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Top Thai prelate steps down after 37 years

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Cardinal Michael Kitbunchu (UCAN News photo)

BANGKOK
UCA NEWS -- Cardinal Michael Michai Kitbunchu is set to stand down on Aug. 16 as administrator of Bangkok archdiocese after 37 years at the helm of the Church in Thailand.

The first cardinal of Thailand, who turned 80 on Jan. 24, has been a priest for almost 50 years, archbishop of Bangkok for more than 36 years and a cardinal for over 26 years.

During that time, the Catholic Church in predominantly Buddhist Thailand has changed from being a missionary Church to one that is rooted in the local community, said the cardinal in an interview with UCA News.

He also gave his views on the current challenges the country is facing, including political conflict that has sometimes turned violent, and the violence in the Muslim-majority deep south that has reportedly claimed more than 3,500 lives since 2004.

He sees the Church?s role in education and social services as one of its biggest contributions to the predominantly-Buddhist country.

Pope Benedict XVI on May 14 accepted Cardinal Michai?s resignation as Bangkok archbishop and appointed Bishop Francis Xavier Kriengsak Kovitvanit of Nakhon Sawan as his successor. Cardinal Michai remains administrator of the archdiocese until Bishop Kriengsak?s installation as archbishop of Bangkok, which is scheduled for Aug. 16.

The cardinal was ordained a priest on Dec. 20, 1959, and appointed archbishop of Bangkok on Dec. 18, 1972. The late Pope John Paul II made him a cardinal on Feb. 2, 1983.

He has served as a member of the Vatican's Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand. He headed the Catholic Commission for Clergy, Catholic Commission for Education, Catholic Commission for Seminaries and Vocations, Catholic Commission for Emergency Relief and Refugees, and Catholic Commission for National Social Cooperation.

UCA News interviewed Cardinal Michai in the bishop?s house in Bangkok.

UCA News: What has been the main change in the Thai Church over the course of your career?

CARDINAL MICHAEL MICHAI KITBUNCHU: Fifty years ago, the Catholic Church in Thailand was called a mission Church. The bishops at that time were foreigners -- from France, Italy, Germany, Spain or the United States and other countries. Now the bishops of all 10 dioceses are Thai. Priests and Religious are also mostly Thai. The number of missioners is becoming fewer and fewer.

What have been your major challenges?

Catholics are a small minority in Thailand. Buddhism is the way of life here, while Christianity is considered foreign. We have tried to change that way of thinking and help people better understand the Catholic Church. Evangelization started here more than 400 years ago. But many people still think of the Catholic Church as Western.

After I was ordained a priest, I considered it the most important task in my life to serve God and serve the people in my country, and also working upcountry among the poor. When I became bishop, I had more responsibilities. The archbishop of Bangkok is regarded as the head of the Catholic Church in the country. So it is a big responsibility.

What is the Catholic Church?s biggest contribution to the nation?

From the beginning, the Catholic Church has been involved in education. The people have a lot of confidence in our Catholic schools. Now we have more than 400 schools, from kindergartens to universities, with more than 300,000 students, the majority of whom are Buddhists.

The Catholic Bishops? Conference of Thailand has had several meetings to discuss how to introduce Jesus Christ in our schools. We decided that every Catholic school would try to be a center of the Good News.

The second big contribution is development and charity work. We are involved in many aspects of social welfare. We have hospitals and medical centers and have set up many centers in remote and tribal areas in the north.

Did your elevation to cardinal have an effect on the local Church?

It was a big honor for the Catholic Church in Thailand. Even the government and leaders of other religions have come to know that and have congratulated the local Catholic Church. From then on, Thai society and government have accepted the assistance and activities of the Catholic Church more than before.

But I dare not say why Pope John Paul II made me cardinal. One day, when I went to see him and was invited to have dinner, I said to him, ?Many people have asked me why I was made a cardinal. Now I would like to ask you directly, Holy Father, why did you make me a cardinal.? He kept smiling and said, ?It is not necessary to give you the reason.? So I don?t know why.

Did the late Pope John Paul II?s visit to Thailand 25 years ago have an impact on the local Catholic Church?

Thai people gained a better understanding of the Catholic Church after the visit. Some were interested in learning about the doctrines and teachings of the Church. In Bangkok archdiocese, we have had more than 200

new adult conversions every year.

What is the Church?s role now amid the political divisions in the country?

Thailand now faces a big political challenge because of globalization. The people are more conscious of their rights and freedoms. The bishops? conference tries to explain to Catholics to reflect correctly on the situation and follow the rule of law as well as Church teachings.

On many occasions I was invited to talk to parliamentarians and high-ranking government and military people about seeking solutions. I told them Church teaching tells us to love one another. This is very important but in practice it is not easy. Mistakes or misunderstandings can happen everywhere. To overcome misunderstandings, people should come together to have dialogue. I don?t say ?negotiation,? I say ?dialogue?. You have to keep peace in your mind and heart. The most important thing is to pardon. If you cannot pardon, you cannot have any reconciliation.

Bishops, priests or Religious must maintain neutrality so that they can say what is right and what is wrong.

How is the Church contributing toward building peace in the south?

The Catholic Church is greatly concerned about the social and political problems in the south. We try to talk with Muslim leaders. We have meetings in which we study the situation and provide solutions, or come up with some suggestions to the authorities.

When the tsunami occurred (in December 2004) the Catholic Church was very much involved in assistance programs and these were very well accepted. We sent Religious people to help and set up several centers to help the victims and affected families. I have given many scholarships to Muslim students.

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