

Anti-Red Priest Leads Foes of Thieu

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Oct. 18—The Roman Catholic priest at the of the thinly disguised movement to oust President Nguyen van Thieu reckons that 3,000 South Vietnamese colonels and lieutenant colonels passed through his courses on anti-Communist psychological warfare.

"Among my students, I can count six generals," said the Rev. Tran Huu Thanh, chuckling. "It is because of this that Thieu is afraid of me."

Father Thanh no longer gives those courses, because he is busy trying to get President Thieu to resign. He sees no contradiction between the lifetime he has spent combating Vietnamese Communists and his current efforts to overturn their No. 1 enemy.

"It is a labor that I have prepared for over the past 30 years," the priest said, speaking French. Father Thanh, a calm man on the surface, chain-smokes even at demonstrations, flecking ashes over his black soutane.

About two months ago, the 59-year-old priest, a member of the Redemptorist order, entered a tentative opposition scene that was dominated by over-familiar names and faces, veterans of unsuccessful causes.

Tear-Gassed at Hue

He had begun his pastorate at Hue at the end of World War II, training young Catholics to counter the mounting influence of the Vietminh. And it was there that he began his campaign against Mr. Thieu.

In Hue last Sept. 8 Father Thanh and several thousand demonstrators were tear-gassed by South Vietnamese policemen. He had launched a de-

monstration, and his political career, with an audacious, six-point accusation that charged President Thieu and his family with gross acts of corruption.

Since then "Accusation No. 1," as it was called, promising others to come, has become the catalyst of a revived opposition. Mr. Thieu has been put on the defensive, at least for the moment, and Father Thanh is the Opposition's hottest political property.

'Tacit Approval' of Rome

The priest says that he has the "tacit approval" of the Vatican for his activities. That became apparent on the morning of Oct. 1, a day when President Thieu was to go on the air to defend himself, and when the cautious Archbishop of Saigon, the Most Rev. Nguyen Van Binh, endorsed the anti-corruption front.

"We are only demanding, at first changes in the Government, not a change of the Government," Father Thanh said, ticking off a familiar list of generals frequently accused of corruption. But he said that he "certainly" hoped that President Thieu would ultimately resign. "But softly, not by force," he was quick to add.

Mr. Thieu's resignation, he speculated, could be followed by elections for a constituent assembly in which the communists would be invited to participate "in a political party, like in France," as he put it. "We accept the Communists in the bosom of Vietnamese politics," he said.

Though he has spent his adult years trying to undo the political handiwork of the Vietminh and the Vietcong, he obviously retains an admiration for their skills at indoctrination: "They use logic," he said.

While he is generally pigeon-

holed as a "rightist Catholic," he says he endorses "the Communists' promises of social reform" while rejecting their authoritarian methods. "That is why, even today, my anti-Communism is different from that of this Government," he said.

The early work in Hue honed his anti-Communism. "Of 80 cadres I had, 40 were arrested and shot by the Vietminh," he said deferring to workers. In 1954, he was sent by Rome to northeastern Thailand to work among pro-Communist Vietnamese refugees and afterward to Hanoi, where he aided people seeking to flee the north in the wake of the Geneva agreements that created the two Vietnams.

"I left Hanoi by the last airplane," he said, and the next day Ho Chi Minh came into Hanoi." Father Thanh returned to Saigon and presented to them Premier Ngo Dinh Diem a plan for a network of anti-Communist agents along what was to become known as the Ho Chi Minh trail, in Laos and Cambodia. The plan was rejected but Father Thanh was offered the job of forming Republican Youth cadres under the direction of Ngo Dinh Nhu, the Premier's brother and the power figure of the regime.

Subsequently, the young priest was appointed head of the School of Personalism and set about writing textbooks on the foggy, eclectic doctrine to which the new government tried to anchor itself as an intellectual counterweight to Communism. This was a mixture of the Christian existentialism of Gabriel Marcel, Dominican ideas about the distribution of wealth and Mr. Nhu's personal philosophical insights.