

A Study of Organization of Catholic Parishes and Sub-parishes in Northern Vietnam from the 17th to the 20th century

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ABSTRACT: Through the use of literature and various documents from the field-work study, the paper is a first step towards describing the process of forming parishes and “họ đạo”, and the organization of the laity into these units. The organization of parishes and họ đạo, together with their activities, in the author’s opinion, were an important part of Evangelical activity, and the development of Catholicism in Vietnam.

In the process of evangelical development in Vietnam, and the organization of its religious activities, the Catholic Church paid special attention to the establishment of parishes and sub-units within the organizational system of the Church. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, parishes covered very wide areas, encompassing a district, a number of districts, or even (in the earliest times) a whole province, with the Church establishing *họ đạo* (sub-parishes) in order that it might more conveniently manage its communities of believers, and their religious activities.

In circumstances whereby there were inadequate clergy, the foreign missionaries selected local people to form societies of catechists and preachers, taking particular care to ensure that the societies were comprised of people who were "wise and virtuous" to collaborate with the clergy in the conduct of liturgy, and other affairs of the parish and *họ đạo*.

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We start in the 17th century, because although various Catholic historians contend that evangelization in Vietnam began in 1533, the reality is that missionary activity only really started to achieve results in the first half of the seventeenth century. This research is limited to the period up to the start of the twentieth century, because we want to put aside research on the later period to another project.

The Process for Establishing Parishes and “*hộ đạo*” in the North

Relying on an instruction of 1659 from *Propaganda Fide*, Bishop Lambert took the first step to fixing borders of parishes and *hộ đạo* at the Synods of Juthia (1664) and Định Hiến (1760).

In the first half of the seventeenth century, parishes covered large areas, and were regularly composed of territory encompassing a whole province. On December 23rd 1673, Pope Clement ratified most of the resolutions of the Định Hiến Synod. The stipulation for the establishment the “parishes, and appointment the managing clergy was as follows: "Therefore this country is to be divided into five parishes, with the parish of Nghệ An to be looked after by Father Martinho, with the diocesan centre to be located in the village of Can. He will look after parishioners from there to the parish of Thanh Hóa, just as Father Leon Trung will look after parishioners from the parish centre at Kẻ An through to the border of Berreae and the Quảng country. Father Philippe Nhiêu will serve the parish of Thanh Hóa Upper, with the parish house located at Kẻ Do Village, Father Vento Văn Tuy will look after the parish of Lower Thanh Hóa, with the parish house being located at Vân Nô Village, and Simon Kiên will look after that part of the lower South parish bordering on the West, with the parish centre located at Trịnh Xuyên Village. Father Juan Văn Học will serve part of the Southern parish bordering the East, with the parish house to be located in Kiên Lao, while the northern and eastern parishes will be held by Father Anton, with his parish house located in Kẻ Nam village. Father Jacob Văn Kim will look after the parish of Nam Thượng, another Eastern parish with few parishioners, the parish house being in the village of Kẻ Ruồng. Finally, Father Vento Văn Thiện will look after the two churches of Kẻ Chợ, one being the Church of the Resurrection, the second being the Church of the Nativity."¹

As part of the process of evangelical development, new parishes and *hộ đạo* soon sprang to life, and were separated off from their mother parishes. For example,

Quỳnh Lưu (Cầm Trường) parish, belonging to the Thuận Nghĩa deanery in the Diocese of Vinh, was created in the eighteenth century. By the nineteenth century, the parish of Yên Hòa had broken off from it, but into the twentieth century, a total of ten parishes had been cut off from it (see figure 1).²

In spite of this severance of new parishes, until the start of the twentieth century, many parishes in the North still covered vast areas, incorporating many *hộ đạo*, each one belonging to a village, a district, or even a whole series of districts. For example, the parish of Báo Đáp (belonging to the diocese of Bùi Chu), at the beginning of the twentieth century “is comprised of thirty-five *hộ đạo*, in twenty- four districts.”³

In a number of our research projects, we have shown that, in the process of formation of parishes in the North, *hộ đạo* were based on *gián tông lương giáo* (an integration of Catholics and non-Catholics), established out *giáp giáo* (separated

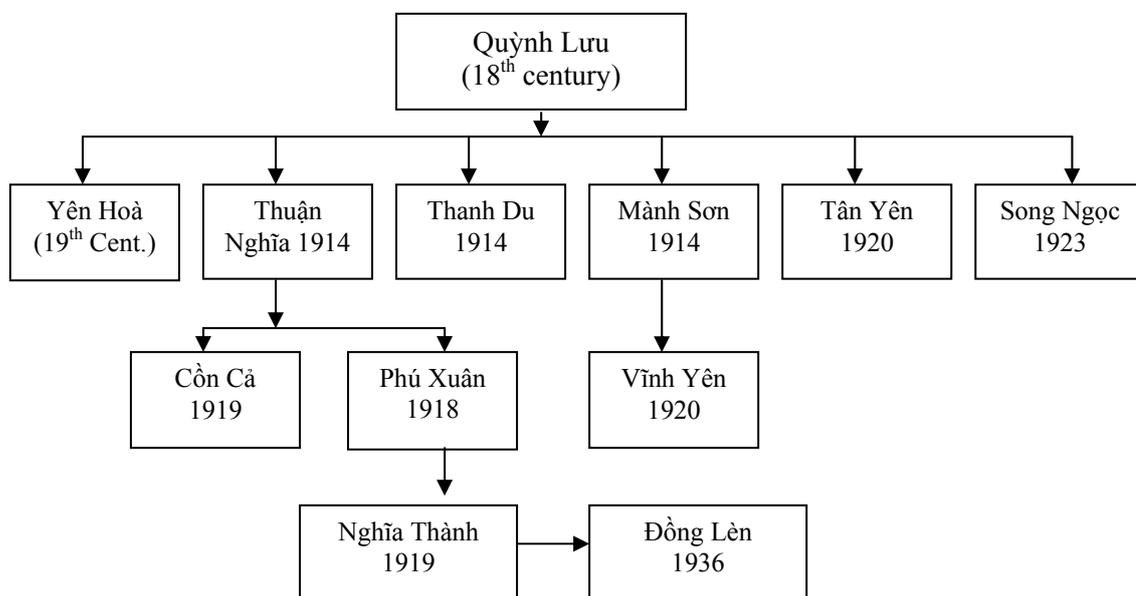
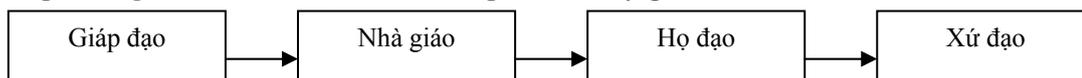


Figure 1

Catholic communities). The *giáp giáo* were initially established around a church centre as a place for teaching catechumens, and also to be used for prayers. It was on this basis that parishes came into being.

When a number of *hộ đạo* were located close to each other, they would, depending on conditions, establish a parish, see figure 2 hereunder:



In a number of dioceses, such as Phát Diệm (Ninh Bình), there was a transitional step between the creation of *họ đạo*, and their elevation to parish status. This was the establishment of an intermediate organization known as the *phiên đạo* (interim parish) (see figure 3).⁴

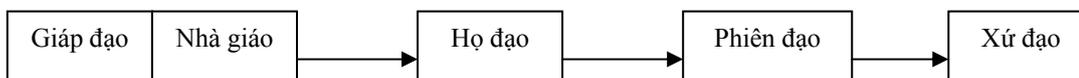


Figure 3

Dioceses belonging to the Dominican order had *họ giáo* instead of *nhà giáo*. As with *nhà giáo*, interim parishes were an intermediate step in the establishment of *họ đạo*. These places were reserved for catechumens to learn about the faith, study its writings, and prepare for the sacraments. When a number of the faithful had permission, and met the requisite pre-conditions, the local church community could be raised to a *họ đạo*⁵, with the following steps being elevation to a *phiên đạo*, and thereafter a parish (see figure 4).



Figure 4

Some *họ đạo* could not be raised to parish status; these were known as *họ đạo lẻ* (minor sub-parishes). Those that could be raised to parishes were known as *họ nhà xứ*, *họ đầu xứ*, (major sub parishes),⁶ or *họ đạo nhất* (principal sub-parishes).⁷ This was the designation in dioceses belonging to the Dominicans, while in those belonging to the MEP, they were known as *họ trị sở* (self-managed sub-parishes).

Họ đạo in the North were completely different from what were known as *họ đạo* in the South. That which was called parishes in the South was called sub-parishes in the North. So the *họ đạo* of Cái Mơn is equivalent to the parish of Cái Mơn, the *họ đạo* of Cầu Kho is equivalent to the parish of Cầu Kho. Local church communities, organizations in the process of becoming a *họ đạo*, distinguished themselves from *họ đạo* in Dominican dioceses by being called *bản đạo*, meaning root communities.

In a number of research projects, we have presented with some care of the matter of the residential integration of Catholics and non-Catholics.⁸ Catholic villages were gatherings of believers who resided in special places to establish *họ đạo* and

parishes, standing isolated from non-Catholic citizens. Those *họ đạo* and parishes which were wholly comprised of Catholics were known as *họ đạo*, parishes or villages *toàn tông* (completely Catholic). Sub-parishes comprised of both Catholics and non-Catholics together were known as *đất xôi đẽ* (mixed lands) or *họ xôi đẽ* (mixed communities). Similarly, villages were known as *xôi đẽ* villages or *gián tông* (partly Catholic) villages, to distinguish them from *toàn tông* villages.

Names: The names of *họ đạo* raised to parish status then became the name of the parish. The patron saint of the sub-parish at the same time became that of the Parish. Thereafter, the *họ đạo trị sở* (*self-managing sub-parish*) did not have its own particular church, as this became the parish Church. *The History of the Central Diocese* states: "Each parish is comprised of several sub-parishes, each with its own church. As for the name of the parish, each takes their name from the principal sub-parish, where the priest usually resides."⁹

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of large sub-parishes were divided into smaller units know as *dâu đạo* (in some places written as *giâu*). *Dâu* can be considered as the gathering of a given number of believers who reside together in a number of streets (or land holdings), or sometimes a hamlet.

A different form of organization within parishes or *họ đạo* was the *khu đạo* (parish ward). Because a parish could be a large area, perhaps comprised of several dozen *họ đạo*, the Dominican missionaries assembled a number of neighbouring *họ đạo* to become a parish, also establishing a series of parish wards in order to more conveniently look after their parishioners. In *The History of the Central Diocese* it was written: "Each large parish is commonly divided into two or three wards, and each ward usually has a priest to more readily look after it".¹⁰

Therefore, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, parishes and *họ đạo* in the North took the following form: A parish was comprised of several *họ đạo*, with each being divided into a number of *dâu đạo*. These were the same as Catholic hamlets, or local church communities. *Phiên đạo* (interim parishes) were equivalent to parishes. The above is only a generalized account as to the structure of parishes and sub-parishes.

The organization of *họ đạo*, wards, etc., is a form organized in a military method, an organizational model created by foreign missionaries in Vietnam. Their establishment also relied on the traditional form of the Vietnamese villages. Because

this is such a military form of organization, the organizational model adopted in Dominican dioceses was perhaps different from that found in MEP dioceses. In MEP dioceses, the organizational forms in those areas were different from those outlined above. Models seen in those areas were not seen in others.

Names and Role of Lay Organizations in Northern Catholic Parishes and *Họ đạo* in the North

Names and Roles of lay Organizations in “họ đạo”

The function of the leader of the *họ đạo* was created first. *The History of the Central Diocese* states "in 1669, when Msgr. Lamberto went to the North to lead his flock, he used the opportunity to appoint a leader amongst seven more native catechists. On February 14th of that year, he also met with leaders from the South West who returned to the North with the Father Provincial, who opened the synod by proposing a law for the diocese, to cover the care of the parishes, the choosing of catechists, the establishment of convents, etc."¹¹

As to the naming of the lay organizations and their functionaries, there were differences between dioceses belonging to the Dominicans and those belonging to MEP, and also differences with the diocese of Vinh, even though Vinh also belonged to MEP administration.

As to the sub-parishes in dioceses belonging to the Dominicans, *the History of the Central Diocese* states: "Every *họ đạo* also has a number of associations, with men customarily known as chief and deputy chief at its head, and a secretary and some other functionaries, in exactly the same manner as indigenous organizations. Each also appoints a number of zealous men to reinforce and look after the spiritual needs of catechumens, and to prepare them when they seek permission to receive the sacraments, and also to make arrangements with the clergy to provide the sacraments to them. And when parishioners reach the hour of death, but there are no clergy available, then these overseers would help them by reciting prayers for their souls."

In addition, each *họ đạo* would itself choose a man and a woman who were known to be avid in prayer, and of good character, to be the teachers of prayers to the catechumens, and to lead them to the Church to pray in the early evenings, and to see that when they did so, the catechumens retained a solemn dignity. If the sub-parish had many young people, then it would not only appoint one man and woman, but several [to perform this task].¹²

Nowadays, the offices of [*họ đạo*] leaders and catechists have been preserved in those dioceses previously under Dominican management; the Diocese of Hải Phòng is one example.¹³ "*Họ đạo*" within dioceses previously belonging to MEP still have a leader and deputy as in Dominican dioceses, but the role of teaching children's catechetics is entrusted to people with a particular educational function. In a letter sent to catechists, Bishop Pierre-Maria Đông, bishop of the North-west, wrote: "We must urge our catechists to teach our children all year round, especially during the season of Lent, during the month of the Rosary [May], and in the two week prior to their the first confession, so that we might more readily provide for their absolution. But our catechists must not only look after the education of our children, they must also take up the task of leading them to Mass day after day, and also keeping them in order during Mass."¹⁴

As to the office of Secretary, in *họ đạo* within MEP dioceses, they were known as *thư dịch* (head scribes) who kept the books and accounts.

The above were the organized functions within the *họ đạo*. Until the start of the twentieth century, the peak organization with the *họ đạo* in areas belonging to the Dominicans and MEP (except Vinh diocese) were called *Ban hành giáo* (Executive Committee) of the *họ đạo*. Before that, in dioceses under Dominican control, the organized functions with parishes and *họ đạo* were called *Ban* (or *Hội*) *hàng phủ* (district committees), or *Ban* (or *Hội*) *hàng xứ* (parish committees).

Vinh Diocese (Nghệ An Province), originally belonging to the North-west diocese, came under the control of MEP. On 27 March 1846, it was split off as a separate diocese by edict of the Holy See. Although it was severed off to become a separate diocese, it still came under MEP's control. However, the titles of the various functions within parishes and *họ đạo* were different from those in other dioceses under MEP control.

The main roles in the *họ đạo* were the *Trùm*, or head of the *họ đạo*, and *Câu*, or assistant to the *Trùm*. If the *họ đạo* was large, then it may have a second *câu*, also known as *biện việc* (advisor). They could also be known as the first and second *biện*. *Giáo biện* taught the children catechism, brought children to the church, and kept order amongst them during Mass, as with the male and female catechists within other dioceses of the Dominicans and MEP. All of these functions were brought together in an organization known as the *Ban chức việc họ đạo* [Pastoral Committee].

In a situation of large parishes, few clergy, and small communities far distant from the parish centre, the role of the *họ đạo* organization was very significant. People in this organization served as a substitute for a priest in carrying out liturgical functions, devotions and prayers within the church, teaching catechism, keeping order, training catechumens, keeping records and finances, etc.; this was a form of active self-management which was very effective in missionary territories with circumstances such as in Vietnam. While the priests might visit the *họ đạo* monthly and annually, they could rely on these *họ đạo* organizations for the maintenance of religious activities.

At the end of the nineteenth century, for convenient management, *họ đạo* as communities of believers divide regions into small units. At the head were *Trùm*, with a deputy and male and female catechist to teach catechism to children in the *họ đạo*, and perhaps a secretary.

Names and Roles of lay Organizations within the Parish

The History of the Central Diocese states: "In each parish, or at least in most parishes in the diocese, there is usually an association known as the *hàng phủ* or *hàng xứ* depending on the district, which have people coordinating the locals into associations. Matters arranged are those of common interest to the local people, both matters of life and faith, such as ceremonies, and other matters, in which the native people come together in spiritual communion. These associations often have a head person, or a head and deputy, and another person often known as a secretary to keep records, as well as a few men with other positions in the association which have been allotted to them, and when the association consults or does anything collectively, then it must proceed in order from highest to lowest without exception, depending on these positions and ranks."¹⁵

In parishes within other dioceses belonging to MEP, the functions in parishes were the same as in Dominican dioceses. The only point of difference lay in their naming. Instead of being called *hàng phủ* or *hàng xứ* associations, they were called *Ban hành giáo xứ* (parish committees). The diocese of Vinh had particular parish "functions, including *Trùm Trưởng* - the person at the head of the parish; *Trùm Phó* - assistant to the leader; and *Thu kí* - who attended to secretarial and financial matters.

All of these came together in an organization called *Ban chức việc xứ* (Parish Affairs Committee) or *Ban Câu Trùm* (Leadership Committee).¹⁶

In those dioceses with *phiên đạo* (intermediate organizations between *họ đạo* and parishes), the functions within them were the same as in *họ đạo*, with leaders, deputies, catechists, and secretaries. Apart from the position of *Trùm*, also known as *Trùm Santi*, who the people of the parish or *họ đạo* appoint for a fixed period to assist with benediction.

The parish of Hà Hồi (Hà Hội village, Thường Tín district, Hà Tây province) separated off as a parish in 1902, having previously been a large, self-administering *họ đạo*. They laity were then split into three groups to assist the priests to celebrate the liturgy. These groups approximated parish wards with people occupying the positions of leaders, catechists, and secretaries. Therefore the *Trùm phiên* here were different from *Trùm phiên* in *Phiên đạo*, and *Trùm phiên Santi*. In order to more readily follow the above, we have constructed this table:

	Parishes of Đa Minh	Parishes of Pari (except Vinh)	Parishes of Vinh
Titles of parishes	<i>Chánh trưởng</i> <i>Phó trưởng</i> <i>Thư kí</i>	<i>Chánh trưởng</i> <i>Phó trưởng</i> <i>Thư dịch</i>	<i>Trùm trưởng</i> <i>Câu</i> <i>Thư kí</i>
Name	<i>Board (association) of</i> <i>Hàng phủ</i> <i>Board (association) of</i> <i>Hàng xứ</i>	<i>Hành giáo xứ Board</i>	<i>Chức việc xứ Board</i> <i>(Câu – Trùm Board)</i>
Titles of họ đạo	<i>Trùm trưởng</i> <i>Ông trưởng</i> <i>Bà trưởng</i> <i>Thư kí</i> <i>Board (association) of</i> <i>Hành giáo họ</i>	<i>Trùm trưởng</i> <i>Trùm phó</i> <i>Superintendent</i> <i>Thư dịch</i>	<i>Câu trùm</i> <i>Giáo biện</i> <i>Biện việc</i>
Titles of dân đạo (ward, hamlet)	<i>Trùm (thu)</i> <i>Thư kí</i>	<i>Trùm</i> <i>Thư kí</i>	

These functionaries in parishes and *họ đạo* were seen by the communities of believers as the dignitaries of those parishes or *họ đạo*. Outside of the duties outlined above, these dignitaries still held authority and as such were greatly respected by the laity; on their death, they were brought solemn offerings by both priests and lay people. They did not have to participate when the parish or *họ đạo* had work to do. At that time, most lay people in parishes or *họ đạo*, when attending Mass had to sit or kneel on the ground; only the dignitaries were seated on a dias or on mats.

The custom in traditional Vietnamese villages of “*mua nhiều bán xã*” (to buy exemption from corvee by selling the village) also applied to parishes and *họ đạo* as “*mua trùm, bán trưởng*” (buy and sell the parish, leadership positions). In Vinh diocese (Nghệ An), it was called “*mua Trưởng mua Ki*” (buy the leadership positions).¹⁷ The price of buying and selling [of these positions] depended on the expenditure requirements of the parish or *họ đạo*.¹⁸

The holders of civic positions in Catholic villages were drawn from these parish dignitaries. They participated in village management functions such as the division of public lands, the auction of ponds and lagoons, markets, the repair of roads, etc; the integration of life and faith was one of the successes of Catholicism at that time.

It is possible to say that the traditional Vietnamese villages had a great influence on the model of organization, roles and functions of organizations within Vietnamese Catholic parishes and their sub-units.

In Catholic parishes and *họ đạo*, there are still a number of people who serve in the Church and presbytery, and help the priest, known as *bõ* (servants) or *sãi* (sacristans). *Bõ* are still called *Bõ ngãi* (faithful servants) because in the contemporary documents, *Bõ* and *ngãi* were often written together.¹⁹ *Bõ* were men, often elderly and single, devout and devoted in their service. *Bõ* would wash and cook for the priest. *Sãi* (also called *ông từ* [church wardens]) were people who opened and closed the church and rang the church and rang the church bell each day.

In studying organization of parishes and *họ đạo*, it is impossible to ignore Catholic sodalities [*Hội đoàn*].

Hội đoàn are forms of organization of Catholic adherents in parishes and *họ đạo*. The origin of these forms of organization of Catholic *hội đoàn* is complex and diverse. As with the birth of parishes and *họ đạo*, the origins of *hội đoàn* have an historical quality, contingent upon the developments of Catholicism in Vietnam, and

at the same time contingent upon events in Vietnamese history. Since earliest times, they have been called *họ* (fraternities) or *họ thánh* (holy fraternities) to distinguish them from local or social fraternities, as well as to distinguish them from familial lineage (such as the Nguyễn lineage, the Trần lineage, etc.).

Which sodality was established first? The documents we have assembled show that the earliest sodality was the Rosary Society.²⁰ According to a Father Thập (Joan de Santa Cruz), in a letter to the Superior of the Dominicans in Manila (Philippines) dated 9 December 1706, he established the Rosary Society in 1678 in several villages and in the capital, known as Kẻ Chợ.²¹ Lay people, especially those in the Rosary Society, particularly treasured their sets of rosary beads. Father Thập recounted that in the old days, the clergy and laity would gather together in the Church to recite a hundred and fifty beads [three rosaries], and to pray silently for half an hour. He taught the lay people to recite prayers, to pray the rosary together, and to separate out into two sides to pray the Rosary in choir. He also translated the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary into Vietnamese. Father Thập “arranged” three books of rosary blessings, in fact many tales and indulgences, the books being given the name the “Flower Garden”. A circular letter sent to the faithful belonging to the Dominicans, 1798, set out the formalities for establishing Rosary Society. Thus the Dominican missionaries were the first to establish Catholic sodalities [in Vietnam]. The Rosary Society was the first of the sodalities established in the dioceses under the management of these missionaries. From the North-east diocese, Rosary societies spread into the North-west. In a circular letter to the faithful dated 24 August 1899, Bishop Pierre-maria Đông (Gendreau), the bishop of the North-Western diocese, announced:

*“Because rosary societies were initially established by the Order of St. Dominic, I have decided that henceforth, only the Superior of that Order is permitted to establish further Rosary Societies, and anyone who has been conferred a certificate prior to October 1899 can request a plenary indulgence from the Holy See for that Rosary Society.”*²²

The letter contained specific stipulations for the establishment of Rosary Societies, methods for the recitation of prayers, rosary beads, and processions.

In the North-western diocese, the sodality which was perhaps established first was the *Hội áo Đức Bà núi Carmelo* (Society of the Veil of Our Lady of Mount Carmel), which was set up in the mid-nineteenth century. After that came the *Hội Lái Tim Đức Chúa Giêsu* (Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus), established by a pastoral

letter from Bishop Bảo Lộc Phước (Puginier), promulgated on 19 March 1873. A pastoral letter of August 1898 confirmed: “In this diocese, three holy societies have been established by the Superior, namely the Veil of Our Lady, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the Rosary of the Blessed Virgin.”²³

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the North-western diocese a number of sacred sodalities, and catechetical associations. On 8 September 1902, Bishop Pierre-maria Đông (Gendreau) issued this pastoral letter: “Thirdly, I have decided to establish sodalities in this diocese, therefore I send the parishes a conjoint rule for the societies; you must look at it carefully, so that when you decide to establish a society in your parish, then the parish elders must submit a letter for the establishment the Society. We will begin establishing them from 1 January next year.” Three years later, on 15 September 1905, Bishop Pierre-maria Đông issued another pastoral letter concerning the establishment of catechetical societies within the diocese.

The above are the sodalities established in the period from the seventeenth to the start of the twentieth century.

The organization of Catholic parishes and *họ đạo* in the North in particular, and in the nation in general, from the start of the twentieth century until now have undergone many changes. Study of these organizations need to continue. Because the organization of parishes and *họ đạo*, together with their activities were an important part of evangelical activity, and the development of Catholicism in Vietnam.

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Reference:

1. The letters chosen come from the pastoral letters of the Vicars Apostolic and Provincial of the Dominicans from 1759 on wards, *The* is the first letter, printed at Kê Sặt, 1903, p. 3.
2. *An Annual Record of the Diocese of Vinh*, Bishop’s House, Xã Đoài, 1922, p. 53.
3. *The History of the Central Diocese*, printed at Phú Nhai, 1916, p. 141.
4. See: Nguyễn Hồng Dương, *The Catholic Village of Lưư Phương (Ninh Bình) from 1829 to 1945*, Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997.
5. *The History of the Central Diocese*, p. 141.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

8. See, for example: Nguyễn Hồng Dương. *The Catholic Village of Lưu Phương (Ninh Bình) from 1829 to 1945*.
9. *The History of the Central Diocese*, p. 175.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 211.
13. In *Rules for Hộ đạo in the Diocese of Hai Phong*, published in 1922 (computerized version), it is stated that at page 12: “With the promulgation of a parish or *hộ đạo*, parishioners must elect a leader, deputy (in a parish or large *hộ đạo*, a second deputy, an elder, and a male and female head catechist).
14. Selected pastoral letters from the North West Diocese, printed at Kê Sở, 1906, p. 208.
15. *The History of the Central Diocese*, p. 210.
16. The committee names are recorded in subsequent documents from the countryside, although we are yet to find them in contemporary texts.
17. Documents in Bảo Nham parish, Bảo Thanh village, Yên Thành district, Nghệ An province.
18. These days they are still preserved in a number of places, but now called *mua an nhân* (benefactors)
19. *The History of the Central Diocese*. In calculating the worth of Bishop Định, statistics on the numbers of clergy and religious showed that in 1907, the diocese had 301 *bổ*. The word “*bổ ngữ*” were written together without a comma between them.
20. “Rosary” can be translated in Han – Viet as Mân Côi, Môi Khôi, or Mai Khôi, meaning “rose”. One of the Catholic titles of the Virgin Mary is “Our Lady of the Rosary”.
21. *The History of the Central Diocese*, p. 210.
22. From a book which recounts the pastoral letters of the North-western diocese, printed at Kê Sở, 1908, p. 83.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 119.