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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/Vatican Media)

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The Vatican-Vietnam joint working group held its first meeting since last year's important agreement allowing for a papal representative to reside in Vietnam and the establishment of an office there to support Vietnam's estimated 6.5 million Catholics.

The meeting, held in Hanoi May 17, was co-chaired by Le Thi Thu Hang, Vietnam's deputy minister of foreign affairs, and Msgr. Miroslaw Wachowski, the Vatican's undersecretary for relations with states, who also headed the Vatican delegation, the Vatican said in a written communique the same day.

It said, "The meeting is the first to take place following the conclusion, on the 27th of July 2023, of the agreement between Vietnam and the Holy See," which came after years of negotiations, and allows for a resident papal representative.

The countries still do not have full diplomatic relations, but the Vatican had a nonresident papal representative to Vietnam starting in 2011. Polish Archbishop Marek Zalewski, apostolic nuncio to Singapore, was named the resident papal representative to Vietnam Dec. 23.

"The two sides had a broad and thorough exchange of views on Vietnam-Holy See relations, including issues related to the Catholic Church in Vietnam," the communique said about the May 17 meeting.

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"While reaffirming the freedom of the church to carry out its mission for the good of the whole of society, they noted that the Catholic community in Vietnam will continue to be inspired by the magisterium of the church regarding the practice of 'living the Gospel in the world' and being, at the same time, good Christians and good citizens," it said.

"The two sides acknowledged the progress in Vietnam-Holy See relations, thanks to regular contacts and consultations, the exchange of high-level delegations and the activities of the resident papal representative, Archbishop Marek Zalewski," it added.

Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong traveled to the Vatican and met with Pope Francis and other Vatican officials July 27. The president later sent a letter to the Vatican in mid-December officially inviting Francis to visit the Southeast Asian country.

The pope told reporters last September that if he does not go, his successor "certainly will! There will indeed be a visit, because it is a land that deserves to progress and that has my affection."