

**SALESIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY OF VIETNAM**  
**Presented by Rev. John Nguyen Van Ty SDB**

If historiography means: *'the writing of history, especially the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particular details from the authentic materials in those sources, and the synthesis of those details into a narrative that stands the test of critical examination'* (Encyclopaedia Britannica) then one can assert that the writing of Salesian history of Vietnam is just a debut.

**1- Situation of Salesian historiography in Vietnam**

**a) Challenges**

The historical events of the Salesian developments in Vietnam within the context of social and political upheaval of the country were extremely complex, from the phase of invitations and proposals (1926-1940) to the 12 years of immediate preparations and attempts (1940-1952) and all through the 61 years (1952-2013) of its active presence. The task of a critical history-writing is all the more challenging because of various reasons:

- The first reason that we can cite of is the lack of authentic sources which are essential for any critical historical examination. The two disastrous social events i.e., the great exodus in 1954 of a body of Catholic population and of the Salesians themselves at the very first years of foundation and the severe Communist purge during the Bolshevistic regime after 1975\* had practically erased all recorded documents that we have, except those that were kept in the Central Archives or in that of the China Province in Hong Kong. The abrupt confiscation of the Delegation office in 1978 had put practically all our documents in the hands of the state police. The loss was aggravated even more because all through the period from 1975 to 1991, owing to severe security measures, no annals or chronicles either of the Province or of local communities had been written...
- Lack of historical interest and awareness can be cited as the second. The Vietnamese are not very keen in recording the events methodically. Furthermore, the political security purge and social context, especially from the years 1975 to 1991, had practically reduced this awareness to null. Only very recently, under the promotion of ACSSA and pushed by the formation of the fast growing number of young confreres, the Province has began to feel the needs of writing a more critical textbook on the history of its existence. There appeared a short proposition in the Acts of Provincial Chapter 2010 *"there should be an effort to accomplish the writing of the history of Salesian Vietnam"* (p.4), which has been reiterated in the PC 2013. Writing and keeping 'cronaca' is always a challenge to all rectors of Salesian houses even today.
- Short of qualified personnel in the field of history writing can be cited as the third one. Only very recently in 2004 that the Province has its first confrere licentiate on the subject of Church history, in the person of Fr. Joseph Nguyen Duc Tam SDB. His theses on the *"Beginning of the Mission of the Salesian of Don Bosco in Vietnam"* was the first attempt to write the history more critically... He becomes a qualified member of the Provincial Commission on History that has recently been created on September 30<sup>th</sup> 2013, a commission ad hoc that was formed with the clear task of studying and writing down the history of Salesian Vietnam.

**b) Opportunities**

Notwithstanding all the above mentioned great and small obstacles, we still can say that we are lucky to have in hand some of the very important sources that will greatly help our historiography in the future. These are living witnesses and testimonies of first quality who could throw light on this dark and messy history of ours.

- The first to be mentioned is the precious records of the Servant of God, father Andrej Majcen SDB, the very first pioneer of the Salesian works in Vietnam and the last Salesian missionary to leave the country after the communist liberation (1952-1954; 1956-1976). He had kept minutely a diary-dossier all through his life time, of which 22 years were spent in Vietnam. His oeuvre is five great dossiers of notes, writings, letters, newspaper clips and photos depicting the Salesian events as well as the social and political ones of the country with the eyes of a witness who lived the events from the inside. Luckily before his death however, knowing the historical value of such a document, he had sent its original copy to the Central Archives in Rome. It was precisely based on this memory that the first book on the history of the Salesians in Vietnam has been written: 'Andrej Majcen and Mario Rassiga, *Opera Salesiana nel Vietnam, Breve Storia Scritta da Don Andrea Majcen SDB, Compilata da Don Mario Rassiga SDB*, AST Hong Kong China 1984'. All that we Salesians Vietnam have to do now is just to study and examine the above mentioned writing more critically and to complete it objectively.
- Of the history of the Salesians in Vietnam, the figure of the proto-martyr, a French missionary, Rev. Francisque Dupont SDB, is for us the most valuable and edifying one. Although his work and activities had not last long, they do lay down the spiritual foundation to all the services of the Salesians in Vietnam for many generations after. About him and about his martyrdom, we are also very lucky to possess firsthand witnesses. In a collection of France Marie and Bordg André, *Révérénd Francisque Dupont, Missionnaire Salésien, Martyrisé et Assassiné à Ke So (Vietnam) le 10 aout 1945 à l'âge de 37 ans, Dossier documenté par Marie France et André Bordg*. Marseilles France 1997, the testimony of the group of Métis children whom Fr. Dupont had been caring for and had defended with his own life had been recorded. In fact after the heroic event of 1945 they have been brought to France and entrusted to the Salesian School in Marseilles.
- Our most challenging historiographical task is writing the Salesian history of the period spanning from 1975 to 1991, during which, owing to severe security reasons, no chronics whatsoever had been written or kept. Nevertheless we have many confreres of vivid memories and living experience of that heroic time still living. Some of them might even possess privately some kind of documents of certain historical value that are worthy to be preserved for further critical study. In my opinion this should be the foremost and vital task of the Provincial Commission on Historical Study that had been recently established by the Provincial, i.e., to have these memories recorded and preserved as much as possible, and then to classify them methodically.

## **2- Efforts that have been made**

Notwithstanding our many shortcomings on the field, we nevertheless have made certain efforts in order to answer primarily to the needs of formation of our younger confreres, especially on the occasions such as the 50<sup>th</sup> or 60<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of Don Bosco's presence in Vietnam as well as for their missionary preparation. Some of these efforts have been made under the auspice of ACSSA itself.

- 1- The first work that has been to some degree of certain historiographical value is the theses mentioned above written by Rev. Joseph Nguyen Duc Tam for his licentiate degree: "*L'inizio della Missione dei Salesiani di Don Bosco in Vietnam, Esercitazione per la licenza in Storia Ecclesiastica*. Pontificia Università di Gregoriana. Roma 2007. It is by far the very first serious scientific study on the History of the Salesians in Vietnam, in which the author took pains to contextualize the beginning of the Salesian works in the social and ecclesiastical historical settings of the country. It is also the first study that has made access to the documents in the Central Archives.

- 2- On the occasion of opening the process of beatification for the Servant of God Andrej Majcen SDB, the Province of Vietnam had published a book entitled "*Lịch Sử Salêdiêng Việt Nam, Theo Vết chân Hành trình Truyền giáo Cha Anrê Majcen, Tự thuật Linh mục Anrê Majcen SDB* (History of Salesian Vietnam, Following the Missionary Footsteps of Father Andrew Majcen, an Autobiography of Don Andrej Majcen SDB)", Thu Duc Ho Chi Minh City 2010. In this volume the author Rev. Dominic Pham Xuan Uyen SDB had re-written in Vietnamese the book of Mario Rassiga SDB, enriching it with more details and anecdotes taking from the above mentioned diary-dossier. The book is not by itself the history of Salesian Vietnam properly speaking, but a sort of 'auto-biography' that interweaves Don Majcen's personal life with the events of the Salesian works and the turbulent events of Vietnam's political history. Anyhow the book serves well the purpose of bringing the younger generation of Salesian confreres closer to the figure of this new Servant of God, and at the same time getting to know more about the heroic past of the Province, particularly the missionary spirit of the pioneers.
- 3- In 2002, at the great celebration of 50 years of Salesian presence in Vietnam, the Salesian confreres felt the pressing need of having a simple book written for them that gives an account of the history of the Province all through these years. A commission ad hoc was formed and the book was published under the title: '*50 năm Don Bosco Việt Nam 1952-2002 (50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Don Bosco Vietnam 1952-2002)*, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Publication. Ho Chi Minh City Vietnam 2002. This small book of more than 200 pages, although of little scientific historical value nevertheless it serves very well the occasion and therefore was well received by the confreres.
- 4- Great events such as the visit of the Rector Major Don Pasqual Chavez to Salesians in Vietnam in 2008 are worthy to be remembered because of their repercussions on our life and spirit. It is the first time that such an event has been officially recorded and classified. The book of Rev. Joseph Nguyen Thinh Phuoc SDB, '*Cuộc Viếng thăm của Cha BTC Pasqual Chavez từ ngày 09 tới 14 tháng 04 năm 2008, Diễn văn Chào mừng (The Visit of the R.M. Don Pasqual Chavez to Vietnam 09-14 April 2008), Welcoming Speeches*', Vietnam Province, Ho Chi Minh City 2008 published shortly after the visit has showed clearly that the Province began to be more sensible to the historical impact of such an event. Thank God for this.
- 5- Under the auspice of ACSSA for the first time, Salesian Vietnam was able to join in the efforts of other more advanced Provinces in the field. At the ACSSA Seminar in Hong Kong in 2004 for the first time a presentation paper has been made in the name of the Province, and presented to the regional forum: "*The Beginning of the Salesian of Don Bosco in Vietnam, The Patriarchal Story and the Exodus, The Beginning of the Salesian of Don Bosco in Asia series*. ACSSA Hong Kong, 2004. The presentation was made by Rev. John Nguyen Van Ty SDB who just finished his term as Provincial one year ahead. With such a method of work, any unskilled confrere with interest in the historical field can learn how to write scientifically. In fact, upon writing the paper the presenter himself for the first time felt the need of consulting the original sources in the Hong Kong Archives.
- 6- The second ACSSA seminar convened at Batulao – Philippines in 2008 opened up another aspect of Salesian history writing, i.e., deepening a particular thematic theme. The chosen theme for the seminar was in fact '*Implantation of the Salesian Charism in Asia – Ideals, Challenges, Answers, Results*'. The paper of Salesian Vietnam was presented also by Rev. John Nguyen Van Ty SDB entitled '*Salesian Charism in Vietnam. 39 years of Sowing and Growth in the Stormy History of the Country*', which later was published by ACSSA – study 7, Kristu Jyoti Publications, Bangalore India 2009 pp. 187-230. Although the article is short, limited to the size of a presentation paper for a seminar, nevertheless it offered a good sketch which can be later on developed more amply into a deeper study. It is a lesson and a valuable attempt of writing down history for spiritual and charismatic purposes of which Salesian Vietnam has so much need, for the sake of the formation of young confreres as well as to offer its experience for the benefit of the whole Congregation, as many superiors repeatedly suggested.

### **3- Prospects**

As a conclusion, we may ask ourselves: does any prospect open up for the historiography of Salesian Vietnam? Notwithstanding all the handicaps of ours that have been described above, we still dare to hope that the horizon will be getting brighter and brighter. If the Provincial Commission on History does work consistently, then we can aim at 2022, on the occasion of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the presence of Don Bosco in Vietnam... (or even sooner?), to have a book on the history of our Province written in a more scientific and critical way. This work will serve well first of all the formation of our confreres..., and then also enriching the treasure of charismatic experience historically proved, which would be a clear sign that the Holy Spirit is continually at work in our Salesian Family.

May this challenge be met through an active cooperation between ACSSA, the EAO Provinces and the Salesian Province of Vietnam.