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Delegations from the Vatican and from Vietnam reported continued progress in their discussions, including agreeing on "upgrading" relations with a permanent papal representative "in the near future," a Vatican press statement said.

"They shared the belief that this step will help relations between the two sides grow and develop further," said the statement, released Dec. 20.

The two official delegations met in Hanoi Dec. 19 for the seventh meeting of the Vietnam-Holy See joint working group, which is trying to pave the way for full diplomatic relations between the Vatican and the communist government. The last working group meeting was at the Vatican in 2016.

"The two sides agreed that relations between Vietnam and the Holy See should continue to be maintained based on the mutually agreed principles and fruitful dialogue in order to build confidence and bolster relations in the interest of both sides and of the Catholic community in Vietnam," the Vatican statement said.

The two delegations also discussed "and reached an agreement on relevant matters toward upgrading relations in the near future between Vietnam and the Holy See from non-permanent pontifical representative to permanent pontifical representative," it said.

While the two countries do not have full diplomatic relations, Vietnam agreed to let the Vatican name a nonresident papal representative to the country in 2011, which was seen as a major step in an ongoing process to normalize relations.

That appointment came after landmark high-level meetings, such as Pope Benedict XVI's meeting with Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet in 2009 and his 2007 meeting with Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. 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.

Talks and relations between the Vatican and Vietnam were strengthened further when Pope Benedict met the head of Vietnam's communist party, Nguyen Phu Trong, and top party and government officials in January 2013. Pope Francis welcomed Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang to the Vatican in 2016.

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After the bilateral discussions Dec. 19, the Vatican "expressed its appreciation and gratitude to the Vietnamese side for the attention that the Vietnamese authorities have accorded to the Catholic Church in Vietnam in recent years."

"The Vietnamese side reiterated that the Vietnamese (communist) party and state are consistently implementing and tirelessly improving the policy framework respecting and ensuring freedom of beliefs and religion of the people; encouraging and facilitating the Catholic community to operate in accordance with Vietnamese law, and to participate actively in national economic and social development and construction," the Vatican statement said.

"The two sides also discussed issues concerning the partition of dioceses and the appointment of bishops in Vietnam," it added.

According to the U.S. International Commission on Religious Freedom's 2018 annual report, Vietnam was one of 16 countries designated as Tier 1 — the harshest level of

repression of religious liberty.

A Tier 1 country, the report said, is "any country whose government engages in or tolerates particularly severe religious freedom violations, meaning those that are systematic, ongoing and egregious."