

## Vietnamese Lunar New Year: Ancestor Worship and Liturgical Inculturation within a Cultural Holiday

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Western theologians or pastoral ministers who explore Asian culture or who minister with Asian Americans will soon encounter two major themes: Lunar New Year and ancestor worship. This column will give a brief overview of Tết, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year celebration, and will focus upon the 1992 Mass formularies for the Tết celebrations.<sup>1</sup> This will lead to an appreciation of the liturgical inculturation of Vietnamese Catholicism and hopefully spur interest in cross-cultural dialogue between Asian immigrants and mainstream Americans. But first, how can the concept of Tết be explained to those raised on American soil?

Imagine a celebration that combines the emotion of family members returning home, similar to the family gathering of the Thanksgiving holiday, plus the general frenzy of New Year's Eve. Add to these two celebrations the hubbub and hype of Super Bowl Sunday. Imagine the stores and media promoting merchandise weeks and weeks before the celebration, as one sees with Christmas displays weeks before December 25. Set aside a full one-week holiday from school and work, perhaps several weeks, and toss in everyone's birthday. Layer all of these celebrations together and a Westerner gets a glimpse of the importance of Tết in Vietnamese culture.

"Tết Nguyên Đán," which is the complete name of the festival, means the feast of the first dawn of the New Year. Vietnam currently follows two calendars, the Western calendar and the lunar calendar that was brought from China during one thousand years of domination. The Asian Lunar New Year occurs during the second new moon after the winter solstice, usually between January 21 and February 20. Tết officially lasts at least three days, and during this time family and friends greet each other with "*mừng tuổi*" or "happy birthday," as this is also the traditional birthday of everyone, when everyone's age simultaneously increases by one year.

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<sup>1</sup> Most of this article is taken from the Doctor of Ministry Thesis of Alphonse Minh, May 2000, submitted to the faculty of the Catholic Theological Union at Chicago: "A Study on the Inculturation of Ancestor Veneration at the Eucharistic Celebration during Tết in Vietnam."

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Tết cannot be defined by comparing it to the Western New Year's Day. In the Gregorian calendar, the New Year begins in the middle of winter, when nature is dormant. In Vietnam, Tết takes place at the beginning of the spring-equinox, as the old is fading away and another one is reborn, hence at this time humans celebrate their birthdays.<sup>2</sup>

As part of the preparation for this celebration, the Vietnamese are accustomed to clean their houses. Pre-Tết is also a time of decorating with *Hoa Mai*, or yellow apricot blossoms (which are common in Southern Vietnam), and *Hoa Đào*, or pink cherry blossoms (which are common in Northern Vietnam). In each house the living room is decorated with flowers and sometimes walls are covered with red paper banners expressing wishes for the New Year.

In these days before Tết, markets are bustling with food purchases in preparation for the three days of feasting. Just as an American Thanksgiving meal has traditional foods, the Vietnamese would not consider Tết complete without *bánh chưng* (mixture of sticky rice, yellow mung, beans and fatty pork, wrapped in green leaves). But most important is the family gathering, as everyone needs to be at his or her home during this time.

At home, the head of the family traditionally sets up a family altar, either inside or outside the house, with food and fruit. At midnight on New Year's Eve, religious rituals are performed in front of the altar to worship Buddha, various known or unknown gods, and ancestors, and for prayers for the New Year. Customarily, people of higher rank in the family give lucky money, *li xì* in Vietnamese, to those of lower rank.<sup>3</sup> People wish each other all sorts of good things especially to grandparents and parents and receive best wishes and advice from them. One visits close relatives of the family and benefactors first and after that, neighbors in the same village or commune. After visits, there is a large family meal at the house of the parents or, if they have died, at the house of the eldest son.

These rituals and reverence for elders point to the teachings and influence of Confucianism and ancestor worship. Tết is the ultimate opportunity to remember ancestors as it is the gathering of the extended family, and this would include grandparents and other relatives, whether living or deceased. This necessitates an explanation of ancestor worship, the Chinese Rites Controversy, and the ecclesial ban on ancestor worship in Vietnam and other parts of Asia, all of which is beyond of the scope of this article.<sup>4</sup> In summary, Western missionaries, Mateo Ricci in particular, attempted to explain to Rome that ancestor worship was a civil rite and was an expression of veneration for ancestors. It was not "worship." By Rome's banning of ancestral rites, including such rituals during Tết, the Church was forced into a posture that seemed hostile to the Asian environment. Indigenous Catholics were accused of abandoning their roots, and hence many Vietnamese, especially the eldest son, refused to convert to Catholicism since they were the ones responsible for officially performing ancestral rites to their dead parents on behalf of the entire family.

Fast forward, skipping several ecclesial documents on this subject, to 1960. On November 24, Pope John XXIII formally established the indigenous ecclesial hierarchy of Vietnam. In keeping with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, the Vietnamese bishops petitioned the Holy See to apply to Vietnam the *Plane compertum est* guidelines granted to Chinese native Catholics and missionaries. This communiqué of permission from the Congregation of the Propagation of Faith was released on June 14, 1965.<sup>5</sup> From then on, Vietnamese Catholics have been permitted to venerate ancestors and heroes, after having been forbidden to do so since the seventeenth century.

2 However, with Western influence, more families, especially in the large cities, are having birthday parties on the day the person was actually born and the celebration includes the typical Western birthday cake.

3 A crisp, new note is placed in a red envelope. The amount of money given may be quite small, but it is a symbol of the fortune of the giver as well as how close the giver is to the recipient. New Year's gifts are usually not given to family members; presents are reserved for teachers, employers, and superiors.

4 See Mark D. Luttio, "The Chinese Rites Controversy (1603-1742): A Diachronic and Synchronic Approach," *Worship* 68, no. 4 (1994): 290-312.

5 *Sacerdos* (Vietnam) 43 (July 1965): 490-492.

In 1974 the Evangelization Committee of the Vietnamese Bishops' Conference issued a communiqué that was stronger than the 1965 document. The 1974 communiqué, covering the building of ancestor altars, use of incense, death anniversary celebrations, etc., was helpful but had little influence. After the fall of Saigon in April 1975, the government control of the Communist Party spread from the north to the south and most religious activities were either forbidden or very limited. But over time, there was some loosening of the political restrictions and the practice of ancestor veneration by Catholic Vietnamese progressed in understanding and acceptance.

The climax of ancestor veneration and the appreciation of the general public (non-Christian) for Catholicism came in 1992 with the formation of the five Mass formularies for the first three days of Tết, during which ancestor veneration plays a significant role. These Mass formularies were published in the 1992 Vietnamese Sacramentary, and the liturgical calendar ranked these days over many other liturgical days of the Roman Catholic calendar.<sup>6</sup>

The five formularies are:

**Mồng Một Tết** (The First Day of Tết): three formularies:

- On the eve of Tết:

(1) *Thánh Lễ Tất Niên* (Mass of the End of the Year):

Thanksgiving and petition for God's forgiveness.

- At midnight:

(2) *Thánh Lễ Giao Thừa* (Mass of the Transition from the Old to the New Year):

For peace during the coming year.

- During the day:

(3) *Thánh Lễ Tân Niên* (Mass of the Lunar New Year).

**Mồng Hai Tết** (The Second Day of Tết): one formulary:

(4) *Lễ Kính Nhớ Tổ Tiên và Ông Bà Cha Mẹ*

(Mass for the Remembrance of Ancestors, Grandparents, and Parents).

**Mồng Ba Tết** (The Third Day of Tết): one formulary:

(5) *Lễ Thánh Hoá Công Ăn Việc Làm*

(Mass for the Sanctification of Human Labor).

Although there is only one day (i.e., one Mass, one formulary) indicated for ancestor cult (the second day of Tết), the other Masses in certain ways refer to ancestors in the sense of "origin." In fact, God is referred to as "the parent of all parents" or "ancestor of all ancestors" in all three formularies of the first day of Tết. These formularies display

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<sup>6</sup> The five formularies can be found in the *Sách Lễ Roma* (Vietnam: Catholic Bishops Conference of Vietnam, 1992), 1037-1045. Even though the Mass Ordinary for the 3rd Roman Missal has been released in Vietnam, the complete Missal (Propers) has not been released yet and these 1992 formularies are still in use, as of Tết 2015.

a maturation in the process of liturgical inculturation in Vietnam, having their Missal provide Masses for the most important and traditional ceremonies in the country.

How do these five Vietnamese Mass formularies compare with Lunar New Year formularies found in other Asian Missals? The revised Korean Missal is still in process, but only one Mass formulary for *설날* (Seolnal; Korean New Year) is published by the Korean Bishops' Conference. In Hong Kong, posted on the archdiocesan website, are only two Mass formularies.<sup>7</sup> The first Mass is for the vigil and is an adaptation of "Masses for Various Occasions and Needs: In Thanksgiving." The second Mass is for New Year's Day. The more original prayers and blessings are from ceremonies that usually occur after the Mass is over—the full ancestor veneration Rite, which includes scripturereadings, veneration prayers, and offerings of incense, flowers, fruits, and wine. Note that Vietnamese Catholics normally have their veneration at the beginning of Mass, as part of the entrance rite, while the Chinese normally have their veneration at the conclusion of Mass.

In the universality of ancestor worship throughout Asia, Vietnamese Catholicism seems to be the leader in integrating this cultural practice into liturgical life. In the United States, Canada, and Australia, overseas Vietnamese can offer a richness of inculturation with the decorations of chapels and churches with *Hoa Mai* and *Lộc Lờ Chúa*.<sup>8</sup> The traditional foods, like *bánh chưng*, could be part of the presentation of the gifts and in some locations the clergy might wear vestments in the style of traditional Vietnamese dress.<sup>9</sup>

This Confucian ethical teaching, of honoring elders and ancestors, has now been restored within the Catholic Vietnamese identity. Further theological reflection is now needed to explore how the value placed on filial piety corresponds with the fourth commandment of the Decalogue and the Catholic Church's teaching on the communion of saints. Perhaps one day, official English translations of the five Mass formularies might be promulgated for multicultural communities that have Vietnamese in their parish. In all of this, Vietnamese Catholics can model, in their religiosity and celebration of Tết, "to love one another more, especially all peoples to acknowledge the First Supreme Ancestor, who begets us, our ancestors, and all posterity. He is God, the Common Father, in whom humanity in all ages come together and say: 'Our Father who art in heaven!'"<sup>10</sup>



7 Note that these Mass formularies, available in Cantonese and English, are not placed in the actual Missal, but are only available as an auxiliary resource, published separately. Diocesan Liturgical Commission of Hong Kong, <http://liturgy.catholic.org.hk/p2c.htm>.

8 This is a Christian adaption of *bao lì xì*, the red envelope with "lucky money." Instead of money, the envelope contains a paper with a passage from scripture. As some Vietnamese would go to the Buddhist pagoda to cut spring buds, Catholics go to church to receive *Lộc Lờ Chúa* (the bud of the Lord's Word).

9 Since Tết is not an observed holiday in Western countries, usually Vietnamese American Catholic communities move Tết to the weekend, usually reducing the celebration to one day, the Sunday before or after the actual calendar date.

10 Upon receiving the permission that applied the 1939 instruction *Plane compertum est* to Vietnam, on November 15, 1964, Archbishop Nguyễn Văn Bình wrote these words in his pastoral letter, entitled "Văn Kiện Về Lễ Nghi Tôn Kính Tổ Tiên" (Document on the Rites of Ancestor Veneration). See *Sacerdos* 36 (December 1964): 892.