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Vietnamese Catholicism no simple matter

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Nothing is ever simple in Vietnam, including Catholicism. Yesterday we published an article reporting that relations between the church and government are warming, and that it is even possible that Pope Benedict could visit Vietnam in 2010.

Today there are reports that thousands of Catholics marched on Vietnamese streets July 26 to protest the beating of two Catholic priests and the detainment of seven other Catholics.

At issue in these protests, and arrests, is a church in northern Vietnam destroyed by U.S. bombers during the Vietnam War. The government maintains that the Tam Toa church is national property and was dedicated as a war memorial in the late 1990s. The incident apparently started when Vietnamese Catholics placed a cross at the site.

It seems to be true that talks between the Vatican and the Vietnamese government are taking place. It is also true, generally speaking, that Catholics in southern Vietnam, under the leadership of Cardinal Pham Minh Man of Ho Chi Minh City, are more cooperative with government officials than are Catholics in the northern part of the country. Northern Vietnam, never having experienced the Second Vatican Council, is a more conservative church, and has been more visibly anti-communist for decades.

There seem to be two overlapping approaches within the Vietnamese church in dealing with the Hanoi

government, which is communist in name only. One stresses cooperation where possible, the other stresses conflict.

The reasons for these different approaches has as much to do with history and geography as it has to do with leadership. That said, Cardinal Man has been very effective in winning gains for Vietnamese Catholics in the Ho Chi Minh archdiocese, one of the fast growing dioceses in the world.

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