

The South Vietnamese Catholics

By GEORGE WALD

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.—When I went to Saigon with an American student delegation, one of the things most on my mind was to connect with Catholic opinion there. There are about forty million Catholics in the United States, many of whom think that a main object of the war in Vietnam is to protect Catholics from Communists. My first intimation that this may not be the whole story was a statement issued Oct. 15, 1969, signed by 93 Catholic Vietnamese living in Europe and "a great number of Catholics in Vietnam whose names cannot be opportunely published."

This statement said, "In our opinion the real obstacles [to peace] are that the U.S. Government does not recognize that the American intervention in Vietnam, the presence of half a million of its troops in this country, and the massive bombardments which have annihilated all the villages, yesterday in the North and today in the South, are criminal acts which violate the fundamental rights and the sacred sovereignty of our people. . . . It is now evident that this tragic-comedy has been entirely staged by the Government of the United States."

About one-tenth of Vietnamese are

Catholics, the rest mainly Buddhists. Prior to 1954, the French colonial regime not only fostered Catholicism, but bred a French-oriented Catholic professional, military and bureaucratic elite.

How do South Vietnamese Catholics now feel about the war, their prospects, and the American presence?

There are two well-organized Catholic peace groups in South Vietnam, the middle-class Catholics for Peace, and the peace faction of Catholic Labor Youth, which represents the bulk of young Catholic workers and soldiers. We spent a morning with members of Catholic Labor Youth. They told us that above all they want self-determination for South Vietnam; and that most of them thought that Mrs. Binh's seven points, put forward in Paris by the delegation of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, was probably the best way to achieve it.

They said that Catholic sentiment in South Vietnam had been changing rapidly. Many older persons, including refugees from the North, had sent their sons into what they thought was a war against Communism, which they now viewed as an American manipulation.

How can Catholics hold such views? I think for two main reasons: one,

that the church is doing so well in the North; and again, their conviction that Vietnamese Communism is more Vietnamese than communistic. It is a highly nationalistic movement. They look on a Vietnamese Communist as another patriot with special economic and social concerns.

But let another Catholic say it—Nguyen Van Can, former deputy to the National Assembly, professor of philosophy, diplomat and author:

"Before undertaking any analysis of the present situation of the church, it is necessary to dispel the widely held impression that Catholics are for the war and against peace. This is absolutely untrue. The origin of this error—or this calumny—is probably found in the extremist attitudes of some priests who were refugees from North Vietnam, had some experience of Communism there, suffered persecution, and saw the regime as working against the national interest in attempting to impose on the country a socialistic Communism contrary to its tradition. The best known priest of this persuasion was Father Hoang Quyhn; but as everyone knows, a few years ago he radically changed his views."

It is impossible to say how South Vietnamese Catholics now divide on these issues. So far as I know, they

have not been polled. Most of the Bishops' council and many older priests and laymen still back the war, but more and more the Catholic youth, their elders and younger priests are joining, and, to a degree, leading the opposition. The most outspoken opposition politician in South Vietnam is Ngo Cong Duc, Catholic member of the National Assembly and publisher of the anti-Government newspaper Tin Sang, issues of which have been suppressed by the police more than 140 times in the past year. When I dropped in on Tin Sang one morning I found the editor working at his desk with a naked pistol lying beside his papers.

In his Christmas message, 1970, Nguyen Van Binh, Archbishop of Saigon and chief prelate of South Vietnam, wrote: "One speaks of peace with victory, of peace with honor. I don't understand what those are. We want simply peace, a peace accepted by both sides. It isn't just Catholics, but all the people who desire peace, for there has been too much killing, in the North as in the South."

This is the second of two articles by George Wald, Higgins Professor of Biology at Harvard and winner of the Nobel Prize in physiology and medicine in 1967.