NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Vietnamese Catholic journalist mourned

Thomas C. Fox | Jul. 13, 2009 NCR Today

Depending on viewpoint, one of Vietnam?s most thoughtful Catholic editors or one of the church?s boldest traitors died last week in Ho Chi Minh City at the age of 79. His name was Father Truong Ba Can.

As the editor of the progressive Catholic journal, *?Catholicism and the Nation,?* Can kept one foot in Vietnamese politics and another in the social teachings of the Catholic church.

?I deeply mourn the passing of Priest Truong Ba Can ? a person who made great contributions to the cause of national liberation and reunification, defense and development of the motherland ? the Social Republic of Viet Nam,? wrote Le Thanh Hai, a Vietnam Polit Bureau member of the Communist Party. Such praise does not win him friends among many Vietnamese Catholics in Vietnam or elsewhere.

Since 1991 Can kept the journal alive with many articles thoughtfully articulating the social teachings of the church and applying them to contemporary Vietnamese society. Can believed that Catholics and communists needed to work together to build Vietnam. This call for cooperation won him both praise and consternation.

His passion for journalism won him the Gold Medal award by the International Catholic Union of the Press in 2001.

Commenting on the award, Fr. Huynh Cong Minh, a former editor for *?Catholicism and the Nation?* and head of the Union Committee of Vietnamese Catholics, praised Can?s work for his role in encouraging Catholics to take an active part in building up the country and to create harmony between the sacred and the profane.

But that award also drew criticism. Redemptorist Father Stephen Chan Tin called the choice of the award ?an offense and a blow to the Catholics in Vietnam.?

In an open letter to Catholic Union, Chan Tin charged that the publication was Catholic only in name and was actually a channel for the communist party to spread propaganda.

Vietnam News, the largest English daily in Vietnam reported [1] on Can?s death:

> Can was born on July 13, 1930 in the central province of Ha Tinh?s Huong Khe District. He was ordained as a priest in Paris?s Notre Dame Cathedral at the age of 28, from where he obtained a doctoral decree four years later.
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> From 1964 until April 30, 1975, he participated in anti-war activities and against the dictatorship of president Nguyen Van Thieu of the former US-backed Saigon regime.
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> He also fought for democracy, workers? rights and against torture on students for years through demonstrations and hunger-strikes before 1975.

As a journalist, he was well-known for an article named "25 Years of Socialism Established in the North," which earned the then editor-in-chief of the Doi Dien (Face to Face) newspaper a nine-month jail term in 1971 at the hands of the then US-backed Saigon regime.

From 1991 until his death, he was Editor-in-Chief of the *Catholicism and the Nation* journal.

Last year, he published an autobiography titled 50 Nam Nhin Lai (Looking back after 50 years) telling the story of his work against the former Thieu government.

Memorial services were held at the Viet Nam Catholic Martyr Saints? Cathedral in Ho Chi Minh City.

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[1] http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn/showarticle.php?num=01REL130709