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Pope meets Vietnam's Communist Party head

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Diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Vietnam were strengthened in January, officials said, when Pope Benedict XVI met Nguyen Phu Trong, marking the first time a pope had met with the general secretary of the nation's Communist Party.

Trong, who has been general secretary of the party since 2011, was accompanied by an 11-person delegation of other high-level party and government officials. The Vatican was one of a number of stops the delegation had planned in Europe.

The pope and Trong met Jan. 22 and held closed-door talks for half an hour. The general secretary and his delegation then met with Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state; Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Vatican secretary for relations with states; and other officials from the Secretariat of State.

The church and religious activity face strict controls in Vietnam, though some parts of the country have seen a gradual easing of restrictions.

The two sides expressed hopes that "some pending situations could be resolved soon" and that the "current fruitful collaboration" may be strengthened, the Vatican said in a written statement.

The Holy See and Vietnam have launched a process aimed at full diplomatic relations; there is a nonresident papal representative to the country, and the two sides are engaged in ongoing talks.

The Vatican and Vietnam established a formal committee to discuss diplomatic relations after Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung met Benedict in 2007. That meeting marked the first time a prime minister from Vietnam's communist government met a pope and top officials from the Vatican Secretariat of State.

Another major step in the process was Benedict's meeting with Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet in 2009.

Soon after that meeting, the two sides agreed to the appointment of a papal representative who -- for the time being -- would not be residing in Vietnam, but the move was still seen as a first step toward diplomatic relations. That representative, Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli, was named in January 2011.

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