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Pope Francis stands between a Vietnamese man in a suit and an Asian man in a clerical collar

Pope Francis presents gifts to Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong and First Lady Phan Thi Thanh Tam during a meeting at the Vatican July 27, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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Vietnam will allow a papal representative to reside in the country and open an office there to support Vietnam's estimated 6.5 million Catholics in a sign of the country's improved relations with the Holy See.

Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong traveled to the Vatican July 27 where he had a half-hour audience with Pope Francis before meeting with other officials including Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state.

During those meetings, the two sides "expressed high appreciation for the noteworthy progress in the relations between Vietnam and the Holy See, and the positive contributions by the Catholic community of Vietnam thus far," the Vatican said in a joint communique after the meeting July 27.

It said that the papal representative will "provide support to the Vietnamese Catholic community in their undertakings in the spirit of the law and, always inspired by the magisterium of the church, to fulfill the vocation of 'accompanying the nation' and to be 'good Catholics and good citizens,' and contribute to the development of the country."

The statement also noted that the presence of a papal representative in Vietnam "will be a bridge to advance relations between Vietnam and the Holy See."

The countries still do not have full diplomatic relations, but since 2011 the Vatican has had a nonresident papal representative to Vietnam.

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Van Thuong's visit to the Vatican was intended to follow up on the 10th session of a Vietnam-Holy See working group which met at the Vatican in March. After that meeting the two sides said in a joint statement that they were "essentially in consensus" on an agreement establishing a resident papal representative in Vietnam.

The agreement announced July 27 is the result of efforts that began in 2009 with the first meeting between Vietnamese and Vatican officials in Hanoi to improve relations between the two countries, the Vietnamese bishop's conference said in a statement after the agreement was announced.

"The regular presence of the apostolic vicar will help the people of God in Vietnam feel in communion with the Holy Father more concretely, to live and bear witness to the Gospel among the people more actively," the statement said.

Pope Benedict XVI met with Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet in 2009 and with Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung 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.

After continuing talks, Vietnam then 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.

About 6.6% of Vietnam's population is Catholic -- some 6.5 million people -- according to a 2019 government census, making Catholicism the most widely practiced organized religion in the country.