). Cảm tạ Chúa, vì sau hơn 400 năm Giáo Hội VN bị bách đạo, ngày 8-12-1939, Thánh Bộ Truyền giáo, đời Đức Piô XII, mới tuyên bố: "Các Kitô hữu và các nhà Truyền giáo ở Việt Nam và Trung Hoa không những được phép, mà còn phải được khuyến khích thi hành Lễ Nghi tôn kính Tổ tiên như Lễ Gia Tiên" (Huấn Thi Plane Compertum Est) Và ngày 20-10-1964, Tòa Thánh Vatican đã chấp nhận bản đề trình của Hội Đồng Giám Mục Việt Nam về Lễ nghi Tôn kính Tổ Tiên theo tinh thần Huấn Dụ "Plane Compertum Est." Sau đó, ngày 14-6-1965, Hội Đồng GMVN đã ban hành Thông Cáo xác định những cử chỉ, thái độ và Lễ nghi có tính cách thế tục, lịch sự xã giao, để tỏ lòng hiếu kính, tôn kính và tưởng niệm các Tổ tiên và anh hùng liệt sĩ, được thi hành và tham dự cách chủ động. Để thực tế hơn, ngày 14-11-1974, Ủy Ban Giám Mục về Truyền bá Phúc Âm, gồm 6 vị Giám Mục, họp tại Nha Trang, đã ban hành Thông cáo gồm 6 điểm: 1) Bàn thờ Gia Tiên để kính nhớ Ông Bà Tổ Tiên được đặt dưới bàn thờ Chúa trong gia đình, miễn là trên bàn thờ không bày biện

điều gì mê tín dị đoan như Hồn bạch. 2) Việc đốt nhang hương, đèn nến trên bàn thờ Gia Tiên, và bái lạy trước bàn thờ, gương thờ Tổ Tiên, là những cử chỉ, thái độ hiếu thảo, tôn kính được phép làm. 3) Ngày Cúng giỗ và ngày Ky nhật được cúng giỗ trong gia đình, theo phong tục địa phương, miễn là loại bỏ những gì dị đoan mê tín, như đốt vàng mã, giảm thiểu, canh cải những lễ vật biểu dương ý nghĩa thành kính biết ơn Ông Bà, như dâng hoa trái, hương đèn. 4) Trong Hôn lễ, dâu rể được làm Lễ Tổ, Lễ Gia tiên trước bàn thờ, gương thờ Tổ tiên, vì đó là nghi lễ tỏ lòng biết ơn, hiếu kính trình diện với Ông Bà. 5) Trong Tang Lễ, được vái lạy trước thi hài người quá cố, thường vái theo phong tục địa phương, để tỏ lòng cung kính người đã khuất, cũng như ?Giáo Hội cho đốt nến, sông hương, nghiêng mình trước thi hài người quá cố. 6) Được tham dự nghi lễ tôn kính Vị Thành Hoàng, quen gọi là Phúc thần tại Đình làng, để tỏ lòng cung kính những vị, mà theo lịch sử, đã có công với Dân tộc, hoặc là những ân nhân của dân làng, chứ không phải vì mê tín như đối với các yêu thần, tà thần. Như vậy, quyết định của Thánh bộ Truyền giáo năm 1939, và của Hội Đồng GMVN năm 1965 và 1974 đều rất phù hợp với tinh thần Hội nhập Văn hóa của Công Đồng Vaticanô II: "Phải làm quen với những truyền thống dân tộc và tôn giáo... Phải kính cẩn khám phá ra những hạt giống Lời Chúa tiềm ẩn của họ... Phải có kiến thức về các Dân tộc, các nền văn hóa, các tôn giáo... Phải hết sức miễn chuộng di sản phong tục của các dân tộc đó" (SLTG 11, 26).

Một LM ẩn danh at (January 07) <http://e-cadao.com/phongtuc/Cacnhatruyengiao.htm>.