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Catholics Thriving in North

By Daniel De Luce
Associated Press

At 6 o'clock mass in the Hanoi cathedral on Sunday morning, the congregation has a distinctively youthful look. Boys and girls less than 10 years old crowd every place on several rows of pews. Many come to the railing of the red and gold altar, kneel and take communion. They know the hymns and sing out. When prayers are said, their "Hallelujahs" and "Amens" are clearly heard.

North Vietnam now has 800,000 to 1 million Roman Catholics, and half of them are under the age of 30, according to Western diplomats who are Catholics. They were born into the faith after the start of Ho Chi Minh's revolution in the early 1940s.

All priests and nuns are Vietnamese. When France withdrew in 1954, French, Italian and Spanish clergy fled or were expelled.

One diplomat who has spent most of his long career in Indochina recalled this bit of history. "The North Vietnamese Catholics were never persecuted for being Catholics as such. Contact with the Vatican was cut off, however. It was resumed last year when the auxiliary bishop of Hanoi was permitted to attend the Synod of Bishops in Rome.

In the 1954 partition of Vietnam, an estimated 1 million Catholics resettled in



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Youngsters gather and cavort outside Hanoi Cathedral after Sunday 6 a.m. mass.

Vietnam, Praised for Patriotism

the South, leaving 200,000 in the North. Diplomats say the southern community now totals about 2 million, but the Northern community has quadrupled.

In the Western diplomatic view, these substantial Catholic minorities may have helped to prompt overtures of conciliation by the North Vietnamese and Provisional Revolutionary governments as they neared victory in the war.

Provinces in North Vietnam that have large numbers of Catholics received special praise for their patriotism and economic achievements.

The Provisional Revolutionary Government last month issued a glowing account of Catholic support in the fight against the American-sponsored Thieu administration in Saigon. It said 300 Catholic priests held a meeting in Cantho in the Mekong Delta last July to condemn the administration's "corruption."

"A Catholic-led popular committee against corruption held big rallies in Hue; other cities—Saigon, Bienhoa, Cantho—followed suit," the government said.

"It is significant that the church, which had always extended vigorous support to Ngo Dinh Diem, assassinated in 1963 in an army officers' plot, then Nguyen Van Thieu, should now keep its distance from the latter.

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The mass of the Catholic faithful had gradually awakened under the impact of events and no longer blindly obeyed the hierarchy. Young priests openly stood for national independence and social progress and went to prison together with revolutionary militants."

Archbishop Nguyen Vin Binh of Saigon called on South Vietnamese Catholics last Sunday to "actively realize our civic duties under the guidance of the Provisional Revolutionary Government.

"What we can do immediately is to contribute to stabilizing the situation," the archbishop wrote in a message read during mass. "What is important is to see to the future in view of building, together with our compatriots, a prosperous Vietnam, a new society in which there will be justice and love."

French, Canadian and American priests are active in church and welfare work in South Vietnam. They run orphanages, homes for the aged and schools. In North Vietnam, such institutions

are run by the government. However, North Vietnamese Catholic children are taught the catechism by nuns in classes held in out-of-school hours.

In New York, the Rev. Robert L. Charlebois, Southeast Asia Secretary of Catholic Relief Services and an expert on the region, said the North Vietnamese government has "disinstitutionalized the church." "There is worship and there is mass being offered, but the church is not allowed to operate in a community way," he said.

He said that hospitals, or-

phanages, old people's homes and schools, once operated by the church, now are run by the government.

"But the church in North Vietnam is still in operation, still recognized by the Holy See just as much as the American church," he added.