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Vietnam cardinal's departure leaves questions

Thomas C. Fox | Mar. 24, 2014 NCR Today

HO CHI MINH CITY -- Pope Francis on March 22nd formally accepted the resignation of Cardinal Jean Baptiste Pham Minh Man who is stepping down after serving 16 years as archbishop of the Ho Chi Minh City archdiocese.

While the move has long been coming and his successor was named last year, Man?s departure leaves a large hole in the fabric of pastoral leadership here and questions about critical between church and state in Vietnam, which is officially a communist country.

Man, a lean and tall man, has been known for his easy-going ways and quiet charm. There has been a split for many years among the Vietnamese bishops regarding how to relate with government officials. Man clearly has stressed cooperation and has avoided conflict. This has not been the case with some more hardline bishops, particularly in northern Vietnam, which was cut off from much of the rest of the world in the 1960s, during the Second Vatican Council.

The archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City, in southern Vietnam, has long been associated with a more pastoral approach to church leadership, moves that preceded Man, but who carried them forward.

Some years back when Vietnam was first coming to terms with a spreading HIV/AIDS crisis, government officials approached Man, asking for help, after not being able to rally support for victims. Man used the opportunity, calling upon a number of religious orders to respond, and he set up an AIDS clinic, which became a model in the country.

That move, in turn, marked the beginning of a period of greater cooperation between church and government officials. At the same time serious restrictions remain on the church here. Catholic schools and Catholic hospitals are not allowed and catechism classes are restricted to church parish property.

Man?s departure will mean his untested coadjutor, Bishop Paul Bùi Van Doc, will take charge. Doc is said to be a more reserved and, in the eyes of some, a more rigid bishop. However, he also comes out of the pastoral traditions associated with Catholicism in southern Vietnam. Doc was the bishop of My Tho, in the Mekong Delta, before coming to Saigon, officially Ho Chi Minh City.

It is hoped the transition will be smooth. Some months back Man moved out of his formal residence and now lives at archdiocesan pastoral Center as a kind of semi-retirement.

The Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City is one of the most important centers for Catholicism throughout the Asian continent. It includes 10 other diocese in the south of the country and consists of more than 200 parishes, for a total of about 900, 000 Catholics.

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