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New Cosmology no longer new in Vietnam

Thomas C. Fox | Feb. 18, 2011

Vietnamese Sr. Dang Thi Ngoc Bich (NCR photo/Tom Fox)

HO CHI MINH CITY, Vietnam -- "So what?s your idea of God?" I put the question to Sr. Dang Thi Ngoc Bich, as she sat after a class at the archdiocesan pastoral center here, thinking her answer might give me a window into her soul.

She was with a group of a dozen or so other women religious. The center draws religious and lay for pastoral education. The religious generally use its facilities during the day and laypeople use it more often at night, after work.

?God?s a mystery,? the member of the Missionary Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of the World, answered after thinking on the question for a half minute. She then added, much to the delight of her friends, ?If I could describe God, it wouldn?t be God.?

And, of course, she was right. The women broke into laughter, seemingly agreeing with her, as if to say to the questioner: ?That was a stupid question. What did you expect??

Truth is I didn?t quite know what to expect. But what surprised me more than her answer was the course the women were taking at the center -- a course on ecology with a focus on what is loosely the New Cosmology, its

spiritual underpinning.

Sitting with the other women, Ngoc Bich appears to be cut from the same stripe as so many other Vietnamese women religious: young, petite, cheerful and vivacious.

Vietnam is a young country. Most of its people are under the age of 25. Most of the women religious are under the age of 35.

If there is a women religious shortage in the West, here in Vietnam the problem is one of abundance. Over and over one hears it said that with so many young women eager to join religious communities resources are strapped and issues of religious and spiritual formation are paramount.

Ngoc Bich appears younger than her 34 years. She has already been a religious for 17 years.

I asked the women sitting with her what they felt is the single greatest social challenge facing Vietnam today. Without coaxing and almost in unison the women said ecology. Unless the people attend to ecological needs, they explained, all other social issues will only get worse and the fabric of Vietnamese society will weaken.

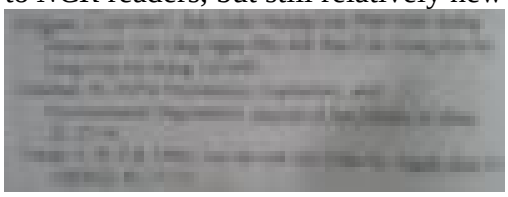
Studies have indicated, for example, that one third to one half of the Mekong Delta, the nation?s primary food source, is in peril and could be under water in 50 years if expected sea levels continues to rise.

That ecology would be viewed by these women as Vietnam?s number one social challenge took me by surprise. But it was followed by another because they were coming to ecological issues through what was for them a relatively new spiritual framework: the presence of God in creation.

Like other developing nations, Vietnam lacks educational resources. And so does the Catholic church here. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese have voracious appetites for education. Textbooks are a luxury the pastoral center. So educators here make up their own resources. In this ecology class the students were each reading from booklets sealed together with plastic binders.

These texts culled from the writing of others, primarily Catholics who have been writing books on the New Cosmology in recent years.

I asked the women if I could look through one of their booklets and quickly paged to the footnote pages to get a sense of their source materials. That was the next surprise. Among the names I found repeatedly were these: Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Albert Fitch, Joan Chittister, and Rosemary Radford Ruether -- all long familiar to *NCR* readers, but still relatively new to the ears of these Vietnamese women.



Let it be said that Catholicism is finding new scientific and spiritual roots here in Vietnam. The New Cosmology is more than a Western phenomenon. As Christians around the globe tackle with pressing ecological issues they are finding ways to education others by attempting to reach spiritual sensibilities.

It was not long ago, Ngoc Bich told me, that many Vietnamese did not understand the causes of climate change. It?s different now, she added: ?We know people are responsible and that climate change is being exacerbated by bad human choices."

She said pervasive Asian poverty, increased flooding and new human migrations can now be traced to ecological abuse.

The way Catholicism is being taught here is changing. This is a young and relatively conservative church. It is also a hurting church facing monumental social and environmental challenges.

It seems these messages are reaching an important target audience: the religious educators of tomorrow.

After some more thought Ngoc Bich said to me in Vietnamese: ?God is a transcendent Creator, giving life to all creation. The task is clear. ?We need to preserve this creation.??

[Tom Fox is *NCR* editor.]

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