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In diplomatic breakthrough, Pope Benedict meets Hanoi president

by Thomas C. Fox

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In a Vatican and Socialist Vietnam first ever, Pope Benedict met with President Nguyen Minh Triet Dec. 11.

For decades, going back to the early 1960s, there have been two Catholic approaches to Vietnamese communism, the hard line anti-communists who have argued there can never be any negotiations or cooperation between Catholics and communists; and those who have been open to negotiations and cooperation, especially on social issues.

Generally speaking the southern Vietnamese Catholics who have had consistently good leadership in key episcopal appointments, especially in Ho Chi Minh City, one of the fastest growing dioceses in the world, have argued for accommodation. Cardinal Pham Minh Man, of Ho Chi Minh City, has tried to find ways to cooperate with the communist government, often walking a diplomatic tight rope. Northern Vietnamese Catholics, almost all of whom were living in North Vietnam during the Second Vatican Council and never were exposed to the reforms that resulted from the council, and who lived under communism in some of its more Soviet manifestations, have been more opposed to working with any socialist government.

It is clear that the southern approach, pushed by Cardinal Man, has had the favor of the Vatican, especially under Pope Benedict, who sees much good coming out of better Vietnamese-Vatican ties. Benedict would very much like to visit Vietnam and it will not surprise me if, in the not too distant future, the Vatican and Hanoi will announce a papal visit to Vietnam.

You can be assured that crowds of proud Catholics would fill the streets wherever Benedict showed up - much to Catholic delight and apparently to Hanoi officials who want to show their increased tolerance

toward religion, though their record, in fact, is a bit more spotty.

To Friday's Vatican visit is historic and something to be cheered and supported and applauded. The following is the Vatican news release issued by the Vatican press office following the visit.

"This morning the Holy Father Benedict XVI received in audience Nguyen Minh Triet, president of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The president subsequently went on to meet with Cardinal Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone S.D.B. who was accompanied by Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, secretary for Relations with States.

"This was the first meeting of a president of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam with His Holiness and with high-ranking officials of the Secretariat of State.

"The Holy See expressed its pleasure at the visit, a significant stage in the progress of bilateral relations with Vietnam, and expressed the hope that outstanding questions may be resolved as soon as possible.

"The cordial discussions provided an opportunity to touch upon certain themes concerning co-operation between Church and State, also in the light of the Message the Holy Father sent to the Church in Vietnam for the opening of the current Jubilee Year. Attention likewise turned to the current international situation, with particular reference to the commitment of Vietnam and of the Holy See in the multilateral field".

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