THE MIGRATION IN 1954 - A HISTORICAL DESTINY OF NORTHERN CATHOLIC MIGRANTS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we put our concern on the 1954 historical event when an exodus took place almost on the large scale in each village, from the original villages in the North to settling villages in the South. We will also try to learn the insiders' experience about this migration with its very woeful yet majestic nature. After all, this 1954 historical and social event is a turning point in history, causing nearly a million Catholics to leave their native lands to go to the South in the condition of people who had to leave their homes.

Keywords: Catholic migrant, destiny, Diaspora, Hố Nai, Cái Sắn.

After the 1954 historical event – the signing of the Genève Agreement, Vietnam was separated into two regions, the North and the South. Many of Northern Catholics went to the South together. Their many-century-old tradition is to cling on to their native lands, to never leave ancestors' graves, and to never leave their heir houses. However, because of their faith in God and their pastors (Catholic priests), they had to leave their native lands and had a hazardous journey to the South. Deserting one's native land for a living is a disgrace. From that moment on, the Northern Vietnamese Catholic migrants' life condition and community heritage were defined as "Diaspora community".

Nevertheless, Northern Catholics' mass exodus to the South after Genève Agreement signed in 1954 is the event that till now very few social research projects have touched upon. There are only researches with respect to Catholic history, and a part of the exodus has been reported, such as: *Quá trình hình thành và phát triển cộng đồng Công giáo người Việt vùng Đồng Bằng sông Cửu Long* [The Forming and Developing Process of Vietnamese Catholic Community in Mekong Delta] (Trần Hữu Hợp, 2005); *Cấu trúc Cộng đồng Công giáo di cư năm 1954 tại Nam bộ* [1954 Migrating Catholic Community's Structure in the South] (Nguyễn Đức Lộc, 2010); *Một số vấn đề nghiên cứu Công giáo* [Some issues in the study on Catholicism] (Nguyễn Hồng Dương et al, 2008), etc. And a number of articles published in specific books and journals, reports in the seminars: "Công giáo" [Catholicism] published in *Một số tôn giáo ở Việt Nam* [Some religions in Vietnam] (Nguyễn Thanh Xuân, 1993); "Nghi lễ, chuẩn mực và tính linh hoạt trong đời sống đạo ở vùng Công giáo Hố Nai – Đồng Nai" [Rituals, Standards and the Flexibility of Religious Life in Catholic Area of Hố Nai – Đồng Nai] published in *Sự biến đổi của tôn giáo tín ngưỡng ở Việt Nam hiện nay* [The Transformation of Religions and Beliefs in the Present Vietnam] (Nguyễn Đức Lộc, 2008); "Vài nét về cuộc di cư của giáo dân Bắc Kỳ sau Hiệp định Giơnevơ năm 1954" [Some Aspects about the Exodus of Catholics in Tonkin after Geneva Agreement in 1954]

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(Nguyễn Quang Hưng, 2004); "Dân Công giáo tị nạn từ miền Bắc vào miền Nam và vai trò của họ tại Cộng Hòa Miền Nam, 1954 - 1959" [Catholic Refugees from The North to The South and Their Roles for The Republic of the South, 1954 - 1959] (Peter Hansen, 2009), etc. Overall, there are many studies of the event only as a part of the Catholic history. Yet, researches from standpoint of ethnography is the domain still left open and should be studied further, so that that historical period can be clearer, and we may have an insight about insiders' conditions.

Therefore, in this paper, we put our concern on a historical event in 1954, in which an exodus took place almost on the large scale for each village, from the original villages in the North to settling villages in the South. We will also try to learn the insiders' experience about this migration with its very woeful yet majestic nature. After all, Vietnam's historical and social event in 1954 is considered as a historical turning point, causing nearly a million northern Catholics to leave their native lands for the South.

The turning point of history

At midnight on July 20th 1954: Armistice Agreement was contracted by the governments of Vietnam and France, separating Vietnam into two regions, the North and the South. 1:00 pm on July 22nd 1954, a caravan of parishioners moved from the rectory of Lai Ôn to Dục Linh, some shouldering, others carrying. After three kilometers, the caravan arrived at An Thổ Wharf and stayed there one night. On July 23rd 1954, they moved by cars to Xuân Sơn Parish, Kiến An and stayed there 25 days to wait for people who had not come yet. After 25 days, they arrived in Hải Phòng and stayed one night at a parochial school. The next morning, under a continuous rain, the caravan moved by cars to Đồ Sơn Coast, they went on troop-carriers being taxied to the open sea to board the French landing crafts. After four days at sea, arriving in Vũng Tàu, the caravan was transferred to smaller boats to get back on land via Bình Đông Port (nowadays it belongs to District 8) and stayed there for 20 days to wait for settlement. After a rest, the parishioners were transferred to milestone 09, Hố Nai (nowadays Thánh Tâm Parish). After four days and nights, they had to clear out the land the diocese had set aside to build Our Lady of Perpetual Help Shrine and the hospital of Order of Saint John of God (also known as Hố Nai Migrant's Hospital, nowadays Thống Nhất Hospital – Đồng Nai Province). The Parishioners moved again to milestone 10.

(According to record book of an inhabitant, at Lộ Đức Hamlet, Hố Nai 3 Commune, Trảng Bom District, Đồng Nai Province – document of the fieldwork in March 2002.)

Genève Agreement in 1954 – an important landmark to restore peace in Indochina – abrogated the rule of France over the Indochinese Peninsula, recognized the independence of native countries, and officially put an end to French colonialism in Indochina.

On July 20th 1954, Genève Agreement recognized the independence and an entirely united territory of Vietnam. However, because of this Agreement, Vietnam was separated into two regions: the South and the North with the 17th Parallel as the boundary. According to Agreement, after two years of signing with July 1956 the latest, people of two regions would vote for negotiation and general election to unite the country. In this context, the United States government officially moved to interfere with the Vietnam's internal affairs by supporting the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam [Việt Nam Cộng Hòa] and its government with Ngô Đình Diệm as Prime Minister.

As soon as appointed as Prime Minister, Ngô Đình Diệm built a very detailed plan for transferring people from the North to the South, in which he emphasized propagandic contents. For examples,

"Define reluctant migrations. Point out the cases [reluctant migrations] where Viet Minh are now beginning in Hà Nam, Nam Định;

Mention the cases: "Invite to study in unwholesome areas as: Chi-lê, Nho-quan" of some people in Nam Định; point out proletarian dictatorial policy of Viet Minh;

Point out the policy: "class struggle". In the early stage, Viet Minh will fondle, then carry out the slogan that they will destroy the opposing classes. All middle peasants, landlords, and petit bourgeois must be proletarianized. The workers would be terrorized and deceived.

Particularly, state clearly every day that: "*Who stay in North Vietnam will be slaves to Communist dictatorial regime, who come to South Vietnam will get practical aids"*."

(Record No. 14613, Migrating plan in North Vietnam in 1954, National Archives Center II)

From there many people in the North left their houses and villages, went in flocks to the South by many different transports. About a million people flocked to Hà Nội, Hải Dương, and especially to Hải Phòng to wait for the transport to go to the South, due to the call of Catholic Prime Minister Ngô Đình Diệm and the material auspices of the United States.

Until June 30th 1955, there were 810.000 persons migrating to the South in total, by transports such as: by ships[2]: 534.761, by aircrafts: 213.657 and by other transports: 61.582, in which, 154 persons were soldiers and soldiers' families. According to summation result of Commissariat – General for Refugees (COMIGAL) [Phủ tổng ủy di cư tị nạn] until November 1955, as follows:

Table 1: The situation of settlement in the South

(Data were up to November 1955)

No.	The situation of settlement	Number of migrants
	Settlement in camps	586.129
	Unrecognized settlement	24.400
	Unrecognized sporadic settlement	140.039
	Temporary residence	10.920
	Soldiers and their families	125.393
	Total:	886.881

Source: National Archives Center II, Record No. 4042, Record about activities of Commissariat – General for Refugees in 1955.

Table 2: The situation of residence in the South with religious dividing

(Data were up to November 1955)

No.	Religion	Number of persons
	Protestantism	1.041
	Buddhism	209.132
	Catholicism	676.708
Total:	886.881	

Source: National Archives Center II, Record No. 4042, Record about activities of Commissariat – General for Refugees in 1955.

[2] *Also known as landing ships.*

Table 3: The situation of settling villages in the South with religious dividing

(Data were up to November 1955)

No.	Religion of settling villages	Number of villages
	Protestantism	3
	Buddhism	18
	Catholicism	265
Total:	286	

Source: National Archives Center II, Record No. 4042, Record about activities of Commissariat – General for Refugees in 1955.

Until December 12th 1955, the number of migrants continued to increase to 887.861. Among which, the number of migrants settling in Biên Hòa was 130.280. Until the end of December 1955, the settlement was temporarily stabilized with 600.177 out of 887.861 persons[3]. Settling camps were divided into kinds such as: camp for ethnic minorities, camp for fishery, camp for small industry (Hòa Bình, Thanh Hóa), most of other camps were for agriculture, except some mixed camps.

According to Võ Tự Do, the majority of Hố Nai's residents are migrants from the North to the South in 1954, most of them came from: Thái Bình, Hải Hưng, Hà Nam, Ninh Bình (Bùi Chu – Phát Diệm Dioceses), Nam Định, Bùi Chu, Bắc Ninh, etc. Until 1955, number of Hố Nai's residents was 40.961. Until 1973, the number was up to 69.978. So after nearly twenty years, the population increased 29.017 persons.

Table 4: The situation of residents at Hố Nai area before 1975

(Data were up to 1973)

Year	Population	Year	Population
1955	40.961	1969	57.869
1960	42.300	1970	61.144

Source: Võ Tự Do, graduate thesis from the National Institute of Public Administration [Trường Quốc gia hành chánh], *Công cuộc phát triển cộng đồng tại Hố Nai* [The community developing work at Hố Nai], 1974.

Based on what was written in some newspapers at the time and what was told by the local people before 1954, Hố Nai was described as an uncultivated land with luxuriant plants and hot climate. So many migrants from the North got sick due to being unable to adapt to the climate there, especially children. Missing their old villages, the peaceful living of their hometown, many embraced their children,

[3] Among 887.861 emigrants (except 125.393 soldiers and their families were assumed by Department of Defense, 762.408 emigrants were assumed by Commissariat – General for Refugees), more than 80% of them were settled in official camps, nearly 20% settled themselves and 734 emigrants resided temporarily in helping resident camps. In 1956, the government would strengthen the plan in framework of strengthening settlement. Until now, researchers are not in agreement about the number of Catholic emigrants, and general number of migrants as well. According to data of Commissariat – General for Refugees at National Archives Center II, the number of migrants was 887.917, until the beginning of September 1956. According to Land in tenure in Viet Nam of William J. Tater, October 1967, there were 888.503 emigrants. According to Vietnamese Catholic Annual Review [Niên giám Việt Nam Công giáo] in 1964, there were 553.680 Catholics migrating from the North to the South. So among sources of data, there is a significant difference. However, this reflects the context of mass exodus of Catholics migrating from the North to the South at that time. Therefore, the data quoted in this book can be considered as a reference, for comparison with data sources of other authors, such as Bernard Fall, Joseph Buttinger, Trần Tam Tỉnh, etc.

cried silently, and at the same time endured the homesickness themselves[4].

In the early stage, a fair majority of immigrants came to Hố Nai, but the narrow land and the natural conditions were not suitable for farming, the Northern people's main work for a long time.

In 1956, a mass of Catholics from Hố Nai- Biên Hòa and some other places in Sài Gòn moved to Land Development Centers [Dinh Điền] of Cái Sắn, Gia Kiệm to settle down[5]. Similarly, Trần Hữu Hợp also held that in the period before the land development center was established, there had been a sparse population forming small neighborhoods along the interprovincial Road 8 and the two channel edges of Rạch Sỏi- Hậu Giang (Trần Hữu Hợp, 2000).

Land resources in the region was mostly cultivated by farmers or owned by landlords who rented lands and got land rent. However, due to the incomplete irrigation system and war impacts, many areas were deserted. With a large area of land, sparse population and often-flooded fields, the people sowed rice in the flooding seasons. Some small marketplaces were formed along the axis road of Cái Sắn. The people in temporarily - residing camps were evacuated to Cái Sắn area in the condition that the channels were under construction, land-use rights were not granted, and housing was not available to live in. The Commissariat – General for Refugees allowed putting up cottages made of bamboo along the road 08 as shelters for the migrants while they were waiting for the channel being dug, land granting and house building. In order to grant land to them, the Commissariat – General for Refugees applied the Decree No. 07, dated on February 5th 1955 by the Saigon Government, regulating recultivation of uncultivated fields.

In the spirit of the Decree 07, those landowners with land in Cái Sắn area had to declare their uncultivated land as well as their land retained for farming. The remaining area was sold to the Government at the price of 500$[6]/hectare. The Government temporarily granted a portion of the acquired land (equal to 3 hectares) to each migrant household (including land for residence and for farming). Those from the North were provided with farming tools. When the cultivation proved to be productive, they had to pay back to the Government in installments within 6 years at the price of 500$/hectare.

In addition, the public fields and public lands in the region were also temporarily allocated to migrants. After every household had been given land, building up houses started to implement. The works of ground leveling and house construction were carried out by households themselves or by mutual helps or by hire. The Commissariat – General for Refugees assumed the supply of materials and 3,000$, the cost of ground leveling and house construction. Together with house construction, road embankment was also

[4] Before 1954, Hố Nai was a wild and unpopulated place which was fully covered with forests. Except the National Route 1 running through and some forest workers, this place was completely wild. (Võ Tự Do , 1974:11). In their first coming there "Immigrants used available materials in the area to build up hundreds of fragile, lonely houses in the middle of dry hills, on the edge of the forest, running alongside the Route 1 from Biên Hòa to Nha Trang. They cramped into narrow houses. On hot days, fly sand and hazy dust were scorching hot. The surroundings were hills with dry grass; in many places, they attempted to dig wells to the depth of three or four meters but only got cloudy liquid. they had to get to the valleys in search of water from springs for daily activities." (Diệp Đình Hoa , 2001:22).

[5] The elderly people in Cái Sắn told us: "It was the migration that made the channels come into existence". Tân Hiệp channel was used as a milestone to name other connecting ones: from Tan Hiep channel to such channels as A, B, C, D, etc. Each household was allocated with 3 hectares of land and some trees and leaves to set up a house. Granted paddy-fields were right after their houses, which was "farming is adjacent to residence" custom.

[6] The currency of the Saigon Government at the time of migration.

carried out collaboratively. The soil dug up from new channels was made into traffic roads along the channel edges connecting residences together, and the migrants' area with the local people's area (Trần Hữu Hợp, 2000:19). In reality, the land development center of Cái Sắn was formed in three waves of migration with the total of 11.500 households, 56.750 Catholics settling down in Cái Sắn as below:

Table 5: The situation of settlement in the land development center of Cái Sắn

(Data were up to 1959)

Wave	Year	Formation	Number of households eligible for settlement	Number of people eligible for settlement	Granted land
1	1956	Cái Sắn I			
Cái Sắn II					
Cái Sắn III	9.000				
.000					
.500	45.000				
.250					
.500	27.153 ha				
.000 ha					
.900 ha					
Total	11.500	56.750	35.153 ha		

Source: Trần Hữu Hợp, 2000, *Quá trình hình thành và phát triển cộng đồng Công giáo người Việt vùng Cái Sắn từ năm 1956 – 1975* [The Forming and Developing Process of Vietnamese Catholic community in Cái Sắn from 1956 to 1975], Master thesis, the Southern Social Science Institute, p. 20

Hence, the two regions of Hố Nai and Cái Sắn were densely populated by the people indigenous to the Northern plain and having the same Catholic faith who migrated to and settled in the regions in 1954.

It could be said that the 1954 exodus was a historical destiny and changed hundred thousands of Northern Catholics' lives. As time went by, it also became a community heritage for their later generations. For during their establishment of the land and the villages, the 1954 Northern migrant Catholics brought with them their customs, practices and lifestyles into the new living of the community in the South. This was considered as a reminder of the Diaspora history of the community in the context of many drastic historical changes.

Diaspora Destiny

The exodus of the Vietnamese Catholics in 1954 basically happened inside the Việt ethnic group. It was also a permanent dispersion of various ethnic groups from the North to the South. During the history of Vietnamese migration, it was often indicated as relocations with different characteristics and names such as "Southward Movement", "Gathering", "Migration". Among of them was the 1954 exodus of Việt ethnic group which was historically distinguished and therefore interested researchers. Diệp Đình Hoa, a researcher told: "*The notion of migration* [di cư] *in Vietnamese is only used for the Northern people moving to the South in 1954*". (Diep Dinh Hoa, 2001:21). It was because "di cư" is a Sino-Vietnamese word

which had its fundamental meaning as moving to live in another location. It was often observed that migrants, especially single migrants, usually quickly adapted to and integrated into the new living environment. That is, they had to abandon some of cultural values, lifestyles, or at least customs and practices of their old communities in order to lead a new life. However, Diaspora communities - migrating and establishing as whole communities - often had strategies to protect, consolidate community in order to preserve, maintain core cultural values as a nature response to the life's conditions which was new, strange and full of hardships. For the "Southward Movement"(1954) simultaneously caused two tormenting pains to the Catholics. First, they had to leave their native lands behind for a troublesome journey to the South. Second, their migration was for the political purpose which was named by the present-day's history as "the separation" of the country.

Deep in the heart of the Northern farmers, the dispersion in 1954 was a destiny in their own lives and their subsequent generations. It made the Catholics face the hard and painful choice between their faith and their beloved hometowns or villages. In our long fieldwork trips in Hố Nai, we were given by the elderly people in the community books with their own account on the history about the exodus in their hand-writing and about the settlement process for the community. It seemed that the moment of the exodus is always unforgettable in the deep reaches of their heart:

> In July 1954, people from far-away dioceses poured into the rectory like small springs flowing into giant ones. All of them took a rest there, checking attendance and receiving a message of migration.
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> Early on July 22nd 1954, Pastor Đaminh Đỗ Đức Thụ and all parishioners offered their last mass at the church of Lai Ôn praying for a safe and peaceful journey. After the mass, with a heavy heart, the pastor made his last farewell to the deacon and those parishioners who remained. He said goodbye to his beloved church and his homeland, where his ancestors were resting in peace. Many felt emotional and sobbed themselves by all this.
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> At exactly 1:00 pm on the same day, the pastor led his parishioners departing one after another melancholically and silently while struggling with their belongings. They left behind their houses, cattle, fields, as well as their forebears' graves. Their most precious luggage of all was "the faith". Sometimes, some of them turned around to look at their beloved village, which was more and more distant and eventually out of their sight.
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> *(Đinh Đức Khương, 2011: 14)*

The Diaspora destiny from the exodus in 1954 caused the Catholic migrants we contacted to associate their fates with the Jewish Diaspora. The notion of "leaving one's native land" (Diaspora) had its original sense in Greece as "dispersion", "seeding". The image of seeds which were scattered on a new ground but still grew up with characteristics of the original plants. It was to imply the Diaspora Jewish community all over the world (Steven Vertovec, 2000:2). The Northern Catholic migrants also recognized themselves in such a plight. When getting to the new land, they were anxious to choose laborious approaches to life. They had to both quickly adapt to the new living conditions, consolidate, and re-form traditional village

structures with ethical values and customs of those coming from the same ancestral homeland so that they could friendly live together. In this way, they could preserve their traditional values, ease their homesickness, and united support one another in a strange place.

From then on, the process of re-producing a traditional village community from the Northern plain in the South actually took root to meet the community's demands on gathering. Churches were first built. Maybe for those in the Diaspora communities at that time, it seemed faith was the only thing they could turn to for support and protection during hardships.

> On their early days of settling, although the people had to earn their livings and make houses for themselves, all were very enthusiastic participating in the construction of the parish church buildings.
>
> The works were assigned to dioceses depending on the number of members. Young men called out to get into forests, onto dense hill gorges, down to bushy springs in search of nice woods in various sizes. It was a really hard work to move a wood pile from a spring slot onto a hill surface, and they then carried it home together. There was already a group of skillful workmen at home who would carve, plane it smooth, chisel mortises and cut tenons. Those who were less strong would take easier tasks.
>
> The day of constructing the church was like festivities with participation of all young men and women. Everyone looked very eager for the event. With the guidance of a head workman, each pile was raised upright in shouts of joy. Soon afterwards, there were piles standing majestically and proudly in the clear sky. The church was 45 meters long, 10 meters wide with 4 rows of piles, among which were two rows of main piles and two rows of sub-piles strongly propped up.
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> *(Đinh Đức Khương, 2011: 18)*

In the new land, the Catholics seemingly had to establish completely new things based on their little cultural knowledge taken along with the exodus. This probably set suitable precedents for forming community identity. The system of organization and management for Catholic parishes from the original traditional villages was reestablished and had considerable influences on the socio-economic development of the Northern migrating communities. It could be said that this was the glue to unite members of the community, and thereby programs for developing community could be carried out easily.

In brief, the exodus in 1954 marked a historical turning point of the Catholic migrating community. This was not only a motorized migration but also a migration of culture, life-style, customs and habits. Over time, the Northern Catholic migrants actually established their own distinguished features. Those features were the clear characteristics of Vietnamese people. The way of organizing and establishing living activities within villages created an invisible tie in the community. The communal spirit was raised and nurtured. Today, when getting into areas densely populated by Catholic migrants such as Hố Nai, Gia Kiệm, Cái Sắn, etc. we can find names of some parishes the same to those of original villages in the Northern plain like: Ngọc Đồng, Kẻ Sặt, Lai Ổn, Ngô Xá, etc. and especially names of some neighborhoods such as quarters

and hamlets similar to those of parishes. Therefore, many who are not Catholics meeting a person from Hố Nai, Gia Kiệm, Cái Sắn always ask: "so you are a Catholic?". It seems to be certain as most of the people living in this area are Catholics. Meanwhile, people who used to know each other and are both Catholics usually ask for more details "Which area [xứ] do you belong to?" with the implication of getting to know more about his or her native land. Making it short as "area" [xứ] instead of "parish" [giáo xứ] was also popular in daily conversations of the migrating Catholics. This proves the clear localism of regionalism, the origins among the migrating Catholic communities. Therefore, when many people talk about "The Northern migrants" or "the 54 Northern people", it should be understood as the *Vietnamese Catholics* migrating to the South in 1954 as a distinguished identity of these communities.

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