Vatican

Vatican News



Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the Vatican's foreign minister, walks in a procession to enter Phu Cam Cathedral in Hue for a Mass on April 12. Gallagher visited Vietnam April 9-14, amid improving diplomatic relations between the country and the Holy See. (Joachim Pham)

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The Vatican's foreign minister emphasized Pope Francis' care for Catholics in Vietnam and the pontiff's desire for full diplomatic relations with the Communist country, during a first-of-its-kind visit in April.

Archbishop Paul Gallagher, secretary for relations with states at the Vatican's Secretariat of State, was accompanied by Msgr. John David Putzer for the April 9-14 trip, organized at the invitation of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam.

Gallagher met with Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and other government officials and celebrated Mass with local Catholic communities.

It was the first such visit by a high-level Vatican official since the Vietnam War ended in 1975.



Pope Francis meets with Lê Hoài Trung, member of the Communist Party of Vietnam's central committee and chairman of its commission for external relations, at the Vatican Jan. 18. Vietnam's Catholics hope Francis will visit their country during his September trip to Asia Pacific. The Vatican's initial announcement of the trip did

not include a visit to Vietnam. (CNS/Vatican Media)

"It is a great honor for me to be able to reach you in the name of Holy Father Pope Francis," Gallagher told some 1,000 people at a special Mass he presided over on April 10 in St. Joseph Cathedral in Hanoi. The livestreamed celebration drew over 100,000 views.

The English-born archbishop said what touched him most deeply was to "see you who are the living stones of the church in Vietnam."

He said Pope Francis shows his love and closeness to them by naming Archbishop Marek Zalewski as the first resident papal representative to Vietnam in December. Zalewski's mission is to foster relationships between Vietnam and the Vatican and assist local Catholics to live out Christian values, he added.

"The church in Vietnam has followed Christ in his passion and in his death, but now it also follows him in his resurrection," the 70-year-old diplomat noted.

Hanoi Archbishop Joseph Vu Van Thien, who is also the Vietnamese bishops' deputy leader, told Gallagher that the visit was highly significant to the church in Vietnam and to the relations between Vietnam and the Holy See.

"I am entirely convinced that the event will make profound impacts on the faith life of the local Catholic community and signify the initiation of a promising new era in the relationship between the both sides," he said.

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In his meeting with Prime Minister Chinh, Gallagher expressed his joy at the positive development of relations between Vietnam and the Holy See, state-owned Vietnamnet reported.

The Vatican said the diplomat believed that "mutual understanding and sincere dialogue will elevate their ties to greater heights."

He also called on Vietnam to create conditions for local Catholics to take active part in providing health care and education as a way to contribute to the country's development.

Chinh said the archbishop's visit "gives true meaning" to the local Catholic community, which numbers about 7.2 million members in a country of some 100 million.

To further foster relations, Chinh and Gallagher promised to prioritize high-level contacts, including a potential visit by Pope Francis to Vietnam.

The diplomatic visit comes amid a warming in Vatican-Vietnam ties. In July, during then President Vo Van Thuong's visit to the Vatican, the sides signed an agreement allowing the resident pontifical representative to live in the country and open an office in Hanoi.

Archbishop Paul Gallagher is greeted by local women in traditional dress in Hue, Vietnam, on

Archbishop Paul Gallagher is greeted by local women in traditional dress in Hue, Vietnam, on April 12. In Hue, Gallagher held a public Mass at Phu Cam Cathedral and met with local major seminarians and Lovers of the Holy Cross sisters. (Joachim Pham)

In December, Thuong also extended an official invitation for a papal visit to Vietnam, that local Catholics hope will take place in early September, when Pope Francis visits Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Timor Leste. The Vatican's initial announcement of the trip, made on April 12, did not include a visit to Vietnam.

A delegation from Vietnam's Communist Party also met with Francis at the Vatican Jan. 18 and invited him to visit their country.

With Francis' appointment of Zalewski as his representative to Hanoi, Vietnam became the only communist country in southeast Asia to have a resident papal envoy. Other communist countries — China, Laos and North Korea — have yet to advance diplomatic relations to such an extent.

Gallagher held a public Mass at Phu Cam Cathedral in the ancient city of Hue and met with local major seminarians and Lovers of the Holy Cross sisters April 11-12.

His journey concluded in Ho Chi Minh City, where he was to lead a Mass at Notre Dame Cathedral, engage with some church groups, and meet with bishops from the nation's 27 dioceses before his departure scheduled for Apr. 14.

Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the Vatican's foreign minister, joined local bishops to watch a cult

Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the Vatican's foreign minister, joined local bishops to watch a cultural performance in front of Phu Cam Cathedral in Hue on April 12. Gallagher visited Vietnam April 9-14. (Joachim Pham)

Vietnam broke off all ties with the Vatican and expelled the last apostolic delegate, Archbishop Henri Lemaitre, from U.S.-backed South Vietnam after northern communist forces took over Saigon on Apr. 30, 1975.

Countless church facilities including schools and hospitals were confiscated, many clergy and laypeople were jailed or put in labor camps, religious activities were restricted and Catholics were treated as second-class citizens.

Both sides' relations worsened considerably after Vietnam strongly opposed the canonization of 117 Vietnamese martyrs by Pope John Paul II in Rome on June 19, 1988.

The Vatican took the first step to resume relations with the communist government when French Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, then president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, visited the country in 1989. Later, Vatican delegations started to pay annual visits for meetings with government authorities.

In 2007, then Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung made history by becoming the first Vietnamese leader in over three decades to visit the Vatican, meeting with Pope Benedict XVI. This marked a turning point in diplomatic relations between the two sides.

The Vietnam-Holy See Joint Working Group was set up in 2009 to hold regular meetings and discuss solutions to their problems. Two years later, the Vatican appointed Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli as non-resident pontifical representative to Vietnam. Zalewski succeeded him in 2018.

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Benedictine Fr. Nicolas Doan Manh Hung describes Gallagher's visit as a sure sign that the Holy See wants to foster full ties with Vietnam for the common good.

"In all likelihood Gallagher discussed practical ways of the establishment of diplomatic relations with the government authorities for the benefits of the local Catholic community," Hung, 45, told NCR.

He said once the pair enjoy a good relationship, local Catholics will have more freedom to perform their religious activities and serve their brothers and sisters.

The Benedictine said the archbishop's trip also aims at affording great consolation to local Catholics who have suffered from persecution, religious restriction, mistreatment, suspicion and hatred from other people, including authorities, for nearly half a century.

Paul Tran Quang Liem from Thua Thien Hue province said he expects the government to recognize the church's goodwill and mission through Gallagher's long-awaited trip.

He said Vietnam should ease its religious policies and allow local religious groups to engage more in social activities for the common good.

"We are inspired to be loyal to the Catholic faith in a fast-changing society because God always loves us and never abandons us in difficult times," Liem said.

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