The Catholic Minority in Thailand: an Example of Co-Existence

Kirti Bunchua

ABSTRACT

RELIGIOUSLY SPEAKING, Thailand is not a secular or an indifferent country, but a really devout Buddhist country, whose 95% of the population are Buddhists and only 0.4% are Catholic. However, Thailand can be cited as exemplary not only as a religiously tolerant country, but especially as a country where religions can cooperate for the progress of a common heritage. The Thai culture has been contributed by all Thai citizens regardless of their religious faith. The religious minority groups, such as Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, all contributed something to the Thai culture. The King and His Government show the interest of this fact by recognizing and giving support to all of them. (Constitution of the Thai Kingdom, Art. 7)

The Catholic Minority started to be present here in the year 1555 by the Portuguese Community in Ayuthya, who then gave rise to the Thai Catholic Community of the Portuguese Origin. They were joined in the course of history mostly by the Chinese and Annamite descendants, who all declared themselves Thai citizens without an epithet. While in many parts of the world we hear of religious discrimination, they are given full right of Thai citizenship and are guaranteed by the Government.

They are so confident of their status, though a minority of zero point four percent, that they establish themselves under a complicated hierarchy with the external pattern of Europe, but with all the hidden characteristics of their country. With all these privileges as minority can enjoy, they in their turn, commit themselves to practicing charitable works in close collaboration with all groups--both the majority and many other minorities.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

To understand the present it is indispensable to reconsider the past: the past can teach much about the present.

Thailand is one of the few countries that could escape the colonisation of the past centuries. From this fact follow some remarkable consequences which should not be overlooked in studying the Thai Policy in general and the Religious Minorities of Thailand in particular.
1. The Thais are proud of their continuous independence through the time of the World Colonisation. They have become conscious of their National Unity; though it was scarcely seen before, because of the multi-racial units in Thailand, and because of the form of Government which was something like the Feudal System in the past.

2. The Thais are in general convinced that Thailand could escape the Colonisation by the intelligence and the capability of the Kings of the present dynasty: Royalty has gained the esteem of the people as a Symbol of Unity and Power for National Survival.

3. The Deeds of the Kings are the centre and occupy the greater part of the Thai History up to the present. It is a general rule willingly accepted by the Thai people that all Kings in human History are not to be given a due respect. However, with due respect, historians can criticize the policies and the governments of the previous dynasties. It is the general consent of the Thai people that a good Thai citizen should not raise any criticism against the present dynasty.

4. The Thai People are one, though they are descended from many races. Nobody is worried to find out the sample of the purely Thai race, but everybody is proud to profess that their ancestors are the Thai Minor Branch (Thai Noi) who immigrated from the South of China about one thousand years ago (though at present many do not agree with this belief). The reason for this pride also can be traced to the national satisfaction of continuous independence during the Colonisation Period.

5. If I am allowed to identify it as a kind of superiority complex, this feeling of pride is a nation-wide complex which a historian of the Thai people in general and of the Minorities of Thailand in particular cannot overlook, because it affects the whole personality of a Thai.

We have, therefore, plenty of manuals on the History of Thailand, which are centered on the Deeds of the Kings whose materials are taken mostly from the Nation Chronicles, which are so far almost the only source of the History of Thailand. Only recently, the Thai historians began to appreciate the narrations of foreigners who were the adventurers in the past: they are now looking for the writings of the European travellers and the Christian Missionaries in Thailand including those of the other Asian peoples who happened to have contact with Thailand. However, they still emphasize the relations of these adventurers with the Kings or the Kings' Deeds and Environments. Only most recently, some historians of Thailand begin to pay more attention to what happens to the ordinary people and also to the oral
traditions. Hence comes up the interest for the minority groups, one of which is the Catholic Minority.

**Historical Background**

When Columbus had found America for the Kingdom of Spain in 1492, the King of Portugal tried hard to find new lands for His Kingdom also. Vasco da Gama, under the patronage of His Majesty the King of Portugal, sailed to India in 1497. In 1510 Alburquerque took Goa from the Sultan of Bijapur and made it the Capital of the Portuguese Empire in the East. In 1511 the same Alburquerque captured Malacca, the entrepot for trade between the Far East and South Asia, and in 1515 he also occupied Ormuz, which dominated the entrance to the Persian Gulf. By so doing, he hoped to be able to establish the Portuguese supremacy over the South Asian seas, and to offer the European spice trade to the Portuguese Kingdom.

When Alburquerque had succeeded in capturing Malacca in 1511, he sent in the same year a delegation to Ayudhya, the then Capital of Thailand. These were the first Portuguese to put their feet on Thai soil. They were allowed to have the audience with His Majesty Ramadhibodi II of Thailand and were granted the trade between the Portuguese Company and the Kingdom of Thailand. In virtue of that contract, the Portuguese traders came to Ayudhya, many of whom established themselves permanently in Thailand. They became the oldest Catholic community in Thailand.

We do not know the names of the first Portuguese who came to establish themselves in Ayudhya, but we can be sure that there was a Portuguese Community in Ayudhya by then. The first known Portuguese in Ayudhya so far were two missionaries who came in 1555: they were Father Jeronimo da Cruz and Father Sabastiao da Conto. Both belonged to the Dominican Order. They were commissioned by the Archbishop of Goa to look after the spiritual welfare of the Portuguese Community in Ayudhya. This Community is composed of the descendants of former Portuguese and the new comers. They were trying to use the Thai language with the result that some Portuguese words were adopted and new Thai words are formed to meet with their needs of expression in European and Catholic style of life.

On August 22, 1662, Bishop Pierre Lambert da la Motte arrived in Ayudhya with two other French priests. They were the first missionaries of the newly established Paris Foreign Mission Society (Missions Etrangeres de Paris). China and Cochinchina were their destinations, but persecutions made it impossible for them to reach there. So they remained in Siam (the then Name
for Thailand) which thus became the first mission of the new Society, and was erected as an Apostolic Vicariate in 1669. This Mission, which had been cultivated for 300 years without interruption celebrated its third centenary in 1969.

There was no opposition from the local authorities in the country at the beginning. On the contrary, the situation was very favourable. This was the period of the long and prosperous reign of King Narai the Great (1657-1688), who desired to rely on France and withdraw from the influence of Dutch powers. Embassies came to Ayudhya from France, and the Jesuit Fr. Tachard, played an important role. Ayudhya in turn sent embassies to France.

During the Reign of King Narai the Great (around the middle of the 17th Century), a group of about 60 Portuguese mercenaries came to serve in the Royal Army: they were skilled in the artillery warfare. King Narai granted them a plot of land in Bangkok to establish the Portuguese Camp in which they could live permanently with their families. It is now the site of the Immaculate Conception Catholic parish in Bangkok. They had the duty of guarding the water way in case the enemies might come from the sea invading through the Chao Phraya River. We may see now that it is a clever policy of King Narai the Great to counteract the power of the Dutch by the power of the French at that time. The family names of these Portuguese Mercenaries as can be indentified by their descendants are as follows: Libeiro, Fonseca, De Jesus, Diaz, Da Cruz, De Horta, De Paiva, Pezro, Rodriguez, Fereiro. Some of them moved to the opposite side of the River to establish another Community called Santa Cruz parish until to-day.

After King Narai's death, almost all Christian communities outside the Capital were suppressed. The only development for almost one century was the beginning of the Chantaburi Christianity in 1707. It grouped the Annamite Christians who came to settle there to escape the persecution from their country. In the Capital itself, there remained only the Christianities of St. Joseph, Sao Pedro, Sao Paulo, and Sao Domingo.

From the very beginning, the Paris Foreign Mission Society (M.E.P.), had worked hard to set up the "General College". It was, in fact, a seminary for the training of the native clergy. It was established next to St. Joseph's Church in Ayudhya in 1666. It had to change place and undergo countless ups and downs, and was even suppressed temporarily in 1783, but was revived in Penang in 1809, until 1983 when it was suppressed again due to the contemporary need of a National rather than a Regional Seminary.
After the Reign of King Narai, no history of the Portuguese descendants was recorded. We know something of them once more during the Reign of King Tak-Sin of Dhonburi Period. They served the King as the Palace Guards. When Phya San revolted towards the end of the Reign, these Guards had a share in defending the royal Palace until Chao Phya Chakri came to put all things right and established Himself as the founder of the new Dynasty, the present Chakri Dynasty.

King Tak-Sin spent the first half of His Reign in building Dhonburi as His new Capital and in reorganising the Kingdom. Many Catholics served him with renowned fidelity. But in the second half of the Reign they suffered persecution side by side with some Buddhists who could not comply with some of His superstitious actions.

Chao Phya Chakri ascended the throne in 1782 known in European Language as Rama I. He built Bangkok or Krungthep Mahanakhon... Ratanakosin as the new Capital of His Kingdom. The Ratanakosin period began. During His Reign the Portuguese descendants still served as "Portuguese Volunteers" in the "Tha Chang" or the "Elephant Port" Army. Once the King ordered new canons and wanted to try them. One of the Portuguese Volunteers, named Keo Libeiro, could hit all the targets proposed by the King. So His Majesty appointed him the Head of the skilled Portuguese Descendants in the Artillery Department and after sometime elevated him to the dignity of Phraya Visessongkram Ramabhakdi and the dignity was transferred to his descendants up to 8 generations, until the Reign of King Rama VI, who reorganised the military system in Thailand according to the European model and accordingly the title of Phraya Visessongkram came to an end. Thence the Portuguese Descendants who become completely Thais served their country in various activities, one of the sons of the last Phraya Visessongkram served as the Governor of many provinces with the dignity of Phraya Samudra Sakdarak. To-day many of them serve as Government officials and Social Welfare Employees. All of them are proud to be born Thai Citizens, though they still remember their Portuguese ancestry.

King Rama I and II had good relations with all foreign powers, so the missionaries were allowed to work freely all over the Kingdom. The Catholic Church began to establish Herself in Thailand really only during this period, waiting for a further development in future.

During the Reign of King Rama III, a group of about 500 Catholic Cambodians and Portuguese Descendants in Cambodia, came under His Majesty the King's Patronage into Thailand following their overthrown Prince Nak-Ong-
They were allowed to live with the Portuguese Descendants at the Immaculate Conception Parish. Most of the Cambodians went back to their own country 12 years later, but the effect remains that the Immaculate Conception Parish of the Portuguese Descendants is called the Cambodian district instead of the Portuguese Camp up to date, though the official name is Mittakham District or the District of Friendship.

In 1785 there were 413 Thai Catholics of Portuguese origin at the Santa Cruz Church in Dhonburi and 379 Thai Catholics of Portuguese origin at the Immaculate Conception Church (in Mittakham District, Bangkok), as well as 580 Thai Catholics of Annamite origin. In 1802 the Christians of the Vicariate of Thailand, including Penang, numbered 2,500. Meanwhile, however, because of the French Revolution and wars, the Bishop remained the only foreign missionary for ten years. He was assisted by seven native priests.

One outstanding figure during the XIX Century was the Vicar Apostolic Bishop Pallegoix (1841-1861), whose fame spread far beyond the borders of Thailand and who was the author of the well-known 2-volume Thai-Latin-French-English dictionary, the first such fundamental work for the Thai language. While the Bishop was at the Immaculate Conception Church, he had learned that a Prince, who had entered the monkhood at Wat Rajathivas near his Church, was interested in languages. A firm friendship developed when the Bishop learned Pali from the Prince-Monk, who in turn took Latin lessons from the former, and they were often seen strolling along the riverside during the late afternoon hours. Sometime later, the Prince entered the Chakri Palace to be crowned as His Majesty King Mongkut (Rama IV). When Bishop Pallegoix died on June 18, 1861, His Majesty King Mongkut did not forget his old friend, and ordered a Royal Palanguin to be used for the funeral, and joined in the mourning by ordering all flags in the Kingdom to fly at half mast. The Mission went on slowly but constantly.

The Catholic mission had envisioned the needs of modern times. A printing press had been set up quite early. In 1885 Fr. Colombet M.E.P., founded the first modern Catholic School in Bangkok, Assumption College. It was placed under the care of the Brothers of St. Gabriel when they arrived in 1901.

The Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres came to Thailand even before the Brothers of St. Gabriel in 1893, to take care of the poor and the sick, and to educate the girls.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, many other congregations of religious men and women came to work in Thailand. Ursulines of the Roman
Union, Carmelites, Salesians, Sisters of Mary Help of Christians, Capuchin Sisters, Redemptorists, Camillian Fathers, Fathers of Betharam, De la Salle Brothers, Stigmatines, Jesuits, Sisters of the Holy infant Jesus, without counting the Thai congregations of Sisters in every diocese.

Since the Catholic Church can live on peacefully with their fellow citizens, the Sacred Congregation of Evangelization in Rome saw that it was appropriate to establish the Hierarchy in Thailand.

Therefore, on December 18, 1956 two ecclesiastical Provinces of Bangkok and Tharae Nongsaeng were created, giving to Thailand its first native archbishops, and the responsibility of the Catholic Church in Thailand is, since then, confided to the Thai Catholics.

The first was the ecclesiastical Province of Bangkok, made up of the metropolitan Church of Bangkok, whose cathedral was dedicated to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, with the following suffragan dioceses: Ratchaburi, Chanthaburi, Chieng Mai. The Diocese of Nakhon Sawan was added in the year 1967, and two years later that of Surat Thani.

The second ecclesiastical Province called Tharae whose cathedral church was dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel with the following suffragan dioceses: Ubon Ratchathani, Nakhon Ratchasima, Udon Thani.

Contemporary Thai Catholic Church

The numbers of the Thai Catholics is estimated at present around 250,000 souls: that is about 0.4% of the Thai population. They are dispersed in every part of Thailand. The Ecclesiastical Administration is divided into 2 Archdioceses and 8 Dioceses.

1) Archdiocese of Bangkok, presided over by His Eminence Cardinal Michael Michai Kitbunchu, has about 60,000 Catholics dispersed in the area of about 200,000 km² in the central part, with 45 parishes, 1 university, 3 colleges, 3 hospitals, and 108 schools besides the parish schools.

2) Archdiocese of Tharae, presided over by His Grace Archbishop Lawrence Khai Saenphon-on, has about 35,000 Catholics dispersed in the area of about 21,000 km² of the Central North, with 52 parishes and 4 schools besides the parish schools.
3) Diocese of Chanthaburi, presided over by His Excellency Bishop Lawrence Thienchai Samanchit, has about 25,000 Catholics dispersed in an area of about 34,000 km² of the East, with 37 parishes and 27 schools besides the parish schools.

4) Diocese of Ubonratchathani, presided over by His Excellency Bishop Michael Bunluan Mansap, has about 20,000 Catholics dispersed in the area of about 50,000 km² in the North-East, with 45 parishes and 11 schools besides the parish schools.

5) Diocese of Chiang Mai, presided over by His Excellency Bishop Joseph Sanglal Surasarang, has about 10,000 Catholics dispersed in the area of about 90,000 km² in the North-West, with 18 parishes and 11 schools besides the parish schools.

6) Diocese of Udonthani, presided over by His Excellency Bishop George Yod Phimphisan, has about 15,000 Catholics dispersed in the area of about 50,000 km² in the North, with 42 parishes and 18 schools besides the parish schools.

7) Diocese of Ratchaburi, presided over by His Excellency Bishop Manat Chuabsamai, has about 16,000 Catholics dispersed in the area of about 30,000 km² in the Central-South, with 24 parishes and 19 schools besides the parish schools.

8) Diocese of Nakhornsawan, presided over by His Excellency Bishop Joseph Banchong Aribarg, has about 6,500 Catholics dispersed in the area of about 90,000 km² in the Central North West, with 18 parishes and 10 schools besides the parish schools.

9) Diocese of Nakhornratchasima, presided over by His Excellency Bishop Joachim Phayao Manisab, has about 4,000 Catholics dispersed in the area of about 40,000 km² in the Central North East, with 12 parishes, 1 hospital and 7 schools besides the parish schools.

10) Diocese of Suratthani, presided over by His Excellency Bishop Praphol Chaicharoen, has 5,000 Catholics dispersed in the area of about 75,000 km² in the South, with 29 parishes and 17 schools besides the parish schools.

NB: Usually a Catholic parish has its own school called the parish school which is accessible to the poorest boys or girls of the environment of whatever religious profession. Besides the parish schools which are open to everybody, there are in each diocese several schools of quality with a rather high school-
fee, run by the religious orders or by private Catholic owners. These schools are among the best educational institutions in Thailand. They educate a lot of qualified citizens for the actual service of the Country.

The Roles of the Portuguese Descendents

The Portuguese who came to Thailand in the Ayudhya Period, brought with them also their own language, Portuguese. It was the custom of the time that the people of the same nationality lived together on a piece of land granted by the King exclusively for them called Camps. There were Portuguese Camps in Ayudhya and in Bangkok, as stated above. There were also the French Camp, the Japanese Camp, the Mon Camp, and also the Christian Camp for all the Asians who were converted to Christianity.

The Portuguese were used to speaking Portuguese in their Camps, but outside the Camps they had to communicate with others, so they tried to learn Thai. After generations, their descendants preferred to speak Thai even in the Camps. Great difficulty arose from Religious Vocabulary: how to translate their Christian faith in the Thai language. They solved this problem during the time of the Ayudhya period by transliterating the majority of their Christian Vocabulary from Portuguese into Thai, for example anjo (angel), mahaanjo (archangel), spiritu Santo (Holy Spirit), Jesu (Jesus), Maria (Mary), Jose (Joseph), Petro (Peter), Paulo (Paul), Sancto Papa (Pope), Martir (Martyr), Apostolo (Apostle), Christang (Christian), Catholico (Catholic), Cristo (Crist), Natal (Christmas), Pasca (Easter), Missang (Mission), Missa (Holy Mass),

They tried to translate some words into Thai, e.g. asombot (synagogue), manochitr (soul), phraongkhachao (the Lord).

In the Ratanakosin period, they tried to translate more and more words into Thai. In so doing, they used many Thai words and phrases incorrectly, e.g. Sil (Sacrament instead of rules of conduct), Bhuddhi (Holy instead of intellectual), Anisong (Indulgence instead of merit), krobkran (Perfection instead of being well equipped).

Some words created by these people sounded strange to the ordinary Thais, e.g. Phra Samai (The Church), Wacwack (distraction), Khuamnobnob (obedience), Surupunlam (Pride), Ritkuson (Virtue), Phayotchua (Vice), Sualo (Cassock).

However, the Portuguese Descendants in Thailand still reserve some Portuguese words for use only among themselves, especially the words
indicating parentage, e.g. **Pai** (Father), **Din** (godmother), **Avo** (grandmother), **Jung** (Brother), **Jon** (sister), **Tiu** (Uncle), **Te** (Aunt).

Many Portuguese words have been adopted into the Thai language and are recognized by the Royal Institute of Thailand, e.g. **Kradas** (Paper from cartas), **Kalame** (from caramel), **Lelang** (on sale from Leilas), **Sabu** (Soap from Sabao), **Kaptan** (Captain from Kapitao), **Pang** (Bread from Pao).

One outstanding fact about the use of the Thai language by the Portuguese Descendants is that during the first hundred years of the Ratanakosin period, they preferred to write the language they used in the Romanized alphabet. We can still find many Thai books printed for their use in the Romanized alphabet. In so doing they had to invent more signs to cope with the Thai pronunciation, for examples:

- or = short vowel
- = 1st tone
- = 2nd tone
- = 3rd tone
- = 4th tone

For illustration, we have a sample of one page from such a book, printed in 1846. (See the appendix A)

**Relationship with their fellow-citizens**

The Thai Catholics are peaceful citizens like their Buddhist fellow-citizens. Both the Thai Catholics and the Thai Buddhists love peace and want to live peacefully side by side with each other. In a peer group of any kind, it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish a Catholic from the remaining Buddhists, because they talk the same language, they dress in the same style, they eat the same food, etc. Moreover you can see easily a Christian venerating the Lord Buddha in the same manner as his Buddhist friends, because for him the Lord Buddha is the most Venerable Sage Mankind has ever known (not to be compared with Jesus Christ who is for him God-made-Man). In the same token you may see a Buddhist venerating Jesus Christ in the same manner as their Christian friends (that is wai or bowing), because for him Jesus Christ is a Venerable Man in the range of the Bodhisats (not to be compared with the Lord Buddha who is for him the uncomparable Samma-Sambuddha). In this attitude, the Thai Christians and the Thai Buddhists can, at present, live side by side peacefully and co-operate for the welfare of their Country.
Sometimes conflicts arise because of misunderstanding resulting from misinterpretation of some words or some acts; fortunately each conflict concerns only a few and the matter is put right in a short time, because the majority of both sides are peaceful Thai citizens and cannot be stirred up by insignificant matters. In fact, both sides are not so sensible to the third hand's selfish calumny.

The generous and peaceful attitude is not observable only on the grass-roots level: His Majesty the King Himself is more generous than anyone else especially in the religious matter. He Himself though a professed Buddhist, accepts to be the Patron of all religions in Thailand. He not only declares, but He does more than what He declares. So the Thai Christians wholeheartedly love Him and wish Him to be safe and prosperous, both in their daily private prayers and meditations, and externally in their solemn Masses where they loudly proclaim in the churches their loyalty to the Royal Family.

In the Government Services, the Christians work side by side with their Buddhist friends, bringing their evangelical love and justice into their milieu, showing themselves trustworthy, responsible and respectful. The Christians in all time offer trustworthy charitable and responsible services to everybody, from Their Majesties down to the most needy people of the Country. They have schools to serve every status of people. They have hospitals to serve every status of people. They have orphanages to take care of the abandoned children without regard to faith and faces. They have Houses of Mercy to shelter the helpless mothers with children without regard to faith and faces. They are among the most ready to help the refugees during the most difficult time.

An Example of Mutual Respect

When a marriage takes place between a Buddhist and a Catholic, in most of the cases, they sign a contract to respect the faith of each other and to let their children be instructed and educated in both faiths until they become adults and choose for themselves the religious community they like to belong to.

The wedding ceremony in such a case is generally composed of both faiths. In the morning food is religiously offered to the monks as an act of merit-making. Both the bridegroom and the bride hold the same ladle to ladle out each portion of food to put in each bowl of the monk. Then follows the traditional ceremony of pouring water, a symbolic act of blessing for the future couple. Water gives the feeling of cleanliness and refreshment. The couple is then assured of a life of clean refreshment in their marriage. The water had been generally rendered lucky by the well-wishing words of a monk over it in his
ceremony of consecration. Every elder who pours the lustral and perfumed water over the hands of the couple, says at the same time all kinds of blessings. Another offering of food to the monks takes place once again before noon, followed by an unofficial lunch offered to all those who are present at the moment.

In the afternoon, all the invited guests, both Buddhists and Catholics gather at the predetermined Catholic Church. The full Catholic wedding ceremony takes place there, presided over by a Catholic priest with several other priests joining the ceremony. The same promise is announced by both Buddhist and Catholic: "I accept you as my consort. I shall love you and be faithful to you the whole of my life, either at the time of happiness or at the time of tribulation." Both are blessed by the priests and prayed for by all relatives and friends who are present in the Church. Surely enough some of them are Buddhists. The couple walk out of the ceremony under the shower of flowers. In the evening, a wedding banquet is offered to all the guests as the last act of approval and well-wishing.

**Outstanding Contributions**

The most outstanding one is in the field of education. Over one century ago, the Catholics introduced the new system of education into Thailand, both for boys and girls. "Assumption School", "Assumption College" and "Assumption University" are well-known names of educational institutions of quality. Actually the number of non-Catholic students in all the Catholic institutions of Thailand far outnumbers the whole number of the Catholic in the country. These students will become one day the responsible citizens of the country and of the world, as a good number of Catholic School Alumni are now taking important responsibility for the country.

Assumption University now is educating over 13,000 students from Bachelor up to Doctorate degrees, highlighting with the School of Philosophy and Religious Studies. It offers special programs of Thai Buddhism for expatriates, and Professional Ethics Programs for Businessmen's Counsellors. There you can see the students of all races and religions sitting side by side with a common intention to gain more knowledge to improve their quality of life, hence to serve the people regardless of their cultures and faiths.

The other outstanding services are those undertaken to help the sick, especially the AIDS infected, the drug-addicted, and the refugees.
Attitudes of the Thai Buddhists towards the Catholic Minority

The Buddhists in general are kind and tolerant in the matter of Religions. Their general attitude complies with the Metta (Mercy) teaching of the Lord Buddha. The Thai Catholics are also inclined to be kind and tolerant in the Metta attitude. The Thai Catholics are peaceful citizens like their Buddhist fellow-citizens. Both the Thai Catholics and the Thai Buddhists love peace and want to live peacefully side by side with each other.

The Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand shows great interest in allowing freedom of worship. The important articles run as follows:

Article 7: "His Majesty the King is a Buddhist and is the supporter of all Religions".

Article 25: "The Thai citizens have full freedom in adopting any Religion or any sect of Religion or any school of Religion. They are free to practise any ceremony complying with their beliefs, provided that it has nothing against the duty of citizens, against the peaceful coexistence or against the morality.

"The Thai Citizens are guaranteed from the loss of right and just benefice because of their profession of any Religion or Sect of Religion or School of Religion or of practising any ceremony, different from other citizens".

Article 206: "Who offends any Sacred object or Holy Place of any group of Citizens with the intention of contempt will be punished....."

Article 207: "Who disturbs the religious meeting for worship or for any lawful activity will be punished....."

General Prem Tinasulanond, while he was in the position of Prime Minister, declared the policy for Religions in Thailand on August 27th 1986 as follows:

"The Thai Government has the policy of guaranteeing the freedom of Religion, of encouraging toleration and good relations among the devotees of various Religions, for the development of morality, ethnicity and culture of the Thai people....."
Mr. Mongkol Sriphraiwan, the then Head of the Department of Religious Affairs of Thailand, convened a Seminar of Religious leaders and organized a Religious Exhibition at the Mandarin Hotel on 29th September 1986, and declared at the opening ceremony as follows:

"Thailand guarantees the right and freedom of worship to all Her citizens. Every citizen has the right to choose any Religion according to his or her own conscience. The Thai Government supports with sincerity Religions other than Buddhism. Other Religions recognized and supported officially are Islam, Christianity, Brahma-Hinduism and Sikh... I am glad to assure you that at present members of different Religions don't have any conflict, thanks to the virtues of all Religionists and to the protecting merit of His Majesty the King....."4

We have the last statistics issued by the same Department that at present the number of the Thai Christian Minority is 435,035 (0.83% of the population) and the number of churches is 1,117. The statistics do not distinguish the denominations. But we know that the Thai Catholics are about 300,000 with about 500 churches.

Suggestions for a Better Cooperation

1. Each religious denomination has to educate its members in the way of mutual understanding, especially in the way of sincere cooperation.

2. There should be a research institute, in which all denominations participate with a view to finding principles and methods for a practical and efficacious cooperation.

3. There should be annual seminars for the national leaders of all denominations, so that they may exchange views and demonstrate their spirit of sincere cooperation. This will be a guideline and example for members of each denomination.

4. There should be frequent seminars for the cadres of all denominations to discuss and make up programmes of sincere cooperation.

5. All denominations must avoid attacking each other in any way, avoid biased comparison, and avoid even satirical discourse when referring to other religions; at the same time each denomination should encourage a free choice of faith.
6. There should be a common committee for the organisation of youth clubs, religious study groups, dialogue groups, etc., so as to promote mutual understanding. Sports among various denominations should be organised with careful planning. The best way is to mix up all denominations before dividing up again into competitive groups.

Conclusion

The Christians are only a religious minority group in Thailand, but they are fully conscious of their commitment as good citizens of a noble nation. Their ancestors had been Thais. They are conscious of their ancestors' heritage. They love their country, together with its culture, history and richness, both material and spiritual. Many of them had devoted their lives for the country and are ready to sacrifice more if necessary. They are a religious minority, but do not want to be considered as second class citizens.

APPENDIX I
Men Religious Orders in Thailand

2. The Camillians (Order of the Servants of the Sick).
4. Priests of the Sacred Heart of Betharam.
5. Redemptorist Fathers.
7. Society of Jesus (Jesuit).
8. Stigmatine Fathers.
10. La Salle Brothers (Brothers of the Christian Schools).
11. Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate.
APPENDIX II
Women Religious Orders in Thailand

1. Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul.
2. Congregation of the Servants of Mary (local).
3. Camilian Sisters.
4. Salesian Sisters (Daughters of Mary Help of Christians).
5. Daughters of the Queenship of Mary.
6. Discalced Carmelites.
7. Daughters of the Cross (local).
8. Good Shepherd Sisters.
9. La Salle Sisters.
10. Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary.
11. Order of the Capucin Poor Clares.
12. Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.
15. Sisters of Charity of Milan and Maria Bambina.
18. Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (local).
19. Ursulines of the Roman Union.

APPENDIX III
National Catholic Organisation

3. Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR)
4. Legion of Mary.
5. Human Development Center.
10. Serea International.
17. Credit Union League.
18. Crusaders of the Blessed Sacrament.
20. Salesian Cooperators.
23. Catholic University Students Group.
24. Christopher Group.
27. Catholic Pen Club.
29. Commission for Dialogue with other Faiths.
30. Cultural Center.
32. Commission of Laity Apostolate.
33. Liturgical Commission.
35. Family Life Promotion Program.
36. The Catechetical Commission.
NOTES


2 Loc. cit.

3 Ibid., p.1.

4 Ibid., pp. 5-6

REFERENCES


